

DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN

RICHARD PRINS

December 31, 2013—2:00 AM

Venus wakes me up to look for her phone underneath the mattress. “I knew it was somewhere. How did the screen crack?”

“You were very drunk that night,” I remind her. She texted me saying she wanted to die. When I got home she was passed out with all her money on the bed.

“I was flying. I’m going to be a bat in my next life.”

I go back to sleep. She wakes me up again, shouting, “Where’s my damn charger? Someone I love is dying because I’m a witch.”

“Use my phone instead.” Since we broke up, I’m not supposed to ask questions about the people she’s fallen in love with, unless she wants to tell me about them. She’s pacing in the room between

the bedroom and the kitchen, leaving voicemails for friends and coworkers, begging them to call her back so she knows they’re safe. It’s dark out, so it must be somewhere between three and six in the morning. Now she’s wailing because her mother is dying in Zambia and won’t pick up the phone.

“What’s going on?” I wrap myself in a blanket as I climb out of the covers, even though she typically only objects to my naked body if it touches her naked body in bed. I lay a firm grip on her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me. Mommy, mommy, are you okay!” Tears are spurring out of her eyes; her mother is wishing her a happy new year. “Is my sister okay, is the baby okay?”

Everyone's safe and nobody's dying. I convince her to lie down. She takes off her clothes and asks me to hold her.

"Of course."

"And make love to me."

"Of course." It was only ten days ago we screwed all afternoon, exploding with repressed bitter passion, gasping how much we fucking loved each other the entire time. Since then, she won't let me kiss her cheek without a scolding. Her body pours into mine like a waterfall.

"Hold me first."

I plunge my hands into the muscles of her back; massages are the only physical contact I've been allowed all week.

"That's how I know you love me. You know my sore spots." As my grip travels and remembers the glossy touch of her bum, a hungering charge shoots through my spine and drives my mouth onto hers. "I can't trust you," she pushes me off and leaps out of bed. "I'm sending my boss a message."

"Not a good idea," I warn her, my ribs still quaking with anticipation.

"You don't know anything." She fires off a text and jumps back

into bed. "I'm terrified; death comes in threes."

"Who else died?"

"Couple friends of Mary."

Mary is Venus's step-sister, thirty-five years older than her, who also lives in Brooklyn. "I don't know who's next, but it's all my fault. I've been putting spells on people. My cards said it's the eagle. Help me. Who is the eagle?"

I ask if she remembers the time she had eagle eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember early on, when your eyes looked so sharp at night in my room? I said you had eagle eyes. Then the first time you told me you were in love with me, you said, 'Guess what my eagle eyes are telling you?'"

She nods; I can't tell whether she remembers. We were drinking a lot back then. I collect my thoughts and speak with calm force. "Don't you get it? You're the eagle. Which means you should focus on taking care of yourself right now."

"You're the eagle," she snaps. "You're always watching me. I don't want to be an eagle, I want to be a bat."

"I thought you're going to be a bat in your *next* life? Right now you're the eagle."

"You're so smart," her eyes gleam in the dark, pleased with my augury. "I'm glad you agreed to be my shaman."

December 31, 2013—8:00 AM

Venus still hasn't slept.

She swings open the door to the bedroom, naked and wet from the shower. She asks me for help with a cab; her cafe shift just started. I give her twenty dollars and decide not to point out that's already half her day's wages. I notice she has slid one of the drawers out of her dresser, emptied its contents on the couch, and left it upside-down on the coffee table. All her clothes are strewn across the floor. Her orange bicycle is blocking the doorway, collapsed on its side. The apartment looks like its enclosed spaces just held a projectile-vomiting contest.

December 31, 2013—2:00 PM

I sleep in. I find my laptop on the ironing board, which is on top of the stove in the kitchen. Venus is still logged into her Facebook account so I read her messages. At four in the morning, she sent

about twenty in a row to someone I don't know, asking if he's safe and apologizing for freaking out at his house; she loves him and will he be her kiss at midnight? She'd also like him to meet a dear new friend whose name begins with a K and ends with an O. She doesn't mean to be cryptic, but she has to be careful, because her mother or father is dying. He responded hours later with a single, perplexed question mark. I want to send her a message demanding to know when she's moving out. I found her a room in a rent-stabilized apartment for \$400/month, a miracle in this city, and it's walking distance from the Senegalese cafe where she's a barista. I already paid her January rent and since she won't fuck me anymore, I need to move on with my life. But as I start typing, I find myself becoming less angry; my message only begs her to get some rest and offers to help her move.

December 31, 2013—6:00 PM

Venus is home from work; I wasn't expecting her. "Do you have six dollars? I need to pay the beautiful driver."

My eyeballs bulge pure stress

at her. I dig a five and a single out of my wallet. She pays the cabbie and paces through the apartment. "How was work?" I try following her frenetic circles.

She explains that the cafe is a secret and exclusive cult, but they have finally decided to let her join it if she stops smoking marijuana and becomes a Muslim.

I agree she should stop smoking so much.

"And I need to stop getting down with ladies and go to church."

"Did they actually tell you any of this?"

"They were leaving me signs. Even Mary!" she claps her hands and howls with laughter. "Mary passed by in the afternoon and waved at me. I was like, Mary, you're in on this too! Maybe she and Khalid are getting married." Khalid is the floor manager; as far as I know, he has no relationship with Venus's half-sister. I suspect Mary was simply making sure Venus was safe after receiving one of her panicked 4AM voicemails. "He made me leave when my shift was over. He was just throwing his hands in the air and yelling, Venus, get some sleep and eat something, for God's sake!"

"You haven't eaten?" I feel my eyes dilating and my forehead wrinkling with concern. "Jesus, don't you work at a restaurant?"

"So I ran out the door and left my phone and tips. I was like, peace out!" She drops herself on the couch and her chest heaves with hilarity.

"Will you calm down for a second?" I still want her to tell me when she's moving out, but I sense that conversation won't happen tonight.

"I need to tell you something. No, wait, I don't."

"You can tell me anything."

"You won't put voodoo on me?"

"Never."

She darts a glance into the kitchen, then the bedroom. "Somebody's been putting voodoo on me."

"Not me."

"The whole day was a set-up! They were leaving signs so I would realize Pascal is my true love." Pascal is one of the other waiters, who asked if I was her new fuck-toy the last time I visited the cafe. "I've been in love with him all along because he's solid, he takes care of me. The New Year's party at the

cafe isn't a party, it's my wedding!"

"I thought you were going to take it easy tonight, sleep maybe?"

"I can't miss my wedding. But I'm terrified, Richard."

I tell her I'm terrified, too, because she hasn't slept or eaten and she thinks people are conspiring against her.

"Not *against* me," she sighs impatiently. "They're doing it *for* me, because it's love."

"You need to sleep. Would a massage help you nap?"

"Yes please." She moans softly, her nerves pliant in my hands. Within seconds, her moans are snores. I watch her breathing and hope she'll sleep through midnight.

January 1, 2014—10:30 AM

My phone vibrates on the windowsill. Three new messages.

Plz come and get me from Mary's we need to go brooklyn tabernacle plz

Sorry I'm ok

Happy new year

I text back that I'm happy she's okay and can we please talk later? Anger is throbbing in my temples as I stare at the next room and remember I can't walk to the

bathroom without stepping on her clothes. I grind my teeth back to sleep, but the phone redoubles its vibrating.

I souled my soul to devil

I need to talk to Jesus

Plz help me I need you to shave my head ASAP I need to be at church for 11:30

Plz!

The last thing I want to do this morning is get out of bed. The other last thing I want to do is walk forty minutes in the cold to Mary's house. I call. She doesn't pick up.

You read the bible what should I do

Can't speak on phone because bad company

I feel Mary might be the beast and I the antichrist but I sold my soul! I'm so serious!

I hopscotch across Venus' scattered wardrobe, now serving as my living room carpet, and sit on the frigid toilet seat. I compose a long message contending that the Bible doesn't treat a soul as something simple enough to be bought or sold and that the Brooklyn Tabernacle wouldn't be open on New Years morning anyway. My phone rings before I can hit send. Venus is screaming

that the apocalypse will happen, dammit, if I don't get her to church by 11:30. She hangs up. She calls again, but it's Mary's voice this time, stern but urgent. "Richard, I need you to come here immediately."

"I'm on my way." I flush the toilet and hope it isn't audible. "Just please tell Venus there's no apocalypse."

"This is not a time for reasoning. I'll see you in ten minutes."

I only have a weakling hangover, but my hands are shaking as I Google car services.

January 1, 2014—11:30 AM

When I get to Mary's apartment in Crown Heights, she wishes me a happy new year and tells me Venus just ran out the door. "I didn't realize how bad this had gotten." Her hair is more silver than I remember and she has a trace of tears on her right cheek.

"It wasn't this bad until yesterday," I suggest, hoping she doesn't think this is my fault.

"I was waiting for you to get here to call 911."

I bite my lip and nod solemnly, finally comprehending

that the woman I love doesn't need advice; she needs an ambulance.

"We should report her missing," Mary decides. "It's never safe having a crazy black woman loose in the streets."

Venus will certainly look crazy. She recently had the back of her head shaved in the shape of a heart, dyed golden. It was alarmingly stylish and sexy and made me want to hump her from behind with my hands on her fuzzy golden heart. Before running out of the apartment, Mary tells me, she was jabbing at the back of her head with a razor, convinced the heart was a satanic symbol. She was doing this without shaving cream, a mirror, or water. She was only wearing pajamas, a light coat, and a scarf. She had no money, no bicycle, and the Brooklyn Tabernacle is at least three miles away. Also, she collapsed this morning and banged her head on the refrigerator.

"Her boss called me to pick her up last night. Customers were complaining about her behavior. When I got there, she kept saying *I killed Richard, I killed Richard.*" Mary's eyes blink twice, reabsorbing the shock. "And I

believed her, I really believed you had argued and she stabbed you and left you in a pool of blood and now she was realizing, holy shit, I killed this white man whose parents have more money than God and they're going to lock me up forever."

I commit an awkward laugh, because that's what I do when I'm horrified. "She thought she killed a lot of people yesterday," I try to sound comforting, but only sound dismissive.

The doorbell buzzes. Venus staggers in with the skittish, disoriented glare of a drugged rabbit.

"Can I have a hug?" I spread my arms. The sight of her shoots me full of something like bereavement, a wound that only her touch can seal. "I'm glad you came back. You scared me."

She lifts her palms defensively. "I need to rest."

"We'll get you rest," Mary guides her into the living room, its tall windows inhaling winter sunlight. She seats Venus on the couch, which is where her daughter, who is Venus's age, usually sleeps. I glimpse her serrated golden heart, still clinging

like a flimsy orchid to the back of her head. It looks like her hair is falling out, discolored. Mary brings her socks, a sweater and sweatpants. "Your feet are freezing."

"I can dress myself, Mary." Venus musters an exasperated sigh. "I have a mother already. Won't this country stop trying to mother me." But she doesn't put on the clothes; we haven't told her what she will be dressing up for.

January 1, 2014—12:30 PM

My eyes leap toward the buzzing doorbell. Venus' eyes swirl with alarm. "Am I being put in a home?" Two police officers stroll in, their walkie-talkies gurgling. "Am I going to jail?"

"Welcome, officers." Mary projects her voice, calm and rhetorical. "Is my sister going to jail?"

"You do anything to go to jail for?"

Venus stares at them in fragile panic. Mary breaks the silence. "We think she needs to stay in a hospital for a little while."

Venus wraps her arms around her shoulders in squeamish resignation. Soon a pair of EMTs

ring the doorbell and ask for ID. Mary removes Venus's Green Card from her pyjama pocket and asks where her phone is.

"In the garbage."

Mary slides open the kitchen pantry.

"No," Venus points out the window, curling her finger with an imaginary splash. "A garbage can on Bedford Avenue."

In the elevator, descending towards the ambulance, Venus keeps changing her mind. First she wants me to ride with her, then she doesn't. "Just let Richard stay," Mary decides. "If he leaves and you want him again later, you won't be able to have him."

The woman who is not driving the ambulance holds up Venus' Green Card. "Is this you?"

"No, that's the devil."

"But your name is Vanessa?"

Venus scowls as if she's been smacked, then nods slowly, accepting the name she was born with. Who would believe her, now, that people actually call her Venus? On the consent form, she signs *The Devil*, then crosses it out and prints a shaky, deliberate *Vanessa*.

January 1, 2014—1:30 PM

"Possible suicidal ideations but no action plan," the EMT announces our arrival at Kings County Psychiatric Emergency Center. "She thinks she's the devil, but I think she'll be ok."

The dreadlocked security guard asks me to state my relationship to the patient while he collects my ID. "Ex-boyfriend; we still live together."

"I'll just say friend," trills a nurse with long blonde braided extensions and a surgical mask over her mouth. "And you're her mother?"

"Half-sister," Mary clarifies.

The nurse welcomes Venus to a seat and towers over her, tapping her pen on a clipboard. "You have insurance?"

"No."

"You allergic to anything?"

"Eggplant, once."

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Too much," she waves her head in a bewildered pattern, like an owl charting its flight. "I need sleep."

"You been here before?"

"I've seen her," the security guard barks from his desk.

"No, she's never been here before," I snap at him.

"Drug use?"

"I was smoking a lot of marijuana."

"How much?"

"Too much."

"Once, twice a day?"

"More."

"See a psychiatrist?"

"I was."

"How often?"

Venus looks at me for help.

"First it was twice a week, then it was once a week, then it was every other week." I like talking; I can explain everything. "He was a therapist, not a psychiatrist, and she stopped almost a year ago."

"You have his number, friend?" She pronounces 'friend' not as a term of endearment so much as a substitute for learning my name.

"It's in my phone," I point back at the lockers, where they made us store our possessions while they dressed Venus in a thin blue papery gown.

The nurse asks Venus if she has a diagnosis.

"My mother has high blood pressure, and I've been drinking

a ton of coffee at work, so I bet I have high blood pressure."

"I mean, did the psychiatrist say you had any disorder?"

"He thought I was depressed." I nearly laugh at the understatement; she hardly left the apartment for months after we returned from visiting her mother in Zambia. I remember the night I got her out to a party. She drank too much and told a stranger, in tears, that she no longer loved me. She broke up with me as I shepherd her out the door, and took it back the next morning; that happened several more times until I broke up with her.

"You take medication?"

"No."

"Scars from surgery?"

She points at three childhood stitches on her right cheek. "I had an abortion. They didn't cut me."

"Are you sleeping, eating?"

"Not enough."

"Sexual abuse?"

"Yes."

"When were you abused?"

Was it a family member?"

"I only abused myself." Venus looks into my anguished, glassy eyes. "Richard, I think you should leave now."

“Wait in the next room, friend,” the nurse waves me towards the waiting room.

I sit directly beneath the television so I don’t have to watch an episode of CSI. I feel self-pity welling in my eyelids. My last ex was murdered. The one before that attempted to overdose on sleeping pills a month after we broke up. *Why is my love a curse?* I want to ask the rangy man who walks in with corn rows and a twitchy basketballer’s strut, taking the seat across from me. He speaks first, “You in detox?”

“Nah,” I raise my wrist as if the pink visitor’s bracelet is a badge of honor. “My ex had a breakdown.”

“Breakdown?” He lifts a skeptical eyebrow; *white people problems*, I can feel him thinking.

“Yeah, like a nervous breakdown. Happy new year, right?”

“Amen.” He falls asleep and continues sleeping through a shrieky fire alarm that none of the staff seem to notice.

January 1, 2014—2:30 PM

The nurse wakes me from my nap and leads me to Venus, who is seated at a table, surrounded by

mattresses with sliding curtains. “Look who I brought you!” she croons in a voice that’s sticky with patronizing sweetness.

“But I’m not nice,” Venus is mumbling, tugging on her translucent wristband, which reads *Vanisa*. “And my birthday is evil.”

“Why don’t you like birthdays?” I use my two-year-old voice, playful and dumbstruck that anyone wouldn’t like a birthday party.

She unleashes a riotous, intoxicating giggle and plants her cheek on the table. “Oh, I love you.”

My cheek lands on the table a moment after hers, laughing through a fresh film of tears as our eyes pour helplessly into each other. “I love you, too.”

“You’re such a joker. I have to ask you.”

“Ask me what?”

“No. I can’t.”

I take her hands in mine and assure her, “You can ask me anything.”

Her smile carves open her cheeks with brightness. “Will you marry me?”

I let go of her hands and my eyes flash their wounds. She sees my pain and pounds the table with

both fists, shouting, "Fuck, you're the only one who's there for me in the craziness! Like motherfucking ghostbusters, who am I gonna call! And you're the one I'm leaving, it makes no sense!"

She stands up and walks to the next table, taking long strides as if stepping over lava. Fortunately, Mary is returning with the nurse, who wants to take Venus' blood. They disappear behind one of the sliding curtains.

Mary sits across from me with a penetrative intensity in her eyes. "Tell me, Richard, how does it feel to be so good-looking?"

I commit one of my awkward laughs, tug on my beard and consider her question. "I can't remember the last time I felt good-looking."

"Oh really?" she challenges me with arched eyebrows.

I worry I've sounded arrogant, blasé. "Not that I go around feeling ugly all day. Just that I'm more aware of looking eccentric than anything else, and I think that's how most people relate to me."

"How interesting. We'll have to talk about where Venus goes when she's out of here. I don't think it should be with you."

"Agreed. That was stressful." I quickly add, "I mean, for her, too," so it doesn't seem I'm simply washing my hands of a loony ex.

"Let's not be martyrs. There's no space in my apartment. But the apartment you found her, it has strangers and cockroaches and she said it's a mess."

"Plus she'd have to make rent. I don't think she can go back to work."

"What about Zambia? All I know about her mother is she's my age. Oh, and she's a nurse, that helps."

I suck whistly air through the gap in my front teeth. "Zambia's complicated. Going back was disturbing for her, because she realized how severed those relationships were, but didn't have time to rebuild them." I pause to imagine Venus living on another continent. The thought of never seeing her again is unspeakably painful, yet it would make everything so simple. "If she went back for longer, maybe it could be different. She lost her passport, though."

The nurse brings Venus back to us. "I weigh 144 pounds," she announces, staring at her

flat stomach and rapidly-deflating breasts as if they aren't her own. "Where did I go?" She weighed 190 before we broke up. I knew she had become skinny, but didn't realize she'd been shedding fifteen pounds a month. I speak with a doctor and describe her recent mania, her previous depression, our prolonged breakup, and my opinion that coming to America at the age of twelve was the experience in her life which could most clinically be described as traumatic. Behind me, nurses are screaming at the only other patient in the observation room, demanding that he stop hitting them. I feel relieved that Venus is here; when she doesn't come home I won't have to wonder whose bed she's sleeping in. We can both rest.

January, 2014

An obese adolescent, androgynous with baby fat, is jogging in slow-motion down the hallway, arms pumping, chanting, "Chugga-chugga-chugga-chugga!"

"I know who you want!" a young female patient chirps when she sees me; yesterday she was staring at us through the window of the visitors' lounge. "She's in

group. I'll get her."

I entertain the pleasant idea that the other patients are jealous of Venus for my visits. The nurse taps her manicured thumb beside each box on the sign-in sheet. "Your name. Patient's name. The date. The time. Your relationship." My hand is shaky; I skid the pen across her thumbnail and leave a slim blue dash. She jerks her hand away, peeved. "I can't read that. What did you write?"

"Roommate. We were living together."

I've brought Venus a spinach and egg-white wrap, plus a couple changes of clothes. The nurse places each item on the table and makes sure they don't have drawstrings. Venus inspects them, too. "I need fresh clothes. Take these home and wash them."

I want to snap that her clothes would be fresher if they hadn't spent the last few days on my living room floor. The nurse speaks first. "There's a washing machine here. Wash it yourself." She opens the spinach wrap and confiscates the wrapping. "Tin foil isn't allowed."

I wonder why; are they afraid Venus will make herself a hat out

of it?

"We were building the solar system in group therapy. Ms. Betty was in charge and Ciara was my partner." Her eyes have come alive. She seems to be having fun in this place. I find that disconcerting but it makes me want to kiss her. "I slept well last night, without the meds."

"They didn't give you meds?" my eyes dilate with concern.

"I refused them. Not unless they show me exactly what I'm taking and why and what the side effects are. I mean damn, how can I heal if I'm just drugging myself?"

"Drugging yourself is smoking weed all day and binge-drinking. This is different."

"You're going to lecture me about drinking, with that liquor on your breath?"

I decide telling her it's just a couple beers isn't much of a comeback.

"Deactivate my Facebook, please," she swats the back of her head. "This damn heart is my profile picture."

"What's wrong with your heart?"

"It's the mark of the beast and they won't give me a razor. If

I can't get it off my head, I need to get it off the internet."

"If you give me your password."

"Change your password, too; I know it."

I chuckle forgivingly. "You've been reading my messages, haven't you?"

"And I need to get rid of my bike."

"Why?"

"She's my slut marker.

Everyone in Crown Heights sees the orange and knows a loose woman is riding through."

"Don't say that." I wince. "All you did was sleep around after a breakup. Come to think of it, that was probably the most normal thing you did all month."

She looks out the window. "Is the world ending out there?"

"Nope. Just a blizzard." My socks are damp, my jacket slick with melted snow.

"Is anyone dead?"

"We're all safe."

"And Beyonce's alive?"

"Still kicking."

"Bloomberg?"

"Him, too, but we have a new mayor, thank god."

She sighs and explains that

when she was young in Zambia, her greatest fear was going to hell. She used to stare at the mirror and convince herself that 666 was inscribed on her forehead. "And now I know I was right, because New Year's Eve I signed my name on a free ticket to the party at the cafe. A customer showed me the *Married To Jesus* sticker on her dress and asked if I knew what it meant. I told her yes, but really I didn't. Then one of my favorite customers, the happy old man who hates cigarettes, he was walking out with tears in his eyes because he saw me selling my soul. So my first night here with all the people suffering behind the curtains? I knew it was me who put them there. And you and Mary were suffering too, plus maybe my mother, and the only way I could save you all was running out naked and screaming. But when I saw my face in the mirror I didn't have any eyes, because I'm Medusa and I keep killing people. Anyway, now I'm sad that when the world ends I won't get to be with my grandmother. You're all going to see me on Judgment Day lined up with Jezebel and the other whores, and Jesus will dump us in the

fucking flames." She bites her lip and shakes her head, disappointed by her fate. "Dammit, I need to stop cursing."

"This is why you need to take the meds." I'm squeezing at my forehead, trying to unwrinkle the strain I feel there. "You have to realize your mind was totally severed from reality when all this happened, or you'll never get out of here." As soon as the words escape my mouth, it strikes me, *She could be trapped here forever.*

"You know me better than anyone else in the world, Richard, so I need you to believe me. I really, really sold my soul. I mean, why would the old man have tears in his eyes unless I sold my soul?"

"Old men cry for lots of reasons. Thinking their waitress sold her soul usually isn't one of them."

"Bring me a Bible next time. I need to learn more about this."

Typical Venus. For three years she treats my withering faith with a blend of disinterest and amusement, but as soon as we break up, she up and finds Jesus. She's never made any sense. *She's like a poem*, my heart reminds me, *she doesn't have to make sense. A*

piece of floss has been stuck in my teeth since last night. I need pliers to remove it, but I couldn't find them in the epic mess we've made of the apartment. I resisted the urge to call Venus in the hospital to ask where they might be. I don't know how to live alone. The persistent tickle of the frayed strand brushing my gums makes me want to nag her one more time. "The Book of Revelation is the last thing you should be reading if you're off the meds."

"But they don't even have a diagnosis for me, so how are they medicating me, right?"

"You had a psychotic episode. They diagnosed that much in a second. But they can't decide what to do about it if they can't stabilize you."

"Stop talking about this." A sudden smile blooms in her face, a plea for tenderness. "Aren't you here to cheer me up?"

"No, I'm coming here in the middle of a goddamn blizzard because I want you to get better." My voice is stern, cracking with the effort of sounding earnest. "I want you to have all the happiness I could never give you." I'm tearing up again, too easily. "You really

scared me, and I think you scared yourself, too."

Now Venus is laughing at me, her body convulsing as she fans herself theatrically with the sandwich bag I brought her. "I'm sorry, but it's just too funny when you get sad. You wanna crack the whip now that I'm in the hospital? Where the hell were you when I needed it?"

I want to shout that I'm definitely not here to reenact our foulest moments together. I want to insist that I tried, dammit, I tried so hard to help her. As usual, I check myself. "We failed. Let's face it. This isn't the time or place to reminisce about our relationship."

"Our relationship?" She claps her hands like a hyperventilating seal. "Our relationship is why I'm here in the first place, so fuck you."

My jaw is a bear trap that's been stepped on, triggered, but won't snap shut. The nurses stop talking and stare at us. Silence engulfs the room so they return to chatting in Haitian Creole.

"And fuck this city, too. Does my mom know I'm here?"

"Mary called her."

"I need to go home again."

"You can't go home again."

You need a passport.”

“I could commit a crime and they’ll deport me.”

“You’re a permanent resident. They’ll put you in jail.”

“So then I’ll kill myself.”

“Don’t say that.” I whirl my chair ninety degrees and bury my forehead in my palm. “You know how much it hurts me when you say that. I’ve told you too many times not to say that.”

“And you never listened. I told you I wanna drink bleach and you just read your blogs and sighed and slurped your beer.”

“No, you never listened. I told you I wasn’t a doctor and you needed real help. So here you are. Let them help you.”

Our jaws tense and grind as we glare at each other; the glare grips us and welds our irises together. We’re both right and we fucking hate it. Venus breaks the gaze and slaps her thighs, suddenly businesslike and dismissive. “I think we’re done here.”

We stand up and walk in opposite directions, the burn still snapping in our eyes.

January, 2014

Venus spends two weeks in

the hospital. On her last day, she is given a single-ride MetroCard and told her preliminary diagnosis is schizophreniform disorder. She rides the bus halfway to my house, but finds the experience intense and decides to walk the rest of the way. She arrives soaked in rain and excited that the streets smell of pine. Five mornings later, she is wearing my pink kneelength dashiki. I’m naked and my hands are shaking. “Why are you still here?”

“Are you blind? I’m packing.” She slashes her hand toward the couch I slept on, strewn with the multicolored zippers she uses to make necklaces.

One of my legs is in my pants. “You’ve been packing all week.” As far as I can tell she’s been moving her possessions from room to room, composing messes and cleaning them up, mocking the Sisyphean task of separating our lives.

“Don’t come at me with attitude!” Her shoulders are tensed, quivering like mine with defensive rage. “I just wanted to sleep next to you. I feel safe when I sleep next to you.”

“You promised you’d be

gone.” She promised to go to her new apartment before I got home, which came after the promise to leave before I left home, which came after the promise to leave by 2 p.m., which was immediately after I asked her to leave by 1 p.m., but shortly before we made love twice and napped, a pattern that kept us precariously entangled all week. I came home drunk and found her asleep, cradling one of my dashikis in her arms like a stuffed animal. I took off my clothes and crawled on her, all my skin thirsting for song. Now I have one dirty sock on, which feels like a position for negotiating. “Can you be gone in thirty minutes?”

“I’m not dressed or showered.”

“You have your own fucking apartment to shower in,” I snap, suddenly enraged by the sight of this woman who thinks my shower is hers. I tie my shoelaces in a furious knot. “And your own room to sleep in. You know, the one I paid your fucking rent on?”

“You’re only saying that because I wouldn’t let you screw me last night.”

Our faces are blazing with truth. We are both hyperventilating

and we could pounce on each other at any second. I pick up the glass of water she’s poured for herself. It squirms like a frog in my palm so I snap my wrist and hurl it, hitting one of the empty cardboard boxes stacked by the front door. The glass doesn’t break, but Venus gawks at me like I just smashed it in her face.

“I was thirsty.” I shrug, and stomp my foot on the unbroken glass. My lungs burst open as the shards crackle. “Don’t waste time sweeping that up. Just don’t be here when I get back.”

“But where are you going?”

“How the hell would I know?”

Outside, no longer wrapped in her presence, my body feels wildly exposed to the unfamiliar gusts of morning. I flash a disheveled smile at the crossing guard so she won’t think I’m trying to abduct her charges. I’ll ride the subway to Coney Island, and there I will be free. But it’s fucking freezing and I’m not wearing underwear so maybe I won’t stroll on the beach. The F train comes right away and there’s a seat, orange and cold as a creamsicle on my butt. The woman sitting across from me laughs at the book she’s reading

with her head tossed back. She catches me looking at her but I have no idea what my eyes convey; are they coy, curious, or bloodshot and pulsing with a residual fury? She throws herself back into the book, tipping the cover so I can see it's *Americanah*, the new Adichie novel. I lent my copy to Venus a month ago and she has no idea what happened to it. I have no idea what happened to us, no idea how she'll survive on her own or how I'll survive without her. The train rises above ground at Ditmas Ave, causing me to reach automatically for my phone. But my pocket is empty. No phone, no keys. I forgot to pocket the damn things, rushing out of the house. I've locked myself out. That means I have to get off the train, ride it backwards and ring my own doorbell. I have to take a deep breath and hope Venus is still home.