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Amanda Nazario

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Nazario: Biting My Arms Off

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE
FINALIST

BITING MY ARMS OFF

Amanda Nazario

I have never seen Omaha before, and I'm fascinated: it's a real metropolis. There are small skyscrapers, as in a smaller, younger New York—the New York of a black-and-white movie, maybe. I know that when you send away for something in the mail, it usually comes from this city—when, as a child, I sent a coupon for a pack of Lucite ice cubes with flies in them (for example), this is where my coupon went. I don't know anything else about Omaha. As Anton drives us into the heart of town, I wonder if each of the little skyscrapers houses crates filled with millions upon millions of plastic novelties. I also wonder how Joe Morrison grew up here and still turned out to be himself.

Joe Morrison has told me he would never return to the Midwest to live. He's had enough of the dusty gold of corn and wheat that is everywhere here; he's tired of the way the colors of every field, building, or person are sun-bleached and muted. Montana is more his speed, he says. I agree—Joe is too extraordinary for this. Anton and I could probably live here, though. We are ordinary enough.

The drive from Sioux City has taken longer than I expected—two hours is a long time for someone like me to be in a car that isn't part of a subway—so I'm relieved to enter the diner where Joe has told us to meet him. When we see that he isn't there, we sit down anyway and Anton orders us a rhubarb pie milkshake, which is a milkshake made with a slice of rhubarb pie thrown into the blender. The waitress gives us two straws.

"How long do you think we should give him, hon?" Anton asks me.

"We have to give him a long time," I say. "He's always late."

We drink the milkshake in silence.

I stab the last crumb of soggy crust with my straw, splitting it in half so we can each suck up a piece and finish the milkshake together. The waitress takes the empty milkshake glass away and refills our water glasses, then brings us coffee in two thick, pink-rimmed ceramic cups. (*Are coffee cups the only things that stay the same no matter where in the United States you go?* I think but don't say.) I snap the edge of the cream container and peel the foil halfway back, then pour a single cream drop into the coffee, then add a few granules from my sugar packet, then stir it. I repeat this process until the cream and sugar are gone.

"When you were friends in the city," Anton asks, meaning New York, "didn't you get pissed at Joe for making you wait so much?" He gathers his black eyebrows up in a frown.

"We still *are* friends," I say. "And no, I found ways to keep busy. Sometimes I tried to chew my arm off, but he would always show up while it was still attached."

Joe and I used to live in Brooklyn, on the edge of Fort Greene right before it becomes Bed-Stuy. That is where the realtors told us it was, at least—possibly because they were trying to dissuade us from living there. The apartment was the third floor of a not-renovated brownstone, with no central heating ("Who needs central heating?" Joe scoffed. "I own two space heaters for a reason!") and a broken window in the kitchen that, for the duration of our two years as roommates, we never repaired. In the living room were two orange-brown couches that had come from the basement of Joe's parents' home—stout couches upholstered with that abrasive plaid fabric that leaves a print on your leg. All the other furniture was mine: black or silver, shiny, smooth. Knowing those orange couches were from Nebraska made me confident that every assumption I had made about Nebraska in my life was correct.

Anton, the Iowan, did nothing to change my mind, which may have been part of why I fell in love with him. When I brought him over, Anton would try to needle Joe by saying,

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“Cornhuskers can’t read!” and “Nebraska is a great place to visit, if you’re a horse trainer! Or a trucker!”

Joe would tell him, “You’re absolutely right. Everything you’re saying is true.”

I pictured Iowa as a flat patchwork quilt of football fields, with handsome, square-jawed young men like Anton huddling and running on it as far as Nebraska. Nebraska was an expanse of long dirt roads and endless rows of crops, interrupted every hundred miles with a silo or a freckled teen in overalls riding a tractor.

The coffee is gone and Joe Morrison still isn’t here. Anton pays the check while I stand behind him, my hand in the wide gap between his shoulder blades. Then we go outside, around the corner, and stare across the parking lot, dazed by the August sun that glints off pickup truck windshields on its way to our squinting eyes. Anton closes his arm around my shoulders and the tops of my arms, and pulls me close to him, kissing me on the temple. The shadows of the cars grow longer.

“Baby, we don’t have to wait any more if you don’t want to,” I say. “I’ll just call him later and make other plans.”

“You don’t have to do that,” says Anton, not apologetically, but with loud bravado, as if he’s addressing someone far away. When I look to the spot he’s pointing his chin at, I see a white minivan weaving between the lines of the empty parking spaces. It changes course and heads straight for us, its headlight eyes merciless, and halts just short of our feet.

“Let’s get a drink,” says Joe with his head hanging out of the driver’s side window. “I can’t drive my mom’s car any longer without a drink.”

He gets out so we can greet him, and my arms wrap all the way around his frame with ease. Joe is wiry, his back knotted with the bumps of his bones. Bracing my knees, I lift him an inch off the ground, because I can.

Joe turns to Anton and they both flash their seldom-seen teeth. “How’s it going, man,” they say at the same time,

nodding, shaking hands, and then dropping the hands to their sides. People say all Midwesterners are alike, and sometimes I understand why this myth prevails.

Anton drives the rental behind Joe's mom's minivan. Joe is leading us to what he says is his favorite bar, a place near the highway named Sally in the Alley. We drive past buildings and streets that look cared-for in a tidy, sad way, like an ailing old relative who still gets dressed up and taken to family parties.

"I wonder if this bar is going to be dirty," I say, with half a chuckle.

"Lyd—we're in *Omaha*, and it's *Joe Morrison*," Anton sighs by way of response. "Of course it'll be dirty."

I lean toward his face, forcing him to look at my smile. "I want it to be dirty," I say as we pull up outside the place, a low cinderblock box. Still, I pull at the hem of my skirt and I have a heightened awareness of my bare toes in my sandals. The path to the entrance is carpeted with cigarette butts.

Joe is holding the door open. I see neon signs and beige lamplight and a scuffed wood floor. "You look like you could use a good liver poisoning," he tells Anton. He looks at my outfit and says, "You're a long way from Studio 54, Lydia." I give him a narrow-eyed, withering look over my shoulder, because I can't think of anything to say.

It has been a year since I last saw Joe, and he looks softer, less guarded, more vulnerable. In New York his hair was always black, stiff with a medicinal-smelling pomade; here it grows below his ears, wispy and the color of watered-down iced tea. He's wearing a plaid shirt and faded jeans. I think he should have a stalk of wheat in his mouth.

Anton and I each order a beer. "It's so great to be back home and get cheap, good beer," Anton says, lifting his glass in salute.

"I can't tell you how many bad kegs we come across on the Upper West Side," I add, taking a sip, wanting Joe to agree that New York beer is bad beer.

"Beer is beer," Joe tells us from across the table, canting his

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shoulders forward. His arms form a brief circle around his tiny glass of whiskey and ice. "I think I've moved on from that for good."

He reaches into his breast pocket and takes out a pack of cigarettes. After showing each of us the opened end with that half-questioning look, he lights one and sinks into the booth's fake leather embrace as he inhales. "Are you officially a quitter?" he asks me. I nod.

When I met Joe Morrison, he wasn't a smoker yet. I was. I used to carry two packs at once, one in each side pocket of my jacket; I liked switching between the two brands according to my mood. When I was out of matches, I'd light the range top and lean over the stove. I kept an ashtray beside my bed, and another on top of the toilet tank next to the shower.

I sat in our living room one hot afternoon, playing a mix tape of '70s songs to drown out the sounds of car alarms wailing through our broken window, wondering in my boredom how long it would take to gnaw all four of my limbs off. I was drinking lemonade and, of course, smoking. Joe's key rattled in the lock and he came in gaunt and exhausted.

"You want some lemonade?" I said. "I just made it. It's in the fridge."

"My father died," he said. "He had a heart attack."

Some spring broke inside me and made me jump to my feet. I stood there, my arms out like a mannequin, waiting for him to walk into them. When he did, when he was in the right place between my right and left arms, they both snapped tight over his body and held him. Minutes passed. Then I offered him a cigarette. We sat and smoked until we fell asleep, and when Joe woke up in the morning he left the apartment to buy and smoke his first pack of Marlboros. He has never stopped.

For years I boasted that I'd been his tobacco guru—the one to initiate him into the rich world of the smoker, with all its paraphernalia and bronchial complaints and fatalism. What I was really boasting about, I think, was that he had slept with his

head on my lap, frosting my pant leg with drool and tears.

Joe told me this later: in the after-death aftermath, his mother sold her house and moved into the house across the street. Somewhere in Omaha, while we order round after round at Sally in the Alley, Joe Morrison's mother is existing in the house across the street from the one she raised her family in, maybe watching game shows and eating off a TV tray, maybe peeking into the front yard to make sure whatever family lives there now is still irrigating the lawn. The whole situation is, to me, sweepingly tragic and desperate, but so quiet—so American, so Midwestern. I have never even known anyone who has died, and when one of my parents goes, I am sure the other won't do anything so drastic as move, because they have been divorced for over twenty years.

Joe has been dating a blonde actress named Kim. When I ask how things are going with Kim, Joe says they just broke up.

"She said she wasn't ready to be married," he says. "I told her I wasn't either, and that we *weren't* married. I mean we weren't like you guys. *You* guys are married."

"Not yet," Anton laughs. He pinches my shoulder. I laugh too, but I have to force it.

"Well, cheers to that," says Joe, picking up the whiskey glass with his thumb and forefinger, "but that's not how we were." He is not laughing. "I'm not heartbroken, though. Don't think I'm heartbroken." He reaches across, seeing my look of poor-you empathy, and squeezes my hand. "When I get to Missoula, I'll be drowning my sorrows in undergraduates."

I laugh a real laugh that shoots out of me like a bottle rocket. "I guess God doesn't close a door," I say, cocking the eyebrow of sarcasm, "without opening a window?"

"Yeah, my version of that proverb is a little different," Joe sneers. "It's that God, um, doesn't exist."

Joe is going to Montana to study, although I can better

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imagine him going there to ride bulls. In addition to Omaha and New York, Joe has been to Sydney and Honolulu and Los Angeles. He has been to Houston and St. Louis and Tampa. I have been to none of the above. Anton travels on business, so he has been to many cities, too—in the past two years, he has been to Tokyo and London and Paris. “They’re a far cry from the Missouri River,” Anton says to those who ask what he thinks of these places.

As a child I traveled to Europe every summer. It has been over ten years since Lydia’s charmed girlhood, though, and I’ve traveled so little as an adult that I might as well have never been anywhere. I am left with wisps and rags of world-traveler knowledge, about a trivia game’s worth. For instance, I know that when someone mentions Brussels you are supposed to envision *Manneken-pis*, the fountain where water flows from the penis of a naked statue. I doubt either Anton or Joe knows the name of *Manneken-pis*, but this comforts me only a little.

More drinks arrive at our table. We reminisce about the girls—the glittering parade of lip-glossed, pedicured girls who used to throng our Fort Greene brownstone in the hopes of an audience with Joe Morrison. When they saw me and said, “Oh, are you Lydia?” their lovely faces would register relief, because they had been thinking of me as competition until they saw that my thighs were wide and my makeup was from the drugstore. I sat smoking with my one girlfriend, Karolyn, while we yelled our conversation over the moans and thumps we heard in Joe’s bedroom. “I think I need to date a foreign guy,” Karolyn used to say, giving me a vamp look through her mascara-thick lashes and curtain of wavy brown hair. “I can’t stand sex talk in English.”

“I think it’s all right,” I’d tell her. “I want an American.”

Days later, Joe would show me the fingernail scratches on his back or the hickey in some absurd place like his armpit. We would sit together in Langosta Café with glasses of their syrupy, headache-making red wine, regarding and laughing at those marks of fierce sex, both of us perplexed that they could

be inspired by Joe.

"They were all insane," Joe says now. "The only difference between them was their varying degrees of insanity."

"Why are beautiful girls always insane?" I wonder aloud.

"Because they can afford to be," says Joe. He leaves to go to the bathroom.

While he is gone, Anton looks at me with sad-bear eyes. "I don't think *you're* insane," he says.

"I'm only slightly insane," I correct him, making a bucktoothed face, "since I'm only slightly beautiful." I hug the top of his arm and lightly bite it.

When we leave Sally in the Alley, it is blue dusk. Anton and I are beyond late for our Sioux City supper—we have temporarily forgotten that Midwesterners sup when it's still light out. I wish Joe luck in Montana, referring to it as "out there." "Good luck out there," I say, and point to the direction I think is west.

"Where? The Gulf of Mexico?" Joe replies. "Montana is this way." He comes up behind me and takes me by the hips, swiveling me and my pointing arm to face Montana. I curl my lip, embarrassed.

A woman is walking a chihuahua across the strip of grass beside us. The chihuahua smells a spot of earth, drops, and starts to roll around in it, flailing with a weird, wild urgency. His legs wave in the air.

"I guess he found his place, huh?" says Anton.

"That doesn't look like a dog to me," I say. "It's like a chipmunk." Anton laughs; Joe rolls his eyes. This is what my creativity, my singularity has come down to: comparing animals to other animals.

Through the rental car window, on our way out of town, I glimpse the lit-up Mutual of Omaha building. I imagine it is stacked to the ceilings with bond notes. Anton drives silently, concentrating on the road, pretending he isn't drunk. His mess of black hair stirs in the breeze from the open window, his broad

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fingers relax on the steering wheel. There is something touching in his nonchalance; I can see him remembering all the times he partied in high school and drove home without a scratch. If I squint, I can almost see the white leather sleeves of a varsity jacket over his arms. On the highway, I watch for deer and rabbits but spot only a dead cat.

When we arrive at Anton's house, his mother and father are sitting in the living room with their feet up, reading different sections of the same newspaper. They are under a line of framed photos of Anton and his brother and sister, all the kids leaning against trees and sitting on stoops at various stages in their development. Supper was hours ago. "So, what does your friend from Omaha do?" Anton's mother asks us while we microwave two pork chops and two ears of corn.

"That's a good question," says Anton.

"He's a student," I say. "He's going to the University of Montana to get a Ph.D."

Anton's father snorts a laugh from his chair in the next room. "A Ph.D.!" he guffaws. "Didn't you tell him Cornhuskers can't read?"

The building in Manhattan that I live in with Anton has its entrance at the foot of a long concrete slope. When we leave to go to work every morning, we have to scale the hill, trudging up toward the subway's red beacon at the top. Before we even begin our commute, we have achieved something monumental.

In the fall, I get an email from Joe Morrison. He asks how I am, how Anton is, if we are getting married, if we want to leave New York since there is "nothing of cultural value" here. *You, as a native New Yorker, might think that's a rash statement*, he writes, *but let's face it: I can buy a book about what's at the Met, and you'd have to go at least a thousand miles before you could find a rodeo.* I imagine that every room in Montana is paneled in pinewood, and that all the furniture is made of antlers. I write back, saying I would like to visit sometime. He does not respond.

Weeks later, while Anton and I eat sushi out of foil takeout

containers in front of a football game, the phone rings. It's Joe, and he says he doesn't have time to talk. "I just wanted to say hi, though," he says. "I have a small group of friends in my department now."

"Is your hair still long?" I tease him, grasping for something to say in the time he doesn't have.

"Yeah, they all call me a hippie poet," he replies. "I'll see you, Lyd, okay?" He hangs up. I suddenly remember all the times when we lived together that Joe stood in the bathtub and handed me a razor, asking me to shave the back of his neck.

The commentator on TV says, "If they had gone for the touchdown, I honestly believe the Colts'd be sitting pretty right about now."

"Got that right," says Anton to the TV, stabbing a California roll with one chopstick. I put down the phone, wondering with vague horror if this is what I have always wanted in a mate: someone who voices his agreement with sports announcers.

In the Brooklyn place, Karolyn used to shake her head, clucking, when she saw the sticky liqueur stains on the rugs and counter, the garbage can overflowing with takeout containers and bottles. She demanded Joe and I organize our bedrooms, a messy home being one of the hallmarks of mental illness. Now she runs her finger over Anton's desk and cracks a proud grin when the finger comes up clean. We sit in the living room drinking martinis out of martini glasses, saying, "Remember when we used to drink martinis out of coffee mugs?" Joe Morrison was the worst, we recall: loath to wash a glass, he simply removed the plastic lid from the paper McDonald's cup he was carrying and poured vodka straight into his orange soda and ice.

When I can't see friends, I imagine a gathering of them—a party whose theme is me, attended by everyone I know. What are they saying? Lydia is twenty-seven years old now, her days of rebellious debauchery long behind her.

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Joe doesn't call anymore. More weeks go by, then months, until our street is paved a foot high with dirty snow. My boots stab and sink into it when I walk to Langosta Café to meet Karolyn. She is already sitting there, with frost climbing the window all around her—she is holding a strand of her dark hair and staring at the ends.

"I hate to tell you this," she begins.

I think, *Why do something you hate?*

She says, "I'm not surprised that he ignores you now. Don't you realize your relationship with Anton makes him crazy?"

"I know," I say. "We're too boring for him."

"No, idiot!" Karolyn scowls. "He's jealous. Joe Morrison is in love with you."

This is perhaps the least true thing I have ever heard, and I laugh at it. On my way home, I let myself believe it for about fifteen minutes.

I won't let myself believe I will never see him again. Instead, I construct in my head the letter I know I'll get—not today, not tomorrow, not in a month, but sometime before I die.

Dear Lydia, I cannot disclose my whereabouts, and writing this letter to you is itself a major security breach. Please don't tell anyone you got it.

Lyd—You never do anything, you never go anywhere. You've become hollow, a husk. Come visit me and we'll ride four-wheelers around this ranch I know. You'll love it.

Lydia, Since I last wrote to you a lot has changed. I had been enjoying my daily regimen of hiking in the woods, until one morning a puma leaped in front of me and ate both my arms. It has been a long road to rehabilitation. I am typing this with my nose.

Lydia—Do not try to contact me ever again. You are dead to me. You read right: DEAD!

The day after my twenty-first birthday, I was awakened at seven in the morning by the wind blowing through our broken window, actually whistling, raising goosebumps all over my reluctant, shuddering body. I realized I was slumped over the

kitchen table—I had been sleeping there, sitting up, with my face in the crook of my elbow. My head raised, throbbing dully, brain swelled and strained against skull. A string of Christmas lights blinked in the living room, making everything look grey, red, grey, red, grey. Beside my arm was an empty Southern Comfort bottle with a brood of shot glasses crowded at its base; a mixing bowl on the counter brimmed with ash and cigarette butts. I stood up, straightening my too-thin, too-scant clothes, struggling to balance on stiletto heels, closing my eyes when I felt the familiar tide of saliva rush to the front of my mouth. Don't throw up. Soft, feminine snores emanated from the couch—I saw Carolyn asleep there with her pink toenails protruding from an army blanket, one hand cushioning her mascara-and-blush-smudged cheek.

"Hey, you okay?" I asked, sitting on the rug so my face met hers. She groaned, then her brown eyes went wide and solemn.

"Oh my God," she said.

"What?" The Christmas lights blinked red, grey, red.

Karolyn sat up and held both my shoulders. "Do you remember what happened last night? At around midnight?"

I told her I didn't; I had no recollection of anything after eight-thirty (revelers throwing potato chips in the air for me to catch in my mouth), or maybe nine (dancing merengue in a sweaty crush of bodies to the Latin station on the radio).

Karolyn took a deep breath and told me that, at midnight, I had kissed my roommate. *Made out with him*, she said. "You don't remember it at all?"

I crunched my eyes shut to hear her play-by-play.

When she was done, I stared at her with nothing in my head. I could not remember one shred of it, could not even see it on the plane of the imaginary. I wanted to and I could not.

Joe's door whined as I shuffled into his bedroom, stepping over dirty jeans and t-shirts, books open with the pages curled against the floor, condom wrappers, a pizza box. Wearing boxers and one sock, he shivered in his sleep. I thought about

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it, wriggling in beside him and pulling the covers over us both. Lying down to bend myself with the angles of his spine and shoulders, to test the strength of his cold bones in my arms. A space heater sat on a brick pedestal next to the bed, aimed at his chest. I switched it on. The room filled with the sound of the heater's electric breath, and I tiptoed out.

A year passes—the knee-high snow turns to terrible grey water and runs into the gutters; square islands of dirt in the concrete sprout daffodils, then tulips; I go for a leg wax and buy a new wardrobe of shorts and tank tops. Anton buys us a blender and we learn how to make margaritas, which we drink sitting before the TV, holding hands but saying nothing. Then, the air conditioner is uninstalled and put into a storage locker in the basement; I recover a suede jacket from the closet; piles of brown leaves collect in the doorways and crunch under our sneakers. Football begins again. Baseball ends. The piles of leaves are buried under piles of snow, and the snow once more becomes filthy with dog shit and garbage. When I think about Joe Morrison, I usually square my shoulders and say to myself, *Joe Morrison is dead to me. I have no Joe Morrison!*

Sometimes, however, I picture him: he is driving a pickup truck under enormous white clouds, surrounded by the mountains. He wears steel-toed boots, orders whiskey by the bottle at his favorite roadhouse bar, shows girls the one front tooth that isn't real because he lost the real one when he was hit by a yellow cab—yes, a real yellow cab!—crossing Madison Avenue, all those years and miles ago. Since the sky in Omaha didn't get dark until nine o'clock, I imagine that, in Montana, it never gets dark at all. I think Joe probably likes that. Once, in a moment of weakness, I write an email to the address I don't even know if he still has. It reads, *Does it ever get dark where you are?*

The first time I saw him, in a neon-lit campus office, he had his hair greased back and was wearing a jacket the color of a fire truck. "Is this the student housing board?" he asked me. He had

been in New York for two weeks.

I shook the bangs from my eyes to look at him; my earrings jingled. A cowboy, I thought—ropy body, long fingers, giant teeth. “Yeah,” I said. “I’m trying to find an apartment.”

“Me too,” he told me, loosening his collar. “I want to live in Brooklyn, though. Not Manhattan. I think I’d like it there better.”

I smiled, not saying anything.

He said, “I mean, I just think it would be more *me*.”

I said, “Okay.”

We cemented our friendship with a walk through downtown. Since Joe Morrison didn’t have any money, I bought him a paper bag full of pork buns from my favorite Chinese bakery. It felt good to feed him, to make him happy and strong.

Lydia: Who’s gonna kiss me on my birthday? Isn’t anyone? The din of voices and the bass thump. The room close and dark. Joe: Five minutes left, right? Some guests checking their watches for confirmation, laughing so hard that when they look up it is already happening. Joe dips Lydia, one arm gripping her waist and the other hand on her thigh—Lydia, who has never had a tango lesson! When they stand up she is too tall in her sexy shoes, she is stooping to reach his open mouth, so they move to the couch, he lifts her (Whoo!), they fall back and she is on his lap. While he kisses her he pulls the hair away from her temples, strokes her face and pulls the hair taut, with hands that look like they would close around her throat. Someone: It’s past midnight! Twelve-oh-seven! Lydia’s back snaps straight. She and Joe leap away from each other, laughing riotously with tears in their eyes.

Does it ever get dark where you are? I wait two weeks for a response to my email, and no response comes. When I lie on the bed and cry, it is because I realize it never will.

Anton finds me. “I don’t want to live here,” I tell him, but I wonder if what I really mean is, I don’t want to live. In the

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Brooklyn years, I was terrified of the end of the world, of standing on the sidewalk while the planet broke in half and everything around me was tossed into space like a bag of feathers. Now, I love the idea of things ending—all earthly matter scattered into cool, blissful nothingness. How delicious, to be gone and disappeared and dead.

“You know the hill?” says Anton, stroking my head like it’s a kitten. He means the hill that leads to our building’s door, the one we have to climb in the mornings. “It’s not getting any easier to climb.”

“I know,” I say.

“When we’re thirty-five, forty, we’re going to hate the hill. I think I’ve already started to hate it.” I see the fine wrinkles around his eyes, the bulk of his belly. I close my eyes and think: Anton hates walking anywhere. He hates having to stand at crosswalks beside so many other human beings, shouldering heavy grocery bags that anywhere else in the world could have been hoisted into the backseat of some SUV. He hates cafés and museums and yellow cabs. He hates it here.

He says, “You know I like it here. But I would love to take our lives and bring them to a place that makes it easier for us to live them.”

Through the tears, I look up again at his face, the kind eyes and slow smile of the only person who really wants to love me. I think of a house wider than it is tall, with a doorbell and a brick porch, a mailbox with a metal flag, windows showing the promise of a white carpet and puffy reclining chairs. I think of deep, plush grass divided into squares by borders of cement. I kiss Anton and tell him how much I agree with him. I tell him that leaving here would be wonderful.