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## **Eleven Kinds of Lonesome**

### **by Taylor Eagan**

#### **1. Rock Bottom: Directions and Advice**

I was sitting in my living room when I realized that it was eleven in the morning and that I had chosen a horrible color for the walls. I had already called out of work, explaining that the burning sensation in between my ribs, which started last night, had not gone away yet and that I was going to see a doctor as soon as possible. I had been awake for three hours, had had my breakfast, my coffee and had taken several Tums to dull the burn. I had already blogged and dusted the screens of both the television and the computer. I had already watered the plants.

Sitting in my living room, I realized that maybe the burning in my sternum wasn't due to heartburn, heart disease or even the heinously colored walls, but perhaps loneliness.

So, after little deliberation, I went out and bought a snake.

It took me an hour to find the pet store, which, in retrospect, should not have been that difficult to find. It was a brightly painted place, wedged between two of the ugliest buildings I had ever seen. When I opened the door a buzzer went off, alerting my fellow shoppers and the manager that I had entered. There were cages and tanks from the floor to the ceiling and my head reeled at the thought of what could inhabit these places. Fish glittered in the back. I was lost.

"Can I help you?" A man sprang up on my right. Behind him, a starfish was suctioned to the front of its tank, displaying its delicacies.

"I'm looking for a pet," I said, clutching my purse. The flame in my chest blazed.

"Well, you're in luck!" The man's lips curled upward, enlightening me with his teeth. "We happen to have some of those."

He, Roger, proceeded to lead me around the store, winding up and down the aisles. We quickly passed the aisles of furrries. Dogs and cats made me nervous, I explained, and I already had enough rodents. I needed something much calmer. Something tranquil.

Roger zigzagged to the back of the store.

"Fish kingdom," he exclaimed. I shook my head. We veered to the left. "How about a bird?" Chatter radiated from cages on both sides.

"Are there any birds that can't make noise?" I asked as the door buzzed and another customer entered. Roger fled and I was left alone and lost again.

One aisle remained and I anxiously made my way into it. The tanks were decorated with leaves, branches and woodchips. Many had water bowls the size of my fist, shaped like little jacuzis. Heat lamps buzzed above them all. I pressed my nose against the closest. A cricket hopped by. I swooned.

Reptiles.

I made my way down the row of tanks. I examined each one. Monitors, iguanas, snakes, turtles. I returned to the snakes. A little one peered up at me. The marking on its head was spear

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shaped and it was curled into a pretzel. Its beady eyes glazed over, unblinking. We stared at each other, tilting our heads to one side then the other.

"That's a ball python." Roger's voice startled me and I dropped my purse, its contents scattering across the floor. My hand sanitizer rolled under the tarantula tank. "We just got it. Cute little thing."

"Does it bite?" I asked, gathering myself from the floor.

"They can, but they're usually pretty shy."

The snake buried its head into the coils it had made itself into.

When I got home and peeked into the cardboard box, it was still wound up tightly. I made up its new home, a firmly lidded tank with a large rock for sleeping, pine shavings for substrate and a heat lamp for warmth.

I called my mother.

"You bought a *what*?"

"A snake."

"Vivian," she said sounding anxious. "Why the hell would you do that?"

I could see her leaning against the kitchen counter, both arms folded across her chest and the phone wedged between her shoulder and her ear. She had probably been reading some tabloid, keeping up on the lives of the famous.

"I've been having these shooting pains in my chest and I was sitting there this morning and I thought that maybe I was dying but that didn't seem right. I don't know. I thought I should get a pet so I wouldn't be alone all the time." I didn't know how else to explain it.

"Did you try Tums?"

The cardboard box on the kitchen table rumbled. My efforts were futile.

"Jesus, mother. Forget it."

"Do you need anything else? I've got to go to my book club meeting." I could hear her rustling papers as an attempt to make her reason for abandonment convincing.

"Yeah, will you and dad help me repaint my living room next weekend?"

"Vivian," my mother panted. "I'll call you tomorrow." The phone clicked and my chest ached.

I contemplated how to transfer the snake to its new home from the box. I began by trying to manually remove the snake, but I couldn't get myself to touch it. I tried coaxing but I wasn't patient enough. It remained coiled in a ball like yarn. I finally used a spatula to shovel the baby python from its box into its tank, holding my arm far from my body. The baby barely stirred.

The next morning I awoke to an empty tank, the lid ajar.

The ache in my chest worsened at the thought of a python loose in the apartment.

## **2. Haiku for the Man At The Table Across From Me**

You have black glasses,  
A blue and white button-up  
And silly duck hair.

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### 3. Updating Your Blog

Vivian Ackerman, 29, started her career straight out of college as office coffee bitch, making coffee and copies for her boss and coworkers at Irvington Insurance. She filed legal documents for almost two years. The native Ohioan has since been promoted to a desk job where she receives calls from costumers and takes down necessary information – which has led to an increased interest in caffeine, men with tattoos, and the cyberworld.

She expresses herself via newspaper clippings, family photographs and the occasional greeting card, sent to her by newly wedded friends. They are strewn across the corkboard of her cubical. "However," she explains, "these objects are all tangible; therefore, their lifespans are finite. I prefer the digital world. Plus, blogging is a great distraction from insurance fraud." Vivian has recently discovered the joys of the blogging universe, an expansive net of writers interconnected through one similar interest: reading the personal lives and thoughts of others.

When questioned about how her blog works, Vivian responds that it's very much like a diary. "Except anyone can read it. And you can add photographs and emoticons!" She hiccups with excitement. "If you have followers, they can add their own comments to your work. I have one friend from Bolivia. He's a very adamant reader."

Does she write about her tattooed men? We're all dying to know. "Absolutely," she responds.

Glorious.

### 4. Yard Work

Lawnmowers scared me  
When I was little. Monsters.  
"Chomp. Chomp. I LIKE GRASS."

Note to self: You probably should have taken poetry in college.

### 5. Cherry Blossoms

*"My heart that was rapt away by the wild cherry blossoms  
-- will it return to my body when they scatter?"  
- Kotomichi*

A woman sat on a bench in the park. It was one of the ugliest days of spring. One of many in which it rained. The woman watched puddles gather around the trunks of the sakuras that littered the garden. The day before, they had all blossomed and now their white and pink petals were in full bloom. The tufts reminded her of snowballs. Their branches drooped from the weight of the rain.

The woman wore a raincoat with the hood up. It was old and brittle; she had had it for years but it had always remained loyal. She let the water slide off her head and into her cupped hands which rested in her lap. The rain was red and stained her skin.

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She pretended she was a painter. With the red rain she drew an X on the bark of the cherry blossom in front of her. And then she drew another on the trees to her left and right.

Before long, the entire garden was riddled with red marks; the paint ran and created tracks that extended down into the trees roots. It was quite a sight, this woman with a mangled raincoat stomping through puddles.

One tree remained bare, so she drew a target onto her chest and then pressed her back against its narrow trunk. The heavy snowballs dangling around her made her feel like a fort and she shivered.

A man in a yellow suit walked by. A golden retriever on a blue leash trotted beside him.

"Sir!" she called. "Excuse me! A little help?" The woman pulled a rope from her pocket and motioned towards the tree. The man and the dog passed without as much as a glance.

That night, after she tucked herself into bed and had fallen asleep, she dreamt her heart was made of crocheted petals, clumped into a pink and pounding orb. An infant python wrapped itself around her ankles for warmth.

## **6. The World's Greatest Macaroni & Cheese**

### *Ingredients:*

- one box of Velveeta Shells
- paprika
- garlic powder
- pepper

### *Instructions:*

Sanitize hands. Put on water to boil. Find crochet hook which has fallen between the cushions of the love seat. Sanitize hands again. When water is at a boil, pour in noodles. Work on granny square blanket until noodles are soft but not too soft. Strain noodles. Mix in cheese. Figure out how to open paprika. Spill paprika. Sweep spilt paprika into hand and dump into cheesy noodles. Add garlic powder. Regret adding so much. Remember to turn off the stove. Top off with pepper. Stir aggressively. Devour as much as possible. Regret devouring so much. Unbutton pants. Put leftovers in Tupperware. Store in refrigerator for later.

## **7. Fuel to the Fire**

Interstate 70 began in Utah and ended in Maryland. Its length from the former to the latter ran close to 2,200 miles. It passed by Denver, Topeka, Kansas City, St. Louis, Wheeling, Pittsburgh and Baltimore. Vivian traveled past two of those cities, Pittsburgh and Wheeling from where she was visiting her mother in Maryland. The drive felt like an eternity, in which the seasons changed as fast as bullets. Near the Maryland line it was snowing hard. Vivian slowed to thirty miles per hour, checking her rear-view mirror every couple of minutes. In West Virginia the snow had stopped and the air was dry, and in the car on the dashboard, a snowflake flashed. It was freezing. Vivian turned the heat to its highest setting.

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She watched the exits rise. At 42 she noticed how dead and withered the trees looked. They weren't like the evergreens outside of her current home, constant symbols of what it meant to be ever alive. In the summer she liked to walk among them, hopeful to be reminded of something, but nothing came to mind except winter, which was another story altogether. Exit 43 and her hands began to sweat. Vivian rubbed them on her jeans before glancing at herself in the side-view mirrors.

She was thirty years old today and her hair was already beginning to molt, dark brown hairs replaced with grey. This was a fact she had been frustrated about at first, but now found pride in. In her twenties, she had reveled in her rising insurgence. But those days had reached a plateau and partying every weekend with arbitrary acquaintances turned into going to bed early and having lunch the next with coworkers.

At exit 44 she turned the radio off and leaned closer to the steering wheel. She had thrown most of her past out of the window but most of it got caught in the bushes.

Finally, 45 arrived and she took the ramp towards Greenville, Illinois. A few minutes later she was crawling up a back road she found only by luck and the directions of the one local she had run into, a man giving her slurred directions through the hole where his front teeth had once been. The road was almost completely dirt but was littered with an occasional pile of pebbles. The car bounced as Vivian drove farther.

The trees created a swollen lace canopy over the road. The falling sun behind their shapes cast shadows through the windshield and onto the leather of the passenger seat where a map and a pair of sunglasses resided. Vivian reached a clearing between two driveways, each leading to its own house. Hers had been the one on the left with the blue paneling. The one to her right with its chipped, red shingles had been his.

She parked the car on a patch of grass nearby and followed a path behind her which she remembered to have been once lined with wildflowers. Now weeds and thorns grew like litter. Vivian came to an empty square of dirt and detoured around it. She slowly walked through a field and up a small hill. The hill had been a mountain when she was younger.

The interstate she has so recently exited rose before her, and she sat on the guardrail nearby.

Vivian waited for what seemed like an eternity. Doubts and memories flashed through her mind as every car whizzed by. She began to count the trucks, promising to leave by the 50th if there was no sign. She prayed he never made it that far, but by the 40th truck she had gone from hopeful, to frustrated, to angry, and finally to disappointed.

The 47th truck was driven by a man with a red baseball cap. It was then that Vivian realized that she couldn't actually remember much from her childhood. She had once had a friend named Charlie. She could remember his blue eyes, tangled blonde hair and dirty fingernails. She could also remember what the dirt he made her eat tasted like. Vivian pressed her eyes shut and tried to picture herself as she had been.

The cars and trucks flew by, their tires against the pavement humming like a fan in mid-summer. But it wasn't summer and the sound wasn't soothing at all. Vivian tried to push it from her mind, though something about it seemed familiar. She squeezed her eyes tighter and focused on nothing but the buzz of the highway.

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*Vivian was ten now and on her porch watching Charlie cut notches with his pocket knife into a stick he had picked up on the front yard. The wind blew through the leafless trees and they clapped their bony hands.*

*"Vivian?" he said looking up from his work.*

*"What?" She sat on the rocking chair with her bare feet up on the railing of the porch.*

*"Oh, nothing," he said. He bent the knife shut and threw down the stick before he got up from the steps and walked to her. He leaned close and their noses almost touched.*

*"What are you looking at?" Vivian backed away from him, pushing his face away with the palm of one hand and rubbing her eye with the other.*

*"I have a secret," he said while waving his finger for her to come closer.*

*"What? Tell me!" She leaned her ear in.*

*"You're it!" he screamed as he flicked her on the shoulder. She gasped, and then bolted off her front porch and along the dirt road after him. He zigzagged through her mother's vegetable garden, which had long been dead, and she hopped through behind.*

*48 trucks had passed.*

*They raced through the field and toward the hill to where the grass met the highway. He ran up first, using the toes of his shoes to propel him up the steep slope, and then slammed into the guardrail at the top. He turned to watch her crawl up the hill behind him; he slid to the ground, leaning back against the metal.*

*"Safe!" he exulted.*

*She was breathing hard when she reached the top and her laugh came out only in puffs of warm air. She climbed over the guardrail and sat on it facing the interstate. When she could breathe again, she couldn't stop laughing. Neither could he.*

*"Charlie," she began in between giggles, "you know how my momma hates when we get into her garden." He was quiet.*

*"Charlie?" She turned towards him and leaned over the railing. She hung there, watching the cars drive by upside down.*

*49 and Vivian could almost hear her ten year old voice now, penetrating her skull like the chilled breeze.*

*"Charles!" She looked at him. "Why do you have your eyes closed?"*

*"I'm just listening," he said. He sat facing their houses and the field, his back to the interstate.*

*"Oh," she sighed. A piece of hair had fallen into her face between her brows and she blew at it. He laughed as she went cross-eyed.*

*"Let's count trucks," he said.*

*They both moved to face the interstate, Vivian sitting on the guardrail and Charlie leaning against it. She spotted the first truck and squealed. She forgot to look at the license plate, so she pretended the truck had come all the way from Canada. Charlie pointed out the 15th, an 18 wheeler from Iowa, and then the 21st from Texas. Everything went quiet.*

*"Where are they going?" Sam asked.*

*"Which ones?"*

*"Those." She pointed to their side of the road, where the cars headed right.*

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*"Those are going east," Charlie said.*

*"East? What's east?" She slid down to sit next to him.*

*"The ocean," he said matter-of-factly.*

*"Well then what's west?" Vivian pointed to the cars moving left. She squinted her eyes at him.*

*"I think another ocean," he shrugged. "That's what my poppy said at least."*

*They didn't speak for many minutes and faced away from each other, watching for their trucks.*

*"My Momma said we're going west," Vivian said.*

*"What?" asked Charlie. Vivian nodded.*

*"She told me last weekend. She said, 'Vivian, come here.' Pulled me right off the couch and into the kitchen. I thought for sure I was in trouble. But then she said, 'Vivian, we're going west.' I didn't know why so I asked, but then she just started crying. That awful, dry kind of crying."*

*The sun began to slide behind the hills and the sky became dusty. The caramel apple colored field behind them melted and became a dull brown.*

*"Did she say when?" Charlie drew his knees up to his chest.*

*"Nah. Said soon, but I don't know when that is," Vivian said. "Charlie?"*

*"Yeah?"*

*"I don't want to go west."*

*"Why?" He rested his chin on his knees. A white truck rounded the bend towards them.*

*"22."*

*"What if there isn't an ocean like you said?" she asked. "What if I don't make any friends?"*

*"You can always come back," he said. "Stay with me. My mom likes you well enough and dad wouldn't even notice."*

*"I can't come back and you know it."*

*"Well you should anyway." He grabbed her hand. "Let's make a pact."*

*"What kind of pact?"*

*"You have to come back," Charlie said tilting his head back until it thumped on the metal of the guardrail. "Meet me right here."*

*"Come back here?"*

*"Why not?" Charlie stood, pulling Vivian up too.*

*They plotted for many minutes. In the end, the two decided to come back to the guardrail across the field on Vivian's 30th birthday, because that's when adults are the most lonely.*

*"No matter what?" Vivian asked, her hands planted on her hips.*

*"No matter what." Charlie then spit into his fist and held it out for Vivian. She screamed and ran from him. They chased each other back and forth along the highway, laughing until hot tears streaked from the corners of their eyes.*

*"You promise you won't forget?" Charlie said as he rolled his eyes and she stuck out her tongue in return.*

*"I promise," she replied through clenched teeth as he began to tickle her. She finally pushed him away jumped over the guardrail. "Safe!"*

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*"We could count trucks again," he offered, stuffing his fists into his pockets as he walked past her and down the path away from the interstate.*

*"Vivian," Charlie yelled behind him. "Vivian?"*

The 50th truck passed by in a streak of silver as Vivian Ackerman turned from the interstate.

## **8. Issues with Commitment**

Dated brown eyes once.

We lived boldly. He loved me.

I had to go North.

## **9. Spoons: a Blind-Date Parable**

I knocked three times and checked the apartment number twice before the door opened and when it finally did, I found a beautiful man staring at me. Minutes later I was sitting in his living room, clutching my purse and staring at the coffee table. It was covered in coasters of every color, design and size. One read, "Bottoms up!" Another displayed what I believed to be a vintage portrait of Jesus. Magazines and newspapers with ripped corners and water stains were stacked in neat piles around the room. I picked up the closest journal to find it dated and bar-coded by a library I had never heard of. I set it back down and cleared my throat. The beautiful man smiled.

"Want something to drink?" He stood up from the love seat, his sweaty calves making an appalling *thwap* as they un-leeched themselves from the russet leather. I crossed my bare legs which felt unexpectedly naked, knobby and ashen.

"No thanks. I'm fine." I didn't mention the flask I kept hidden in my purse for such occasions. I also didn't mention that I had drunk the majority of it before I had even stepped out of my car. I was never very good with nerves and this was the first date I had had in a long time.

I couldn't do it alone.

"We could play a game until we think of somewhere to eat. I honestly didn't expect you to show up." He squatted in front of his TV stand and opened one of the cabinets. Several Scrabble letters cascaded onto the carpet. "How about dominoes? Connect Four?" He faltered, shoving box after box to the side, more game pieces spouting to the floor. "Clue? It's my favorite."

I could feel my eyes start to water.

"I haven't played any of those since I was, like, thirteen. Not that you can't play them when you're older, it's just...well. I don't really play board games anymore."

The tiny buckle that held my left high-heeled pump together looked bent. I bounced my foot up and down until it broke completely. My shoe fell to the floor.

"Shit."

Liam almost looked concerned as he picked up tiny metal trinkets. A thimble, a boot and what looked to be a battleship.

"It happens all the time. Really." I gulped and my mouth felt dry. "How about that drink?"

After he had left to make the Jack and coke I had requested, I began to wander around the room. His apartment was small and pristine, yet filled with items that some would consider clutter. I wondered if he had a cleaning lady.

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"Do you have a cleaning lady?" I heard him cough, and when he returned from the kitchen, his cheeks were flushed red. I had never seen a man blush before. It was endearing.

The coffee table, chairs, curio cabinet and bookshelf all seemed to match. I guessed the wood to be pine, sanded and oiled with a pale blonde varnish. Classy, yet not over-priced.

I found everything in the room distracting.

"Want to have sex?"

I nearly choked on my own tongue.

"Excuse me?"

"I was just kidding." He laughed before I could slap him. How could a man be so revolting and so adorable at the same time?

I bounced my broken heel again, drinking as fast as I could.

Liam was an attractive man. In fact, he was the most attractive man I had ever been on a date with. His arms were cut with veins and when he walked, he had to take short, waddling steps to accommodate the bolts of iron muscle that ran down his thighs.

"How about Indian?" He was sparring with his tie and the tie was winning. "Maybe Middle-Eastern?"

"Let me." I took the tie from him and pulled it around my own neck. Just as I slid the skinniest end into the tag that hid behind the fat end, I noticed three initials written in permanent marker.

L.A.S.

"Isn't your last name Alexander?" I loosened the tie and slipped it back over my head.

"Yes," he exclaimed, ripping the freshly knotted cloth from my hand.

Thirty minutes and two drinks later we were on our way to The Taj, the town's most popular Indian restaurant. My drinks began to kick in the moment Liam had pumped his car into gear and the yellow streetlights flew by my window, leaving long paths that looked like comet tails. Or hair. I gagged at the thought.

"So, Liam." I was feeling daring. The alcohol coursed right to my head. I smiled with all my teeth and in my mind they sparkled. "What made you ask me out for a date?"

He tightened his grip for a turn, taking glances at me with just his eyes. Doing so without turning his head made him look like a chameleon. A chameleon with big olive eyes and sweet eyelashes that curled. Big, big, eyes.

The button for the radio was massive. I punched it and the hushed wail of a violin began to bleed through the speakers.

"What the hell do you listen to?" I pressed several other buttons.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" He leaned closer to the wheel. "I prefer not to talk while I drive." He pressed the colossal power button again and the oldies station I had found faded away. I must have made a face and he reached over to pat my hands which were laced together in my lap. I had to smile.

Something in the glove compartment rattled and before I know it we were parked and Liam was paying the meter.

"You coming?"

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"Yeah. Just a second." I felt around by my feet for my purse which seemed to have exploded sometime during the ride from Liam's apartment. "I dropped something."

One by one, I found the contents that my purse had regurgitated. My wallet, flask, keys, cigarettes and a lighter. Then three more lighters. Then four more. None of which were mine. I peeked between my legs and under the seat. Blood rushed quickly to my head.

Nearly a hundred lighters. Red ones. Ones with flowered prints. Zippo's and cheap ones from gas stations. Hundreds of lighters in a plastic bag.

"Vivian?"

I sat up and undid the top buttons of my sweater. He said my name like he was calling for a dog. It made me feel like Lassie.

"Are you alright?" Liam's tanned face appeared at my window. He opened the door for me.

"Absolutely," I lied. An image of the bag full of lighters flashed into my mind. "Just a little warm is all." I unbuttoned the rest of the buttons.

"Wait until you try the food." He grabbed my hand and held it until we had been seated.

Once we had found our table, napkins unfolded on our laps and water glasses full, Liam ordered Lamb Curry and I followed behind with Chicken Pakora and a glass of pinot noir. Usually a white wine would satisfy my thirst, but tonight had turned out to be unnecessarily traumatic and I wasn't feeling much like myself.

While we waited for our food we talked. We began with literature. He rarely had time to read, though when he found an empty thirty minutes, he made it a priority. One of his favorite authors was Gogol and another was one I couldn't pronounce. Next he brought up favorite vacation spots. Liam wasn't much for traveling but he'd been to a dozen different countries and almost every state.

"I absolutely love sailing," he said, rearranging the silver utensils and dove colored china in front of him.

"You have a boat?" I sipped from my wine glass slowly this time. I wished I had chosen a sushi bar. Sake bombs would have been so much more fun.

"No. I borrow a friend's." He switched his salad and dinner fork. Liam's spoon sailed off the edge of the table and he disappeared below the folds of the cloth. He reappeared before long but to no avail and he shrugged.

The waitress returned with plates piled high with steaming Indian cuisine and Liam asked for a new spoon. In the glow of the centerpiece candle, I felt like a queen. The skin of our hands looked as smooth as melted butter and with every flicker of the wick, more of Liam's freckles were erased.

"What?" He stopped chewing.

"Hmm?"

"You were staring."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize." I picked up my fork and began shoveling chicken into my mouth and washing it down with gulps of wine. I could feel red splotches sprouting up over the bridge of my nose and down my neck and chest. I thanked the candle for remaining lit and hiding the rash.

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Forty-five minutes later, we had finished eating and Liam had paid the check, put down a tip, and we were back in his car driving to his apartment. He slowed for a stop sign and something rattled again. I was pulling my hair up messily from my face and neck which were still flushed and damp. When I was finished, I leaned forward to unlatch the glove compartment.

"Vivian, don't." He grabbed for my hand but it was too late. The compartment was open and a waterfall of lighters gushed into my lap and around my feet.

We sat at the stop sign for minutes while Liam stared at me and as I stared at the lighters that I was now drowning in. I looked up at him. He blinked.

"I have to go," I said, pushing open the car door and kicking lighters onto the curb as I stepped out. They crunched beneath my broken shoe.

I huffed. Everything had been going so well. I had chosen to ignore the lighters earlier, which, to be honest, I thought was pretty creepy, and Liam had made up for it during dinner by being a fine chap. He was sweet and quiet and gorgeous. Ultimately, he was everything I was looking for in a lover right now.

And now there was this.

Now I was swimming through lighter fluid. If we had gotten into an accident, we would have been made into toast instantly.

"Vivian, please," Liam said as he got out and stood on the opposite side of the car. I could only see his head past the open moon roof. "I can explain."

"Can you?" I quivered. I contemplated running away right then but I had no idea where I was. Everything around me looked the same. "Please. Be my guest. Explain to me why you have hundreds of lighters billowing out of every crevasse in your car. I would really like to know."

"They were given to me." He looked hopeless. Hopeless and cute. I wanted to both hug him and light him on fire. And I could have.

"Someone just gave you all of these?"

"Yes."

"Why?" I slammed shut my door, squashing even more of the lighters, their fluid dripping through its crack. "It's just...I don't know. Weird."

After this, we stood separated by the car, me glaring and Liam begging me with his eyes to get back into the car. Perhaps I was being insensitive. I considered the fact that I had had several drinks throughout the night which could have clouded my tact and grace. My car was at his place anyway.

I refused to get into his car until all of the lighters had been safely stored in the trunk where I couldn't see them. The rest of the drive home was spent in completely silence, just as Liam liked it.

Once we were back, I stormed from his car towards my own which took longer than expected with a broken heel. I hoped he wouldn't say another word but he did and somehow it was relieving. Two words, in fact.

"Don't go." I turned and found he had followed after me. His hands were crammed into his pockets. "Please. Just stay a little while longer."

"I was really having a nice time." It felt like a walnut had lodged itself into my throat. "I just got a little freaked out."

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"I know. I didn't mean to ruin anything. I forgot I had even put them in there. It's no big deal. I like to..." Liam trailed off. "Collect things."

He reached out a hand to me, which I took warily. We walked next to each other up the entire flight of concrete steps that led to the front door of his apartment complex. He keyed himself in and moments later I was inside of his living room with my back pressed against the door and my arms wrapped around his neck.

"You're a good kisser," he said.

"You're not bad yourself."

We stumbled into his bedroom, feeling each other up the entire way, and then he disappeared into the adjoined bathroom. While I waited for him, I made my way around the room, dragging my feet along the lush carpet, leaving a long trail of footprints behind me like a slug.

The room was straight out of a department store furniture ad. The navy blue and grey plaid bedspread with matching pillows reminded me of college. Yet the bed itself was queen sized and perfect for two people to sleep comfortably, unlike the full sized ones found in every dorm room. I plunked myself down on it and bounced right back up. It was the softest bed I had ever felt.

Across from the foot of the bed along the wall sat his dresser. Its top was littered with an assortment of objects. I moved closer to inspect further. A glass jar with what looked like a class ring, several pairs of cuff links and a chain or two. Next to that sat a metal dish full of loose change that he deposited into at the end of every day. Random toiletries: deodorant, aftershave, cologne. I picked up the latter and brought it to my nose.

It reeked of sandalwood and leather. As I began to place it back down onto the dresser, I noticed the clear "TESTER" sticker that had been fixed strategically on the bottles side.

The toilet flushed in the bathroom and I heard Liam turn on the sink. I jumped quickly back to the bed, smoothed my skirt over my crossed legs, and waited.

"Mind if I change?"

"No. Go ahead." I turned away from him towards the window. He pulled open two of his dresser drawers, one after the other, before he stripped off his shirt and unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. I could only imagine the V of muscles that cut into his hips from his stomach and lower past the band of his boxer briefs. I shivered.

Something thumped onto the carpet nearby. I shifted my gaze towards the bed where he had thrown the khakis he had worn onto our date. There on the floor lay a silver spoon.

The same silver spoon that had made a suicide leap from the edge of the table before dinner.

"Is that..."

"No," Liam said, throwing his body onto the floor. When he stood, the spoon had disappeared. I tackled him back onto the bed.

"Give me that."

"No. It's not anything."

I straddled his scantily clad body, a body that was indeed toned nicely, but I ignored the matter. I struggled to pull his hands from under him and then he rolled over, pinning me with his own weight. He held his left hand far above my head and in it was clasped a silver spoon, identical to the one from the restaurant.

"Don't be mad at me," he said, wincing as if I was going to hit him.

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I smacked him on his bare shoulder once for wincing and again for stealing the spoon.

"Is this a habit of yours? Stealing things from people wherever you go?" My legs were getting tangled in the comforter and it was getting harder and harder to move. I could feel the TESTER sticker gaping at me from the dresser. It made too much sense. I smacked him again for the hell of it.

"Stop hitting me."

"Stop being a clepto."

This ended the fighting and he hovered there above me, out of breath and flustered.

He kissed me and I kissed him back.

"So now you're just going to start stealing those too?"

"That wasn't stolen."

"How do you figure?"

"You gave it to me."

The spoon dropped onto the carpet.

I took great care to sneak out the next morning without waking him. I stealthily slid from under the covers and crawled across the room, picking up various articles of clothing that had spread themselves along the floor. Liam looked charming, cocooned in the sheets like a caterpillar. My head rang from the wine.

I didn't bother leaving a note and figured he'd just have to call if he wanted to. If he felt like asking me for a second date, of course. I stepped over a pile of magazines and then returned and knelt down next to them. The one on top had a white address label on it. I had to pull it close to my face to read because my contacts were almost completely dry and had misted over. The address didn't look familiar and I wasn't surprised.

Once I was free of the apartment complex and in the safety of my car, I pulled a cigarette from the emergency pack that I kept in my center console. And that's when I panicked. I frantically picked up my purse from where I had thrown it dumped its contents on the passenger seat. Flask, wallet, cell phone, chapstick. But my lighter was missing.

I threw the unlit cigarette out the window.

## **10. Making Friends with Aeolus**

She forgot to pack the curtains and the furniture had yet to be shipped by the movers, but she remembered to bring her sleeping bag so she unrolled it and camped out in the living room. It curled against the wall beneath the window, which naked as it was, attracted green, then yellow and finally red light from the outside intersection. Vivian found the spattering of color on the hardwood floors fascinating. It reminded her of confetti cupcakes. Vivian liked baked goods and found that much of reality reminded her of the wonderful snack.

Vivian always forgot something. A week earlier she had forgotten to take the roast out of the oven and ended up with smoke-filled kitchen and a horrid dinner. The week before that she had forgotten to take a shower for many days in a row until a co-worker made a complaint. Now, due to her forgetfulness, she was doomed to months of sunshine.

"This room is very quiet," Vivian grouched, gazing upwards towards the ceiling.

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Later in the day, Vivian found a crack in one of the window panes big enough to stick a thumb through and cold air was leaking in, so she pulled a sock from her luggage and stuffed it into the gaping hole. It stayed there for three months before she finally decided a sock wasn't efficient for insulation. Vivian liked to make executive decisions, especially when no one else was around.

For weeks Vivian worked on unpacking. Being quite alone, the task demanded diligence and focus, but neither could be given. She went through box after box, placing half of the items where they belonged in the new home. The other half of the boxes remained unexplored, for Vivian often found herself distracted from the simple chore of unpacking. A jar of forgotten marbles sent her into a fit of merriment while a misplaced photograph album created a depression so deep, that even the thought of leaving her bed made Vivian's soul feel weak.

Every day she'd come home from work to find, excitedly, that she had received mail. And every day she was disappointed to find that it was addressed to Mrs. Schon, a nice Jewish lady who had moved to Boca Raton leaving the home with a total of six mezuzahs and weeks worth of mail.

"Perhaps everyone has lost my address," she sighed aloud, reassuring herself along with her pride. She picked at the skin between her forefinger and thumb and made a mental note to send out "Here's my new address!" cards to her closest of family and friends.

As a joke, Vivian referred to herself as Miriam Schon and on Hanukah she bought herself eight presents. The first was a harmonica for she had always wished she could play. On the eighth night, she bought herself a dictionary and promised herself she would learn to write poetry. Three poems later, an executive decision was made to find a new hobby. Vivian even bought herself a menorah to light night after night. However, after several horridly reoccurring dreams of it being knocked over by Noodles, her clumsy yet sophisticated Calico, she gave it to a Jewish acquaintance. The thought of the whole neighborhood going up in flames made her shiver. Christmas was a much safer holiday, she concluded, squinting in the sunlight.

Something tinkled outside.

"What a lovely sound!" she exuded, padding to the bare living room's bay window.

There, hanging cleverly from the neighbor's porch, spun the most beautiful wind chime Vivian had ever seen. It was made entirely of glass, small celestial orbs dangling from one large, saffron sun. She pressed her face against the screen making small squares of facial fat squeeze through the netting.

In the middle of the night, Vivian made an executive decision and stole the wind chime from her neighbor.

"How very stealthy, I am," she cooed. She wrapped the glass pieces in tissue and placed them into an empty shoebox.

Week after week she made the midnight adventure. She began in her own neighborhood, kidnapping chime after chime from their natural habitat to bring them into her own home where they were delicately wrapped and tucked away. Each week the escapade grew harder as each neighbor began to sense the infiltration. Vivian grew wary of motion censored lights, dogs, and the rare but constantly troublesome automatic sprinkler system. She moved on to adjacent neighborhoods.

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After many months of responsible thieving, and with the final find of a Noah's Ark replication, Vivian decided that her collection was complete. She unwrapped the wind chimes and began to hang them precisely along the ceiling of her previously dull living room. She favored no one chime over another but loved them equally.

They sang for her as she hung them. They reminded her of birds. The wooden pipes of a mahogany chime sounded as wise as an owl while the clanks of aluminum pieces against each other rang like the laughter of a kookaburra. Or, at least, what she believed such a bird would sound like. Vivian hung the entirely glass piece last, placing it the closest to the center bay window, still void of curtains. Its planetary globes caught the sunlight and it ricochet around the room. Its glass tinkled brilliantly.

"Beautiful," Vivian said, stepping back to review her work. The tinkling stopped and the room fell heinously silent.

Vivian swallowed and pondered the idea of purchasing a fan.

### **11. Transistor Radio**

"Where are you? Are you there?" I turned the dial another notch. The radio crackled before a voice came through. "Are you there?"

"I'm here." It crackled again. "I'm here. Jesus, it's gorgeous."

"What do you see?" The static intensified and I fiddled with the antennae. "Can you hear me? What do you see?"

"The cold." His voice was airy, barely a whisper. "The cold here fucking glitters."

The signal faded and blipped from reach. The radio went silent and I sat there in the quiet. The room was full of shades of red. There was red in the tile, in the table cloth. Even the decaled China was blemished with the color. I thought of skull against concrete. Him. The longer I sat, the more the walls began to churn into each other.

My coffee was cold so I put it in the microwave to reheat. The dryer began beeping from another room and its pitch against the unwavering was startling. I followed it into the laundry room where a fresh load of towels was waiting to be folded.

He always did the laundry when there were towels to be washed. They were the easiest to fold, he'd say. Spread out, join two corners, fold, turn, fold again. The same mundane task repeated over and over until there were no more left to fold.

Now the job was mine and I couldn't bear to start. It was the same for the dishes. The trash. The garden. All of it overgrown. All unfinished.

I returned to the kitchen where the radio sat mutely and waited for a sign that he had made it.

An unsealed envelope slipped under the door the next day. Inside was a blank piece of paper so I wrote him a note.

*How does it taste?* I asked.

I put the letter back into its envelope and placed it under my pillow. I didn't know what else to do.

In my dream that night he responded.

"How does it taste?" He laughed. "Everything I can, of course. Everything as it was supposed to be tasted."

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We were sitting together on a ski lift.

"How did I get here?"

"A bad dream."

I leaned forward to see the ground beneath my tangled skis. Thousands of red parkas that matched our own dotted the feathery snow. They lay vacant and limp.

"Where did those people go?" I asked, pointing to the abandoned coats. Our lift jumped.

"Their final place." He pulled his goggles down over his eyes. I was faced with my own reflection. I looked different. My eyes were dark. There was no contrast between the pupil and iris. My skin shone inhuman and lifeless. "You can't stay here for very long."

"But you've been here for a long time."

"I have."

"Why haven't you been sent away?" He lifted the safety bar over our heads and the ground suddenly didn't look as soft as before. I straightened out my feet. The boots were heavy.

"Well. That has two answers. You could either say that I am very lucky, or you could say that I am quite unfortunate." He laughed again and pushed me out of the seat.

I woke with a start and found myself snarled in the sheets. They squeezed my chest. I could barely breathe.

That place had changed him, wherever he had gone to wait for judgment. Its air, which was corroded and smelled like rust, had seeped into his veins. That place was overwhelming.

I had to bring him back, but to do so I had to join him there first.