

A FEW GOOD HOURS OF DAYLIGHT

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I book the flight after the birches and boxwoods have shivered off their leaves, after the snow plows have mounded gray mush embankments along the sidewalks and storm drains. I've begun sticking my face in an LED light box and cupping Vitamin D capsules in my chapped palms to swallow with my first sip of coffee. For three brilliant weeks, the hillsides along the highways are ablaze all up the New England coast, and then a breeze rolls through, a candle is extinguished, and we hibernate for winter. I turn on lamps when I wake up and draw the curtains closed against the chill and the dark. A boxy metal AM/FM radio balances on my kitchen windowsill. It stays tuned to NPR. I twist the volume dial and lean a hip against the counter as the coffee drips. The broadcast fills my studio, the voices like old friends. It's a jolt when Renée Montagne goes off the air, but then I get used to Rachel Martin's voice. I weep when Cokie Roberts dies.

I belt my bathrobe tighter and knot my hair atop my head whenever I hear a mention of Syria. I open my laptop and click refresh on my emails to see if there is anything from Mac. He doesn't write every day. There is another woman in the picture, Melanie, a wife he is trying to slough off. He says it will be dealt with by the time he comes home. Mac tells me about the proceedings from a shipping container that he lives in and shares with another medic. They are on opposite shifts, so we have miraculous, delicious privacy for our calls. I don't feel like the other woman. I had him first. We have a longer history.

This morning, no word from Mac. On NPR, they're saying Icelanders are gathering in parkas and ski hats on the dark shores of an ancient lava bed to commemorate the death of a glacier. Methane gas

previously dormant in the Arctic permafrost is being released into the atmosphere because of the icemelt. I read an article about it on the *National Geographic* website. I click through photos taken off the coast of Reykjavík. Half-drowned boats tethered to shipwrecked concrete, birds bobbing in the currents. Tourists in pea coats loading onto decommissioned coast guard ships to see the orcas, binoculars looped around their necks. In one photo, a child zippered into a red down puffer jacket is licking an ice cream cone on a cold rocky beach. I am moved. I feel there is something going on here I want to be a part of. The newscast is saying you have to go see the ice chunks before there aren't ice chunks anymore. The glaciers are melting. Pretty soon, everything will be underwater.

I walk a mile uphill to class, slogging through the wet snow. I used to take the bus, but I want to be svelte and sleek and smooth to the touch when Mac comes home. Melanie was born in 1998, eleven years after me, on the brink of Y2K, when I was first learning to wand mascara on my eyelashes, wad up toilet paper to pad my trainer bra, snake two saliva-slicked fingers down my throat. I'm thirty-two and I feel good, I've stopped with the binging and the flushing, the delicate dabbing of the mouth with hand towels, the red eye drops to mend the broken blood vessels. But fuck. She doesn't have a single line on her face. She has athlete's shoulders, striated, shaped like delicate gourds.

On campus, I teach an English class and I attend an English class. In between, I buy a paper cup of coffee in the drafty basement of the stone building and look at white marble sculptures and think about Mac. He calls me that night. It is tomorrow already in Syria, and he is drinking coffee, decaf, because he means to go back to bed. He has the day off. His team is going out on a big mission soon, forty-eight hours without sleep, so they've been given time to rest up. He got my package. I'd sent just the right things. How did I know? He looks at me tenderly on FaceTime and my heart feels big and red and sloppy in my chest. I'd found Melanie's Pinterest boards and seen that she was sending themed boxes, decorated with multi-colored construction paper. He says how silly it was, she was so young, a child, didn't know him at all,

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and now here I was sending plain brown boxes, wrapping gifts in parchment paper and twine, dispatching useful things to the other side of the world, sharpeners for pocket knives and clear booze smuggled in contact lens solution bottles, carabiners and single-serve packets of freeze-dried cobbler from REI that he could heat up over a camp stove, because I've been deployed before, I know how it is, I know what he needs, and god it feels good to be with a grown woman, he doesn't want a papier-mâché package with gummy worms inside, glued together in a single blob.

Mac asks me what I am doing with my winter break from grad school, almost two months, Jesus Christ, so much time off, and I tell him that I am going to Iceland. I don't know where this comes from. It's not true. I haven't even looked at tickets, and I can't be spending money on a fancy trip. I've made myself house-poor. I have a notched brick wall running the length of my studio, and a fireplace, and enough light in the summer to where my spider plants keep growing new heads, Medusas tentacling fresh green tubers out over the mantle piece, bright green and tender as frog bellies. My bed frame is a platform made out of freight pallets and propped up off the floor with book stacks. What I want to say is, I spend eighteen-hundred dollars a month on this studio and I am going to sit in this studio and I am going to read the Smithsonian and 1940s copies of *Vogue* and play records and not get properly dressed, walk barefoot on the plank floorboards and shave my legs twice a day in the bath and scrub my skin pink and wear slippers and big shirts and eat cake for breakfast and hop around to boutique exercise classes where the first session is free and never go back and never pay and that is how I am going to pass two months.

But I understand that Melanie is boring. Mac told me as much. She doesn't like to go skiing or kayaking with him. She went to community college and works the graveyard shift as a nurse and she likes to spend her weekends on the couch watching reruns of *Friends*. So I tell him about the icemelt. I tell him about the lava beds. And then I find myself telling him I've booked tickets, I can't wait to go, I can't wait to strap crampon over my boots and hike ice cliffs, clamber down steel chain ladders, eat fish grilled on flat stone over an open flame on a

black beach, meet backpacker friends in a hostel and go on expeditions and hunch over hot pots and drink whiskey near the freezing turquoise seafoam of the Arctic circle and watch the northern lights play across the sky. I say something about an aurora of photons, opposing magnets forced together, creating explosions of light. He tells me this is why I'm different, this is why he loves me so much, I'm the only woman he can imagine exploring the universe with.

I find round-trip tickets for three hundred dollars out of JFK. I book them on a credit card. The air-line charges almost two hundred dollars for anything bigger than a Jansport, so I select no, no proper luggage, thank you, I'll only need a personal item. The night before I leave, I spread out my belongings on my bed. I Google "Iceland packing list." Parka, wool socks, beanie, swimsuit, gloves. I read on a travel blog that the key to getting good photos is to wear bright colors because everything in Iceland is gray and black and wheat color. Pack royal blues and canary yellows to stand out. I want to have enough clothes to make it look like I'm not traveling light. Pack leggings, one blog says. They take up minimal space. Neoprene keeps you warm and rolls up tight. Bulkier items you can wear on the plane. A sweater and a hoodie and a vest and a windbreaker over it and a snow jacket atop that. Long johns under a pair of jeans. Two pairs of socks and snow boots.

Five weeks later, I'm cruising over the dark waters of the Atlantic at night. I sent Mac a message on WhatsApp before the cabin closed, a selfie, chin tilted, a smug closed-mouth smile. I'm glad no one I know was at the airport to witness me going through the TSA line, peeling off my layers one-by-one and stuffing them in first one bin, then two, three, and finally a fourth. But Mac doesn't know that. I've divested myself of my extra layers and stuffed them in the overhead compartment, and I am wearing a Patagonia sweater that matches my eyes, and my hair is freshly cut like how Melanie wishes her hair was cut. It is angled along my jaw, longer in front than in back. I have this over her, my thick hair. Hers is fine and staticky. All of the haircuts she's pinned online are in this style, a long bob, loose curls, highlights. Mac loves my hair. I doze off and wake up when the flight attendants deliver trays of corned beef and

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potatoes, packaged in little cardboard boxes and sealed in plastic. There are miniature cheesecakes for dessert. The cutlery is made of flat slats of wood like tongue depressors, with little grooves for scooping and spooning and stabbing, recyclable. I eat and then go back to sleep.

We land in Reykjavík at seven in the morning. The airport is out past the city, on a wide-open stretch of lunar landscape. The sky is still black. I slide the window shade up halfway and peer out, see the thin, lit-up veins of highways fissuring out into the darkness. There are orbs of light every so often, petrol stations cratered into the roads like little space stations.

The Fiat I rented vibrates when I maneuver into fourth gear on the highway. I have time to kill before my bed opens up at the hostel. I drive around the half-moon of the bay. The city blinks on the water. Hills in the distance hump up out of the channel like sleeping dogs. This far north, my guidebook says to expect only a few good hours of daylight. It reminds me of when I lived in a small mountain town in northern Idaho, before I moved to New York but after I'd gotten out of the Air Force, an in-between phase, before things worked out for me. I would go lap swimming in the mornings at the YMCA, then dress for the day in the locker room, emerge through the front doors into the empty parking lot, hair wet on my collar, temporarily blind in the predawn after an hour under glaring fluorescence. I'd drive to the pub where I bartended the early shift, our patrons mostly ER nurses and truckers. I'd mix a Bloody Mary or a Tom Collins and look out the window and never know if it was twilight or eight a.m.

I loop back and forth along narrow cobbled streets in my Fiat. There aren't any people about. I think of them all sleeping in their apartments above bakeries and flower shops. I stop at a cafe that has a neon sign in the window and purchase a cheese danish and a coffee, black. It is served in bone-white china with a saucer. Bells on the door jingle any time someone goes in or out. I settle into a tufted tweed chair draped in sheepskin and try to connect to Wi-Fi. There is a magazine on the table, printed in English, Shetland ponies on the cover. Inside are advertisements for expeditions that take tourists to see the arctic foxes and

puffins, the green fjords and water-falls.

Nothing from Mac. I check Instagram. Melanie has a makeup page where she sells creams and powders and mascaras for some company. She has the face for it. Poreless skin and plump lips and a symmetrical nose. She posts tutorials about her regimen. I watch her swirl blush from a tiny pot and dab it on her cheeks, smear concealer under her eyes, use a sponge to blend the colors. Her face is exquisite, her palate cleaved in below her cheekbones. I lurk on a fake account that she maybe knows is mine. We're aware of each other. She and Mac got in a fight once over me, after they got married. They were at a ski resort in Colorado and Melanie had gone to bed. Mac was with his buddies in the living room and was telling them about me, that I was so smart, got out of the Air Force to be a writer. I was going to a big school now. He said maybe he was still in love with me, that he had regrets. Melanie was brushing her teeth around the corner and heard. They had a fight. It was magnificent. It was like Pompeii. Things shattered. When he told me about this, I felt serene, like I had won.

I close my laptop and look out the window. It's ten a.m. and I can just see orange and pink brushstrokes starting to leak across the horizon, white plaster houses with clay-shingled roofs. Boxy flat-faced buses run on hydrogen fuel, exhaling steam emissions when they brake. There are deep-bellied oil rigs sailing into harbor, chain link fences along the marina, an old machine shop in the corner of a shipyard. There is a man on a bike cycling along a concrete pathway, an empty baby seat clamped to a mount behind him. He is pedaling grim-faced into the wind.

I think of Mac in the cold. His beard. His flannel. The time he came home from Iraq in the dead of winter. He was going to get cinnamon rolls for us, but the Volvo's battery had died. He walked a mile in jeans to get a new one. He lugged it home. He got the old one out but couldn't get the new one to cooperate. One of the screws was stripped. He spent hours working at it. I watched from the window. I wanted to say we didn't need cinnamon rolls, we could call Triple A, it was okay, come inside, your hands, your poor freezing hands. I watched him slide out from under the car, snow on the back of his Carhartt. He took a hammer

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to the hood. He pounded and pounded until it was stippled with dents. He beat the shit out of it. Then he came back inside. We never spoke of it. I called the insurance company and said it was hail, and we got it fixed, and we went on as if nothing had happened. Nothing at all.

The hostel is a brick three-story that used to be a biscuit factory, situated on a busy four-lane road on the lip of the bay. I bring my backpack inside and find my way to my room. I've got a bed for the night inside a twenty-person room, ten bunks, coed. There are a few people lodged in their cubbies, scrolling on their phones. I want to talk to Mac, but he is gone on his mission and I won't be able to get ahold of him for a couple of days. I'll be getting ready to head home when he can connect to Wi-Fi again. I told him I'd keep an eye on the news, but I wouldn't worry. I'd be off having fun. I'd wish he was there the whole time.

My socks are damp from footsweat and snow, and I peel them off and lay them on the radiator under the window. They smell like sour onions, and a girl on the bottom bunk across from me looks at me and then at my socks. She doesn't say anything, but I take them down and put them in a plastic grocery bag. I try to take a nap. My eyes ache in their sockets. The mattress is lumpy under my hip. I long for home, for my fluffy bath towels, for the hot water I can run all day because my landlord is paying my water bill. I can live for free in my apartment for weeks if I have to. I can boil rice and use up all my canned beans and pot-
ted meat. I can eat saltines with hot sauce and drink tea and go to bed early.

I can't fall asleep. The radiator is making ghost noises. I spritz rosewater on my face to calm myself down. It doesn't help. I go to the window and see skiffs cruising along the shoreline, dragging weighted settling under my breastbone, like I've swallowed battery acid. I collect my toiletries and leave to find the bathroom. The shower is a big open room with eight heads sticking out of the walls, four on either side. My flip flops make a squeaking noise on the wet tile. The water gets warm but not hot, and I find myself shivering. I try another shower head and then another, until I find the best one, the farthest one, in the corner.

Perhaps it is closest to the water heater. The trick I find is to wiggle the handle and turn it the opposite direction for cold, and leave the lever three-quarters of the way into the blue line. The heat feels good on my shoulders. I'm standing in a shallow pool collecting at the bottom of the slope, near the drain. I see dark long hairs floating on the surface. Another woman walks in and turns the handle of a shower head across from me. She's stripped naked, unconcerned. We used to shower like this in Afghanistan, big open spaces in green canvas tents, but that was years ago, and I was younger then. I turn off my shower and squeak out of the tile room into the holding area where there are toilets and sinks and wooden benches to keep your things dry. I didn't have room to pack a towel, and the hostel charges ten kronar per day to rent one. I use my dirty clothes to wipe down my body and then put fresh clothes on, but they stick to my half-wet skin and I feel mossy, gangrenous.

I leave to find food, on foot, thinking I will experience the city differently this way. I walk along the curb of the highway, one foot in front of the other in a straight line, and for twenty minutes it feels like I have no idea where the city is, I could be on the fringe of nowhere, there are the cars speeding along and it smells of putrefied shark meat and I wonder where everyone is, where they are going, where all of the things are that happen in this city. Then suddenly I'm back in a tourist area, with restaurants and shops. I stop at a little place with tea candles and plastic houndstooth tablecloths. On the menu are beef cheeks, lumpfish roe, sunchokes, and I feel heartened to see fancy things available to order. Those kinds of meals, even the bottom-shelf ones, are fifty-five kronar. I order the fish stew from the appetizer column. When I'm finished, the waitress brings me a little glass dish of tapioca.

I walk around the neighborhood and see an advertisement for a planetarium. The banner says that for only twenty kronar you can go inside a big amphitheater and see the northern lights. It promises an unreal experience, an immersive audio and visual journey into the heart of Iceland, projected on an overhead dome in high resolution, accompanied by booming surround sound. I walk back to the hostel. It is nearly dark again, though it is only four p.m. I don't go inside. I hop in

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the Fiat and navigate to the planetarium. The air inside is chilled, like a refrigerator. There are fold-down cushion seats like in a movie theater. I sit down and there is hardly anyone around. It feels like a hollow steel colosseum.

I haven't seen Mac in two years. All of our lovemaking and promises have been over FaceTime. I think about the last date we went on. We had gone to the zoo. We were drinking gin out of Nalgenes. We stopped to watch the fish. It was summertime but it was so cold inside by the tanks, like I was in the produce section of the grocery store, and I could feel the hairs on my legs standing upright in their follicles. We were tipsy. The aquariums were backlit by a blue glow. I could hear my voice echoing up into the rafters, into empty chambers of air, the acoustics all sound and void, like organ music in a stone church. The stingrays and eels and dragon fish moved against the tank, illuminated like stained glass. We got fish and chips from a food truck to soak up the booze and Mac drove us home on the back roads.

I lean back in my seat and I stare up at the dome. I can see the big dipper. I look for Orion. I think this is meta, so meta, it's funny, experiencing the northern lights like this, blue and green alien alchemy projected in a cold vacuum capsule in Iceland. And I think this is the way things are sometimes. I taste salt at the corners of my mouth and lick my lips and realize I am crying.

The next day, I try to gather myself and carry courageously on. I slept poorly. I fold up my clothes and stuff them in my bag and dismantle the nest that I created on my bottom bunk. I take a heel of bread from the hostel kitchen and smear butter on it and leave for the day. The Fiat feels lived in, paper cups of coffee and crumbs and little wrappers and napkins.

The guidebook says you have to travel the Golden Circle. That's where all of the things are that you're supposed to look at. I travel east from Reykjavik into the Nordic tundra, past volcanic plateaus and basalt columns, balconies of stone terraced like wedding cake. It is gray and vast and cold. I feel as though I am tunneling through a gravebed of

Vikings. I stop in a sleepy seafaring town to get lunch and connect to Wi-Fi. There is a hotel on the far point of a narrow isthmus. From a corner booth in the restaurant, I can see a gray stretch of beach. A waitress serves me beer in a stein rimmed with salt. I eat palmfuls of nuts while I wait for my cottage pie.

Melanie has been active on Instagram today. She got a new shipment in from her beauty company. She is unwrapping the package on video using her front-facing camera, slicing the tape with a long manicured fingernail, folding back the cardboard flaps and smoothing them down on the sides. She pulls out packages of lip balm, ten in a set. Vials of eye cream and cleanser and toner. There is a sale now that the holidays are over, the company has extra inventory and all these goodies, do you see these goodies she says, well can you believe it, they are going at a discounted rate. So cheap. You will save so much money.

I recognize the fleur-de-lis on the backsplash behind her in the video. She is filming in the kitchen. She is supposed to get out soon. She's been fighting with Mac about it, even though he owned the house before they got married, and her name isn't on the paperwork. Mac is trying not to get lawyers involved, but Melanie's parents are insistent that she needs to put up a fight, that she can't trust Mac to come up with the plan to divvy things up, that he's trying to pull one on her, that it won't be fair. What Mac wants to do is pay off her car and give her sixty percent of their savings and be done with her, but they are still quibbling over it.

Melanie has such lovely thin hands. She is not wearing her wedding ring anymore. She announces a giveaway for a cuticle cream. You have to like the post and tag three friends. I hate her. I hate her and I want to be her friend. I want to fly to where she lives and I want to stake out her grocery store and I want to run into her on accident in the soup aisle and I want to read what her face says when she recognizes me. I want to ask her how it was for her with Mac. Did he call her lover? Did he say he was going to put babies in her and did she feel a warmth travel up her brainstem when she pictured a tiny embryo barnacled up in her uterus? Did he get sangria-drunk with her on summer nights after going to see the

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minor league baseball team play, and did he stay up late in the kitchen playing cards with her? Did he say he was going to tickle their children and toss them in the snow and build her a house in the mountains and run away with her forever and build her fires every night and kiss her like they were fools in love did he did he did he.

All of the Instagram girls are going to The Blue Lagoon. It is the place to be. It is like an ancient Roman bathhouse, with geothermally heated pools and healing water, and also sort of like Las Vegas, the swim-up bars, fluffy robes, mud masks, massages. Women get photos looking like slippery sexy bitches in their one-piece cutout swimsuits and steam rising up all around them, gel manicures encircling Grey Goose martinis, emerald glaciers in the distance. But it costs two hundred kronar and is in the other direction, towards the airport, and you have to buy tickets in advance. I Google if there are other hot springs, and find one that is naturally-occurring, free, just a bit of a hike, thirty kilometers away. The water will cure baldness, arthritis, jet lag. I download the map on my phone.

I find myself trudging up a muddy trail, hobbling along crag, razor-back ridges, snowcapped sum-mits, bubbling cauldrons that smell like eggs. I picture aqueducts of water and gas and sediment running underground. I know I've found the hot spring when I see bralettes and panties flung over low scrubby bushes off the side of the trail, edges lifted in the wind. I change behind a wooden privacy screen someone has built and slip into the water. Wet tongues of hair cling to my cheeks like seaweed. The water is warm as broth. A group of French ladies are floating in the water, old, naked, wrinkled, laughing. It begins to snow.

There is another girl who seems to be alone. I find out her name is Evulka. She's from the Czech Republic and is working at an inn for the winter in a town a few hours away, changing bedsheets and setting tables. She owns a little cottage in a village outside of Prague, near her family, and renovates it in the summers with help from friends and YouTube, then spends the bulk of the year earning money working odd jobs in other countries. She was given a week off from the inn and spent it hitchhiking along the highway, to see the rest of Iceland. I think my luck has turned and I ask if she needs a ride. She says it is a long way and

maybe I don't want to drive that far, but I feel invigorated with purpose and possibility. I tell her I have nothing better to do and let's get down the mountain and get her home before the bad weather gets worse. We climb out of the hot spring and put our jeans and sweaters back on over our wet bodies and slide in the muck and the sleet down to the Fiat.

Evulka is so easy to talk to, and so happy to have a ride. She has blond hair and looks like she was raised on dairy cows and turnips with her wholesome, clean skin. She has an easy laugh. We pass waterfalls. We pass power lines that stitch their way up the grooves of gorges. I lose track of time until Evulka tells me to turn, and we wind up on a gravel road that has been half blown out from the storms.

We come upon a turf-roofed wooden farmhouse, illuminated in the halo of my headlights. I park and Evulka leads me to a back stoop. Inside, the kitchen is homeopathic, dried bundles of sage and thyme hanging from wooden rafters. There are white stacks of dishes on live-edge shelves. The appliances are industrial, stainless steel, gleaming. The fridge is see-through. Inside are all manner of fish. Halibut, haddock, catfish, monkfish, cod. There are summer vegetables, too, nestled together beside clear bowls of blue and brown speckled eggs. Evulka tells me they have greenhouses, geothermally heated, so they can serve tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers year-round. They can thrive without light. They don't need soil. They hardly need anything.

There is a woman hunched over a gas stove, and she turns when she hears Evulka's singsong greeting. She wipes her hands on her apron and kisses Evulka on both cheeks. She takes me in a hug, and I smell yeast and sweat and clove and garlic. She'd been worried about Evulka traveling in the weather, and no cell phone to get ahold of her. She thanks me, says I am a goddess from the heavens, and then I have a glass of wine in my hand and I've been invited to dinner. Evulka says she is sorry, so sorry, all of the guesthouses are full, but there is a pullout sofa in their efficiency, a slant-ceilinged studio over the kitchen, and I can't think about leaving, not tonight, where else would I possibly stay, the town is too small, and it's too dark and too late. I am shown upstairs where there are two twin beds, a wingback armchair, sheephorn hooks for hanging garments, an Italian leather settee.

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The guests eat at a long table like a family. The meal starts with individual ceramic tureens, and we ladle soup into our mouths with spoons carved from whale teeth. Next we are served pan-fried trout with prawns and slivered almonds, geysir-baked rye bread, and after that, lamb pastries and purple cabbage and fried potatoes. It's so beautiful, it sounds made up. Evulka is doing the serving, but waves me down when I offer to help, and beams at me as she continues to refill my wine and tend to the other guests. I am sitting next to a Dutch couple whose daughter is sick in bed for the evening. They say I can be their new daughter for tonight. I can tell they are the sort of people who have monogrammed towels and a half-bath off a chef's kitchen, chilled bottles of wine in a special tiny refrigerator hidden in the center island.

I am happy and drunk when I fall asleep. In the morning, I dress in the dark with a headlamp. Evulka sends me on my way with a pat of yellow butter on brown bread and a cup of hot tea that fogs up my glasses. She presses a penciled note in my gloved hand, a thank you written in Icelandic. She tells me to be careful, waves as I rattle off in the Fiat.

I drive in the dark to see the glaciers where they are drowning in a dazzling lagoon. I take photos and buy hot chocolate and browse through the souvenir shop and wait in line to use the bathrooms. There are placards with facts about the melting. For every person who drives a car one thousand miles or takes a round-trip flight from New York to London, thirty-two square miles of sea ice vanishes from the Arctic. Just in the past four years, more than a trillion tons of ice have been lost, four hundred million Olympic swimming pools' worth of water, enough to fill a single pool the size of New York to a depth of twenty-three feet.

I spend the few hours of daylight at the lagoon, though there is not much to do except look at the ice. A couple is getting married. The woman is shivering in a sleeveless dress and the man is in coattails, looking at his phone while the photographer sets up his camera. I fantasize about where Mac and I will get married. He suggested Ireland, an elopement, which makes sense since it won't be his first. I take breaks in the Fiat when I need to warm up and blast the heat on high. I listen

to BBC World Service and I like their accents. I lean my head against the seat and close my eyes. I've driven so many hours that I feel like I need to spend more time here to justify it. There is talk about Turkish envoys and the Kurds and troops moving out and fighting over oil, and I listen for tidbits that I maybe can talk to Mac about. Then the weather report comes on and says there will be a big storm. Some of the roads are shutting down. I think this is a good reason to leave, to get back to Reykjavik. Mac will be back soon.

It is a six-hour drive through the hinterland. I take it slow. Land Rovers and Expeditions hurtle past me on the two-lane highway, but I cruise at seventy kilometers an hour and hold the steering wheel properly at ten and two. The storm surrounds the Fiat like I'm in an ice palace. At first it is magic. I don't play music. I just let myself dream like I am in Narnia. Then the wind picks up and turns violent. The Fiat is blown into a ditch. It doesn't roll and I am able to drive out okay, but I am shaken and stop at the next town. There is a hotel, but it is all booked up. I say, I need a place to hunker down for the night, and the woman at the desk says, well you can't sleep here, and it is a fancy place anyways, a place I can't afford. I wander away from the desk and down a hallway and find the hotel restaurant and tuck myself into a booth in a dark corner. The clerk must have trailed me because she comes along and tells me I can't just be sleeping there. I go back out to the Fiat, shamed. I re-park in a corner of the lot and listen to the noises of the storm swirling around me. I fall asleep.

When I wake up, it is the middle of the night, and there are men circling the car. I don't know where I am. I roll down the window and think maybe they need something. But they are laughing. There are arms sliding in the gap in the window. The Fiat used to feel like home but now it is unfamiliar and I don't know where the button is to roll up the window, the button I just pressed to roll down the window, and I feel a panic, like maybe I am going to die, or worse. I don't know whether they are laughing because they think I am poor, out here sleeping in my car, or because I am vulnerable, a woman alone, prey. I cry out, and my movements are frenetic, and I manage to figure out how to back the car up, and the

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windows are down and the storm has calmed but there is snow falling off the roof into the car, and these men, there are four of them, little more than teenagers really — they are still laughing, whooping and clapping their hands and stamping their feet as I high-tail it off out of the parking lot. I shake the entire drive back to Reykjavik.

When I get to the hostel and connect to Wi-Fi, I see that Mac is online. I am so relieved to see his face. I feel my heart expanding against my ribcage. I have so much to tell him. Evulka, the hot spring, the pretty meals, the pullout sofa and falling asleep in front of a fire in servant's quarters in a tiny hamlet, the glaciers, the nasty men who harassed me. But then I hear the quake in his voice and see the red in his eyes like he has been crying, a grown man crying, and I think oh no, someone has had their legs blown off, or one of his friends has died, or he has had to shoot someone, god, the horror, the horror of war, and I think how much I would like to comfort him, to enfold him in my warm arms and say shhh shhh, I'm here. But no. He is telling me something about Melanie. She had been at a house party. Someone had done something to her drink and then taken her upstairs. She called him to let him know. She was getting a rape kit and was trying to figure out what to do about the guy, a firefighter, an acquaintance. The blood test shows she was drugged, and they were able to collect semen, so she has enough to go on if she decides to press charges. His voice is wavering. He says none of this would have happened if he hadn't set the divorce in motion. He feels so bad. He is a shit husband. What has he done. What the fuck has he done.

I am sitting in the common room at the hostel. Someone is playing music on a saxophone in the corner. Someone else is plugging an electric guitar into an amp. It's a Friday night and the hostel is about to come alive, stand-up comedy and live music and speed-dating. They start a pub crawl here too, though I'm not sure there are any other pubs nearby to crawl to. I have paid thirty kronar for the hostel to do a load of laundry for me. I feel like everything stinks and is wet. I just want to watch a show on Netflix while my laundry dries, but I can't get Netflix in this country. I huddle in an armchair and tuck my feet underneath me. There is a draught coming down from the chimney.

I want to tell Mac about the car. I want him to know what the men did to me. I want him to know how close I was to danger. I want to tell him, think about what could have happened to me. Think about what those men might have wanted to do. What if I hadn't figured out how to get the gearshift in reverse and lurch out of my parking spot and drive away. I want to tell him about after we had broken up the last time, when I was living in Idaho and I had taken a trip to visit a man I didn't know well, and I flew back into Spokane and it was after midnight and I had to drive two hours to get home, so I stopped to take a nap in my car and the cops came and knocked on my window and it startled me and embarrassed me when they asked for my ID, like maybe they thought I was some junkie in a stolen vehicle, and they let me go but told me not to sleep there, did I know where I was, this was a bad part of town, men could come and slash my tires and break my windows and then what would I do. But I can't say any of this. I can't tell Mac about these things. He will look at me, his face a rock, and say, so they laughed at you, that's it, nothing happened, you're fine, nothing happened? And he will think I am a sick sick woman, trying to steal Melanie's spotlight, and why can't I just let her have this one glorious beastly thing to herself.

I have to leave the hostel. There are so many people. It feels unbearable. It feels like I might suffocate. I am wearing joggers and an upcycled Army surplus jacket. I bought it in Idaho. When I got out of the Air Force, I thought, I will never care about any of this again, this isn't who I am anymore, and I ripped my nametags off my uniform. took a pocket knife to the threads that sewed on my rank. I stripped the garments clean so there was nothing on them but the smell of my perfume. I loaded everything up in garbage bags and took them to the Salvation Army. It was a few months later, on Veterans Day, that I saw people posting photos in their uniforms, and I felt like a hole had been cut open inside of me. I went back to the Salvation Army looking for my uniforms, where were they, where were they, I wore those uniforms for years like they were my second skin. I ran around the store like a crazy woman, raking my shaking hands along the racks and racks of clothes. A woman asked me could she help me, and I was standing there crying and chest

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heaving, and I said nothing and I left and I went to the Army surplus store and I found this jacket, green, puffy, something that belonged to a paratrooper in another war. This is the jacket I'm wearing as I cross the highway from the hostel, as I run and run and find myself on a pier stretching out into the bay, looking down into the dark seawater, at the foam collecting around the pillars, waiting for something to surface.

I live somewhere else now, on the top floor of an old city hall building in upstate New York. There is crown moulding. There are wooden floors and tea-colored water stains on the tall ballroom ceilings and a pull-down stairs to get to the attic. There are white hexagon tiles in the bathroom and a claw foot tub and wide windows so old it looks like the glass is melting. I live with a good man. On our block there are antique homes, some restored, some with buckling porches and chipped paint. At the end of our street is a lawnmower repair shop and a tire store. When the snow piles up to the fire escape and the car is buried, we lace up our boots and wrap scarves over our mouths and walk to the Mavis for free popcorn and hot chocolate. We sit on the plastic chairs and watch through the glass as men jack up Pontiacs and Chevys and rip out fistfuls of titanium lines, spread the guts of engines and carburetors and transmissions on metal trays. *Roseanne* plays on the TV, muted, with subtitles. We watch the characters laughing noiselessly, mouths open, the hollering of mechanics and the whine of the manlift in the background.

Another thing we do is visit the IKEA in the next town over. There is a food court in the center, with meat-balls drizzled in warm sauces. We don't go to buy anything. I like wandering around and looking at the Scandinavian lamps, linens with Norwegian names like Bergskrabba and Kratten and Trattviva.

By February, it is hard to do things. I wait until my whole wardrobe is dirty and all that's left to wear is an old long-sleeve shirt and a pair of pajama pants, and then I haul armfuls of clothes to a laundromat down the street and get six washing machines going at once. When I get home I dump the piles of laundry on the sofa, the bed, the desk, and the whole apartment smells of dryer sheets and fabric softener. My hair hurts at

the roots when I let it down from a bun. I work my fingers along my scalp, and it is a feel-good hurt, the same as when I was a kid about to lose a tooth, and kept biting and biting, stretching the soft tissue of my gums until the roots gave way.

When I'm overtaken by gloom, the new man cooks me cornbread in a little cast iron pan and brings it to me straight from the oven, the edges crisped with butter, and he grips the handle with a dishtowel that has daisies on it and there is a dollop of vanilla bean ice cream softening on top and he serves it to me at the windowsill where I am sitting on the ledge crying and looking out at the lake, engulfed in a turtleneck sweater, my feet on the radiator, my arms wrapped around my legs and there is nothing the matter, nothing at all, it's just he does these things for me and I don't know if it's the curve of his jaw or the tenor of his voice or the shape of his teeth or the way he looks at me like he's found daylight, but after all this time I still cannot bring myself to love him. He wants sex in the afternoons, when we are watching TV or playing cards on the coffee table, or reading but not flipping pages, staring at our books, listening to the sound of the rain at the windows. We'll be doing one thing or another and then suddenly he is by my side, his breath on my neck, his hand in the bend of my knee, and I want him not to touch me, but how to tell a man you want him not to touch you, especially when he is being kind. Sometimes I tell him I'm on my period when I'm not. Later, I find that he has marked some of the days on the wall calendar in the kitchen with a tiny red dot. I wonder if he is keeping track to be considerate or to catch me in my lies.

We have a brick fireplace that's been painted gray. Two angular sofas, one leather, one corduroy. Leafy plants. Stacks of books. Pencil drawings of women's bodies on thin white parchment paper, framed in teak wood. I lay on the corduroy sofa in the middle of the day in pleated velvet trousers and look at the fire. The creosote has started to bother my eyes. I need to have the chimney cleaned. I suppose this is the landlord's job. I ought to call. On the mantelpiece are stacking Russian dolls. They are made from walnut, sanded smooth as marble. Evulka mailed them to me when I got home from Iceland, a thank you. Inside the biggest doll is another doll, her face painted in white, two crescents

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for eyes, a dot for a nose, no mouth, and inside that doll is another doll, features painted the same, and on it goes. There are seven of them. The last is the size of a peanut shell, but I think it keeps going. I think there are universes inside her. I think I could unlid her and unlid her and there would be more inside, until the mouthless doll became dust. It makes me think of when I was a child, perched on the bathroom counter, brushing teeth and combing hair, and I would open the medicine cabinet mirror and angle it so that I could see myself in a prism of reflections, stretching into oblivion. I could make myself so small. Tiny. Gone. Poof.