

# ***SHORT STORY NIGHT***

***NAFISSA THOMPSON-SPIRES***

**"SUICIDE, WATCH"**

***RACHEL HARRISON***

**"GOBLIN"**

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# Suicide, Watch

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 [dissentmagazine.org/article/suicide-watch-heads-colored-people-social-media](https://dissentmagazine.org/article/suicide-watch-heads-colored-people-social-media)

Nafissa Thompson-Spires & Spring 2018

Jilly took her head out of the oven mainly because it was hot and the gas did not work independently of the pilot light. Stupid new technology. And preferring her head whole and her new auburn sew-in weave unsinged, and having no chloroform in the house, she conceded that she would not go out like a poet.

But she updated her status, just the same:

*A final peace out  
before I end it all.  
Treat your life like bread,  
no edge too small  
to butter.*

Jilly was not a poet or even an aspiring one. She just liked varying her posts as much as possible. She had 1,672 Facebook friends and 997 Twitter followers, and she collected them like so many merit badges. The beautiful mixed friend with the blond curls meant that pretty people liked Jilly, too. And being friends with the mahogany-colored guy with the enviable and on-trend tapered beard with all the followers on Instagram—the one who liked one of her baby pictures a year ago—was almost the same as having a fine black boyfriend when all the research and a popular video said it was a good thing black women already knew how to dance to “Single Ladies” because that was going to be their song forever.

Her friends included her mailman; five of the checkout boys at Stater Brothers on Riverside Avenue, three from Foothill in Fontana, and one from the grocer Ralphs in Rialto; all sixty-four of her mom’s friends from high school, many of whom had known her in utero; the podiatrist who removed the bursitis from her left big toe in seventh grade; her therapist from high school; her therapist from undergrad (her current therapist had a no-friending policy); all her high school teachers; the professor with whom she slept and two with whom she didn’t; her third-grade best friend; her birth buddy from the hospital, who had been born exactly one minute after her, and who had been particularly difficult to find since her name had changed; as many mutual friends as said yes; and countless people who’d sent her LinkedIn requests, despite her disdain for that particular networking ploy.

Jilly determined to wait at least four hours before checking the status of her farewell post so she wouldn’t look desperate, but then she remembered that she didn’t have long left, so she waited five minutes and checked her phone.

Four notifications:

JULIA WEINBERG, KAREN GRANT, AND 2 OTHER PEOPLE RECENTLY LIKED YOUR STATUS.  
JESSICA GIVEN [that was Jilly's mom] COMMENTED ON YOUR STATUS.  
REMINDER: YOU HAVE 1 EVENT THIS WEEK.

Six more people had liked her other status, about a juice cleanse she was considering, from earlier in the day.

She didn't know how to interpret the likes on her poem. Was it too cryptic? Were people happy she was saying goodbye, sanctioning her death? Jilly checked the third notification on the list. The Studio Center art show was on Friday, and she had already picked out an outfit. She drew her feet under her hips and sank deeper into the couch. She ignored the text message and two subsequent phone calls from her mother, who must have seen the poem and interpreted it properly. So it wasn't too cryptic. She opened the clock app and set her phone timer to one hour, then got up and put her phone in the microwave, a trick she'd taught herself to keep from checking it obsessively, because the act of having to retrieve the phone was supposed to be such a bother that she'd get tired of doing it.

Since she was already in the kitchen, Jilly removed the pouch from the utility drawer—she liked calling it that, a utility drawer, though many of the things in it (the stubs of crayons too small to use, pennies stuck together, widowed locks and keys) were no longer useful—then removed the box cutter from the pouch. She sat back on the couch, trying to decide on the best place to be found with slit wrists. A bloody mess in the kitchen would make it look unplanned, her life taken abruptly in a fit of desperation. The shower, on full blast while she sat under its stream, would make less mess but look desperately premeditated. The bathtub, where the blood would pool—she couldn't even think of the bathtub. She had seen *Harold and Maude* in a sociology class, and it scared her, all kidding aside. Most blood did, in fact. She put the knife back in its pouch and thought it a shame, because it was a cute knife and pouch, with matching kawaii cupcakes on the handle and flap.

She checked her pages again, this time on her laptop.

Pills might not work the first time. All she had were six pseudoephedrine-free gelcaps, and they seemed most likely to upset her stomach. There was no alcohol in the house to mix with anything, because she drank only when people could watch. She was really funny when she drank, or at least she tried to be. Her impression of Shirley Temple as Heidi was a big hit. "I've got to see the grandfather, I've just got to," she would say, bunching up her lips and hunching her shoulders. She'd tap-danced on a table once or twice to applause.

On the bright side, if the suicide attempt failed and she had to have her stomach pumped, she would lose at least ten pounds, and that would be better than last year's colonic, the pictures of which had elicited an awkward silence from her online friends. Weight loss would

make for a great status update.

Razor wounds were better, she decided, because even though there would be blood, she'd pass out before she saw much of it, and if she didn't die, she could take pictures of the scars. Actually, scarring might be much better than attempted or completed suicide because there'd be questions to answer, like "What happened? Who did that to you? Are you okay? Do you need help with anything? You didn't do that to yourself, did you?" She committed to becoming a cutter for an hour or so, like Ellie on *Degrassi*, and to make a few marks up one arm and then post a picture. She eyed her marmalade cat, Sherman, sitting on the window's lily-print cushion. The cuts would have to be deep enough so they wouldn't look like mere scratches but not so deep as to draw too much blood.

The first tiny cut hurt way more than it looked like it did when Ellie tried it, and Jilly was hungry. She put the knife back in its pouch, again, licked at her wrist—though there was no blood, only a superficial abrasion—rifled through the pantry, and finding nothing to snack on, sat back on the couch.

She had read somewhere, a book in Psychology 101 or something, that people who told everyone they were going to do it were just asking for permission, but she didn't need or want permission.

The thing about Jilly—and this is something she'd feared about her life from adolescence onward—was that there was no backstory. Nothing exciting or terrible had ever happened to her, and if there was any oppression for her to overcome, it only grazed her but never lingered. She had been followed in posh boutiques many times by Asian and white women and twice by black women, but those were the only examples of racism she could remember experiencing. She knew that she should feel discontentment, connected to a large chain of disenfranchisement or systemic persecution—it's not that black death and the news of the world didn't touch her spirit—but she was somewhat ashamed to say, in therapy or publicly, that the bulk of her discontentment came from having very little about which to be discontented. Her mother was pushy but stable, her father claimed her, her friends were attentive if tired. It was she who broke up with her boyfriend, not the other way around, and they were still Facebook friends. She got a dozen "Are you okay?" direct messages after she changed her status from "in a relationship" to "single." And she had a full network of supportive people, however superficial most of their interactions were. The support she lacked felt more fundamental, and she didn't know where to seek it.

The picture Jilly had posted the day before had gotten only four likes and two comments: "HOTT," from an acne-prone creep she'd known in high school; and "your welcome" when she replied to his post. Perhaps that was what set her off, not disregard for the difference between "you're" and "your," but the shallow comments. She thought the picture, which she'd taken in her bathroom mirror from her camera phone, warranted a better response, at very least because of the interesting angle from which she took it. The sideways shot showed her,

fingers making a peace sign, lips making a fish face, in a cream-colored skirt that stopped at the upper thigh and offset her smooth brown skin, and a purple bandeau top that might or might not have been half of a bikini.

She put her laptop down and pulled her knees toward herself when an idea came to her. It was Thursday, after all. She posted “TBT” and a link to a YouTube video of “Dead and Gone,” to feel out the traffic, then waited for the notifications to start, for the thumbs to erect small monuments.

Within twenty minutes, a red square announced fourteen likes, no comments. She didn’t know how to read this. Were they saying they wanted her dead and gone or that they liked T.I., or Justin Timberlake?

She waited ten minutes and tried a second video, then another, posting from her laptop. These things worked best in a quick succession that made them seem stream of consciousness. “*Another one: ‘Give Up the Ghost’ by Immature, feat. Bizzy ee.*”

| *Oh and can’t forget Bone Thugs: ‘Crossroads.’*

Jilly could boast of few superlatives that might be included in her obituary. In eighth grade, she was voted Most Photogenic by her peers and earned a quarter-page feature in the school yearbook. But she could never regain that former glory. By high school, she was one of four Prettiest Girls, and two of them were thicker than she was, and she wasn’t even the only black girl to win the honor. An undergrad boyfriend said she was the best kisser he’d ever had, but he cheated on her. A stranger at the mall said her feet were “the most adorable feet I’ve ever seen.” She wasn’t sure if the compliments of a creeper even counted. What did she have to show for her life, other than the near perfections of her appearance?

She did actually feel depressed now, thinking about it, dying and all. No one would associate her with Sylvia Plath. She wouldn’t look like the Lady of Shalott with her new weave framing her face as she lay on her back in a boat, or even Anne of Green Gables as the Lady of Shalott or even Megan Follows as Anne of Green Gables as the Lady of Shalott, because her natural hair wasn’t even red, and anyway, she’d read that when black women died it wasn’t glamorous, and people didn’t make metonymic literary connections about them, even to lynching—as they did for black men; black women’s bodies just died, out of frame, and that made her sadder.

The laptop pinged. Another notification.

| *Love this song! You’re on a roll today, girl.*

If Jilly were to run a content analysis of the style and type of posts that got the most responses, it would emerge that faux Ebonics always ranked high, especially up until the past year or so: “Peep this foos.” A picture of herself wearing red oversize Sally Jessy

Raphael glasses and making a fish face was one of her all-time highs, with 384 likes and 73 comments; maybe yesterday's reenactment photo, in the white skirt and purple bandeau, was just played out. Current events worked, if they were interesting, deep stories she'd seen on Yahoo News about medicines that actually made you sicker or soy milk filled with estrogenic compounds and neurotoxic proteins. Posts about television were even better: "Kerry Washington is SO gorgeous. I want that outfit . . . and that one. Go, Shonda!" Instant 56 likes. Cat videos outperformed babies, which followed closely behind, but delicate posts about family and #blessings could be tricky, because people didn't want to see how happy you were too often, even if you were making it all up.

Jilly returned to the kitchen and scanned the refrigerator. Several of her friends were on antidepressants and had attempted suicide before, and they got a lot of positive responses for their candor. Jilly had asked her third therapist for antidepressants twice, but she said, "No, Jilly, I'm still not that kind of doctor. And you aren't depressed, just narcissistic, and there are, so far, no medications for that."

In third grade, after reading *The Secret Garden*, Jilly had asked her mom—and subsequently two doctors—for a back brace to treat her scoliosis, like Colin. They had all laughed and said, "What an imagination," in those adult voices.

Her second therapist said, "You're not a hypochondriac; you just have too much time on your hands. Try volunteering somewhere."

The old people in the nursing home looked uninterested when Jilly tried out her tap-dancing and Shirley Temple imitations. A man with long ear-and-nostril hairs fell asleep midact, and his snoring was so obnoxious that Jilly paused the show to try to rouse him.

Jilly thought going to and posting vaguely about therapy at least left something up to the imagination of her followers. She mentioned her experiences there frequently in her "Think About It" Tuesday posts, with captions like, "Who says black people don't go to therapy?" and #therapy. If she mentioned it often enough, without saying why she went, people could fill in a sexier disease than narcissism, which you couldn't exactly tell anyone you had, because it made you look bad, and she didn't even have the malignant kind or the official personality disorder; even her narcissism was pastel pink, kawaii cute.

Jilly was really hungry now, and dying of starvation wasn't a quick suicide option. She had a cabinet full of groceries, some even gourmet, but a meal of microwave ramen seemed more fitting for the occasion than, say, chicken tenders and broccoli. She chose one of the Thai-flavored packages from the cupboard.

She had forgotten to put water in her ramen a year ago and heated the dry noodles and powder sauce to a smoky black mess that left her kitchen smelling like burned fish for a week but which made for an excellent photo. 227 likes.

During senior year, she'd known a girl named Fatima who had bulimia, and though Fatima didn't otherwise eat dairy, she often binged on big servings of nacho cheese. Jilly didn't envy any sickness that made you throw up or poop uncontrollably or look so gaunt that you weren't even pretty anymore, but it did seem that everyone else had a label, that their illnesses got more attention, that there was something chic about them.

One of her friends—not online, but her real friend—Carl from the eleventh-grade art club, at Eisenhower High School, had even died. He hadn't asked anyone for permission or left a note. His mother and friends, even Jilly, had wept openly at his funeral.

Jilly shivered, thinking about Carl in the closed casket, and his mom's eyes, glassy yet hollow. She took out a porcelain bowl, which she'd ordered from Etsy, printed with kawaii lollipops.

She'd heard people, including Carl's sister, say that suicide was the ultimate act of selfishness, that it left everyone else behind to clean up the mess. Jilly wasn't sure how she felt about that. It was Carl's body and therefore his choice. And no matter how you died, it left a mess for someone else to clean up. If Carl had died in a car accident or from cancer, his family would have still asked why, and they would have still been responsible for the funeral arrangements.

Jilly chose a porcelain soup spoon and floral-printed chopsticks and placed them next to the bowl. Who would make the arrangements for her? Her mother didn't even know her favorite flowers, and she would probably want Jilly buried in an Ann Taylor dress suit with a bedazzled collar. The auburn sew-in weave was cute, but Jilly wasn't sure she wanted to be memorialized in it forever. Who would run her online tribute page or make sure the right people came to the service? And what good was a funeral if she couldn't, like Tom and Huck, witness the mourners and see how much they had all loved her?

She chastised herself for her stupidity and chuckled. She was not going to kill herself, certainly not today. Maybe she would try volunteering again, try reading to the elderly. She could wear a costume and visit sick children or attractive young men in the hospital; she could start brainstorming the outfits and completing the necessary applications as soon as she finished her dinner. The pictures she would post. Nothing was more fulfilling, it occurred to her, than giving back to others and letting people know about it.

She poured water from the filter pitcher into the bowl, over the dehydrated noodles and powder, and put the whole deal into the microwave and pressed start before she remembered her phone.

Later, those who mentioned her asked whether anyone had noticed anything different about her. Were there any warning signs? And why did she set the whole house and the poor ginger cat on fire? Why did she use the phone instead of a more traditional way? But in the

moment, Jilly saw only the bright crimson of the explosion. It came in four red pops, like notifications, friend requests.

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# I Bought the Goblin App and All I Got Was This Eating Disorder

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 [electricliterature.com/goblin-rachel-harrison/](http://electricliterature.com/goblin-rachel-harrison/)

January 15, 2020

## “Goblin” by Rachel Harrison

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It was Dani’s idea to download the Goblin. We were in the dressing room at H&M and she kept sending me out for different sizes. I passed her multiple pairs of the same jeans through the curtain as the attendant disapproved from behind a rack of unwanted clothes.

“None of my clothes fit,” Dani said, as she pulled me into her room. “I found this incredible dress to wear to Michelle and Ben’s wedding, but I don’t feel good in it. You know what I mean?”

“Mm,” I said, stumbling over a pile of skinny high rises.

“I need to lose five pounds,” she said. “Will you do it with me? I do better with a partner. I heard it’s super easy. You just download the app and you get a Goblin.”

“Is it tech or magic?”

She shrugged.

Some people are good at saying no. Toddlers are good at saying no. Virgins are good at saying no. God is good at saying no. I am not good at saying no.

She said we’d start on Monday. *Poor Monday*, I thought, *it’s the Ringo of days*.

I reconsidered my decision later that night, letting the shower run hot so the bathroom filled with steam and diluted the light, making it kinder to my body. I used to shower in the dark, but then I got into the habit of feeling myself with my hands and mis-imagining my proportions. *Are my thighs really that wide? My hips?* Eventually, I relented and turned the lights back on. I couldn’t go on cutting myself shaving. My shins looked like butcher block.

I counted the little pink scars as I sat on the edge of the tub, wrapped in a towel, my toes swirling the soap suds roving toward the drain. I thought about calling Dani and politely backing out of the diet. The only problem was I wouldn’t know how to answer if she asked me why.

Well. Not the only problem. My plucky past self had committed to going to this wedding. Stuffed the RSVP in the mail with the stunning arrogance of a white-collar criminal. Four months ago, I had been certain this wedding was the perfect opportunity to prove to myself

that I was finally over him. To be in the same room and for once not feel like an unwanted puppy, like a sad footnote in someone else's love story.

A few weeks out, I wasn't feeling so confident. But it was too late now. I'd committed. Chosen salmon over chicken. What would they think if I didn't show?

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On Sunday night I spent two hours debating whether or not I should order Chinese food before ordering Chinese food. The weeks ahead of me loomed in the image of a giant, undressed salad. Of course I caved. Sesame chicken with brown and white rice, pork lo mein, won ton soup, an egg roll. They threw in those flavorless crunchy noodles, and I ate them mindlessly, dunking them in duck sauce. There were two fortune cookies, which meant they assumed there would be two people eating the food.

My first fortune said, "Joys are often the shadows cast by sorrows."

I was too traumatized to open the second.

I ate until it was painful, until I had to lie on my side to stop from feeling like I was going to burst. I messaged Dani. "Last supper?"

"Bottle of Rosé. To. My. Face."

"Naughty."

"You?"

I eyed the catastrophe strewn about my coffee table. The empty container of chicken, the stray noodles drooping over the side of the grease-stained takeout box, used napkins and leaky sauce packets oozing soy onto the ripped paper bag it all came in. A few crumbs of crunchy noodles powdered the wreckage.

I replied, "Noodles."

"Nice."

I threw everything away. Took out the garbage. Cleaned the coffee table with a Lysol wipe, lit a candle to mask the smell.

*I'll make it up tomorrow*, I told myself, washing my hands like Lady Macbeth. *Gym and juice cleanse. Tomorrow.*

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Dani came over after work to download the app. We planned to start the diet first thing but decided to wait to get the app until we were together. We were too afraid to do it alone. I had only seen what the Goblin looked like in ads. Cute and animated. Smurf-esque. "Gotta-get-a

Goblin!”

I resisted Googling to avoid the opinions of hangry strangers. Dieters aren’t reliable, always quick to jump on bandwagons only to abandon them twice as fast. Atkins. South Beach. Master cleanse. Gluten free. Paleo. Whole30. Until the studies find you should really base your diet on your blood type. Until other studies find that’s bullshit.

Dani showed up in head-to-toe Adidas, a smoothie in each hand. All I’d eaten that day was oatmeal and cucumber slices. I was grateful for the smoothie but also wanted to smack it out of her hand.

We sat at my kitchen table holding our phones. We opened the app store. It was the second most popular Goblin app, coming in after “Goblin Quest.”

“Ready?”

“It’s \$4.99?”

“Meg.”

“Okay, okay.”

We pressed our thumbs and waited.

Two tiny green Goblins appeared, each about six inches tall. Dani’s was wearing a nightcap and glittery shoes with little bells. It twirled, shook its hips side to side and gave her the thumbs up. Dani giggled with delight. “Cute!” she said.

I felt my face fall. My Goblin was stocky. He wore an unbuttoned vest and brown, clunky boots. His head was shiny and bald except for three thick, curly black hairs spiraling up like springs. His ears were the size of quarters, paler than the rest of him and pointy. The worst part about him was his mouth. He had fangs. Two sharp canines poking out of his flat, grey lips. His arms were crossed over his chest.

“Mine looks angry,” I said.

“Aw, no! He’s just serious. Means business.” Dani rested her chin on the table, “Hello little ones.”

“What now?” I asked, but before the words were out the Goblins were gone.

“They’ll come back when we need them.”

“Like when?”

“Like when we’re about to make a bad choice,” she said. “Like order Chinese.”

She lifted my fortune off the counter. I thought I'd thrown it out.

"Last supper," I said. "Noodles. I told you."

"I know," she said, her voice pitched high like she'd just inhaled helium. "I wasn't shaming."

I picked at a chip in my manicure, pretended I wasn't bothered.

"Want to watch a movie or something?" she asked.

In the movie we watched, the actress was very thin.

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I woke up to panic. There was commotion in my apartment. Crash. Bang. Slam. I might die right where I am, I thought, standing in my bedroom in mismatched flannel pajamas and slippers shaped like narwhals. I always think I'd be good in a crisis until I'm in a crisis, then I remember the truth about myself.

Something glowed in my periphery. There was a message illuminating the belly of my phone. The message said, "Hi Gorgeous! Your Goblin is visiting doing some Goblin good!"

I stepped cautiously out of my bedroom. The light was on in the kitchen. I paused in the doorway, a force field of equal parts shock and fear stopped me from going in.

There it was, ripping through my cabinets. It poured out a box of reduced fat Cheez-Its and started stomping, crushing them into orange dust.

"Hey!" I yelled from the doorway.

It looked up at me, its small, dark eyes narrowing. Then it went back to its destruction. It hopped over to the fridge, pulled the door open and climbed inside. Before I fully understood what I was doing I slammed the refrigerator door shut.

From inside I heard a horrible, guttural grunting, then a distinct POP!

The Goblin was on the floor by my right foot. It glowered at my slipper for a moment, then drew its arm back and slapped my slipper across its adorable narwhal face. The Goblin wiped its hands on its vest, walked over to the fridge, opened it, and continued its work. Stunned, I sat myself down at the table with a glass of water.

I watched as it marched across the floor with a chocolate bar lifted over its head. It tossed it into the garbage, along with a bag of frozen chicken fingers, a half-empty jar of alfredo sauce, ranch dip, and a carton of chocolate soy milk.

The Goblin vanished after it finished clearing out the fridge. I shuffled back to bed but couldn't calm myself enough to sleep. I tried all my usual tricks. Breathing exercises. Naming state capitals and all of the kids in my kindergarten class. Selecting a memory and recreating the scene in my mind in great detail. My fifth birthday party with a clown called Annie who wore an orange wig and a felt dress, who made popcorn in her hat.

It was no use. My mind insisted on going back to the one thing, the one person, I was trying not to think about.

I wondered if he looked the same as he did back in college, his hair long, fuzz on his face, a little over his lip and a little under. I wondered if he was as skinny as he used to be, if he wore the same clothes. Baggy t-shirts he bought already ripped, black jeans, scuffed-up combat boots with the laces loose. I remember the distinct thud his boots made when they hit my dorm room floor. Conjuring the sound still got me excited.

His mouth was always cold for some reason, and when he kissed me, I would get the chills. He thought he was turning me on, and he was, but mostly I was cold. I'd pull him onto me for body heat.

One time he told me he loved me. He didn't mean to. I woke up in his room on a brutal February morning after promising myself I'd never go there again, but there I was, staring at the tapestry he had tacked to his ceiling. Stars twirling around the signs of the Zodiac. He's a Capricorn, I should have known. My high school boyfriend was a Capricorn. He took my virginity and treated me like garbage. Told me I should get a tan. The worst part about it was I did. I went tanning. If I get skin cancer someday, I'll scream.

"Hey, be back soon. Love you."

Right away, he realized what he'd done. I saw it on his face.

"Okay," I said, pulling the covers over my shoulder, pretending I was still mostly asleep. I stayed in his bed a while longer, trying to remember everything I'd learned in psychology class about Freudian slips.

He's the only one I ever told about my treatment. I figured he'd understand because he had two sisters, and because I knew it wouldn't make a difference if I told him or not. He wouldn't want me either way.

"It's something I still struggle with," I said.

"I'm sorry," he said, holding my head to his chest, kissing my forehead. He smelled like tobacco and Axe. "You're beautiful."

I thought, *that's it?*

For me, the hunger was nostalgia. It was like visiting an old friend, a friend I'd forgotten how much I hated.

It spawned in my gut around eight-thirty every morning that first week. By noon my vision spotted and shoulders wilted. My lunch was three plain rice cakes, grapes and peach nonfat yogurt. By the time I left work I wanted to strangle everything that moved. I stamped through my apartment door and heated some sodium-light tomato soup on the stovetop, ate it with spelt toast. Every night, every night I burnt my tongue on that godforsaken soup. I couldn't wait for it to cool.

I had apple slices with cinnamon for dessert.

I was highly motivated. I wanted to look good for Ben. There was the backless dress I'd ordered for the wedding, the picture of Emily Ratajowski I'd taped to my fridge.

Really, I just didn't want the Goblin to come back.

I weighed myself at the gym, breaking a dusty old promise I'd made to myself, my parents, various therapists. The numbers were mean.

My stomach bloated in protest. I pressed my fingers down on it and made my skin pale. I went to bed early.

On Sunday I went to McDonald's. Fast and dirty. I stood in line salivating at the smell of salt and crackling hot oil. I had to wipe the corners of my mouth with my sleeve. I ordered a ten-piece chicken nugget and ate them out of my jacket pockets on the walk home. I was on my third when the Goblin appeared. He slapped the nugget out of my hand.

"Hey!" I said.

"Hey!" he said. His voice was gruff and ugly.

He reached into my jacket and began throwing the nuggets onto the ground one by one. I managed to save two and shove them into my mouth. He glared at me with his beady black eyes, climbed up my arm, stood on my shoulder and tried to pry open my mouth. He dug his fingernails into my lip.

"Ow!" The chicken mush came spilling out, landing mostly on my chin.

I shook the Goblin off. I expected him to go flying but he landed on the sidewalk before me on both feet, his hands on his hips.

I wiped away the half-chewed nuggets with the back of my hand.

"Jerk."

“Bitch.”

He began to kick the dirty ground nuggets into a nearby sewer grate, muttering to himself. When the last nugget was gone, he disappeared.

I called Dani.

She was out of breath. “I’m on the elliptical. What’s up?”

“My Goblin called me a bitch!”

She laughed.

“I’m serious!”

“They can’t talk.”

“I swear to God it just called me a bitch.”

“Mine doesn’t say anything.”

“Lucky you.”

“Maybe you get the Goblin that suits you,” she panted. “You respond better to tough love.”

“No I don’t.”

“You always date mean men.”

“Who was mean?”

“Kurt. Milo. Ben. Your high school boyfriend.”

“Ben wasn’t mean,” I said. “I was in love with him and he was in love with someone else. That’s different.”

“Sure. I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

We hung up and I moped home. I found my workout clothes laid out for me on my bed, my sneakers on my pillows. There was a package torn open on the floor, and the dress I’d bought for the wedding was hanging on the door to my closet, slinky and beautiful and small. It fluttered in the breeze from the open window. It looked like it was dancing.

I wanted to be angry, but I could feel the grease lingering on my chin and was disgusted with myself. I began to undress when I saw the Goblin out of the corner of my eye, a smear of green disappearing. I turned to see where it went, but instead I saw myself. In the full length

mirror I bought from Ikea to make my bedroom look bigger, in the yellowy hue from the ceiling fixture, I saw my body as it was. No filters. No generous angles. Just the brutal truth of it.

My eyes traversed the flawed landscape, until I was too hysterical to keep them open, until my fat, syrupy tears relieved me of the sight.

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I collected compliments in a shoebox under my bed. It started after a strange overnight held by my church when I was fifteen, attendance was mandatory in order to make confirmation. I wasn't particularly religious but figured I owed it to my parents. We were allowed sleeping bags but not sleep. We were kept up all night with prayer and team building exercises and store-brand snacks. At midnight we received brown paper bags with our names written across the front in swirly dark Sharpie. We were told to write everyone kind messages, memories we shared together or traits we admired, and put them into their bag. We were encouraged to sign our names, but it wasn't required so no one did. We weren't supposed to read our notes until we got home.

I started in the car, despite being deliriously tired and overwhelmed by all the Bible talk. I finished reading them on my bed, knees tucked under my chin, the scraps of paper all around me like snow flurries.

Some were nothing. Fluff. "You're really nice." "You're smart." Others surprised me, telling me I was witty and had a great smile. I decided to save them so I could re-read whenever I was feeling bad about myself. I put them in a shoebox. Eventually I started adding, writing down sweet things people said to me. Friends. Boyfriends. Professors. Catcallers. I put in pictures, too. Ones where I thought I actually looked pretty or thin. Ticket stubs from movies I liked. Birthday cards from my grandparents. A post-it with a quote from my therapist about my body being my home, and I should treat it well because it's where I live.

I thought about that quote while on the treadmill, the Goblin turning up the speed from 6 to 6.5. It didn't seem profound anymore. It didn't make me feel good. It felt like a prison sentence.

I decided when I got home, I would pull out the box, read through it.

But when I went to look, I couldn't find it. It wasn't there.

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Dani and I decided to meet up to celebrate a month of our Goblin-ing. We went to a popular salad place for lunch, where everyone was content to wait half an hour for a salad and unsweetened ginger lemonade. It seemed like lunacy, but the truth is a good salad is hard to find.



We ate our salads on a bench in a nearby park. I picked at my spinach, hunting for tiny bits of chicken or tomatoes.

“You didn’t get dressing on it?” Dani asked me. “That’s commitment. You look amazing, by the way. Glowy.”

I forked my dry salad. “Has your Goblin stolen anything from you?”

“What? No. Why?”

I shook my head. “Never mind.”

“I don’t think they’re programmed to steal. That’d be, like, crazy.”

“I probably just lost it.”

“Lost what?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “Do you have shoes for the wedding yet?”

---

Someone told me he cut his hair. By someone I mean Facebook. I needed another dose of motivation, so I started looking through his pictures, all the way back to the ones with me. Us sitting on a stoop blowing cigarette smoke at the camera. Us in a basement breaking beer bottles against the wall because we were young and delinquent and didn’t have to clean it up. Us at a party, sitting on a stranger’s bed, my legs over his legs, my head on his shoulder, his hands in my hair. Us playing air hockey at a random dive, his arms up in victory and me making a sad baby face.

I couldn’t blame myself. He was beautiful.

The spinach was rough coming up. It was the stems. They got caught.

After, I made myself chamomile tea. It’s what I used to do. The smell made me sleepy.

---

The group text could not be escaped. An invitation to dinner and drinks from Kelly. Allison couldn’t make it Thursday. Friday? *I could do Friday*, I said. Everyone could do Friday.

What time? Seven? Eight? Nine? Nine was too late for dinner, it was decided. Dani called us grandmas. *Is that supposed to be offensive?* I asked. *I like my grandma very much*, Allison said. *Same here*, Kelly said. Dani said, *ha-ha, I guess seven-thirty*.

Then came the choosing of the restaurant. Mexican? Sushi? Mexican. Price range? Dos Caminos? Prickly pear margaritas? What about that Latin bistro with the empanadas?

The guava and goat cheese empanadas are the best thing Kelly's ever tasted. Do they take reservations?

I wasn't going. I was never going. Going would mean a guaranteed appearance of the Goblin, and at least 2,000 calories. It was one week to the wedding. I was almost out of time.

I bailed an hour before, citing a migraine. I made soup instead.

Kale and chickpea soup.

I was hungry again in twenty minutes. I decided to make toast. Whole wheat.

I left it in the toaster too long and it was dry.

Jam, I thought. A little sugar-free raspberry jam. But I didn't have any jam.

I did have organic coconut spread.

I took it out and started with a thin layer over the toast, burnt crumbs flaking off as I ran the knife over. I took a loud bite. It was terrible.

More spread. I was able to taste the coconut. My mom always said there are two kinds of people in the world, people who like coconut and people who are wrong.

I dipped the knife back into the container.

The Goblin knocked it out of my hand before I could spread it. It hit the floor with a clink-clank-clank.

When I leaned down to pick it up, I heard him say, "Cow."

With that he was gone.

The knife went into the sink and the toast went into the garbage. I sat on my bedroom floor with my laptop balanced on my knees, searching the Internet for the best juice cleanse. Edited it to, "best juice cleanse for weight loss." Organic, cold-pressed. Unpasteurized. Six-day cleanse delivered to my door. Six juices a day. \$375 plus shipping and handling.

I thought if I missed chewing, I could have some celery.

I visualized the way I wanted my body to look, how I wanted other people to see me. How I wanted Ben to see me, or anyone who'd ever overlooked me. To really see me and know that I was beautiful and desirable and that I mattered.

I saw a future where I didn't spend my days obsessing or feeling bad about myself. In that future, I was someone else. Someone who looked nothing like me.

When I was sixteen a few girls caught me in the bathroom at school and went to the guidance counselor, who turned around and told my parents, along with all of my teachers and my soccer coach. It was a violation of some kind, I was sure, but I was young and meek. It bothered me that everyone knew. It made me feel raw, unsafe.

At the same time, I didn't understand how it was a surprise to anyone. I was a bone. Part of me was hurt that they hadn't said anything sooner, that they hadn't shown concern.

My mom cried that night, it carried through the walls.

"How could we let this happen?" she asked my dad.

How was he supposed to know what was normal for a teenage girl? He thought I was losing my baby fat. He thought I'd gotten taller. I would never get any taller. Those pencil markings on the wall in the laundry room, there would never be any more. I did damage. I deprived myself.

The vitamin shakes they gave me were foul. I had to pinch my nose to get them down, and as I did, I imagined what they'd look like coming up. Probably the same.

---

The day of the wedding, Dani and I sat in traffic eating mushy grapes out of a plastic bag. I skinned each grape with my teeth and then sucked on it to make it last as long as possible. Dani made a playlist of songs we used to listen to in college, and we sang along loudly until all of the songs had played multiple times and the nostalgia wore off.

"Is this going to be weird for you?" she asked me as she searched for replacement tunes.

"God, no," I said, laughing. "Ben and I were together for, like, five minutes."

"Yeah," she said. "Still."

"Ben was always in love with Michelle. It's not like I didn't know. We all knew. I was a placeholder," I said. "I'm glad they ended up together. I'm happy for them."

Dani snorted. "You're either a great liar or a much better person than I am."

I rolled the window down, draped my elbow out of the side of the car, adopting a casual posture. "I'm surprised they invited me."

"You're part of the group. It would have been super shady to single you out."

"I guess."

"Well, you look amazing," she said. "I give up. You pick the music."

I put on a podcast about murder.

---

There were violins. There was a sign that read, “Pick a seat, not a side.” There was the added pressure caused by that sign when deciding where to sit, wondering what that seat location could possibly be interpreted to mean. There were the fickle straps of my dress that kept falling, the backless bra that dug into my skin, the shapewear cutting off my circulation.

There was Ben, standing at the end of the aisle in an ill-fitting suit. He was too far away for me to get a good look at his face. From where I sat, he could have been anyone. Generic groom.

There was Michelle in her mermaid gown, cathedral veil, a collection of pretty bridesmaids in not quite matching dresses, hair half-up half-down.

The ceremony was quick. There were mosquitos and people crying. There were vows. She promised to be his teammate, but to never keep score. To challenge him, to be patient, even when he gets sick, because he’s such a baby when he’s sick. That got a laugh. He promised to love her always, to put her first, and to never ask her why she needs so many shoes. There was more, but I was too busy willing my stomach to stop howling to pay close attention.

At the cocktail hour, there were drinks named after the couple’s cats—Fig and Olive. I sipped tequila slowly, avoided trays of hors d’oeuvres. Bacon-wrapped shrimp and mini quiche and deep-fried mac’n’cheese balls.

There were old friends. Todd, Ben’s sophomore-year roommate who used to call me Megatron, and apparently still did. There was Whitney, a notorious kleptomaniac who once stole Dani’s heirloom earrings and then wore them to Dani’s birthday party. Now she was a life coach. There was Jenna, who complimented my dress and showed me pictures of her kids. She used to sell weed and shrooms out of a retro lunchbox.

There was extended family and an excess of decorative moss and mason jars and tealight candles and a taco bar and pizza station.

There were table assignments attached with twine to tiny keys.

“What do you think this unlocks?” I asked Dani, holding up my key.

“Probably nothing,” she said, not understanding.

There was a highly choreographed entrance of the wedding party featuring props such as fake mustaches and feather boas, followed by the couple’s first dance.

*That's Ben*, I told myself. *That's him*. But he looked so different, clean-shaven, his hair short. And he was having his first dance to "The Scientist" by Coldplay. The Ben I knew would have punctured his eardrums before listening to Coldplay.

"Isn't this a breakup song?" Dani whispered to me.

"Not if you completely ignore the lyrics," I said.

We watched Ben and Michelle sway back and forth leaning against each other, necks and shoulders limp with exhaustive happiness. The burden of joy.

A series of audio malfunctions disrupted the speeches. We could barely hear. I said a quick prayer of thanks to the God of faulty microphones. I downed my champagne.

Salad arrived on gold and mint art deco china. Chunks of watermelon and feta and ripe, shiny tomatoes nestled in a bed of romaine. I unfolded my napkin across my lap and reached for my silverware. It was then I noticed my hands were shaking, my fingers spasming, palms sweating.

I was woozy. The only solid food I'd eaten in days were the grapes earlier that morning. I sucked on the lime wedge from my tequila soda but wasn't sure if that counted.

I eventually managed to close a fist around my fork and stab at a piece of watermelon. I deposited it between my lips and let it rest on my tongue. Let it melt there.

"Look who it is."

There was a hand on my shoulder. I didn't need to turn around to know who it belonged to.

I stood up too fast. For a moment, the room went fuzzy and the floor bounced beneath me. I had to put my hand on my chair to steady myself.

"It's good to see you," Ben said, opening his arms to me.

He wasn't as tall as I remembered.

"Good to see you, too," I said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," he said. "We're, uh, making the rounds."

"Yep," I said.

"Hey, Dani," he said. "You guys look really good."

"Thank you," Dani said. "We know."

“All right. Michelle went that way, so let me go find my bride,” he said. “See you on the dance floor?”

“You know it,” Dani said.

“See you on the dance floor?” I said to Dani. I slid back down into my chair and stared at my salad, anticipating the deep over-analysis of the interaction. I prodded at my emotions with a long stick, as if they were something dead in the woods. I interrogated myself. *Are you sad? Are you angry? Are you disappointed? Heartbroken?*

The truth was, all I felt was hunger.

I skewered a tomato. It was only a tomato. Harmless.

But then the next bite, I scooped up a little feta.

I had forgotten the simple pleasure of flavor. I ate the entire thing, fast and frenzied. And my entrée when it arrived. A slab of salmon pink as a sunset resting on top of a fluffy cloud of mashed potatoes, fenced in by soft stalks of asparagus. A golden pool of butter gathered on one side of the plate. I sopped it up with a dinner roll.

“You want mine?” Dani asked, offering me her roll. “I don’t want it.”

That’s when I realized what I’d done. The shame came swift. A searing, all-consuming embarrassment.

I couldn’t look at her.

“I’m deleting my Goblin,” she said. “I’m over it. I’m just not gonna eat bread.”

As soon as she said it, as soon as I heard *Goblin*, the pain registered. My leg. Ankle. It had bitten me. I looked down and saw it there, fangs dripping blood.

“I have to go,” I said. I grabbed my bag and bee-lined for the bathroom.

It was all marble and neutral pink. Flowers. Baskets of assorted products. Too many mirrors.

I caught a glimpse of myself.

My skin was sallow, my hair damp with sweat. My carefully applied eyeliner was now smudged and uneven. There was a small clump of mashed potato cradled in the silky cowl of my dress. I recoiled in horror.

When I stepped back, I realized it was still there, clamped on me, its tiny jaw hinged around my ankle. I couldn’t feel it anymore, I couldn’t feel anything, but I could hear it gnawing. I could see the small puncture wounds, the thin streams of blood.

I began to flail, kick my leg, try to buck it off me, but it was clamped on so tightly it wouldn't budge.

"Stop!" I screamed. "Please!"

It occurred to me then that someone could walk in at any moment. I retreated into a stall.

I was panting. All that food. I ate so much food, and it set in my stomach like cement. My dress felt tight, my shapewear suffocating.

I reached down for the Goblin, but it was on the toilet lifting the seat.

"Do it," it said, in that gravelly voice.

When I was done, it flushed for me. Then it stood on the back of the toilet with its arms crossed, looking smug and mean.

"Go away!" I said, wiping my mouth. I was completely exhausted. I sat there on the bathroom floor crying about how tired I was.

"Again," the Goblin said.

I got to my knees, my bare skin cold against the tile. As I made sure that my dress was shielded from splatter and that my hair was out of the way, I had an image of myself in a wedding dress shuffling around the stall, gathering up an avalanche of white fabric, layer upon layer of lace, and I knew. Even if my life were different, even if it was my wedding day, I would still be alone in the bathroom, hunched over a toilet.

"I can't do this anymore," I said. "I'm done. I'm deleting you."

It snickered. "You can't, stupid. You need me."

"No," I said. "I don't."

I stood up. Slid open the latch on the door. As I stepped out of the stall, I heard it growl.

I turned to see it lunging toward me. I leaned back, narrowly avoiding it. It face-planted on the floor.

I sprang forward, smashing my foot down.

I hit the thing. I half expected it to have disappeared, but there it was, stunned, its little legs snapped in different directions, one eye dangling free of its socket. It was hideous.

I crouched down. It made a low moaning noise and for a moment I felt sorry for it. Then I saw it smile. A cruel, mocking grin. With both its broken hands it was flipping me off.

I grabbed it. To hold it was a funny thing, it felt kind of rubbery. It weighed a pound or two. When I squeezed, it had give. Flesh. A pulse. My grip tightened to stop it from thrashing around. A fang scraped the meaty part of my hand.

I always imagined rage to be a red, chaotic state. But it's quiet and translucent and euphoric. A sister to freedom.

I ate the legs first. They were chewy. Once I finished the legs it stopped screaming. The middle required paper towels. I saved an ear for last. And as I swallowed it down, I realized I quite liked the taste.