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## Transing My Gender: An Exploration of the Process of Becoming Me

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**MASTER'S THESIS TRANSING MY GENDER**

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE PROCESS OF BECOMING ME**

By

Equinox Charette

B.A. University of Maryland Global Campus 2021

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2024

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# **MASTER'S THESIS TRANSING MY GENDER**

## **AN EXPLORATION OF THE PROCESS OF BECOMING ME**

By Equinox Charette

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Rosalie Purvis

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(in English)  
May 2024

The following is a collection of short stories and flash fiction assembled in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the creative writing concentration of the degree of Master of Arts in English. The pieces are autofictional in nature, tracing, with some degree of accuracy, my personal experiences with reconstructing my gender identity. The collection deals with themes of isolation, dysphoria, love, acceptance, and reflection. The pieces are largely drawn from experiences I've had during the course of my participating in this MA program, though there are also stories that take place during the time I spent in the military. The intent of this collection is to explore my own experiences with forming trans identity and queer community in an attempt to both help me process the experience by being known and also to allow others to understand the experience better.

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### Critical Introduction

This collection of short pieces was not something I had originally intended on putting together. The majority of the pieces, such as “Instructions for Writing a Story”, “Tree”, and “Remains” were written as pieces for workshops, whereas some, like “Photographs” and “Productive Member of Society”, originated as simple writing exercises. However, as I accumulated these pieces, tucked neatly away in the various seminar-based folders of my laptop, I realized that there was a consistent theme across many of them: the process of exploring and reshaping my sense of identity. As the final semester of this MA program drew near, I realized that, while not the politically critical genre pieces I had originally been developing for this thesis, these stories held so much personal and emotional significance that it almost felt more appropriate to flesh them out into a proper collection to mark this turning point in my life. As such, I present *Transing My Gender*, a collection of short stories and flash fiction exploring the ins and outs of the formation of my sense of identity, particularly the experiences of dysphoria and introspection.

I believe it would be best to categorize the stories in this collection as generally realist autofiction, though splashed with occasional departures from reality, as the majority of the pieces are based on specific events and moments in my life, though filtered through a fictional lens, whether in the form of a second-person perspective, a theatrical framework, or simply a narrative voice that does more than present and comment on the events. On the other hand, there are stories that are less specific, whether they are more abstract, like “You Do Not Belong Here”, or more of a blending of several events into one story, like “Remains”. Stories like this fall further into the fictional realm with less of the memoir-adjacent elements that are present elsewhere.

I do struggle to place exactly where this collection falls within literary tradition or current trends. I tend to read mostly genre fiction, whereas I’d argue that these pieces would fall more on the literary

side. I also do not have a lot of experience reading autofiction or flash fiction. I do, however, recognize inspiration from a few authors that I read for writing workshops, primarily Giadda Scodellaro and Ling Ma, whose worked in similar forms. I do not, however, believe that either of these authors had enough of an influence on these pieces to truly call my work in conversation with either of theirs.

The most obvious source of inspiration for this collection is my own life, as the plot of the stories are largely based on real events. As far as tonal influences, I aspire to a sort of playfully dry wit that is best exemplified in British authors like Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett. These authors write about very serious and meaningful topics while sprinkling in, sometimes grim, humor. I try to mix this sort of outlook with a punk rock-angled mindset, with queercore bands like She/Her/hers, Pansy Division, Against Me!, and Dog Park Dissidents informing my heavily queer liberationist beliefs. Many of these groups write deeply personal and soul-baring lyrics that expose the core of their queer experiences, digging fingernails into the bleeding wounds of gender dysphoria and discrimination. While I'm not much of a song writer, I wanted to have a similar sense of painful, angry exposure woven through these pieces. I think this is particularly visible in the negative self-talk of "You Do Not Belong Here", "New Razor", and "Photographs." Other stories, like both versions of "Taste of Ash", were written as a sort of therapeutic exercise for processing a strong emotional response I was experiencing.

When selecting from pre-written pieces, I made sure to focus on including stories that, as I previously mentioned, feature struggles with gender identity and dysphoria; however, I also included stories like "Bad News", which was written years ago, and "Farmers' Market" to show significant moments from my past that tied into Winter's experiences in "Tree". As the collection was refined, these pieces became "leaves", an interruption of "Tree" that was intended to fill in the backstory of Winter and the different struggles they had faced. Originally, these interruption stories were placed throughout the collection, but I felt that the non-conventional formatting of the interruption was a more appropriate way to express Winter's/my story. Regarding non-conventional form, I also felt as though a short play

would be the most interesting way to show the events of “Farmers’ Market,” as so much of the content of the original story was internality and location-based context. I like the idea of reading the play with all of its stage direction and contextualizing details, then imagining how spare and lacking it would be to actually see the actions staged: a person walks past bickering farmers, sits down, and takes a phone call. That’s how it would have looked to an external observer that day, so it felt worth portraying that way.

As I was nearly finished assembling the collection, I realized there was, generally, a fairly negative tone throughout most of the pieces. In order to combat that tone, I intentionally wrote the pieces “Freaky Tranny Sex”, inspired by a recent relationship, “Aloo Gobi”, based on a North Indian curry recipe that I love to cook for people, and “You Still Do Not Belong Here”, a sort of response to the opening piece intended to express the sort of peace and comfort that I’ve found in the small queer community I’ve developed for myself over the last year or so. These pieces were inspired, to some extent, by the theories of queer liberation and queer utopia, as discussed by queer theoretician Jose Muñoz. Ending the collection with these lighter stories felt especially important, as, for the first time in a while, I am generally looking forward with a positive, hopeful outlook, and I wanted the end of this collection, this series of snapshots of the last few years of my life, to reflect the upward trend in my mental state as best as possible.



### Preface: You Do Not Belong Here

You do not belong here. You never have, and you know that you never will. You see it in the mirror, on the faces of others, in your deepest thoughts, the ones you think on the worst days, the days that refuse to end, hours stretching into bleak eons of miserable reflections, ponderings, and musings of all the many things wrong with you and the many reasons you do not belong here.

You do not know when you realized that you do not belong here. You were always a little... different when you were younger, always a bit out of step with your peers, always a little too energetic, too talkative, too difficult to understand. You had such a hard time understanding why people treated you the way they did, what about you meant they saw you in a certain way, where their assumptions about how you would act came from. And it wasn't like *all* of their expectations and assumptions were *that* hard to conform to. You liked swords and lasers and monsters and were never all that interested in sappy romance, but, on the other hand, you hated dirt and mud and mess and still do.

You do not know where you belong instead of here. You know about other places, where people live with different expectations or even without them. These seem like happier places, better places, truer places, but you still don't think you belong in any of them. Some of them may seem like decent matches for you, but you can't see a way to actually reach these places, to settle down in them. You don't know if these places would even take you in if you managed to find a way to reach them. They would look at you and see an outsider, someone who belongs where you are now, even if you know it isn't true. They would expect from you what the ones from here do, things you cannot live up to, things that keep you from belonging.

You do not know how to explain to others that you do not belong here. They look at you and see... you aren't sure, but it seems to be someone who belongs, if a bit uncomfortably. They have these expectations and, to them, you seem to fit them, albeit poorly. You have a body that fits their

expectations, that makes you look as though you belong here, regardless of the different ways you try to make it stand out. There are all of these things about yourself that you can clearly feel, things that set you apart from their expectations, things that refuse to allow you to belong here, things that stop you from belonging anywhere, things that others who *do* belong here also have, that don't make those others feel as though they don't belong in the way they do you. You have tried to talk about these differences, these faults and stumbling blocks, with others, with the ones who only meet most of the expectations of here, with those who aren't from here, with those who left here, but you've never been able to find the words to make people understand. They never understand. Instead, they praise you for the ways you buck the expectations of where you live, how you choose to live how you want regardless of what is expected of you, how your evasion of social expectations is a cool and good thing for people who belong here to do, actually, and not a clear indication that you don't belong here.

You do not know how you are going to keep going if you are stuck here. You've tried, you've tried so hard, to fit in, to do your best to meet their expectations, to actually be what they actually think you are and want you to be, to be what would fit in here, but you've failed. You've failed again and again and given up so many times that you don't even know how you would succeed at something anymore. What even defines succeeding when you so thoroughly do not fit in? You have no idea. You don't even know if succeeding at something would make you happy, since you don't know how to be happy here. If you could settle down somewhere else, you might be able to find happiness, if you could find acceptance there, but you don't know.

You cannot stay here. You have no idea how to leave or where to go. You are trapped. You do not belong here.

### Instructions for Writing a Story

Step One: accept that you're bullshit, you're nothing, you can't fucking accomplish anything. You never have and never will do anything to actually make yourself proud. Your parents are disappointed in you, whether they admit it or not. Do you even care? Every time they think they actually know you, you're lying. That's all you do, lie, fake, pretend, bullshit. Nothing you do has purpose. Nothing you do is meaningful. You're a fake and a hack who gets by off of mediocre work and a charming persona.

Step Two: remember that your inner critic is even more bullshit, more nothing, than you are. Sure, your life is full of false starts, giving up easily, abandoning things the moment they get difficult. Sure, your parents probably are at least a little disappointed in you. Fuck 'em. What do your parents or your inner critic know, anyway?

Step Three: decide to kick your little bitch of an inner critic right in the dick. This isn't going to be easy—after all, your inner critic is more of an abstract concept, a personification of parts of your own mind that work against you. It exists in your mind. It doesn't live in a place you can physically go to. It (probably) doesn't have a dick to kick.

Step Four: reject the divide between physical form and abstraction and find a way to kick its ass anyway. To do this, you're going to need to do some rigorous prep work. Your initial thought might be something to do with meditation, mindfulness, something along those lines to clear your mind, put the inner voices to the side. WRONG. In order to enter your own mind and physically assault an element of your own consciousness, you don't want a clear fucking mind, you want to let the inner critic fill you with its thoughts and judgements, be amped up on enough caffeine to kill a horse, and so full of rage it would make the Hulk explode. It might help to read someone else's writing first, really let your critic compare you to them. Maybe read some of your own writing, if you think you can handle the massively inflated sense of power that'll give the critic.

Step Five: assemble the little bits of ritualistic nonsense you call your “focus charms”. No, they don’t actually do anything. Yes, you know this. No, this isn’t just your inner critic putting you down, you do know that lighting the same candle—pumpkin spice because you’re basic—and wearing the same necklace whenever you write doesn’t do anything more than slightly trick your brain into thinking that they’re helping you think. That doesn’t fucking matter.

Step Six: fail a few times. Pick one of the dozens of half-formed ideas floating around in your phone or on a notecard on your desk. Get excited. Write half a page. Decide that it’s shit, absolute shit, such utter shit that you can’t even believe you’ve ever had the fucking gall to call yourself a writer. Delete it. CTRL+Z. Look at it again for a minute. Delete it again. Decide you’ll maybe eventually probably come back to this idea once you’ve had some time to think it over, it just isn’t ready yet, you’d need some time to flesh out the idea, decide where it should go. Maybe write a note somewhere to convince yourself that you’ll come back to it. Abso-fucking-lutely never go back to it because you’re a shitty quitter. Really let the contempt sink in. This will give your inner critic the approximate sensation of several hundred orgasms simultaneously. This will give you the approximate sensation of being drowned in the effluence of several hundred of your inner critic’s simultaneous orgasms. It will be less fun than it sounds.

Step Seven: act quickly while the inner critic is basking in the afterglow of nervous system cum collapse. While it is distracted, crack open another energy drink and let the sweet, sweet caffeine lift your mind out of the critic’s heaps of ejaculate. You’ll know that you’ve conducted this step properly if you feel as though you could either fight a god or become a god, and you aren’t sure if the difference actually matters. This is, certainly, not an easy mental change to undergo, so it’s important to remember that the most direct method is by channeling your discontent onto the page. It may help to sit and quasi-journal for a bit, just vent out the anger you are feeling at yourself and your inner critic into something self-aware, probably attempting to be too clever by half. If you can avoid the trap of overly reveling in the

meta humor, this is the easiest way into your own mind. Your inner critic should be too distracted by the aftershocks of pleasure wracking its metaphorical body to stop you from sneaking in.

Step Eight: avoid getting trapped by the many, many layers of defenses your inner critic has erected over the years. Once you enter your own mind, you will find yourself surrounded by the vast halls of all of you. It will be full of your proudest moments and accomplishments—assuming you have at least a few—as well as your deepest shames, regrets, hates, and secrets. That is the direction you must go in order to deliver the planned kick into the recently overused dick of your inner critic. You must, however, be careful. It will be immensely tempting to get caught up in the rows upon rows upon rows of shortcomings the critic has displayed. As you approach their lair, you will be faced with every aspect of your personal appearance that you hate—yes, especially THAT one. These are simply mirrors, maybe distorted, maybe not, and you must turn your eyes away from them as you pass. Tapestries will adorn the walls, painstakingly illustrating every social faux pas you’ve committed, every former friend you treated poorly, every porn video you’ve ever been ashamed to have watched. You especially need to avoid the porn tapestries.

Step Nine: throw open the door to the inner critic’s chamber and deliver the dick kick. If you’ve done everything right up to this point, the inner critic will not be expecting you. This means you need to do this quickly and without hesitation. Your inner critic will likely look a lot like you, or a more perfect version of yourself lacking the many, many flaws and defects that were so present in the mirrors. Do not let this stop you. Reel back as hard as you can and kick the fucker. Kick the fucker so hard its dick flies right off. It doesn’t matter if you wouldn’t have expected a figurative representation of yourself to have a dick, it does, and you *can* kick it off if you try. No, not can, *will*. For once in your life, believe in yourself.

Step Ten: after you properly savor the meaty *thwack* sound of the critic’s dick hitting the stone wall of your mind (don’t ask why the walls will be stone, they just always are), return to your corporeal

self and set fingers to keys. Let the echoing cries of your shitty inner critic's pain be fuel. Use them. Weave them into your sentences, but work quickly; eventually your critic will recover, regenerate its missing anatomy—possibly bigger than before—and set about tormenting you again. It will, in all likelihood, remember the way you thrashed it on this day and beset you with renewed vigor.

The Most Important Step: remember that you defeated it once, and you *can* defeat it again.

Write.

## Tree

Life was... well, not exactly misery, but, as far as Winter was concerned, it wasn't exactly enjoyable. This was the line of logic they turned over and over in their mind as they lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. It was white and textured with pattern-less ridges and whorls of paint. Winter was fairly certain this had been a stylistic choice rather than a show of extreme laziness, but they weren't an interior designer or architect, so they couldn't be sure.

In truth, they weren't much of anything, except nearing thirty and aimless. They'd tried on a number of things so far—including office worker, soldier, artist, student, man, server, musician, and writer—but none of them had seemed a proper fit. They would get excited about a new idea, a new thing to try, and commit for a little while, but eventually the enthusiasm would fade, the new skill would prove challenging in ways Winter hadn't anticipated, and they'd end up back at the start, laying in a bed without a box spring (poorly supported by slats that weren't sized right for the frame), and reexamining the messily painted ceiling.

They lived in a small apartment (though technically the empty doorframe in about 2/3 of a wall prevented it from being categorized as a studio, not that it really mattered). The outer walls were nearly as much window as wall, but were blocked from outside by trees, overhanging roof, and bad positioning to keep out the majority of the sunlight. Winter didn't mind; abundant sunlight made it hard to brood, which was one of their favorite pastimes. They were more annoyed at how little cabinet space the apartment had and how cramped the little kitchenette was. Winter wasn't exactly a good cook (and often wouldn't cook simply to avoid having to clean dishes), but they found having the option comforting.

That morning, however, their apartment was nothing more than the setting for Winter's ruminations on existence, purpose, and society. To say they felt numb or detached wouldn't be accurate;

in fact, they were acutely aware of the uncomfortable, if not outright painful, way the lumpy, poorly structured bed was pressing against their hips and shoulders. The blear of the previous night's beer (only one, but it had been rather proofy and too close to bedtime) hung across their eyes and sinuses. It felt as though the best way to describe how they felt as if their chest was something hollow and meaningless, like a plastic gallon jug that had been emptied and discarded on the side of the road that someone had picked up, uncapped, screamed into for a solid minute, quickly recapped, shaken for a while, and tossed back onto the side of the road before going about their day.

The resonance of that echoed scream—the scream of an imaginary person with direction and purpose—bouncing around in Winter's chest was finally too much to stand, so they rolled out of bed, refusing to check what time it was. It was Tuesday, so they were free until class in the evening. What felt like every joint in their body snapped and popped as they briefly stretched out, a series of staccato cracking that someone who didn't know better could have mistaken for machine gun fire—Winter did, however, know better; machine guns, even LMGs, sounded more like a thunderous whirring, though one time their shoulder *had* made a sound that could have conceivably passed for a frag grenade.

Gunfire-adjacent or not, Winter's joints did eventually settle down, so they walked the four steps to the bathroom to take care of the morning's business. As the stubborn toilet refused to flush on the first and second turn of the flusher, Winter finally managed to defeat the porcelain creature by holding the flusher down for what felt like a literal minute—which was, in their opinion, a much longer period of time to do the same, static thing than many authors gave it credit for; maybe their attention span was just that much shorter than an average person's, a person who could actually stand still and look at something for five minutes without having a thousand concurrent and unpleasant thoughts.

Regardless of the relative tolerability of lengths of time, Winter was... bemused? Amused? Ambivalent? (This was, in no small part, why they were in a constant state of giving up on writing: they



could never be sure if they were using the right word for anything and refused to turn to a search engine; Shakespeare didn't have Google, and if he could just confidently use wrong words or make them up as he went, why couldn't Winter?) Winter decided *uncertain* was the best descriptor for how they felt about considering the poorly flushing toilet to be an enemy and not just a fixture of their mediocre apartment.

As they washed their hands, they kept their eyes turned down into the sink to avoid looking at the real enemy in the bathroom: the mirror. The mirror was a complicated thing, a layer of polished glass bonded to a sheet of silvered aluminum that showed physical reality with all of its glaring, aggravating flaws. Shutting off the sink, Winter caught a glimpse of themselves in the reflective surface, and they were trapped. With a sigh of resignation, they straightened up and came face-to-face with the face plastered over their skull.

It was broad and blocky, with too many hard edges and sharp angles, dense and square and firm, not ethereal, reaching, willowy. Winter wasn't sure, exactly, how one's face would be ethereal, reaching, and willowy, but they knew that was what they wanted. Instead of focusing on the implicit wrongness of the whole, they fixated on the little details they could hate, like the stubble that dirtied their jawline, the pocked scars (ghosts of moles and ingrown hairs that had been shaved off, shaved over, and never able to heal during their stint as a soldier), the adult acne, and the patches of dry skin they couldn't get rid of.

Winter compulsively grabbed the tweezers on the side of the sink and started plucking at the short, dark hairs that were growing in on their neck. They were coarse and ugly, and Winter hated them nearly as much as they hated the dark wiry hair that grew all over their body. There was far too much of it, and they hated it, and it was everywhere, and it grew back too quickly and too thickly to combat, so Winter chose to hide it by keeping their body as covered as they could as often as they could. It took a real effort to put the tweezers down and tear their attention away from the mirror, but Winter managed

it eventually. Their need for caffeine overpowered their implicit desire for aesthetic perfection—even if they couldn't really define what that perfection would look like.

As they filled the electric kettle and measured out the aromatic brown grounds into the French press, Winter finally turned their attention to their phone. A litany of misery greeted them: utility bills and rent coming due, new credit card statements, messages from “family” and “friends” expressing “concern”, the most recent escapades of corrupt politicians and billionaires, diet trends that claimed eating random bullshit would make you lose weight, medical trends that claimed taking nonsensical cures would fix cancer and diabetes, climate disasters, mass shootings, cryptocurrency, ignorance, hatred, lies, damned lies, and statistics.

To shut it out, they opened YouTube and scrolled mindlessly through the selections the all-powerful algorithm had prepared for them that morning. Alongside the usual mix of comedy drawing shows, game streams, LGBTQ+ meme compilations, movie criticisms, and bardcore covers of metal music, the algorithm had, in its apparent and growingly concerning omniscience, determined that what Winter needed this morning was a comparison of philosophies of meaninglessness.

Leaning over their kitchenette counter, Winter listened to a cursory discussion of the ideologies of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus underscored by the bubbling hiss of rapidly boiling water. The video compared the despondent, hopeless meaninglessness of nihilism to the existentialist belief that people had to seek out and create their own senses of meaning in a fundamentally meaningless universe and rounded them out with the absurdist's assertions that life had no absolute meaning and that mankind must find joy living in the absurd state of existing without meaning. They had no idea if the videos did a good job of portraying the philosophies or not and probably wouldn't do the work to actually read up on any of them to check. When the coffee was brewed, they poured it into their favorite jack-o-lantern mug, lit an apple cinnamon candle, and settled into their desk chair.

Taking the first sips of their steaming coffee, Winter wasn't sure what to think. They knew that life was without meaning, that was never in doubt, though they were never sure if only *their* life was that way or if life as a whole was. They were terrified by the idea that their life was fully their own, that they were responsible for defining their own meaning and themselves. Even though social standards of happiness and success—a big house, a nice car, lots of money in a savings account, a happy spouse, and an average of 2.33 kids—had never appealed to them, they weren't sure how to live a life divorced from it all. How was one to exist within a society that they were so different from? The swirl of thoughts and feelings were too much for Winter to process, so they sat down to write.

Ideas weren't hard to come up with—Winter had countless notes jotted down here and there, often striking visuals that had come into their head like a priest conjuring forth figures from a stained glass window to protect them in a time of need or a dead atheist being so angry that his family held a religious funeral that he gets up from the casket to chew them out—but actually turning an idea into a story that actually had themes and characters and development and scenes and a satisfying conclusion and so forth was such a daunting task that they often gave up before they got far enough into the process to see if their idea had legs or not.

That morning, absurdist ideas wrestling with their sense of existential angst (as well as the impending deadline of needing to submit a piece of writing for their seminar that evening), Winter decided to write something akin to auto-fiction, a sort of fictionalization of their morning. Before they started writing, they gathered their thoughts for a minute and considered which details to change in order to separate their character from themselves—such as what name to use, what characteristics about themselves they found upsetting, which of their mugs they drank from, what scent their candle was, the exact order things happened in, and a few other small details that would hopefully leave a reader with the illusion that Winter wasn't just dumping their own morning and angst into a Word document.

After a few minutes of prep, they set fingers to keys and typed the first line of the story, “Life was... well, not exactly pain and suffering, but, as far as Equinox was concerned, it wasn’t exactly preferable.”

The next few hours passed relatively smoothly as Winter detailed the slightly fictionalized account of their morning. They were mostly happy with how the story shaped up, but they worried it meandered a little too much and was, well, masturbatory. Somewhere around the seventh page, they decided a clever way to end the story would be to have “Equinox” sit down to write about their angsty, existentially challenging morning. They typed out a couple lines of Equinox starting their story, using the exact line they had opened their story with (except with yet another different name, allowing Equinox the same degree of auto-fictional separation between the character and the self as Winter had taken) as the closing line.

With a weary sigh, Winter gave their piece a placeholder title, saved and closed the file, submitted it to their class Brightspace page, and powered down their laptop. They gulped down the last few sips of now-cold coffee and blew out the candle, frantically fanning the smoke rising from the wick to keep it from setting off the overzealous alarms (they lived in a smoke-free apartment, and the lease explicitly stated no candles).

At this point, Winter had no idea what to do. The bottled, echoing chest cavity scream was still there, filling them up with somebody else’s expectations, the expectation to be someone, to achieve something, to contribute and belong—things Winter had never been very good at. They could hear the mirror’s taunting call from the bathroom, reminding them that their struggles were as much exterior as interior. Winter looked at the time; it was barely past noon, leaving them with nearly six hours to fill until class.

They weren't exactly looking forward to class. It was a hefty social obligation, where they would be expected to provide helpful but generally kind feedback and criticism to their classmates. They weren't even sure if they wanted to finish their graduate degree in English. What would they even do with it? Far too many days disappeared into a haze of negative emotion and ennui as they struggled to find the motivation to do anything, and while class had left them inspired and invigorated for the first few weeks, the eventual burn out they always seemed to experience had thoroughly set in again.

Disgusted by the idea of spending yet another day angsting on the couch in the smotheringly small apartment with its ugly peach walls and lumpily painted ceiling, Winter made a choice.

### Photographs, a Leaf

Photographs you didn't take, photographs you did your best to never have to see if someone else did.

Hair cut far too short, too high, to be flattering, as though that was the point. The shorter it was cut, the longer you could go without cutting it again, the less often you had to deal with the whole process.

The eyes. Was the anger there? Was the pain? The general disdain for the world and, more significantly, yourself? Or were you so good at hiding it that nobody could see, nobody could really recognize how deep the wells were, how empty and dried up the bottoms? There was no passion in those eyes, to be sure, typically just the glaze of a slowly receding hangover.

If you were to look back at even older pictures, you would see that you didn't smile, you smirked or pulled a face. It's rare to find an old picture of yourself with a smile that shows teeth. You didn't feel like you had much to smile about. They were all faked, anyway.

You covered your body in practical ways, whatever was most fitting to the weather. Before they all left, before you were alone, you might have made the effort to actually wear something pretty, something floral or colorful, if you were going to be around friends, but that was rare. During those days, that lonely year and a half, you just wore whatever mostly fit and didn't stand out too severely. That was all you cared about, fitting as well as you could and not standing out. Clothes were a matter of function.

You could count on the loneliness. You almost miss it. Nobody to hurt you or to hurt. Nobody there to let down. It was a comfort, reliable. You were so, so very alone. There wouldn't have been anyone else in the pictures, during those days. Not even you.

### **Productive Member of Society, a Leaf**

The pill bottle is opened, and a capsule is withdrawn. The pill is swallowed, maybe with water, maybe without.

A brief stretch to limber the joints, some light calisthenics, then a shower to clean away the sweat and grime of the day before. The cheeks are shaved carefully, the teeth scrubbed thoroughly, the hair combed meticulously, everything specifically groomed in order to maintain respectability. A shirt is selected, as is a tie. Neither are black nor white, both are lightly colored, though not excessively. The impression must be crisp, professional, but neither stiff nor flamboyant.

The layers of clothing are placed over the freshly cleaned body, creating a stock photo of an office worker. A podcast about finances provides productive background for a simple breakfast of fruit, coffee, and eggs, and then the productive member of society leaves home to begin the commute.

You wonder what they think about, day to day. You wonder if you could have found contentment if you'd chosen that life. You wouldn't know; you chose to be yourself, instead.

### Bad News, a Leaf

Grinding, crackling, crunching. Around and around the handle spun, pulverizing the aromatic brown beans into the coarse shreds of pre-happiness. The strong aroma of pumpkin spice rose from the hand grinder, filling my sparse little workplace with the smell of autumn. Always has been my favorite season, probably always will be. *Ping*. A new email popped up on Outlook, burdened with an official name in the from-line. Only two things came from that address: tedious daily updates that they won't let me unsubscribe from or—the reason I *can't* unsubscribe from the garbage—important bad news.

Grinding, crackling, crunching. I do my best to ignore the notification. It's late—well, not for me, the overnight shift is just starting, but too late in the day for the same-old, same-old alert—so I'm almost certain there's bad news inside. I know I probably should open the email quickly, as the bad news in intelligence analysis and reporting is often urgent, but I'm loath to abandon my quest for caffeine. I focus on the smell of the coffee beans, anticipating fresh, flavorful brew that, in only a few short minutes, will deliver me from my current state of bleary semi-consciousness into bored awareness. Around and around the handle spins, but the cracking and crunching sounds have stopped, the burs meeting no resistance. A small smile of satisfaction spreads across my face. Walking to the other side of the little nook where my colleagues and I conduct our 24/7 toil, I empty the pre-happiness into the Pyrex basin of the press and flip on the electric kettle. Knowing that it'll take a few minutes for the water to be ready, I walk back to my desk, resigned. It's a slow night and I have no excuse *not* to read the bad news email.

While I was up, a second message arrived. One lateish-night delivery from an official sender usually isn't great, but it might not be terrible, but two? Two is never good. I skim the content of the first; these damned things are always full of so much official nonsense, the hallmarks of inter-branch military communications. Beneath the formatting and jargon and disabled links—for my security, they tell me; you never know who could be sending emails on this intranet email server—I find a nugget of



the news I expected; not as bad as it could have been, but still not great. It looks like [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], [REDACTED], which will certainly need to be looked into, if not urgently. *Click*. The water is ready. Putting the news, and its likely implications, aside for the moment, I walk back over. About a liter of bubbling water goes into the Pyrex. I watch as it foams a little around the pre-happiness, scalding it to draw out the oils that make full-happiness, before I replace the plunger-lid.

Rather than go back to my seat, I wait for four minutes while the coffee brews, savoring the anticipation with my dulled mind. I press the plunger, finalizing the glorious ritual—I always wished this part made more of a sound than a gentle hissing and burbling, as it feels like an important climax should make an important sound—and I pour the liquid wake-up into my heavy ceramic mug—a years-old gift from my parents, still my favorite. Setting the remaining coffee aside either for later consumption or for a coworker to share, I walk back over to my desk. Cursed with a heat-sensitive tongue such as I was, I have to let the brimming mug of nutmeg-infused joy cool a little before I can take the first sip, so I review the first email, making sure I didn't miss any information before I share it with my subordinates. *Beep beep beep beep* shouts the arrhythmic tone of the work phone.

"This is the [REDACTED] reporting desk, SGT [REDACTED] speaking. How can I help you?" I answer customarily. Nobody who calls this late gets super hung-up over protocol, but formalities must be followed nonetheless, just to be safe. One of the shift leads from the [REDACTED] reporting desk is on the line. "Yes, I got an email about it. Yeah. No, I hadn't heard that yet. Yeah, no, yeah. I'll make sure I put my guys on alert for exactly that. I don't think we'll see any reflections in our systems, but we'll be extra alert, just to be sure. Yeah, thanks for the heads up. I'll reach out if we find anything. Of course. You, too." *Click*.

Phone call ended, I check that other email and, sure enough, it contains exactly what the other analyst told me. Worse news than before, though not as bad as it could be, I guess. Once again, I double

check the contents to make sure I don't pass wrong info. As much as I hate being the bearer of bad news, I hate giving wrong info worse, doubled for wrong bad news. My subordinates are all severely disappointed, as expected, since we had all been anticipating an easy night of half-awake, lackadaisical monitoring of our target while we read our books or work on our college classes, like usual. The bad news is spread—correctly, at least—and now there's nothing to do except get back to work with regrettably intensified focus. Of course, the rich aroma pouring from my brown ceramic mug reminds me that that isn't exactly correct. There's still one thing left to do. I raise the cup of brown life-liquid to my lips for the first sip and receive the worst news of all: my coffee went cold while I was on the phone.

## **Farmers' Market: a play about tragedy in one scene, a Leaf**

### Dramatis Personae

Me: the perspective character, early 20s, recently graduated from basic training and sporting an appropriately ugly haircut, no identifiers like tattoos, piercings, or jewelry. Probably wearing some stupid cargo shorts or something.

Mom: voice on the phone, off-stage. Voice sounds like a mom in her mid- to late 40s.

Brother: not actually in the play, but the emotional stakes mean more if he is cast. 19 or 20, a little taller and heavier set than Me, not as close to Me as he used to be. Someone Me could have run around the yard with, swinging wiffleball bats around as though they were lightsabers or pirate scimitars, pretending the boulder was the walls of Helm's Deep, someone Me could have tricked into believing that the shifting branches in the woods a clear sign of approaching, carnivorous wild rabbits looking for human brains.

Farmers: it's their market, after all. Anywhere between four and twelve of various ages, genders, and racial backgrounds (Monterey, being home of the Department of Defense's language training school, is an incredibly diverse town with particularly large Middle Eastern and East Asian populations).

Aggregated Humanity: a motley collection of individuals, vagabonds and businessmen, unhoused people and commuters, off-duty soldiers and sailors. Also a vastly diverse group, should be at least a dozen or two.

Staging notes: capturing the environment of Monterey is incredibly important for this piece. As such, the use of such props as sound machines, fans, big buckets of salt water, fresh baked bread, piles of dirt and manure, climate control, and whatever other options a director and stage manager can devise together is strongly encouraged. It'd probably be for the best if you actually took a trip there, to get a better understanding of the place.

*Setting: a gorgeous summer day in Monterey, California. The sun shines down through a light layer of coastal clouds, and a gentle breeze blows in off the Pacific Ocean, carrying with it the smell of brine and the harsh barking of battling sea lions. Temperature is around 78 degrees Fahrenheit, about as hot as Monterey ever gets. The farmers' market has gathered, taking over Alvarado Street all the way from*

*Franklin Street to the Simoneau Transit Plaza. The scene is generally energetic and cheerful. The Farmers are at their stalls hawking their wares, which the Aggregated Humanity are browsing.*

*Enter Me carrying a boba tea, purchased at Plumes, the café they frequent, in one hand and pressing their phone to their ear with the other. They walk around and between the stands of the market, doing their best to avoid bumping into any of the Farmers or Aggregated Humanity.*

Mom (on phone): —last night, he’s been at the hospital since. The doctor thinks it’s epilepsy. They ran an MRI half an hour ago; we should have results soon. He’s—

Farmer 1 (shouted): Garlic from Gilroy! Fresh bulbs, minced, paste, jelly, garlic of all kinds! Garlic from Gilroy!

Farmer 2 (shouted): I’ve got the freshest bread in Monterey! Come try a little of this fresh, fresh bread!

Farmer 3 (shouted): Bullshit you’ve got the freshest bread! I’ve got the freshest bread!

*A scuffle between Farmers 2 and 3 breaks out, which is actively attended by the a portion of the Aggregated Humanity. Me continues walking toward the Transit Plaza.*

Mom (on phone): —probably a brain tumor. The doctor said—

Farmer 4 (shouted) Apples and carrots! Farm fresh and cheap!

Mom (on phone and straining to be clearly heard): —not unheard of in teenagers, but still—

Unhoused member of the Aggregated Humanity (to Me, who waves them off): Hey man, you got a dollar? Some change for the bus?

Mom (on the phone and sounding more distant): Oh, hold on, the doctor is back, give me a minute.

*Me continues into the Transit Plaza and looks around for an empty bench to sit, process what they’re hearing, and maybe think about Brother. Somewhere along the way, the boba tea has disappeared from*

*their hand. Now off-stage, the sounds of Farmers 2 and 3 fighting is increasing. Miscellaneous shouts and profanity, insults about soggy bottoms and dry crusts can be heard over the general din of the market.*

*Finding an opening on one of the benches, Me drops down onto the rough concrete bench. It's cold, grey, porous, and hard, but at least it isn't hostile architecture; many unhoused people have spent their nights on these benches. Sitting on the benches around Me are more members of the Aggregated Humanity.*

*Me sits, deep in thought, phone still pressed to their ear, for several minutes. The sounds of fighting in the background escalate to ridiculous degrees. Eventually, Me's phone rings against their head. They had been deep enough in reminiscing about Brother and how deeply, deeply afraid for him they are that they hadn't realized the last call had ended.*

Me (softly): Hello?

### **New Razor, a Leaf**

If there are two things you know for certain, it's that shaving fucking sucks and that whoever invented facial hair that doesn't stop growing is a shitty little dickhead who you'd like to have "words" with behind a Denny's at 3am.

Unfortunately, you actually know more than two things. One of the other things you know is that, no matter how much you may want to, you'll never get to have those "words" with the shitty little dickhead who invented constantly regrowing facial hair, behind a Denny's, IHOP, Waffle House, or even a non-chain diner, if such a shitty little dickhead even exists. Another thing you know is that being angry at the invention of said hair isn't going to stop it from growing or stop people from seeing it, so you are relegated to shaving in order to stave off the unpleasant feelings of being seen with the several-times-aforementioned hair.

Now, you do also know that there are other options, but laser treatments and electrolysis are expensive as hell and time consuming; facial wax is typically meant for lighter, peach fuzzier facial hair; and burning all the hairs out at the root with a cigarette lighter would probably take a more concerted effort of will and more pain tolerance than you could manage, however tempting the idea might be when the dysphoria hits. Besides, that would leave scars that your rudimentary skills with makeup would be insufficient to hide.

The totality of this knowledge leaves you in the incredibly unenviable position of shaving every day you're going to go anywhere that you might encounter someone who may see you and/or how you look. This does not, thankfully, include yourself. You already don't like yourself and/or how you look, so you can stand and stare at your stubbly jaw, cheeks, upper lip, neck, chest, whatever with abject disgust and frustration as often as you'd like and/or find yourself trapped in front of an unforgiving mirror. Even if you did shave, you'll probably end up at the mirror anyway, eyes hyperfixated on any jagged stump of a

hair that didn't quite get shaved away, tweezers questing for the offender and ready to tear root from follicle.

Presently, however, you sit fixated not on the everlasting (not everlasting, eventually you'll be able to afford more permanent treatments, you tell yourself) battle with the scourge unfettered testosterone has caused to burst forth from the fleshy contours of your face, but with a new weapon to deploy in your upcoming offensive against the coarse invaders: a safety razor.

The handle is bamboo (naturally slip resistant, according to the marketing) and weighty. There is a heft to this tool, a heft that has been absent from previous iterations: years and years of men's cartridge razors, quick but imprecise, leaving skin irritated, hairs ingrown, and the ghostly remains of five o'clock shadow already forming; women's disposable razors, gentler, shaving pretty cleanly with much less bleeding and irritation, but only lasting a shave or two before dulling; an electric razor that does a worse job quickly and fairly painlessly, a short-term solution that leaves irritation and sets up a far worse shave the following day; the nearly forgotten memory of a cheap plastic straight razor, its disposable blades an echo of a long-since abandoned search for a stronger sense of old-school masculinity.

You hold the safety razor, tip it this way and that, letting yourself grow accustomed to the way its weight sits in your hand. This tool came highly recommended from several friends. Once you get the hang of not slicing yourself, you had been told, it gives a cleaner, smoother shave than anything else. It just takes time. You have time. Do you have patience?

You stand, poorly ventilated bathroom filled with steam that refuses to dissipate, holding the razor and pondering the price. The handle wasn't too expensive, but replacing the blade will add up over time. Will it end up costing less than the disposables, than the cartridges? More than the eventual laser treatments? You don't know. Thinking about finances always gives you a headache. Instead, you settle for being angry at the systems that put you in this spot: capitalism and endocrine. It's bullshit that you

grow all this shitty hair. You already know that. It makes you feel awful. It's bullshit that getting rid of it isn't free. You already know that. It makes you need to work a shitty job. The shitty job makes you feel awful. Being mad at a stupid razor won't fix that. You already know that. It feels kind of nice to be mad at a stupid razor, though. It's better than being mad at your stupid self.

Looking at the razor, the blade is almost entirely concealed. A little sliver of metal peers out to either side of the metal head, its little comb teeth (little undulating walls to stand the hairs up against before they are annihilated) concealing all but the glistening, cutting edge. You aren't entirely sure how to use this thing. It came with a link to a tutorial, but you figured you've shaved enough times to be confident and threw it away. Now this idea seems... regrettable. Your nervousness mingles with excitement. Maybe, after you get past the learning curve, this will be the answer. Everything you've heard said it took practice to learn but was well worth it. You just have to get the hang of it.

A faint glimmer of optimism shines through the slowly dispersing shower fog as you set the blade carefully against your cheek. With a slow, measured breath, you draw the razor along the skin in a short pass. You rinse the foam from the tool. So far, so good. With another deep breath, you go to repeat the process. A cough spasms your lungs. The blade slips. Blood spills.



### Tree, Continued

Winter rolled out of the chair, enshrouded the mocking mirror with a spare towel, ran a hot shower, dressed as amorphously as they could, and drove to the city forest. It was a grey fall day, with overcast skies that subtly threatened gentle bursts of rain and a breeze strong enough to throw about the dead leaves that carpeted the ground, not really cold enough to be called cold but just a little too cold to be chilly. It was a perfect sort of day for someone with Winter's aversion to sunlight. It was also early afternoon on a weekday, so the gravel trails were largely deserted.

Breathing the damply crisp air, Winter was a little annoyed to realize that they hadn't gone for a walk through the woods in the year since they'd stopped trying to be a soldier. They weren't exactly sure who or what to be annoyed with, but they were pretty sure it was themselves. While the sun may be their mortal enemy, the stillness and tranquility that could be found amongst trees was about as close to experiencing divinity as Winter ever felt.

Peace settled over their shoulders as they stepped off the trail and wandered languidly between the birches, pines, maples, and oaks. They were perfect: tall and wispy, fixed but changing, inhuman in the most magnificent ways. The non-evergreen trees were mostly bare at this point—the trees had been wreathed in leaves of splendid shades of red, orange, and yellow a week or so ago; now they were mostly dry and brown and recent winds had sent most of them to the forest floor—which left each step to meet with a wet crunch and a burst of autumnal scent, a mixture of petrichor and decay that Winter had always found so comforting. They meandered aimlessly between the trees, refusing to think about existence and society and life or any of it. The trees didn't have to consider retirement funds or rental agreements, so why should Winter? The towering, silent trees made amiable companions, and their soothing presences helped Winter keep their mind clear.

After a while, Winter was well and truly lost. They'd made no effort to mark a path back to the trail, no effort to note a series of landmarks that would lead them back to their car. They hadn't even brought their phone with them. There was peace in their heart, and the omnipresent, echoing chest-scream seemed to have fallen silent. In the woods, there was no mirror to reflect their flaws. In the woods, there were no parents to express disapproval thinly veiled as concern, there was no society to impose expectations and beliefs. In the woods, Winter felt like they could connect with a simpler, more pure sort of existence. They looked around at the looming figures of the trees, simple and beautiful even in their bareness, and started digging.

Using a chunk of grey stone that they'd picked up from among the fallen leaves, Winter scraped back layer after layer of dark brown dirt. The heavy smell of wet loam reached up and infiltrated their nostrils. They didn't need a particularly deep hole, or a particularly wide one, but a rock wasn't exactly a shovel. It took an hour and a half—what felt like an interminably long time to Winter, they of such short attention span and immeasurable distractibility—but eventually they had created a one-foot-by-one-foot-by-one-foot ditch.

Into their one-foot hole they placed two feet—their two feet, specifically. They had taken their shoes off, and they probed the cold soil with their toes, reveling in the sensation as they began piling the loose dirt back in. This was a much quicker process than creating the hole had been, and Winter wondered briefly if there was some sort of metaphor to be found there. They shook the thought free to fall to the ground, much like an autumnal leaf, and focused on taking root. It was a long, slow process, but eventually they felt their feet extending, spreading out to create a root system to anchor them to the ground and nourish them.

Winter had spent so many years trying to recreate themselves, to release themselves from societal expectations, to escape the burdens of living in such a complicated and ever-expanding world, but no

matter what Camus or any other philosopher had said, they weren't sure a person could. That was why, having finally rejected the absurdity of human society, they had decided to become a tree. A tree didn't have to decide on a path in life, and now Winter wouldn't have to, either.

As their feet became roots, they felt their legs fusing into a trunk. Skin became bark, organs became wood and took on 27 rings—if they were going to be a tree, they were going to be a proper tree, after all, so they needed their insides to reflect their age. As the transformation crept up their body, Winter tipped their head back and raised their arms to the sky, examining the pattern-less ridges and whorls of the clouds for a last time. Arms became thick, sturdy branches and fingers became little twigs. Winter's face sprouted outward painlessly and became a canopy of branches, their thoughts and worries each becoming a leaf that quickly shriveled and fell, drifting to the ground to join their compatriots. They were at peace.

### Taste of Ash

It's late, the road is dark, and the smell of Black & Mild Wine permeates the car despite the window being as far open as I can handle—mid-November cold is a bitch. I haven't had one of these in over a year, but I've always thought grunge sounds better with the taste of ash in your mouth, and it was certainly a grungy sort of night. I let the cigarillo hang limply, the slightly sweet wood tip clenched lightly between my teeth as miles of dark highway whipped by. A gentle pull in, hold for a moment, puff out through the window, and stick the tip out to carry away the ash. I had almost forgotten how calming a smoke could be after the sort of week I'd been having.

Classes hadn't been going well, I was way behind as the end of the term was coming quickly, bills were starting to pile up, daily life had become monotonous, and I hadn't had a social interaction that wasn't in a classroom, at work, or in a store in what was starting to feel like forever. I was feeling exhausted from the drain of social interaction, but the image of my empty apartment for one left me with a sort of hollow longing.

Unbidden, a memory springs to mind: a sharp, stubbly jaw pressing and rubbing against my neck, firm lips tracing and gasping for me. I smiled a little as I took another drag of the cigarillo. I hadn't thought about him in a long, long time. He had always smelled like a cigarette, but a freshly smoked cigarette, not the pallid stench of old, stale cigarettes. No, the smell of ash and tobacco and tar had been somehow alluring on him. Christ, how long had it been? I couldn't have been older than twenty, probably only nineteen, not old enough to drink but old enough to fuck. The memory pulled me back.

I'd met him at work. It had been a fairly busy day at the normally busy fast-food chain that I had worked at in high school and college before I'd dropped out. I worked the grill, the repetitive and sweaty process of placing frozen beef on the hot griddle, closing the clamshell top, seasoning the meat when it was done, and scooping it into the plastic trays that were slotted into the heating cabinet. It was high-

tempo and boring, and I was sweating like, well, like someone like me in a church. As the lunch rush was tapering off, the manager told us there was a new hire coming in to work register-side. We all kind of just assumed he'd be another useless slacker like so many of the other recent hires had been. It didn't really matter, anyway, since the kitchen team and the register team typically left each other alone as much as we could. I preemptively wrote him off as yet another person I didn't care to know.

That opinion changed when I heard his voice from around the corner. Some stereotypes exist for a reason, like "gay voice". Well, he damned sure had "gay voice", ever so slightly effeminate and lispy, but his voice was deep and husky underneath the affectation. His voice caught my attention and my interest even before he came around the corner and I saw him: a few years older than me, nearly 6'4", action hero jawline, long limbs banded with lean, toned muscle, carefully styled hair. I flushed so hot that I found myself running off to the walk-in. I must've made some excuse, like needing another box of chicken breast or 10:1, but I don't remember anymore. I'm not sure I even knew what I'd said at the time.

The scene in my mind falters for a while, and I'm back in the car on the dark highway with the rapidly dwindling Black & Mild presumably shedding light grey ashes all over me, a little present to find later. The snippet of memory, seeing him for the first time and responding so viscerally, was one that had bounced around in my head off and on, coming back now and then but never really sticking. It hadn't exactly been an awakening—I'd realized that I was at least somewhat attracted to men years before, even if it wasn't common for me to find any *specific* man attractive, and it wasn't like I'd never seen a hot person before. There had been something different that day, though. I really wish I were able to explain it. Try as I might, I couldn't remember any other time in my life where I'd felt powerful, instant attraction like that. Another puff of smoke out the window.

Half-memory takes over then, a kind of blur of remembrances. I don't remember what sort of things we had talked about, but I do remember having to make an active effort not to follow him around like a puppy dog. I can't say for sure, but I think he noticed. I've never been the best at getting to know people, not back then and certainly not now, so I have no idea how I managed to convince him that I was worth his time. Maybe he didn't care about my personality, just the fact that I was young, thin, and fit. Maybe he found my tongue-tied fumbling for clever words endearing. I don't really remember how I managed to get closer to him, but I do remember when he told me about the fact that he and his boyfriend had split up and how he was having a hard time. I don't remember what I said next, but I definitely remember getting invited over to his place one day when neither of us were working. Looking back on it, I probably should have realized how scummy it was to jump into some guy's bed the moment he was single like that, but I was young and horny, and it wouldn't have been the scummiest relationship I'd rushed into.

In the present, I've reached what passes for city limits in Maine and have to pay a little more attention to the road as other drivers join me in nighttime transit. Neon lights of chain restaurants leer down the exit ramps at me, insisting that I stop and have some of their overpriced frozen food, not too different from the fast-food chain of years before. More often than not, I'd have been more than willing to succumb to the temptation of a mediocre meal and a weak cocktail, a gustatory attempt at washing away the emotional funk, but not tonight. Instead, I let the memory continue playing out, but I don't let myself be as present in it as I was before. Have to stay focused on the road, after all.

I remember putting a lot of extra time and thought into what I was going to wear that day; he did modeling work for Hollister off and on, so I wanted to look fashionable, or at the very least fuckable, for him. I'm sure I didn't pull off the first, even though I apparently managed the second. It must have been school break, probably summer since I was working at that chain and staying with my parents. I told them that I was going to go hang out with a friend for a bit before he went to work and not to

expect me to be home for dinner. I don't know if they noticed the extra effort I made or if they would have guessed why if they did. I can't imagine that they did; there's no way it wouldn't have been remarked on at least passive aggressively. The whole family had always suspected that there was something different about me, even if nobody wanted to address it directly. Catholicism has a way of engendering a sort of quiet judgement, an understanding that you know what you should be ashamed of and that you'll be properly ashamed. It left me bubbled by a sort of passive discretion was just fine in my book, still is.

Anyway, the next important bit of the memory was getting there. He was having a cigarette outside his building. I can't remember if it was summer or winter—was he wearing shorts and a t-shirt or a jacket and jeans? I don't think it matters. I don't know what brand he smoked, either. I remember that he offered me one, though, but I turned it down. I've never smoked a cigarette still to this day, despite having at least tried almost every other form of readily available tobacco. I hung around his porch and made small talk while he finished his smoke, trying not to stare too obviously at the way he caressed the slender tube with his lips.

We were inside after that. The details of the apartment are mostly lost to time and irrelevance, but I remember for sure that it was a second-floor studio with a massive window on one wall. There has to be a name for the sort of window, but I don't know it. It was a few panels that angled out and created a sort of trapezoidal shelf. He had set out some decorative knickknacks on the shelf. I don't remember what they were, but I'm pretty sure they were tasteful. I also remember that the bed—king-sized, I think—was set in the corner beside the window, close enough to get natural light but not at an angle where passersby could see in through it.

He didn't have a couch, so we were laying on the bed watching one of Ellen DeGeneres' stand-up specials from before she was out, back when she did the bit about calling god on the phone with

questions. Quickly, we went from laying down to cuddling, and then things started moving quickly. Certain details stick in my memory, like the breathy way he whispered in my ear, “Can I kiss you?” and the desperation in my response. His kiss was strong, his mouth big, and his jaw stubbly. It wasn’t like kissing women, but at the same time it was. His tongue tasted like tobacco and ash, just like he smelled. It was delicious.

From there, the memory falls into individual sensations: the sensual firmness of his touch, the smooth sculpt of his chest, the taste of his body, and the feel of him against me, writhing around me, inside me. It’s a good memory, but one I’m so far removed from that I don’t feel much from it anymore. Usually, it makes me a little happy; it was a lot of fun, after all, even if that was all it ever was. There wasn’t a connection beyond the physical, and I never expected there to be.

We hooked up a few more times over the next couple months, but it ended when I went back to school, then moved to another city, then left the state altogether. I never heard from him again, and I never tried to reach out. I do look him up on Facebook every now and then. I guess he got back together with his ex not long after I knew him, and they got married and moved to Texas. I wonder if his husband knew about me—and however many other boys there were during that breakup. I’m not arrogant enough to think I was the only one.

My exit is coming up, my lonely apartment approaching, so I toss the stub of the cigarillo out the window. When the wind hits the glowing cherry, it flares up and throws a handful of sparks back into the car. I wince away from them, but they don’t singe or anything. They’re just a quick flash and gone, not meaning anything and not intended to mean anything. I drove the short distance from my exit to my apartment with the plaintive sound of grunge in my ears and the taste of ash in my mouth.



## Remains

When you wake up, the corpses are never far away. You only have to open your eyes, look across the room, and there they are. Bits and pieces hang in your closet, old enough as not to drip, fresh enough not to have fully rotten. You can look at them and feel the sensation of peeling the tattered flesh from your bones. The colorful strips of flesh dangle from hangars interspersed with your newer clothes, things the living you bought and wears often. The new clothes fit better, present better, represent your newly living self better in the eyes of strangers. Most of the truly old, rancid remains are long gone, either given away, donated to Goodwill, or just thrown away, in a few particularly worn out cases. One of these days you'll get it together, gather up what's left, and get rid of them, but you still haven't fully let them go.

The limp, dangling parts in the closet are far from the only remains of your dead past selves clinging to your apartment. You have a cupboard stuffed full of well-intended but poorly executed gifts, tributes to these dead selves, unknowing offerings to the spirits of yourself. Soaps that smell entirely wrong, shirts with cuts and patterns that just don't work for yourself, trinkets you might use to practice hobbies that have been long since abandoned. Tucked away somewhere is the ratty old hat you wore like a second scalp. That you died a decade ago, but you couldn't bring yourself to toss the hat out with the corpse.

Most of the memories are less than pleasant, most of the lives better off gone. There are, however, positive reminders of these dead selves as well, mementos that have carried forward between the different lives: the musical instruments, favored to different degrees from past self to past self; the collection of books, growing still but certainly started before your current, living self was born out of the death of another past self; a few articles of clothing kept around either for comfort or because their aesthetic is neutral or universal enough to have outlived the past selves.

The echoes and ghosts exist well outside of the confines of your apartment, too. You walk outside, getting ready to run errands, and are greeted by your neighbor. She's a friendly woman, middle aged and hard lived, always happy to chat for a bit. She doesn't use the name you'd prefer, but that isn't her fault; she met a recently deceased version of you, and you haven't actually told her about the new name. It still stings a little when you hear the old name, but you hear it every time you go to work, too, so you don't hold it against her. The name isn't as dead as versions of yourself it represented, yet.

Despite obviously not really understanding, you're pretty sure she sees the new version of you, the living, breathing version instead of the ghostly overlay many see. If nothing else, she rarely comments on the changes, rarely acknowledges the newly created version of you. You consider telling her about the new you—about the series of deaths and rebirths you've undergone all life long, about how this newest version of yourself feels like the most genuinely alive version, how you don't feel like a shambling corpse for what may genuinely be the first time in your life—but you decide against it. You aren't ready, this form is still being perfected, and it would take a lot of explaining. There's also that little layer of fear that she'll respond poorly, too.

You drive, not heading anywhere in particular. You live in an area that is both intimately familiar and strange and new, not quite your hometown but close enough that the difference is negligible. Close enough that the ghosts of past selves still hang around many of their old haunts. The pub over there has born witness to the dying and rebuilding, though most of the regulars still know you as the freshest of your trail of corpses. You feel safe there, welcomed. The bookstore around the corner is another of the interesting places, somewhere you only started going during your current rebirthing, but where connections run deeply back to a long-dead past self, long dead and happily buried. A manager with a son from your high school class and occasionally a teacher from the same time. They see this newest form. They don't really know it, but they welcome it. You have... complex feelings about the experience, feelings that would probably be worth taking the time to unpack. You keep driving.

You drive past the tattoo and piercing shop and a deep warmth blossoms deep inside you. So much of the new you was sculpted there, so much of your newly found confidence and vivaciousness created with quick recreational puncture wounds and an artist who likes to chat. You are known there, no remains follow you. This, actually, may have been the location of your most recent death, your most recent rebirth, though you aren't actually sure. It doesn't really matter; your new self is seen there. Unfortunately, your last few piercings are too recent, far from healed, to get any more, so you keep driving.

You get on the highway, I-395. You know which direction you are going, whether you mean to or not. You're treading routes that your zombies drove. They still do. As you look around, you see phantasmal images of your old cars, somehow brought back through the process that keeps your spectral echoes around. Some are headed to the second run movie theater, some are headed to your old fast food job, others drive to the company where you did seasonal office work. The office workers are some of the most present ghosts, the kind that are most likely to be seen. They aren't particularly old, but their presences are among the most reviled, false even by the standards of the past, false selves. Your old selves would force themselves to appear "presentable" or "respectable" or even "socially acceptable", things you haven't ever really felt or wanted to feel. You wouldn't dare show your new form around that office. You don't know how it would be received. Rather, you do know. This form would be ignored, denied, or chased away. That's ok with you; it isn't a place you have any interest in returning to. You drive on, past the old office.

You have entered your hometown. Two decades worth of past selves, disintegrating corpses and faded phantasms, swarm and surge around familiar buildings. Years upon years of selves reluctantly and resentfully flit about a church parking lot. These ghosts are weak; they were never strong, true, or realistic selves to begin with, choked and stifled imitations of life even when they were alive, desperately aware of how little they belonged but not really knowing why. The knowledge... The knowledge is what

gives your current form so much *life*. You feel pity for the disappearing ghosts, a pity that previous lives wouldn't have managed. No, recent iterations of yourself would have hated these decade-and-a-half old remnants, hated who they had to pretend to be, the things they did and said in that pursuit. This current life, this *true* and *alive* life, is able to pity them, to forgive them for simply doing their best. You drive on.

Autumn leaves lazily fall off old trees, blanketing the fields where your corpses half-heartedly play sports they aren't good at and don't enjoy, wreathing the public pool that dead selves hadn't felt comfortable enough going to after puberty started to throttle them without understanding why, outlining side roads where exes who never understood the falseness of then-animate corpses used to live. The ghosts and ghouls of yourselves that teem around these places don't matter anymore. Most of the people who knew them moved away after high school and didn't come back. You certainly haven't kept in touch with the handful who stuck around. They don't know you; they know your remains. You drive on.

The drive lasts a while. You eventually slow to a stop: approaching cars are keeping you from making the left turn into your parents' driveway. On your right, the abandoned house of an old friend. His family broke apart and scattered after they realized he, too, had never been a truly living version of himself but a series of now-decaying corpses. You had been proud of him (maybe even a little jealous?) when he had realized and revealed his nature. Many years later, he was still forming his living body, regenerating and rebuilding himself into something alive and real, too. Things were better with his family, too. The cars pass. You turn left, park in the driveway, and stop.

The one ghost you wished you could have seen is absent, but of course it was. The old dog, only a year gone, was a different kind of dead, a more permanent kind. He wasn't being reborn, he was just dead. You keep his ashes on a bookshelf. The dog house he never actually used is still there, though. The yard is completely blocked from sight, every inch crammed full of ghosts, zombies, revenants, specters,

ghouls, and skeletons of past, dead selves. You had lived here for about fourteen years, after all. Some of them are from times before you realized there was something inherently dead, inherently in need of recreation, about you. Many are from the grim, angry years where you knew something was different and wrong, but didn't know what or why, echoes like the ones you'd seen at the church. It was an overwhelming sight, but you hesitated, awash in the sea of dead selves. Which of them would your parents see? Was it the most recent form? The oldest? Some aggregate of all of them? You guessed that other people must actually look and feel like that, a collection of traits and features of their aging process rolled into one, never torn apart and reborn from scratch.

Before you get out of the car, you hide yourself under a layer of rotting limbs and flesh, concealing your vivid, lively new self with a camouflage of past lives. Your parents wouldn't be able to handle seeing you, otherwise. You still haven't told them about the process. You're too afraid to. They won't understand why the version of you they created isn't real, isn't alive and never was. They could see some of the features—the glow of life, the physical realness that past corpses had lacked—but didn't understand them and hated what they saw. They had reacted horribly when your neighbor friend had revealed his newly reborn self. They had refused to see it.

You get out of the car and go inside. Time passes. It could be worse. It could be much better. They mean well, but you exist in an entirely different world than they do at this point, a world of death and rebirth and shambling, rotting memories. They do not. Eventually, you find an excuse to leave and get back into the car. You peel away the masking remains, carefully wiping away as much of the slimy ichor as you can. You take long, slow breathes to bring yourself back to center, back into your proper, true self. It isn't easy. Time with your parents can make you feel as though the rotting selves are more real than you are, can make you question if your newest rebirth is actually real or not, can make you doubt yourself.

Before driving away, ears ringing with the ghost of a name you're trying to escape and dripping with the gunk of your own corpse-camouflage, you stop and check your phone. Four messages had arrived while you were trying to hide how alive you truly are, messages from recently-made friends. These friends are alive, like you. They had helped you slough off the rotting flesh, tear away the fetid hair and grave dirt, had been the midwives of your rebirth. Warmth surges in your chest again. You drive away to meet your friends, knowing that sometime soon you'll come back and probably disguise yourself again, will probably continue to do so for a while. The ghosts and ghouls and zombies disappear from the yard, from the mirror, from the backseat of your car. As the dead selves fade away, a weight is lifted. Knowing you probably shouldn't, you look down at your phone again and see the messages. They bring you peace and comfort, bearing your new name, the one for this newest life full of light and peace and hope: Equinox.

### **Taste of Ash (Reprise)**

Almost a year and a half has passed, but I still believe that grunge sounds best with the taste of ash in your mouth. Another Black & Mild Wine (harder to find now, with Bangor banning the sale of flavored tobacco) scents my car, my clothes, my breath. The wood tip is sweeter than I'd remembered, but the mid-January air pouring in through the cracked window is as harsh as ever. The miles of highway tick by, marked by chunks of discarded ash tapped loose into the wind. It's a grungy sort of day, again.

It hadn't started that way, though I guess I should have realized something was off. Sleeping at far sides of the bed, a passive-watching comedy on the TV while cooking and eating breakfast instead of one of our relationship-connected shows, less enthusiasm for the process of planning the day, sitting upright instead of cuddling while we drank our coffee on the couch. Something had clearly been different. As I drew another long, slow puff of the cigarillo and thought about what she'd said, I guess it hadn't really been all that different than other mornings, I was just noticing it.

I'd driven out through Bangor, dropped a couple bags of old clothes, clothes that older versions of me wore, off at Goodwill, then followed Stillwater Ave out to Orono planning on jumping back on I-95S back into Bangor. It was a wildly inefficient way to get home, no reason to head toward Orono at all, but I didn't want to be in my apartment, not by myself. I'd feel her absence. 95 passed below me, moving from ahead to behind, as I dreaded heading home. The Black & Mild was almost gone, the glowing cherry creeping closer and closer to the wooden tip, my fingers, and my mouth. The unnecessarily long drive was an excuse to have a smoke, and the smoke was an excuse to stay out of my apartment.

Even as I drove, memories of our time together forced themselves onto my mind. The first time we had met, a mutual friend had invited her to karaoke night, and I had gotten immediately flustered when she walked in. That was rare for me, to be so immediately attracted to someone. It's hard to believe it had only been a few months ago, things had moved so quickly, gotten so serious so suddenly. A

pulled another long drag from the cigarillo and let the smoke out, watching how quickly it disappeared out the window. A poet probably could have made it feel less clichéd, but I'm not a poet. The blatant, glaring symbolism was far from lost on me.

We had started hanging out almost immediately, though I don't get why, what she'd seen in me. That first night, I spent so much time rambling about grad school, the stories I was writing, the songs I sang, I, me, and myself. When I drove her home after the bar closed, we ended up talking in the car for a long time, easily a couple of hours. She was less shy, then, when she could speak and be heard. That's the problem with meeting someone at a pub karaoke night: they're damned loud and hard to chat. I asked for her number, told her I'd be interested in seeing her again, and drove home. Having as little game as I do, I didn't text her, too afraid of saying the wrong thing and coming off as an asshole.

Bangor was rapidly approaching, as was the butt of the cigarillo. One or two drags left before I risked burning my fingers. Alice in Chains changed over to Nirvana's "About a Girl", and I wasn't sure if it was ironic or if my own sense of drama had put the song on the list, knowing I would need to over-express the feelings. I took the opportunity to check my phone; none of the friends I had texted earlier had responded. I take another long pull, knowing it isn't their faults that they were probably working or busy with other plans they'd made well in advance, but I couldn't help feeling abandoned, like my hour of need was being ignored.

I saw her again the next Monday, at the same pub karaoke night. The same pub karaoke night I was supposed to go to tomorrow. That I expected to see her at. Fuck. Anyway, things had gone about the same, but it had been a slower night, so we had more of a conversation than me monologuing. Things were going well, so, at the end of the night, I reiterated my interest. She wasn't looking to date, but we decided to hang out as friends. I think we went thrift shopping, or maybe that was a couple weeks later. I



can remember the time together, even if I don't exactly remember the order. I know the apple orchard wasn't the first time.

That had been one of the best. We walked around, snuck into the corn maze (nobody was there taking tickets, but I still say it counts), talked about live, transness, plans and goals, where we were from, everything, and picked a pumpkin. I showed her a few of my favorite scary movies while carving it that evening. It was so much like a date, even if it wasn't. I know I hadn't even really tried to stop myself from developing a crush.

The cherry had all but reached my fingers as the Hogan Rd exit was drawing near, Bangor finally reached. I flicked the smoldering butt out the window, onto the road, and watched the spark disappear into the past. I was only a couple miles from home, but wasn't ready to go sit in the dark by myself. I thought about going to Taco Bell, burying this newfound sadness under several pounds of shitty beans and cheese, but I felt sick to my stomach at the thought of eating. Instead, I stayed on the highway, bound for my own exit and the isolation of my empty apartment.

We got together right around Halloween. There was a false start the night before, when she had asked me if I wanted to actually date, since we had essentially already been dating anyway, but then broke things off the next morning because she was afraid and didn't think she was ready to date again so soon. I had gone to her house after class to talk, to tell her I would be willing to take things slowly or to wait or whatever it would take to make things work. At the time, it had felt like a mature, adult way to approach things. I wonder, now, if it came across as desperate. Regardless, it had worked. She spent the night at my place the next day, and more often than not after.

As I pull off the highway, I think about all the time spent together, the way she made me feel like I could be myself in a way nobody else ever had, the talk of future plans and where we might want to end up settling down, the time I told her that I thought I loved her. She hadn't said it back, said she

wasn't sure she was ready. I understood, didn't bring it up again. I hadn't wanted to pressure her into feeling that way, not until she was ready.

This morning, well, afternoon, she came back over. We had tickets to see some movie later, some silly romantic period piece that I'd never heard of, so she had gone back to her place for a bit to chat with her parents, who had tried calling the evening before, and pick out a cute outfit. It was, in fact, an extremely cute outfit: a simple, mono-colored shirt, a long, textured skirt that I hadn't seen before, and the little black cardigan we had picked out together at a thrift store. I was bagging clothes to bring to Goodwill, so I had her come into the bedroom to chat while I finished packing. Not once but twice she turned her face away from a kiss, so I asked what was wrong. Tears jumped to her eyes as she said we needed to talk.

Despite the feeling of dread, the absolute desire to *not* sit alone in my dark apartment, I pulled off the highway and turned toward home. It had only been a couple of hours since she told me that, no matter how much she cared for me and how good of a friend I am to her, her crush had never really grown into the romantic spark she had been hoping for, had been waiting for. It simply wasn't there, and she knew that she didn't feel the same way as I did when we were kissing, snuggling, fucking. She cried. I forced myself not to, not until she had left. Then, I laid on the floor in the dark, half tucked under the bed, and wept.

It had only been a couple of hours, and the sorrow was sharp and fresh, though I had stopped crying before leaving. As I parked and killed the ignition, I slumped down in my seat. I sat, collapsed, in the car as the smell of the cigarillo faded, wallowing in the misery of it all. Grunge and ash, a time honored paring for smothering feelings, or so I always tried. I'd change up tobacco for alcohol later, I knew. After about ten minutes, the music died, a built-in feature of my Focus to prevent needless battery

drain. I sat, quietly. The taste of ash might make grunge sound better, but it didn't really seem to help otherwise. Resignedly, I left the car, walked inside, and faced the emptiness, alone.

### Freaky Tranny Sex

A heavy crash interrupts the chorus of low, consistent moans, followed quickly by laughter and desperate apologies. No, the bed isn't broken I insist, this happens all the time, even when I'm just sleeping. The boxspring wouldn't fit up the stairs into the apartment, a low ridge of ceiling blocked it, so I had to use some wooden slats that don't actually fit the frame; sometimes they just fall down like that.<sup>1</sup> She still feels bad, which is adorable.

The two of us separate, a far more complex process than one might expect, what with the tangle of long limbs that need to be unentwined and something like 23 collective pieces of body jewelry<sup>2</sup> to keep from catching or snagging. Some are fresh enough to really worry about, while others are in particularly sensitive places—also worth worrying about. After we're sure nobody's nipple bar would catch on anyone else's navel ring, I flop off the bed, trying not to land too heavily on the ground. I'm not entirely sure if the downstairs neighbor moved out recently or not (his mail has been piling up for a while, and I haven't seen him in a bit, but it's mostly junk mail, and I don't really see him that often anyway, so it really isn't clear), but there's no reason to subject him to any more than I already have.<sup>3</sup>

Fixing the bed is a simple, if undignified, process: loose objects, like pillows and blankets, need to be tossed off the mattress, then I heft one side up onto my shoulders. After that, I have to pick the fallen end of the slat up off the floor and wedge it back into place under the mattress on the narrow metal lip of the frame, all the while crushing my neck with the balanced mattress and trying not to focus on the pair of beautiful hands trying to distract me from behind. Once the slat is properly aligned, I step out of the frame, drop the mattress back down like some sort of powerlifter, throw the pillows back on the bed, then throw myself back on the bed, squirming and wiggling invitingly.

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<sup>1</sup> A split boxspring has been purchased since, much more stable.

<sup>2</sup> More now, since I have something of a problem.

<sup>3</sup> The floor creaks a lot. Sorry, Malik.

You, dear reader, don't need to be here for the next part. A lot of sweating, writhing, moaning, maybe even a little hand holding, that sort of thing. Probably best if you don't try to imagine it.

Anyway, eventually a point is reached where you, sweet and gentle reader, are permitted back into the story. At this point, there is definitely hand holding. The best kind of handholding, even, the kind that happens with no words, just quiet, joyful understanding.<sup>4</sup> The handholding leads, as joyful handholding often does, to cuddling, which leads to falling asleep wrapped up in each other's arms, warm and comfy and safe.

It's hard to say it out loud—I'm still getting better at expressing my positive emotions genuinely and honestly—but it feels like she knows me, truly knows me. I don't just mean because she's joined the fairly small and elite group of people who have seen every inch of me, not just because of the lurid nature of the scenes you, kind reader, were not welcome to spectate, not even because we've been spending so much time together both in public and in private. No, there's something different about the way she knows me, something more innate. Something deep inside her speaks to something deep inside me, something normally buried underneath all the layers of performativity, the flamboyance and bombast that I use to cover the vulnerable parts, those vulnerable parts that I'd rather get rid of than talk about.

It's far from the best night of sleep I've ever gotten, but I've slept a lot worse. As I lie in the bed, half awake, she curls into my side, nestling her beautiful head right into the crook at the front of my shoulder. It fits perfectly, as though the width of my shoulders, the interplay of muscle, collarbone, and joint, had been sculpted specifically for her to rest on. I listen to her deep, steady breathing and gently stroke her long brown hair. I've already started finding it mixed in with mine around the apartment.<sup>5</sup> It

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<sup>4</sup> God, I got teary eyed re-reading that. She's the best thing that's happened to me in such a long time.

<sup>5</sup> It's easy to tell which are whose, seeing as how her hair is so much longer than mine and also not one of a half-dozen different shades of pink or purple.

makes me smile a little whenever I find one of the strands, a small reminder of her while she isn't here. She looks so peaceful sleeping with her wavy locks splayed across her face.<sup>6</sup> It's a face I could fall in love with. I plant a gentle kiss on her forehead, close my eyes, and make the conscious decision to try to sleep. It comes, slowly.

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You rejoin us a couple weeks later at another inopportune moment, gentle reader, in the midst of another round of what she and I have taken to ironically calling "freaky tranny sex". This time, the venue is not the bed (the collapsing slats have been determined to be too much of a nuisance) but the couch.<sup>7</sup> I'll let you know when it's an appropriate time for you to be part of the story again.

Ok, reader, you can come back now. The point of hand holding and cuddling has been reached yet again, though the size of the futon is much more cramped than the bed. I lie there, gently tracing meaningless shapes on her chest with a finger and staring deep into her eyes<sup>8</sup>, thinking about the future. That's not something I do often. I've been told that living so fully in the present, with little regard for either the past or future, is a common symptom of ADHD, a condition I definitely have and am actively receiving treatment for, but I also hear it's a common trait for pre-transition trans and non-binary people. Right now, I'm not willing to think too deeply about the why, I'm just enjoying the act.

Tell me about your dream house again, I ask her, and she does. I don't believe it would be appropriate, dear reader, for me to share the details of the house with you, as it is her dream that I've

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, the way she kicks and shakes like a dreaming puppy does do a number on how peaceful she looks, in totality.

<sup>7</sup> Ok, it isn't a couch, it's a cheap, out-of-a-box futon from Walmart, but it's comfy as hell.

<sup>8</sup> Her eyes are a lovely mixture of green and hazel with less of a border and more of a rather blurry line separating the two. They're easy to get lost in.

been welcomed into, not my own, and sharing details like that without permission would make me feel like a poor guest.<sup>9</sup> As far as you're concerned, reader, the only relevant details are the ones that especially relate to me, which include a big yard for one to several dogs, the well-stocked home bar, and a library tower with a writing nook for me to work my craft.

I admire the way she can look to the future, have dreams and hopes for herself. It touches a part of me, a sad, desperate part that wishes I could do more than live moment to moment, that I could dream of a future where I was truly happy, not just getting by and scraping for contentment. Is she afraid? Sure, I guess so, but that's what having a dream for the future is: having a thing to be afraid won't come to pass. Lost in her eyes, I feel a little ember of hope stirring in my chest, too. Her dream is so vivid, I can almost see the house, hear the dogs, smell the espresso and homemade beer.

What are you smiling about, she asks me. I hadn't realized how wide I had been grinning. Desperate for any answer that doesn't sound completely corny, I say, you.<sup>10</sup> She smiles back at me, nestling in closer. She asks what I want to do for the rest of the day. I can only think of the one, simple answer: keep looking deep into your eyes, lost in the hopes of a future that it feels, if I'm being honest, a little too soon to be imagining so fully.

Of course, I don't say that. I suggest some video games, and we shift into seated, upright positions and shoot and loot our way through the planet of Pandora<sup>11</sup> until it's time to cook dinner. I try not to let on exactly how much she means to me, just yet, because we haven't been together all that long, and I don't want her to think I'm obsessive, even if I kind of am.

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<sup>9</sup> To be clear, I absolutely asked her if she was ok with me writing and sharing this story before I started, and I shared it with her before anyone else. I'm not an asshole.

<sup>10</sup> Reeaaaaaalllly good job playing it cool with that one. I am so fucking lucky that she has such lame taste.

<sup>11</sup> I realize retrospectively, patient reader, that you may not have recognized this as a reference to the Borderlands franchise, an excellent series of shooter-looter games. Give the second one a try, some time. It's on sale on Steam more often than not.

\* \* \* \* \*

You join us next on Christmas morning, dear reader. We spent the night together in my cramped little apartment, like so many nights since we've been dating. Like so many other times, it's best that you don't try to picture the actual events of the night, my kindhearted reader. Instead, join us that morning. As is our routine, her alarm wakes me up far earlier in the morning than I'd like it to<sup>12</sup>, and she rolls out of bed first and heads into the kitchen/living room/office of my apartment to start making coffee and, if I'm not fast enough to interject myself, breakfast. I don't like to let her do too much of the cooking when we share meals—I don't like the feeling of heteronormativity that comes with having the woman in the relationship be the cook, and I extra don't like the way her fitting conventional gender norms makes me feel like the “man” of the couple. I also really like cooking for people I care about. Instead, I try to keep us to a “it's my kitchen, I cook; it's your kitchen, you can cook” set-up.

Coffee, however, is entirely her domain. Would you, reader, step between a painter and their easel, an alchemist and their cauldron, a navigator and their ship's helm? I'd certainly hope not, and I, personally, know better than to interfere with an artist and her work. While I prefer the beans at my place, the coffee making process at her place does produce a better cup. I have a French press (which doubles as a cold brew steeping carafe<sup>13</sup>), whereas she has a moka pot. We both, as it happens, prefer oat milk in our coffee, which works nicely.

This morning, this Christmas morning, I reach the kitchen before she has a chance to start making breakfast. While she's measuring water for the coffee, I start grabbing ingredients for chocolate

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<sup>12</sup> Around 7am, which isn't unreasonable for people who work normal hours, which I, unfortunately, do not.

<sup>13</sup> This is the one arena where I am responsible for making coffee, even if we both prefer it hot. The cold brew is easier on my stomach, though.



chip pancakes. I don't own a mixing bowl<sup>14</sup>, so the eggs, milk, oil, and Bisquick all go into one of my big pots. She rolls her eyes at me, jokingly judgmental. The whisk, which I only acquired when she saw how I struggled to mix pancake batter with a rubber spatula a few weeks before and gave me one of hers, gently flicks around the non-stick sides of the pot, blending the distinct components into something more, as my thoughts are pulled elsewhere.

There's something I want to say, though I'm worried it's too soon, that it'll scare her. I only have so much time to make my decision: she has to work at nine despite the holiday, and I'm expected at my parents' house to open gifts a couple hours later. What I want to say is gnawing at me, an aggregate of so many of the little things about her, about how she makes me feel, about the safety and acceptance and feeling of real understanding that I find in her arms, distilled into such a short phrase that has the potential to push things in one of several *very* different directions. The coffee is ready, the batter is mixed, the pan is nice and heated. She passes me my mug and settles on the couch while I tend the pancakes. She flips on a Christmas special episode of one of our go-to passive watching shows and waits for breakfast.

I overcook the pancakes a bit, not quite burnt but definitely darker than I'd intended, while I'm caught up trying to figure out the best way to express that simple phrase that means so many things. I plate up breakfast, set the dishes of warm fluffy goodness on the table, and get the syrup from the fridge. We eat, chattering away and enjoying the morning like usual, like I don't have something so significant predominating my mind. Once the meal is done, we exchange gifts. I gave her a couple of comic collections based on an adult animated super hero show that we love to watch together. She got me a book that I've read before and loved and a candle lighter, something I'd expressly mentioned

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<sup>14</sup> Until we started dating, I had never had a reason to own a mixing bowl, as I hadn't made pancakes since moving out on my own and this apartment has a tiny-ass oven that doesn't even have temperature settings on the knob, so I've never bothered with baking.

needing somewhere along the line. Her gifts are so thoughtful and make me even more sure that what I want to tell her is true, but I don't know if it's time yet.

Next thing I know, the "you really need to get on the road now" alarm on her phone goes off, as it does every morning we spend together.<sup>15</sup> She groans and quickly gets her work clothes on. I kind of hover, butterflies fluttering around in my belly<sup>16</sup>, as I try to figure out the best way to say it. She's tying her shoes, right by the door, has her bag and keys in hand, ready to go. She's left the gifts and her pajamas on the table, as she's planning on coming over again in the evening, after her work day is over and I'm back from visiting my parents, and I know that I'm going to have to either say it now or wait for another time.

I start nervously, mincing words as I set up something important. I couch it with "I think" and "I understand if you aren't ready" and "I hope you don't think I'm obsessive or clingy or anything". She isn't ready to say it back, not yet, but that's ok. I know I fall in love quickly, I didn't expect her to be ready, but I don't think it scared her. We kiss and say goodbye for now, and she leaves for work. I start getting ready to visit my family, mind buzzing with the fact that I told her. I told her and I think it went ok and ahhhhhhhhhhh.

\* \* \* \* \*

I drop you back in in the middle of a night about two weeks later, dear reader, for one last, brief moment. Whatever had happened during the day isn't relevant. What happens the next morning isn't relevant. The relevant details are how damned loud at least one of my neighbors is being, how it's making it damned near impossible to sleep, and how damned 2:30 in the morning it is. I think it's the first time we've shared a bed that I've actually been sleeping better than she has. We may have also had

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<sup>15</sup> And, presumably, the mornings we don't spend together, but I'm not actually there to verify.

<sup>16</sup> Ughhh, what a tired cliché. Why am I like this?

something of a tense conversation earlier in the night and things had gotten a little strained. I'm not sure exactly how much that was contributing, but it probably was.

She tosses and turns more than usual, eventually turning to me and asking if I'd feel hurt if she went to sleep on the couch for a while. I tell her no, I get it, it's a lot quieter in the living room, and roll back over, carefully shielding the more sensitive parts of myself from a stray knee as she climbs off the bed, over me, and heads to the other room. She pauses in the doorway<sup>17</sup> and looks back at me. I don't think she realizes that I'm awake when I hear her whisper the same sentiment that I expressed that Christmas morning before shuffling to the couch. I don't say anything, just smile to myself as I settle back to sleep. A couple of hours later, she comes, quietly, back into the bedroom, climbs over me as carefully as possible, and snuggles in next to me. Barely awake, I know that things will be ok, that, despite the hard times that will come—and certainly they will, for a couple of people doing their best to survive in the rotting corpse of modern American capitalism—the love and acceptance I've found with this beautiful woman will be there for me, and I sleep sounder than I have in years.

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<sup>17</sup> The bedroom doesn't actually have a door, just a frame, so I hung a pride flag over the opening to give more of a sense of having rooms.

## Aloo Gobi

Necessary items: A medium-sized kitchen knife that's at least sharp enough to chop potatoes, a large pan with a lid, one or two friends to share the meal with, measuring spoons, a variety of bowls for storing ingredients and serving, something to drink with the meal.

Prep: Chop a medium yellow onion, 2 medium plum tomatoes, a small head of cauliflower, 2 russet potatoes, and a green chili pepper (jalapeno for milder, serrano for hotter). Place the potatoes in a bowl with some water to keep from browning. Make sure the friend(s) are on the way to your place. If you're worried, you can do this before chopping the veggies, but if you, like me, aren't the fastest in the kitchen, it would be best to get some of this out of the way in advance. The cauliflower and pepper can also go in a bowl together. Crush at least 5 cloves of garlic—I prefer 7 or 8—and set them aside in a smaller bowl with about 1 tbsp of ginger paste (you can use fresh ginger, if you can get it, but my grocery store of preference doesn't tend to. If you do, crush up about  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch) (IMPORTANT UPDATE: crystalized ginger does NOT make a good substitute, trust me). Measure out 2 tsp coriander, 1 tsp cumin,  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp turmeric,  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp chili powder (or more),  $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp black pepper, and 1  $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp salt. These can all go into a small bowl together, gently shake to mix together. At this point, you'll be tempted to start the side of rice you intend on serving, just to get it out of the way, but don't. If you plan on cooking the rice on the stovetop, like I do, it's too soon.

Cooking: Heat  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of neutral oil (I use extra virgin olive oil) in a large pan over medium-high heat and toss in 1 tsp cumin seeds when the oil is hot. Sizzle the seeds for a few seconds, then add the onion. Sauté, stirring frequently, until the onions are golden. Realistically, your friend(s) will arrive during this cooking time, requiring you to dash over to the door to let them in as quickly as you can. Make sure you don't linger, apologize as profusely as you have to, and get back to sauteing. You'd better not burn those onions. As your friend(s) settle onto the couch, make sure you offer them something to drink—assuming

you're like me, you don't have a ton of experience hosting people for meals, so you'll be thankful for this reminder. Add the garlic and ginger and sauté for about 30 seconds, then add the tomatoes and seasoning blend. Depending on which friend(s) are over, make sure to point out that the streaming services are connected to the Xbox—point out which controller is for the Xbox, if needed—and suggest a handful of options for shows. Cook until the tomatoes have softened and the oil is separating from the mix. This should take about 5 minutes. Hopefully your friend(s) will have chosen something to watch by then. Regardless, it'll probably be around this point where you have to fend off offers to help. The kitchen, after all, is more of a kitchenette, and there really isn't space for help, thank you though. Remind your friend(s) that they're guests and should just relax. Drain the water from the potatoes, then add them, the cauliflower, and the chili pepper and sauté for another 5 or so minutes. Adjust levels of conversation to the visitor's needs and how interesting the show they picked is. Reduce heat to low-medium and cover the pan. Leave the curry to cook for a little less than half an hour, stirring a few times. About 10 minutes after you cover the curry, start the rice. While the curry and rice cook, make sure to revel in the overwhelming surge of positive emotions that making and sharing a meal with loved ones brings up in your chest. Disregard this step if you simply cook as a way to sustain yourself and don't feel an overwhelming surge of positive emotions when making and sharing a meal with loved ones, though understand that I consider you a strange creature. Regardless of the level of warmth and positivity in your chest, enjoy the time however you see fit. You'll know the aloo gobi is ready when the vegetables are extremely tender and there is no moisture left in the pan. Stir in ½ tsp garam masala, ½ tsp soy sauce (to add a little umami), and 1 tsp lime juice, then serve with rice, naan, and good times. Leftovers, if you have any, will keep in a plastic container in the fridge for about a week.

### Afterword: You Still Do Not Belong Here

You still do not belong here. You never have, and you know that you never will. You see it in the mirror, on the faces of others, in your deepest thoughts, and that's fine. You've tried, so very hard and for so many years, but what did that accomplish? It brought you so much needless pain, so much misery you didn't deserve. You do not belong here, and you're going to be ok anyway.

You haven't belonged here for a long, long time, but you never actually looked around, looked for the others who didn't belong, either. You spent so much time focusing on yourself and why you didn't belong that you didn't realize how many others there were that, while not just like you, were much closer than the ones you didn't belong among, the ones that didn't want to belong, either. You don't *have* to be able to explain to them why you do not belong where you are/were because they just *understand*. The words don't matter, not to these other people you should have been looking for, been gathering to yourself like a warm blanket or a protective layer of armor.

You don't know exactly how it happened, but you are no longer in the place where you do not belong. You really haven't gone anywhere, but your surroundings have changed. Sure, there are still the people who look at you and see something that doesn't belong, something that refuses to just behave correctly and perform the acts of belonging the right way, but they don't have the power they used to. You and your new—and growing—circle of non-fitters have carved out your own little space, found a way to belong while surrounded by the places you do not belong. You know that this is better. You have escaped the trap. You have *created* your own place to belong. You are happy.

### **BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Equinox Charette was born in Bangor, Maine on June 9, 1995. After receiving their degree, Equinox will be attending the Stonecoast MFA program at the University of Southern Maine. Equinox is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in May 2024.