

FAULT

Written by

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After I abandon my wife and kid, I stop by a taco truck. Carne asada. Chips and guac. Sprite. \$18.56.

The woman prints a receipt and gives it to me and I sit down at a plastic table and unsling my backpack from my shoulders and place it on the ground. I fold the receipt in half, then half again, then half again, then half again, until I can't anymore. Notice my nails: uneven, long. Need to trim them. Forgot the clippers. Could go back to get it. No. Should've stayed to talk to Melody about it though: my decision to leave. Why didn't I? Because then I wouldn't have left. Because I'm a weak person. Had to scamper away in secret. Like a thief. They're saying my number, and I go over to the truck. They put a box in a bag, slide it all over to me. I say thanks. They say thanks.

I think about Melody: just now getting back from her run probably. She calls out, "Hey, hey," for the whole house to hear. Her parents echo her greeting. She checks in on our daughter, Vic, who's playing in our bedroom. Melody only then registers my absence. Only then she discovers the envelope I left on the pillow. Within are two letters. One for her, one for Vic. Explaining. I hope they understand.

On a slope at the park I unhook the lid of the box. The tacos slid while I walked, so now they're piled up to one side. I squeeze the wedge of lime and place the radish discs. The meat has been sliced into thin pieces. Cross sections of muscle and nerves and fat. Pain and trauma: spiced, sold, and consumed. It could be human flesh. Would I know? Would I really? Whatever. Eat. Chop chop. Mash mash. Grease on my fingers. Grease on my chin. Bits of cilantro on my lap. Heaviness in my stomach. Hard to get it all down my throat. Dry. Imagine dying right now, mid-swallow, like an idiot. Every second I spend in this city I risk a terrible and painful fate. In the year 2004, one can never rule out the possibility of death by terrorist attack. I watch a guy walk along the footpath. What if he randomly pointed a gun at me right now. What would I do. What would I offer. What do I have to offer anyone. I think I'd just accept the bullet.

When I finish, my foot is numb. I wiggle it. Take a few steps. Better. Bend down, put the box in the bag. The skin between my shoulder blades feels wet. My shirt is damp around my arm pits, below my sternum and my man boobs. Shouldn't have worn a polo shirt. Melody calls the way I dress conservative. Which makes me sad because this is just what I feel comfortable wearing. Usually. When it's not so hot. There: a trash can. I toss my garbage. A minute ago, while I ate, it wasn't garbage, but now it is. It's no dirtier than before, but my relationship to this Styrofoam box, this plastic bag, this sauce container, has changed. It's trash because I have no use for it anymore. It no longer serves any purpose. Like how I'm no longer needed by Melody.

The bus terminal. Announcements over speakers. Smell of gas and dust. Particulates in

the air. How ever many parts per million. Coating my lungs. Hold my breath until I'm past the exhaust pipe of this particular bus. Warm toxic breeze on my calves. Ache in my chest. All clear. Deep breath. Smells like piss. People, solemn and stoic as they wait, doing nothing. I can do nothing for hours. I can do nothing for weeks. Sit there and look at the wall. Actually there aren't any seats available in the waiting area. So I just stand. Weight of the backpack on my shoulders. Terrible for my spine. Tolerate it. You don't deserve good things. The driver walks up. (Another man in a polo shirt!) He opens the under carriage for our bags. Takes out a scanner. A crowd forms around him. Beep. Beep. Beep. I unzip my backpack, take out my ticket. I printed it out from the internet last night. The printer had run out of ink though, and I had to ask Melody's mom where they kept the spare cartridges. Light cyan. While she dug through the supplies closet, she asked me what I needed it for. She wasn't suspicious. She was just making conversation. I lied: tickets to take the little one to Sea World. "Ah that's nice," she said.

I show the driver my ticket, and he points his scanner at the bar code, and for a moment the scanner seems to be loading, or processing, I don't know, but I hope I've made a mistake: sorry, that bus departed an hour ago. Nothing to do but to go back home, return to Melody and Vic.

But the scanner blinks green, and the man waves me inside.18A. I go up the steps and turn down the aisle and put my bag in the overhead compartment and sit down and lean against the window. My knees I stretch diagonally across the empty seat to my left. Sweet and pungent smell. Unidentifiable as to what exactly it is. The smell of years and years of passengers. The smell of their breath and skin.

A woman walks up, gestures to the seat next to me and mumbles something, so I move my legs. She sits down. I think about making conversation. Nothing flirty. Just to be nice. No. Too awkward. What do you have to talk about? Hi, I left my family today. I turn away from her and look out the window.

The bus rocks and lurches and pulls away from the curb. The city scape scrolls by. Apartments and shoe stores and clubs and tourist traps which soon give way to railroad tracks and factories which themselves give way to farmland and forests and rivers and wind turbines.

It's night time when we reach the last stop. I step off and it feels hot outside. Humid. Familiarity trickles in. The columns on the facade across the street. The rows of trees trimmed in neat unnatural bulbs. The vines. The cicadas. My mouth feels dirty. The convenience store in the station is still open. I pick up some gum. Pay the kid. I worked that counter once. Same shift too. I want to tell him about it. The coincidence. Is it a coincidence? More like an admission of defeat. He looks tired. Never mind. Who cares.

I take a taxi to my sister's place. It's deep in the mountains and it used to be our grandfather's. I knock on the front door. I knock again. There aren't any lights on in the windows.

I'll wait then. I lie down in the grass. You can see the stars here, unlike in the city. Feel something itching my ear. Hit it away. A weed. I'm hungry. I dig into my bag. Feel around with my hand until I land on an apple. I take it out, set it down on the dirt. There should be an orange too. I root through my bag again. Below my underwear. Below my toiletries bag. My headphones. There. I unearth it from my backpack. The orange. I dine on a feast of fruit. I know how to live deeply, don't I.

Something prods my shoulder. I open my eyes. Page stands over me. She's wearing yesterday's clothes. I'm still in the grass. It's dewy.

"Hi," she says.

"Good morning," I say.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm alright. Where were you?"

"Out."

"I was going to ask if I could crash here."

"You should've called."

"Mm. Yeah. Everything happened really quickly. Sorry."

"I thought you were a dead person. When I saw you out here."

"No. Not dead. Sorry."

She helps me up and leads me into the house. It's called the stone-house by everyone in the family because a lot of it is made out of stone. Lots of different kinds of stone. Grey. Red. Black. I don't know the names, but I think Page does. She fills a boiler with water at the sink and then plugs the boiler in and flicks the switch on the handle and the whole thing starts to hum. I pace around and look at all the antiques and cobwebs. She leans on

the counter and watches me.

“Are you going to tell me what’s up?” She asks.

I say, “Things weren’t working out in the city.”

“How come?”

“Because I’m stupid and I can’t find work or friends and I feel like there’s going to be a terrorist attack there and I know that’s paranoid and neurotic but I also know that the more time I spend time with Melody, the more of my paranoia and neurosis will rub off on her, until we’re both just as emotionally crippled as me. I want to move back here. Not here, at the stone-house specifically, I mean back in town. I want to go back to school. Get a teaching degree. English. Art. I could do something like that. But you do know if they explode a dirty bomb it’ll probably be in the city?”

Page’s water starts to boil, and the switch flicks off on its own. She opens a cabinet, takes out a mug. “I thought you wanted to do film,” she says.

“I dropped a light,” I say. “The biggest one. It shattered at my feet. I could’ve lost my toes. I’m not getting hired again after that. People talk. And then - and then Melody had an idea for us to make a little short film together. She wrote a script.”

“About the fisherman?”

“About the fisherman, yeah. How do you know about that?”

“She sent it to me. It’s good.”

“You two talk?”

“Yes. We talk.”

“Huh, okay. Well, um, where was I? Right. Our cinematographer quit on the second day of the shoot because she hated me, but honestly she had no idea what she was doing. I had to redo everything she did. Then the actors kept questioning me on every scene. Why this. Why that. ‘Shouldn’t I be holding the croissant since in the last scene I picked it up?’ ‘If I’m estranged with my friend, I feel like I wouldn’t be calling him right now.’ That sort of thing. I didn’t have answers for those sorts of questions. I was lost. I remember looking at Melody. She was there on set as a script supervisor. And she looked at me.

And she seemed so disappointed in me. She should've been directing. She could've handled those actors. Film is her thing. Not mine. I felt like I was pretending. I felt useless. And I can't keep living with her parents. They're nice people. But I feel too bad freeloading. Or paying 'reduced' rent or whatever. I can't keep consuming. Increasingly, I've become disgusted with the mechanisms of human life. Eating. Breathing. Sleeping. Snot. Saliva. Ear wax. Dandruff. Blood. It's so gross. Toenails? The fuck?"

Page cuts a lemon and squeezes it into her mug of hot water. Puts honey. Then says: "You have to eat."

"No, yes, I know. I'm just saying."

"What's your plan?"

"I told you."

"I mean your immediate plan. What are you going to do next? Like, today?"

"Could I stay here for a little bit while I look for an apartment?"

She thinks and sips lemon-honey-water from her mug. "You can hang out today but you can't stay the night," she says. "You either need to find somewhere else or go back home."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because you should go back home."

"Why?"

"Because it's the right thing to do."

"Why?"

"Because it is."

“See? The reasoning just stops there. Because of duty and gender roles and blah blah blah.”

“I’m not talking about gender roles. These are people who love you. You’re their best friend. It’s not fair to them.”

“No but it’s for their own good. They’d be better off, materially and emotionally, if they didn’t love me.”

“That’s not how they’ll see it.”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

Page’s landline rings. She goes over and lifts up the telephone and puts it to her ear: “Hello? Yes, one sec.” She turns to me, holds out the phone, doesn’t have to say who it is.

I step over, pick up the phone, speak into the receiver: “Hey, honey.” The pet name comes out of my mouth accidentally. By impulse. Sounds cruel to my ear.

“Hi.” Melody’s voice is measured.

“I hope everything’s going okay over there.”

“Things could be better.”

“Mhm.”

“When will you come back?”

“I think, uh, never.” I added the “uh” to soften the blow, but it just comes off as sarcastic.

“That’s sad.”

“Yes, but that’s what makes it the correct thing to do. Did you read my letter?”

“What letter?”

“The letter I left.”

“Where?”

“On your pillow.”

“I never saw a letter.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

I sigh: “It’s fine.”

“You sound mad. Are you mad at me for not finding a letter?”

I feel some sort of memory unveil itself in my brain, then I say, “No, I’m not mad.”

“But you’re annoyed.”

“I’m not. Truly. I’m not. If I am, it’s at myself.”

“Can I talk to your sister again?”

I pass the phone to Page and walk away, and while she talks in hushed tones I rummage through my backpack. Unzip everything. In the laptop pocket: a blue folder. Check inside. My birth certificate and stuff. But also: a folded envelope. The letters I had written and intended to leave behind for Melody. I wrote them the night before, put them here for safe keeping, so no one would discover them before I fled, but as I rushed out the door, I forgot to take them out and put them on her pillow. I forgot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. The most important part of my plan. Squandered.

Where does all my self-loathing leave me? Nowhere. I still don’t make good decisions. I still have a bad memory. I’m still selfish. I think back to earlier, when I mentioned the dirty bomb exploding in the city, I didn’t consider that even though I’d be safe, out here in the country, Melody and the little one would be in the blast radius. I’ve saved myself from a hypothetical terrorist attack but left my family behind. I never even thought about it. That’s sad. That’s what Melody had said just now. That’s sad. Sad that I’m so self-centered. Page won’t help me. No one else in my life to reach out to. I think about what it means to live apart from my family for the rest of my life and I feel a cold current of despair flush through my body. Too much. I don’t deserve this. They don’t deserve this. I thought the sadness was a noble sadness, a byproduct of the sacrifice I was making, but

now I think this sadness just shows how wrong I am. Perhaps the moral thing to do is to do what will make you happy. Deeply happy. And happiness is your reward for doing the correct things. And being happy means being back with Melody and Vic. And if that means struggling more with my job and what I want to do with my life, that's fine. That's just a matter of logistics. At least I'd be with them and they'd be with me.

After Page is done with her call, I ask if she can drive me back to the station.

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When I open the door, Henry is standing on the front step, a hopeful, shameful look on his face as he waits for me to say something.

"Come in," I tell him.

As he approaches, he brings his arms up to embrace me. I let him. My hands snake around his torso; my chin hooks onto his shoulder. He holds me there. I think about what the appropriate length of time a hug in this situation would be. People don't talk about these things. We find ourselves in a gap too granular for general rules of etiquette to cover.

The comfort I find in his embrace is quickly followed by a pinprick of disappointment in myself, so I disengage and back away from him. He shuffles forward, takes off his shoes, his shoulders sloping downward. He has a mule's shoulders, my mom says sometimes.

In the living room, a crime procedural plays on the television. Dad watches it, mom doesn't. They smile at Henry and exclaim in greeting: "Heyyy!" But they're livid. I know this because they don't stand up from the couch. Henry senses it as well. He nods and apologizes for scaring us and swears he'll do better in the future. In the mean part of my mind, I question what exactly he means by "do better in the future." Do what better? Abandon us better? Don't worry, next time, I'll make sure to leave a note. He means he'll be more dependable, but either way, I often notice that he's a lot better at saying things than doing things. He had telegraphed that he was going to leave for several days. In bed, he confessed how guilty he felt because he had appended himself to my life. He told me Vic and I would be better off without him. He told me sometimes it must seem like I take care of two children: Vic and himself. How do you respond to that?

Vic peers at us from the stairs. When Henry turns to her, she runs down to him and he scoops her up and spins her around. Vic prefers her dad over me. She said it, outright, in the matter of fact way that young people speak, with no intention to hurt my feelings, while I walked home with her from the park. I don't believe that I feel bitter about it, and

her preferences will change over time, like how when she's older, she'll have developed a taste for shrimp and carrots that she lacks now.

Everyone already had dinner, so Henry microwaves leftovers. Vic and I sit with him while he eats. In between bites, he lectures her about added sugars. His lips smack and click, and small particles of food fly out of his mouth because he's trying to simultaneously chew, breathe, and talk. This is the fourth time Vic has listened to this lecture. She loves it. After he's done, he washes his plate and fork and announces that he's going to take a shower.

I put Vic to bed, and when she's finally calm, I go back out to the living room and watch television with my parents for a few minutes. They've switched over to a reality show about food where a man is tasting a delicacy made out of fried bees. Although I intend to turn my brain off, I find myself immediately invested in the host's reactions and commentary and simultaneously dazzled and grossed out by the shots of the dishes.

"Where are they?" I ask mom.

"Yunnan," she says.

I wonder if I could write a short story about a traveling food show's crew. The main character could be the camera operator. I like the idea of being in a beautiful place, where you're half-tourist, half-working-professional. How often does the crew partake in the food they're filming? I think Lou knows someone who works at the channel. Maybe I could ask them.

Henry gets out of the shower and walks through the living room with only his towel wrapped around his waist. He glances at the screen, then disappears into our bedroom, leaving behind wet footprints on the floor. When he re-emerges, he's in Pajamas. He walks over, bends down, whispers in my ear: "Do you want to come to bed with me?" He wants to have sex. Make-up sex. Homecoming sex.

"I'm watching this with my family right now," I say.

"Oh, okay," he backs away and glances again at the screen. He hates watching television and looks down on people like my parents who watch a lot of it. "I'll watch too." He sits next to me and leans on my shoulder. When I don't reciprocate with physical affection, he starts to fidget. He crosses his legs, then uncrosses them again, and sits up straight and twitches his mouth and repeatedly flexes a muscle in his jaw. His breath becomes heavier, and I can tell he's talking to himself in his head. He chuckles even though there's nothing

funny going on in the show.

“Henry, what are you doing?” mom asks him.

“Um, I think I’m just tired,” he says.

“Maybe you should go to bed then.”

Henry remains in his seat: “No, it’s alright.” He tries to suppress his tics, but that just makes it worse. Eventually, he stops watching the show and alternates between looking at his lap and the side of my face. As the episode ends and the credits roll, he practically shoots out of his seat, stretches his arms and yawns theatrically. “Well, that was interesting.” To no one in particular, he adds: “Goodnight.” He pads into our bedroom and shuts the door.

After an ad break, a cooking competition starts. With the dramatic music and the announcer, it’s pretty loud, and I have a feeling it’s keeping Henry awake. Soon, the bedroom door opens again, and he peaks out.

“Hey,” he says, “could you guys turn down the volume? The bass is pretty intense.”

Mom doesn’t acknowledge him for a long moment, but after a few seconds, she finally lifts the remote and hits the volume button a couple times.

“Thank you,” Henry says.

He gets nothing from my parents, and he retreats back into the bedroom. After a few minutes, I overhear the sounds of crying from the bedroom. I get up to check on him.

In our bedroom, the lights are off, but he’s sitting up against the headboard. When I climb into bed, he snuffles and wipes his nose with his fingers and asks: “Am I a bad person?”

“I think you’re just a little lost,” I say as I lie down.

“But if we met today, would you want to be my friend?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“You’re talented at lots of different things.”

“But I haven’t done anything with those talents, have I?”

“You just have to pick one and focus on it.”

“But which one do I pick?”

“Just pick one.”

“Can you tell me what to do?”

“No.”

“Can you touch me?”

I put my hand on his wrist. I just lay it on top without grabbing it, but still he quiets down. I feel his heartbeat in a vein near the fleshy part between his thumb and index finger. Touching his skin reminds me of how much older he is than me. Already there are creases, like a book’s broken spine, warnings of wrinkles to come, that wind all around his hands. “Thank you,” he says. In the living room, a chef presents her plans for making a dish with scallops in it. I don’t remember falling asleep.

In the morning, I wake up to an empty bed, but I hear his whistling coming from the kitchen. I put on my slippers and follow the sound. He has a pot of tea steeping, and there’s a bouquet of flowers on the coffee table.

“Good morning,” I say.

He turns: “Oh, good morning, I was going to bring this to you in bed.” By the way he smiles, the bubbly way he talks, it’s like everything from the day before has been forgotten.

“It’s alright.”

“Well then, this is for you.” He picks up the bouquet and puts it in my hands. It’s thick and lively and colorful and smells sweet and sickly like all good bouquets.

“Thank you, it’s really beautiful,” I say as he pours the tea into a mug and puts it on the table. These kind gestures are tainted somewhat by the undercurrent of desperation

within them, but it's still nice. I sit down and sip the tea. "You didn't have to do all this for me."

He shrugs: "I was thinking, maybe we could all go to the beach today?"

I put down my mug. He's forgotten. "You should take Vic, but I have those language sessions."

"Oh yeah. Well maybe after, you can meet up with us?"

"I'm going bouldering with Lou."

The hurt is plain on his face. "Right. Never mind."

"I can cancel on her though. It's no big deal."

"No, don't."

"No, yeah, I want to see the beach."

With bitterness, and perhaps a touch of sardonic aggression, he says: "No, it's okay, you don't have to change all your plans for me."

"Well wait a moment, if you're going to stay at the beach until sunset, I could meet you then?"

He pauses. "And maybe we could get dinner at the peanut place?"

"Exactly."

He starts whistling again. Now that his goal of making amends with me is accomplished, his jovial mood has returned, as if nothing happened. The switch in his demeanor makes something inside me collapse; I don't want to drink anymore tea. I don't want these flowers, either. It annoys me that he's trying to be nice. That undercurrent of desperation that I sensed? It's actually worse than that. Everything he does, especially when he acts kindly or generously, he expects some sort of reward for. *I made you tea, so please forgive me.* It's sickening. I put the mug of now-unappetizing brown liquid on the counter and say, "I should get ready."

"Oh, okay." He chews the inside of his cheek, and his lips form a leaden frown when he

sees that I've barely touched the tea. I ignore the heat of his growing frustration, and instead of giving him an explanation, I head to the bathroom, shut the door, lock it, and brush my teeth.

Later, I stand outside and check our mailbox. As I sort through the letters, promotional info packets for my parents' bank accounts, I realize I'm holding my breath. It's like a form of Russian roulette, waiting for mail, wondering if the next envelope will say your name on it. There's nothing for me. I had sent my collection of short stories to a publisher, but haven't heard back from them yet. I put the letters back in the box.

"No news?" dad asks. He's in the front yard, repeatedly bumping his back against a tree, one of his exercises. He does three sets of 100 most days.

I shake my head. "Not today, no."

"Are you feeling alright? In general?"

"Yeah, I'm alright."

He grunts. "Yeah that's what I thought. He's an idiot but he's okay." When I was eight, we adopted a cat from the street, and the cat gave birth to a litter of kittens. Once, she put the kittens in our shoes in the closet, and when dad discovered them, he picked them up one by one while they were sleeping and threw them across the room. He actually chucked them, not caring if they hit the wall or not. In comparison to my dad at that age, Henry's great.

I go to the first house, where I teach French to a girl named Edie, and her mom pays me for my time. Then, I go to another house and teach a boy Italian. Afterwards, I walk around a cemetery. I like to walk around cemeteries. They're creepy and traumatic but peaceful at the same time. Someday, Henry will die. All the rage and grievances and contradictions inside his brain will stop and won't bother anyone anymore. That's comforting, I think, but Henry would likely disagree. I have to give two more lessons today, but I already feel tired. I remind myself of the total amount of money I'm making today. It's enough for a couple weeks of groceries. This way of quantifying what I'm achieving this morning gives me a sense of basic, pathetic pride that motivates me to keep going.

Finishing up my lessons, I pick up a box of cucumber-avocado sushi from the supermarket. I quickly eat it all while I'm waiting for the metro. Henry, Vic, and my parents must be having lunch around now. It occurs to me I've barely thought about Henry today. I really only thought about him once, at the cemetery, but that's it. I should

probably figure out what to do about it. About us. About him. Even though my mom thinks Henry is below my league, she still wants us to stay together. After he left, she told me that I had to “win” him back, practically forced me into calling his sister. I think my mom wants me to be like her, joyless but married. She wants to feel the camaraderie of us, together, hating the men in our lives. It gives her someone to blame. But I don’t hate Henry. Or do I? Do I really know how I feel at all?

I don’t think I’ve let myself feel anything for a while. If I did, I’d have to contend with questions that I don’t want to answer: whether or not I love him anymore. I’ve been numb, planning my lessons, taking care of Vic, taking care of my parents, placating Henry’s moods. I plow through an infinite to-do list and bury myself in logistics to avoid having real emotions. There was one moment when this numbness ceased. It was the day before yesterday, when I discovered he had left. I felt relieved, which is sad, because I actually do love him. Yes. It’s becoming clear to me now. I do love him, but it’s just because he’s an important figure in my life and I’ve told him all of my secrets. It’s not romantic, whirlwind love.

The metro arrives, and with a chime, the doors open. I squeeze in, worm my hand through the press of bodies, touch the metal pole. The train rumbles up to speed; my brain turns to, yet again, logistics. What would be best for Vic? If we separated, where would he go? Would I stay with my parents? Would I get an apartment of my own? The numbness returns. Of all these questions and possibilities, I realize I haven’t asked myself what I want. Not what I want to achieve in the short-term or long-term, but what I want my actual day-to-day life to look like. I’d want people to respect my work, my real work, not my language tutoring, and I’d want to have more time to do it. I’d want to have dinners with my friends, not just my parents. I’d want to watch more plays. I’d want to take guitar lessons. I’d want to go swimming at the beach with Vic. Where would Henry fit in? I’m not sure.

I meet Lou at the bouldering gym. We climb and talk. She tells me about gossip from her life and the lives of friends and friends of friends.

“Sorry, I’ve been talking at you for, like, forty minutes,” she says.

“No no, I kinda love it,” I reply. It’s true, hanging out with Lou is like checking *The Guardian* for the current events of our sprawling, somewhat disconnected friend group. There’s Suzanne, who moved away, but is super close to Lou and still calls her a lot; and Alma, who pivoted after grad school and started working on a farm; and Ilsa, who stayed in academia. Beyond that, there is a web of interconnecting secondary characters and sub groups, which I don’t know too well, but it’s still entertaining to hear about who’s having

sex with whom.

“How’s the writing going?” She asks.

I shrug, “I’m working on a new thing about these fishermen who, well it’s a little dumb when I say it aloud, who try to summon an Ocean God to destroy a supermarket that’s taking up all their business.”

Her eyelids flick up and down several times, and her lips form a pinched smile, then she goes, “Then what happens?” I wish I didn’t care about her opinion on my stories, but I do because I don’t have many other ways to measure my creative work. Even just now, I slightly lied about my story. It’s not about fishermen, plural, it’s only about one fisherman. But maybe it *would* be better if there are multiple fishermen?

“So,” I say, “it’s a really complicated spell and they aren’t sure if they’re doing it right, but they do it, and the supermarket gets turned into a turtle -”

“A turtle?”

“Yes, a sea turtle, but then the spell works too well and everything in the world related to commercial fishing gets turned into sea turtles, like restaurants, and farmer’s market stands, and even the fishermen’s boats, and eventually, the fishermen themselves.”

After a pause, she says: “Hmm, interesting.”

She must really hate how it sounds; I just keep talking. “I wrote it as a script already, a script for a short film, but that was really different and a lot simpler. It was just about a couple fishermen talking in a bar basically. The film turned out badly, so I’m re-doing it as a short story, and I’m changing lots of stuff too.”

“Well good luck on that.”

We climb in silence for a while, until she starts to talk about herself again. When our arms feel like pool noodles, we decide we’ve had enough, and we change out of our climbing shoes and say goodbye.

Afterward, I stop by home, and when I enter through the front entrance, I call out: “Hey, hey.”

Mom’s eating a sandwich and solving a 1000 piece puzzle. Dad’s taking a nap.

“Page called,” she says.

“Was it urgent?” I head into the bathroom and pick out a beach towel, grab my swim suit, stuff it all into a tote bag.

“No, she was just checking in.”

“What did you say?”

“That you were out and you’d call her back.”

I go over to the landline, dial her number, and listen to the ring tone. I realize I forgot to ask Lou about the traveling food TV shows. Next time, I’ll remember. Maybe I should figure out some detailed questions in advance. With a click I hear Page’s voice. She asks me how I am, and how things are with Henry.

“I think we’re still adjusting back to each other, but it’s going alright,” I say.

“I’m glad,” she says. “I have no idea what he was thinking.”

When I finally get to the beach, the sun is low, and clouds have come in and the wind has picked up, making it feel overcast and cold. I don’t see Vic or Henry. They must have gone to the restaurant early. We call it the peanut place because they serve shelled peanuts when they seat you instead of bread. I find them at a booth, a bowl of empty peanut shells on the table. Vic draws with crayons on the paper table mat.

“You found us,” Henry says. “I was worried you wouldn’t find us.” He has a half-empty virgin Mojito.

“Have you ordered?” I ask.

“Why would we have ordered? You weren’t here.”

“I didn’t know how long you’ve been waiting.”

“Why would we order without you?”

“I don’t know. It’s a natural thing to do.”

The waiter approaches, and I get spaghetti for Vic. It's a seafood place but she doesn't like seafood. She just likes the peanuts and the vibe. For myself, I ask for a seared salmon. Henry gets octopus stew.

We don't speak. There's nothing to talk about. As a pastime, we watch Vic draw. I prefer not having to talk to him right now. I'm not particularly mad at him, but whenever he speaks, there's an underlying ugliness to everything, and he repeats himself a lot. I don't think he realizes it, but I've heard the same stories and jokes so many times. The food arrives, and we eat, and still, we don't speak. I'd rather be swimming in the ocean in the cold. Well, maybe I'd just float in the water, because my muscles are tired from bouldering. Would Vic want to swim with me still, despite the cold? I think so. She's strong and wild. I have a feeling it was too cold for Henry, which is why they came to the restaurant early. Henry breaks the silence by asking me if I'd like to try his stew. I decline. He huffs, taking my refusal as an insult. I notice he's staring at me.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Nothing." He looks back into his bowl.

Vic can't finish her spaghetti, then she falls asleep, lying down on the booth. I let Henry pay. It makes him feel better to pay for our meals. I look at what Vic has drawn: giant ladybugs on a mountaintop. There's actually a sense of perspective and depth to the drawing. I take the paper table mat, wipe away some marinara sauce, and fold it up. Later, at home, I put the drawing on the fridge. There are several of Vic's other drawings here: some crayon, some pastel, some water color. Henry taught her some art skills like how to draw vehicles from a three-quarter point of view, and she's frighteningly good at it.

"We should talk," I tell Henry. He nods. We go out to the backyard.

"So? What is it?" He says.

"I think we should separate," I say.

His mouth twitches downward into a frown. "Why?"

"There isn't just one reason that encompasses it all. It's lots of things. But mainly, I think you just feel attached to me because we've known each other a long time, so we feel comfort in being around each other, but that's not the same thing as love, is it?"

He thinks about it for a moment. "But I came back."

"But when you left, I was several times happier than when you were here. What does that say?"

"You were?"

"Yeah."

"This is bullshit. I want to make this work."

"There's no making this work. It's dead."

"It's not."

"I used to never see your faults, but now I feel nothing for you anymore, and all I see now are things about you that annoy me. Almost every single thing you do is aggravating. Even the nice things." I'm not sure if I'll regret these words later. Actually, I regret them as I say them because I see how much they are hurting him, but I know it's necessary.

"Just tell me what to do and I'll improve."

"No, you have to think for yourself."

"Please."

"No."

"Please."

"I'm telling you to leave."

"Actually?"

"Yes."

His shoulders sag. "Do you want me to leave now?"

"Tomorrow. You need to say bye to Vic and my parents."

“What do I say?”

“Whatever you want, just say something.”

He nods. “I’ll figure it out.” Then he turns and walks back inside. My body feels rubbery, like how I feel after bouldering or exercising intensely: tired, but also lightweight. In the morning, he’s gone without saying goodbye, but he leaves behind a letter for us.