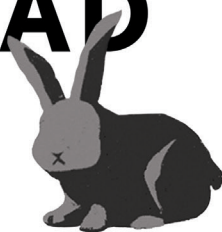


**EVERYONE IN
THIS ROOM
WILL SOMEDAY
BE DEAD**



EMILY AUSTIN



atlantic fiction

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part one

Advent

There must have been an explosion. I hear ringing interspersed with a woman's muffled screams. Everything is black. I blink repeatedly.

Black. Black. Black.

I blink once more and see sunlight. The towering silhouette of a streetlight forms in front of me. The light is green, but I am not moving. I glance behind me. A beige van is expelling smoke from its bent hood. There is shattered glass across the concrete road—

I remember now. I was about to sip my coffee. I heard a car horn, looked into my rearview mirror, and watched as that minivan plowed into the trunk of my car. My airbag exploded, and I involuntarily punched myself in the face.

I am now covered in both the scorching guts of my erupted thermos, as well as a concerning gray dust that was emitted when my airbag detonated. I turn my hazard lights on and glance again at my mirror. The screaming woman has emerged from her van. She is rushing toward me.

I am overwhelmed by the smell of my deceased coffee as it resurrects itself in the form of stains on my car's upholstery and burn scars on my chest. Sunlight beams directly into my eyes, and I still hear ringing. I close my eyes and focus on the blackness behind my eyelids.

The woman raps her knuckles on my window, but I keep my

eyes sealed shut. I tend to cry when I am overstimulated. Keeping my eyes closed might stop me from succumbing to that humbling tendency.

“She’s not opening her eyes!” The woman’s muffled voice shrieks through my window.

“Is she dead?”

I keep my eyes closed but wave an arm to demonstrate that I am alive.

“Why are your eyes shut?” she asks. “I thought I’d killed you!”

Does this woman think that all dead people shut their eyes?

“Can you hear me?” She knocks on the window again.

Rather than fill her in regarding how I am closing my eyes to avoid crying in public or exposing her to the dark realities of wide-eyed death, I decide the easiest thing to do now is open my eyes.

White light floods my vision.

I hear the woman say, “Oh, honey,” pacifyingly as tears begin to throw themselves off the cliff of my nose.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

I discovered the corpse of my pet rabbit when I was ten years old. I was planning to split my apple with her. Instead of sharing a moment and some fruit with my pet, I came face-to-face with her lifeless remains. Eyes wide open. Dead.

“Are you okay? You’re bleeding, you know.”

I lean my face closer to the rearview mirror and stare into my reflection. My nose is bleeding. My moment with the mirror also reveals that I have bloodshot eyes and a pale, watery complexion; however, it is possible that these afflictions beset me before the accident. I haven’t been looking in mirrors that much lately.

“And your arm . . .” She gestures toward my arm.

I look down to discover that one of my arms is sitting abnormally in my lap. The impact of the airbag has either broken or dislocated it.

Despite both my car and my arm being broken, I am driving myself to the emergency room. I resolved not to involve an ambulance because I do not like to be a spectacle. I would rather be run over by another van than be surrounded by paramedics touching me inside such a conspicuous vehicle.

My foot is pressing down on my gas pedal so delicately that I am barely moving. I am crawling down the road with the airbag hanging out of my steering wheel like it has been disemboweled.

A large white truck is tailgating me. Its driver keeps honking its horn.

I grip the steering wheel, cognizant of the fact that if another car rear-ends me right now, there will be nothing left to cushion the blow.

I glare at the truck as it passes me like it is a predator hunting me. I clench my steering wheel while I stew intensely with the reality that I am a living, breathing thing that is one day going to die. Reckless drivers can snuff me out. I am trapped inside this fragile body. I could be run off the road. I could be crushed by a van. I could choke on a grape. I could be allergic to bees; I am so impermanent that a measly bug could hop from a daisy to my arm, sting me, and I could be erased. Black. Nothing.

I stare at the creases in my knuckles and begin consciously breathing.

I am an animal; an organism made up of bones and blood.

I study the trees as I crawl past them. I do this to occupy my mind with thoughts that are not related to my own fragile mortality.

That is a pine tree.

A maple.

Another pine.

Spruce.

My death, and the death of everyone I love, is inevitable.
Pine again.

I head toward the receptionist's desk and position myself in the center of his view. I wait patiently for him to look up from his paperwork to greet me. I read the posters plastered on the wall behind his desk, to appear occupied, and to distract myself from the fact that every passing moment brings me closer to my ultimate destination. (Death.)

One poster is titled: THE HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS! The odd use of an exclamation mark is what drew my eye. The model hired to pose for the poster is grinning so aggressively that I can see every single one of her enormous teeth. I am staring into her beaming eyes, wondering how I too can achieve happiness. Does living a life unburdened by the fear of catching HPV result in that level of euphoria? If so, shoot me up.

"What's the problem today?" the nurse finally asks me.

I want to tell him that my problem might be that I have yet to receive my HPV vaccine; however, I have already been mentally reciting what to say, and so I announce: "I was just in a small car accident."

"What?" He glances up at me, surprised. "Were you really?"

"Yes."

"Oh, dear. Are you okay?"

That is a strange question, I think. My presence as a prospective patient in this emergency room implies that I am not okay.

Despite thinking the question is strange, I tell him, "Yes, I'm fine." I add, "Well, I think that I may have broken my arm, but I am okay in general. How are you?"

He stands up to look at my arm. He then looks me dead in the eyes and squints. "You are a lot calmer than you usually are when you come in here."

Failing to fashion a more articulate response, I stammer, "Thank you."

Compelled now to direct the conversation away from my usual lack of composure, I decide now is the moment to share: “And I would like to be immunized for HPV, please.”

While waiting for my number to be called, I occupy myself by amateurishly diagnosing everyone in the waiting room with the condition that I imagine they are suffering from.

That man has the flu.

That lady has cancer.

That kid is faking it.

After completing my assessment of everyone in the room, I hear a familiar voice shout, “Hey there!”

I can see through my peripheral vision that a nurse is waving at me.

I pretend not to see her. I act very focused on the floor tiles.

Not intuitive enough to recognize that I do not want to be addressed, she re-shouts, “Hello!”

I grit my back molars and look up at her.

“Nice to see you!” she hollers.

I smile weakly. “Nice to see you too, Ethel.”

She smiles back at me while a different nurse, whose name is Larry, walks toward her. Larry also looks over at me. He waves. “Back again, are we?”

I nod.

“Do you work here, or something?” the patient sitting next to me pries.

“No,” I reply—just as Frank, one of the hospital janitors, points at me and shouts, “Hey, girl!”

I am being interviewed before I can see the doctor.

“Are you on any medication?”

“No,” I reply. “Well, I have been taking a lot of vitamin D recently.”

Last week when I came to the ER they told me that nothing was wrong with me, and that I should consider taking a vitamin D supplement.

“Just vitamin D? No other medication?”

“No.”

“Does your family have a history of heart problems?”

“No.”

“Is there any chance that you could be pregnant?”

“No.”

The nurse purses her lips as she writes down my responses. I interpret her pursed lips as an indication that she is judging me. I responded that I take no medication, which means no birth control, and I responded that there is no chance that I could be pregnant—consequently suggesting that I am likely celibate. I am not. I am just gay, and thus blessedly exempt from the hazard of pregnancy.

“No chance at all?” she repeats.

“No,” I say, watching her lips purse again.

“This might hurt a little,” the doctor warns me.

“That’s okay.” I nod.

She moves my arm quickly. It makes a disconcerting popping sound.

The nurse in the room raises her eyebrows at me, impressed.

She says, “Wow, you didn’t even flinch. You sure are brave.”

“Thank you.” I nod.

I did not flinch because it did not hurt. I am not going to admit that, however, because I would prefer to impress this nurse with my bravery. I would also prefer pretending that I am brave because I suspect that it should have hurt, and the fact that it didn’t is likely a symptom of some much larger medical problem.

The nurse is staring at me.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“What?” I look at her.

“Are you all right?” she asks me again.

“Oh.” I nod. “Yes, I’m fine.”

I broke my arm once before. I was in the fourth grade. I made a dicey acrobatic move on the monkey bars and sunk into the gravel below the jungle gym like a shot bird. I lay there, staring up into the faces of my rapt classmates as they crowded around me.

I have always hated being the center of attention. Despite my arm being broken, and despite what I would classify as stunning pain, I assured everyone that I was fine until they disbanded.

I was not fine. I had fractured two bones in my arm.

“I need you to check for redness around the cast every day,” the doctor instructs.

“Okay.” I nod.

“And if your arm ever feels warm, or if you develop a fever, come back to the ER, okay?”

“All right.” I nod again.

She flips through some papers on her clipboard. “I see that you’ve been coming into this hospital a lot recently. You’ve been complaining about chest pains and breathing problems. Is that an ongoing issue?”

“Yes,” I reply. “My chest feels tight a lot.”

“It sounds like you’re having panic attacks,” she tells me. She then looks down at her clipboard and says, “I can send a referral to a psychiatrist.”

They always send referrals to psychiatrists. I never hear back.

“In the meantime, have you considered taking a vitamin D supplement?”

“Are you able to pick these up on Wednesday?” the pharmacist asks me after I hand her my painkiller prescription.

“Wednesday?” I repeat.

“Yes.” She nods. “Would that work for you?”

“That’s three days away,” I comment.

She frowns. “No it isn’t. It’s tomorrow.”

“O-oh,” I falter. “Right. Sorry, I’ve been sleeping a lot lately. It’s affected my perception of time.”

She frowns at me again.

I clench my toes in my shoes. I don’t know why I shared that.

“I’ve been feeling sick,” I lie quickly. “I’m battling this nasty cold, and I’ve been sleeping too much—”

I realize as I fabricate this lie that this woman is a health care professional, and therefore she might somehow be able to sense when people are faking illnesses.

“I feel much better now, though,” I say to negate the lie.

She replies, in a tone that exposes absolutely no sincerity, “I am so glad to hear that.”

“Hello?” I struggle to answer my cell phone.

It is sunny out. My cell phone’s screen brightness is too dim to read the caller ID.

“Are you ignoring me?” the caller confronts me.

I recognize that the caller is Eleanor. She is the girl I’m seeing.

Rather than answer no like I had planned, my tongue trips over itself and I produce no audible noise.

“Hello? Are you there?”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” I spit out.

“Why didn’t you text me back? You know, I can see when you’ve read my texts. It’s not very nice to ignore me—”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat. “Could we please talk about this later? I just got into a small car accident and—”

“What? Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” I confess. “I’m trying to figure out the bus.”

My car is being towed to my apartment.

“Do you know how to get to my house from the gas station on Alma Street?” I squint up at the yellow bus stop sign above my head.

“Do you think I take the ninety-four or the ninety-seven?”

“You don’t know if you’re okay?”

“Well, no, to be completely honest, I don’t. I’ve been feeling unusually tired lately. No matter how much I sleep, I still wake up feeling exhausted. I think that I might have some sort of imbalance—”

“No,” Eleanor interrupts me. “I meant from the car accident.”

“Oh. Yes, I’m fine. I’m more concerned about having a vitamin deficiency, honestly. I think I need more calcium or something. I feel really weak and foggy-headed. Do you drink much milk?”

A brittle, elderly man is offering me his seat on the bus.

“I can’t accept it,” I tell him.

“Sit, sit,” he insists.

I shake my head. “No, thank you, that’s kind of you—but I’m fine.”

“You’re injured,” he flags, nodding at my new cast. “Please, these seats are reserved for people like you. I insist that you sit.”

I glance at the decal above the seat depicting a pregnant woman and an elderly man with a cane. I am neither; I am a twenty-seven-year-old woman who couldn’t possibly be pregnant. I would consider myself to be the lowest priority passenger on this vehicle. I have a minor injury on a component of my body that does not influence how difficult it is for me to ride a bus.

Instead of explaining this, I reluctantly accept the seat. I tell the old man “Thank you” four times.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

“Really, thank you.”

“Thanks so much.”

Whenever the driver brakes, the old man stumbles. I am nervous that he is going to fall completely. I imagine him losing his footing and propelling across the bus. I think about how old people have porous, fragile bones. I think about how old people can die from falling. I start to picture myself attending this man’s funeral.

I am wearing all black.

I am telling his loved ones that he died because of me.

“This is all my fault,” I explain.

I got off the bus two stops early so the old man would take his seat back. The bus doors opened in front of a coffee shop. Instead of walking directly home, I walked into the shop.

After I ordered a large cup of milk, the coffee shop employee asked me to “please take a seat.” I thought that was a peculiar request, because I didn’t order a drink that takes time to assemble.

Rather than question her, I just sat down.

I spend a few moments wondering why she asked me to sit. I then begin wondering why it matters to me why she asked me to sit. Why do I need to know what her rationale is? Why can’t I just trust that the people around me have their own justification for their requests and their behavior? Why can’t I be like a dog and sit when I’m asked to, without wondering why?

I glance at the small crowd of people surrounding me. Maybe we are like dogs. Everyone here is waiting for their drinks like trained animals. I look down at my hands, and then at the hands of the people around me. These are our paws. We are creatures.

My leg is shaking restlessly.

I open the news app on my phone to distract myself. I begin rolling my thumb over the stories.

There was a school shooting last Wednesday.

Multiple celebrities have been caught sexually assaulting other celebrities.

The glaciers are thawing.

Sea turtles are going extinct.

I decide to veer off the popular news page. I click an article titled:
WEIRD WAYS PEOPLE DIE.

Lottie Michelle Belk, fifty-five, was fatally stabbed by a beach umbrella blown by a strong wind.

Hildegard Whiting, seventy-seven, died of suffocation from carbon dioxide vapors produced by four dry ice coolers in a Dippin' Dots delivery car.

"What happened to your arm?" A little girl tugs on the sleeve of my coat.

"I was in a small car accident," I explain as I look away from an article about a man and a lava lamp. The man could not get the lamp to work, so he put it on his stove and turned the heat on low. The liquid in the lamp started to move and bubble before it overheated and exploded. The lamp popped and the colorful wax, clear fluid, and shattered glass flew through the room. A piece of the glass flew into the man's chest, pierced his heart, and killed him. All the comments beneath the article ask what possessed this man to conduct such a harebrained experiment, but I once microwaved a lightbulb when I was a teenager, out of blind curiosity. I understand how the train of human thought can derail. It is tragic both that this man has died and that his stupid impromptu attempt at entertaining himself misfired in a way that will now define him.

I wonder if my death will be what defines me.

"Can I sign your cast?" the kid tugging at my coat asks.

I look at her dirt-encrusted fingernails, and then at her pink, slobbery face.

I answer, "Sure," even though I would prefer it if she didn't touch me.

I sit, a martyr for this child's happiness, while she draws with a

red permanent marker all over my new cast. She keeps accidentally drawing on my skin and on my clothes.

When she finishes, I ask her what it is she drew, and she tells me it's a dog. I look down and examine what appears to be a drawing of a penis with eyes, and sigh.

The coffee shop employee shouts my name, so I stand up.

She hands me some sort of smoothie, and I accept it without flagging that she must have misheard me when I ordered.

I guess I probably mumbled.

I think that I am allergic to whatever was in that smoothie. My tongue feels like it's two times larger than it is supposed to be.

"For fucks sake," I groan out loud while rubbing my eyes with the edge of my new cast.

Someone touches my shoulder.

I turn and gape into the face of an elderly woman framed by a habit. I gasp because I didn't turn expecting to come face-to-face with a nun.

I am not religious, but still would not have chosen to say "for fucks sake" in front of an old, devotedly religious woman had I known she was within earshot.

She beams at me. "Are you okay, dear?"

"I'm fibe," I answer. My tongue has expanded so much that I now have a speech impediment.

"You sounded frustrated by something," she comments.

"Oh no, I'm fibe," I repeat, smiling insincerely.

She smiles back at me. "Can I offer you a church newsletter?"

She hands me a folded piece of yellowed paper.

I have started to collect dirty dishes in my bedroom. My smoothie cup from earlier today is sitting on top of a small stack of cups, plates, and

bowls. Piling the dishes feels sort of like building a block castle. Every dish I add is risky. At some point the castle is going to collapse.

Thinking about washing the dishes feels a lot like thinking of going for a jog.

I will do it tomorrow.

I bought the last three editions of *Guinness World Records* before I was fired from my job at the bookstore. I bought them thinking I could return them after I read them. It was my lazy alternative to the library. Now I can't return them without confronting my old employer, who thinks I am untrustworthy and irresponsible. I'm worried if I did try to return these books, he would just accuse me of stealing them.

I was a bad employee. I find it hard to wake up, so I was rarely on time. I often missed entire shifts. I don't think I added much value when I was present, either. I don't have the right personality for customer service. A customer once asked me if I was really an employee of the store, or if I was just three possums in a trench coat. I was so confused by the remark, the customer had to explain it to me. She said that possums are notoriously skittish. I said, "But what about the trench coat, though? I'm not wearing a trench coat. And aren't possums kind of small? Wouldn't I be like five or six possums in a trench coat, if I had a trench coat?"

She complained to my boss about me. He made me sit in the back room and listen to him preach about the five pillars of good customer service. I was so distracted by how impassioned he was by the topic, I couldn't retain anything he said.

I crack open the most recent edition of *Guinness World Records*. I flip through its glossy pages. I read that the oldest human to ever live was 122 years old. She was a woman named Jeanne. She died in France.

I touch my greasy hair, turn the page, and wonder if there is a record for the longest a person has gone without showering.

* * *

My heart is pounding at a faster pace than a rabbit's when being accosted by a fox. I am standing in front of my bathroom sink, telling myself repeatedly that I am fine.

I am fine.

I feel like someone is sitting on my chest, but that is fine.

I tear open my bottle of vitamin D, pop two tablets in my mouth, and chew.

"This should cure me," I say out loud, knowingly deluded.

I haven't inhaled properly for at least five minutes. There is no oxygen reaching my brain.

I should go to the hospital, but every time I go to the hospital, they say it is just anxiety.

Is this just anxiety? Is it worth risking that this is a real heart attack? What if that car accident exacerbated a legitimate heart attack?

I reach for my phone and dial a number that I have memorized.

A man's voice says, "Hello, you have reached Telehealth. If you are currently experiencing a medical emergency, please hang up and call nine-one-one. How can I help you?"

"Hi," I say, breathless. "I'm having an attack."

"Please go to the emergency room."

"I've been there too much," I explain, panting. "The nurses know my name. That isn't normal, is it? I can't go back."

"You've already gone and seen a doctor?"

"How can I tell if it's a heart attack or a panic attack?" I clutch my chest.

"If you change positions, does the severity of the chest pain change?"

"Let me check."

I lie down on the cool bathroom tile, clutching my knees to my chest.

I pause to listen to the rapid thud of my heart.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

“Sort of,” I say.

“It’s likely a panic attack, then,” the man explains. “Do you have issues with anxiety?”

“Apparently,” I say, the pain in my chest easing slightly.

“Do you have anyone you can talk to about that?” the man asks me after a quiet moment passes.

“I have you,” I say.

He laughs.

“How is the old bookstore treating you these days, sweetie?” my mom asks me while slopping a heap of mashed potatoes onto my ceramic plate.

“I got fired,” I admit while shoveling a forkful of the potatoes into my open mouth.

I once read that human beings can live solely on potatoes. A potato contains all the essential amino acids humans need to build proteins, repair cells, and fight diseases.

“You got fired?” my dad chokes out. “What? Why would they fire you?”

You would have to eat about twenty-five potatoes a day to get the recommended amount of protein, however, and you would have calcium deficiencies.

“Hello? Why did you get fired?”

Eating just potatoes wouldn’t be exactly healthy, but you would live longer than solely eating foods like bread or apples.

“Are you deaf?” My dad waves his hand in front of my face.

“What?”

“Why did you get fired?” he asks, his face slightly red.

“I don’t know,” I say, despite knowing that they fired me because I didn’t show up for five consecutive shifts.

“Did you get caught stealing books or something?” my brother, Eli, jokes.

“Have you been handing out your résumé?” my mom interjects before I can respond to Eli’s allegation.

“Yes,” I lie.

We all stew quietly for a moment in my unemployment.

My mom sighs. “Should we open a bottle of wine?”

“No,” I say quickly.

“What?” My dad looks at me. “Why not?”

“Because,” I insist, “I’m on medication.” I hold up my broken arm.

“You’re on medication?” my dad says. “I thought you said the car accident and your injury were both minor? Are you badly hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

“And yet none of the rest of us can have a drink?” he scoffs.

“That’s right,” I maintain.

“There won’t be any more issues.” My dad shook hands with my principal. “Her mother and I will handle it. Thank you, Dave.”

When I was fifteen, my parents were called to my school because I was being suspended for two days.

My class had gone on a field trip earlier that day. When we were leaving, my friend Ingrid and I took the seats at the back of the bus. A group of girls confronted us there. They insisted we give them our seats. I started to stand up, to comply, but Ingrid refused. She held my wrist and said, “We’re not going anywhere.”

The girls who wanted our seats started calling us lesbians.

Ingrid was not a lesbian. She was often accused of being one, however, because she was my friend, and there are some misconceptions about how it spreads.

Everyone on the bus was looking at us. People were laughing. A guy named Brandon started shouting, “Dykes!”

“Stop calling them lesbians!” Mrs. Camp, the teacher supervising the field trip, finally intervened. “What an awful thing to say!”

The girls had to sit down in the seats in front of us. Ingrid felt so enraged that she took her lighter to the ends of their hair. The girls weren’t hurt, but their dead ends got a little fried, and the bus stunk.

Mrs. Camp made Ingrid and me go to the principal’s office. The other girls weren’t sent. I saw Mrs. Camp consoling them as Ingrid and I walked to the office. She patted their backs and said, “I know that was scary.”

My dad lectured me while he and my mom drove me home. He said, “When you grow up, you’re going to realize you could have worse problems than stupid girls bullying you on the school bus. You need to keep your nose clean.”

“It wasn’t even me who—”

“I don’t care. The people you hang out with are a reflection of you. You shouldn’t hang around this Ingrid girl if she’s lighting people’s hair on fire—”

“Those girls were—”

“I don’t care! You should’ve kept your head down.”

My mom was silent.

Different-sounding sirens are intermingling outside my apartment. Together they are creating a vibrating, hostile music that I am unable to sleep through. I open my eyes. I stare at the ceiling above me.

I fell asleep on the beach one summer, and Eli buried me up to my neck in the sand. I woke up completely immobilized. I couldn’t get up without him digging me out. I feel like that now. I feel chained to my bed.

I kick my legs until my blankets unchain me. I muster all the strength stored in the caverns of my body to stand up.

There is a bright orange light framed in my window. I approach the light and peer outside. The house across the street is on fire. There

are fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars circled on the front lawn. I stand at my window and stare down at the glowing house. Flames have engulfed the upstairs. They are burning through the roof. I hope no one is inside.

My eyes dart, looking into the windows. I am trying to spot silhouettes of people. The windows upstairs are glowing. There are no shadows, just bright yellow light. I can't make out if anyone is in there. The windows downstairs are expelling black billows of smoke. I can't see through it.

I pat my chest with my fist to steady the thump of my worried heart.

The firefighters are blasting water into the flames, but the fire is still raging. I think the roof is caving in.

The sirens are so loud that I can't hear anything but them. I hope no one is screaming for help. I feel panic twinge in my chest. I watch the water blast from the hose and tell myself the fire is going down, even though I can't tell if it is.

People outside are shouting. What are they saying? I can't make them out. I open my window. The late November air is warm from the fire. The smoky, acrid smell of the burning house seeps through my screen. I try to hear what the people are shouting.

"Where's the cat?"

"Is the cat out?"

I press my forehead up to the cool glass and scan the darkness, searching for the missing cat.

My search for the cat is obstructed by the people who are crowding around the house. An audience is forming. They are standing in their pajamas, watching the commotion. I notice that some of them are holding take-out coffee cups. A man has his kid on his shoulders.

A yellow eye contained in the decomposing carcass of a seagull watched me sunbathe the same day my brother buried me. It was in

the middle of August. I was nine years old. My parents had taken me and Eli to Port Stanley, and they had unknowingly laid our beach towels a stone's throw from a hot dead bird.

As the day progressed, I noticed living seagulls would visit the dead seagull's body. I imagined that they were doing so to pay their respects. I thought I was witnessing the poignant wake of a seagull.

My dad noticed the carcass after a while and said, "I think those disgusting sea rats are trying to figure out how that other gull died."

"Shame about what happened across the street, eh?" the woman who lives in the apartment next to mine comments as I lock my door behind me.

I look at her. She is dressed in a pink bathrobe, and her hair is wrapped in a towel.

"Yeah," I reply, wondering why this woman is lingering in the hall.

"Scary living in an apartment building," the woman continues, now eyeing me up and down. "You never know if your neighbors clean their lint traps or leave their candles unattended. Of course, you have a fire extinguisher in there, don't you?"

"Of course," I lie. "What kind of irresponsible ass that doesn't have a fire extinguisher?"

I devoted the past four hours of my life to locating a store that sells fire extinguishers. After visiting three stores, and speaking to five salespeople, I was finally able to charge a sixty-dollar, top-of-the-line fire extinguisher to my now-almost-maxed-out credit card.

I am now quashing my compulsions to grunt, swear, and pause for breaks while I smuggle my shiny new fire extinguisher into my apartment. I am doing so with one working arm. My prying neighbor, who I am afraid will spot me with this and realize that I lied to her, is oblivious to the lengths that I have gone to to safeguard her life.

I feel the apparatus slip slightly from my sweaty grip. I start to picture myself dropping it. I think of it rolling down the stairs and crashing through the floor. I think of the noise it'll make. I picture it crashing through someone's ceiling, plummeting through the air, and clunking against the skull of some poor, unsuspecting victim. I imagine my neighbor emerging from her apartment in her pink bathrobe to confront me and the murder scene.

I drop my keys twice while I fumble to unlock my front door. Once I finally get inside, I kick the door shut behind me, and toss the fifty-pound apparatus onto my unmade bed. It immediately bounces from the springy mattress into the air and crashes clamorously onto the floor.

My heart twinges.

I rush over to inspect the damage. I see that it landed directly on the remote for my TV, which I carelessly flung to the ground last night.

I examine the damaged remote. It is cracked down the middle. Five of its buttons are pressed into the plastic and are now unclickable. I tell myself, *It's okay. I can just change the channel from the TV from now on*, and chuck it back on the ground. Its batteries fly out like gutted innards.

I watch the batteries roll across the floor, and then I scan the room. What else am I supposed to do to ensure that I am not responsible for killing the people who live in this building?

I check my lint trap.

I throw the two candles that I own out.

I unplug my stove.

I pull the cabinet below my oven open. I look down into the drawer at heaps of mail and paper. It dawns on me as I scan the mass of combustible material that I am a hazard.

My apartment has limited storage. I have been keeping all my paperwork here. I never cook, so the danger isn't imminently threatening, but still.

I kneel in front of the cabinet and start shoveling through the mass of unopened mail, newspapers, and letters.

I shift through a lot of overdue bills before spotting an advertisement.

It says: ARE YOU FEELING LOW?

Yes.

DO YOU NEED SOMEONE TO TALK TO?

Apparently.

COME TO 1919 PEACH TREE CRESCENT FOR FREE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT.

The words LOST CAT confront me from a sad, wrinkled poster plastered to the telephone pole outside my apartment. Mittens, seven years old, last seen napping in his favorite windowsill, has been missing since his house caught on fire. He is friendly and responds to his name. His family is offering a reward for his safe return home. He is gray with white front feet—hence the name “Mittens.”

“Mittens?” I call into the dark bushes as I walk by them.

“Here, kitty kitty.”

I peer over a fence into a backyard. There is frost on the grass.

“Mittens?” I call out into an open garage.

“Mittens? Are you in there?” I hush into the darkness beneath somebody’s front porch.

“Come out if you’re in there, Mittens.”

1919 Peach Tree is the site of an enormous gothic church. I am standing on the lawn in front of this intimidating building, allowing myself to soak in the realization that I was duped by an evangelizing advertisement. This is not the location of free therapy; this is where people are converted to whatever religion this church hawks.

I stare down at the paper and recognize as I do that it is the paper given to me by that nun.

“Beautiful building, isn’t it?” a man’s voice says from behind me.

Startled by his unexpected presence, I trip over nothing.

He chuckles, extends his hand toward me, and says, “Hi, I’m Jeff.”

I stable myself and reply, “Hi, Jeff.”

“It’s nice to meet you, dear. Are you here about the job?”

I open my mouth to reply. I stop myself before the word no escapes. I notice Jeff’s white collar. He’s a priest.

I stammer, “Y-Yes.”

“Wonderful!” He claps his hands together.

“We lost our previous receptionist to the Lord just last month,” Jeff tells me as I sit down in his office.

Losing someone to the Lord makes it sound like God steals people.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say, while trying to veil how uncomfortable I feel being in the presence of so many Jesus figurines. The figurine nearest me depicts Jesus looking sorrowfully up toward the sky. I look away from his mournful eyes and glance around the room. This office reminds me of my bedroom when I was nine and obsessed with sea turtles, except Jeff is obsessed with crucifixes. I had a turtle bed set, turtle posters, and turtle stuffed animals. Jeff has a mixed-media gallery wall behind his desk with a wooden cross, a gold cross, a ceramic cross, and framed photos of crosses. There is a cross-shaped candy dish in front of me that contains dusty Werther’s Originals, and a dirty coffee mug with a renaissance painting on it of Jesus holding—you guessed it—a cross.

“Thank you, dear,” he says.

I start to picture a world where Jesus had been killed using a different murder device. I picture little ceramic guillotine figurines. I imagine miniature nooses hung above children’s beds. Electric chair necklaces and earrings.

“I know Grace has been committed into the hands of God,” he adds.

I stare forward, unsure of how to respond. Should I ask for a Werther’s?

He looks down at his hand, at a ring on his finger.

“This was Grace’s ring,” he tells me. “I wear it to remember her.”

I don't know what to say. I eye the ring. I wonder why she left it to him.

"Now." He clears his throat. "Everyone who has been applying for Grace's old job has been—oh, how shall I put it?" he hums. "Well, let's just say the applicants have all been eligible for a discount at Denny's, if you catch my drift?"

I force a laugh to demonstrate my good humor.

"They all ride the bus for free on Wednesdays, if you know what I mean?"

I force a laugh again.

"I know I am not one to talk." He smiles. "I am seventy-two myself, can you believe it? Do I look it?"

I open my mouth.

"Oh, now don't answer that!" he says, chuckling again. "But seriously, I would love someone young in here. Do you know how to use the internet?"

"Do I know how to use the internet?" I repeat.

He nods. "Yes, I am looking for someone familiar with the internet. Are you acquainted?"

"Well, yes—" I begin to reply.

"Wonderful!" He claps his hands together. "Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful! And how is your hearing?"

I stumble to say, "It's regular, as far as I know. I think I heard everything you've said—"

"Well, little lady." He grins. "I think you might just be our gal! You're Catholic, of course?"

"Yes," I say, even though I am an atheist lesbian.

He slaps a hand on his desk. "You're perfect!"

Two Jehovah's Witnesses came to my door when I was seven. They asked me if I was baptized. I answered no, and they told me that was because my parents were atheists. I remember their voices deepened when

they said the word “atheists” as if it were an obscenity. Being seven years old, I was inclined to take notice of swear words—so I committed the word to my memory. I spent the next three years calling people atheists, having no clue what it meant, thinking I was a cutting trash-talker.

My teacher gave me an F on a spelling test, and I muttered, “What a freaking atheist.”

Gemma Igmund started a rumor that I was gay, and I confronted her. “Shut your God damn atheist mouth, Gemma.”

My mom made me go to bed early, and I screeched from the top of the stairs that I was living in a family of cold-blooded atheists.

I exit the church like I am escaping a crime scene. I peer over my shoulder as I scuttle down the street, worried the priest is following me.

The advertisement that lured me to the church is still clutched in my fist. I uncrumple it once I have darted far enough away from the church that I am confident I am not being watched. I examine the ad for any indication that the free therapy it promotes is being offered by a Catholic church. I turn the paper over, confirming that there isn't so much as a decorative crucifix on it.

My eyes are open. I am lying awake in my bed. It's the middle of the night. I can't fall asleep. I am thinking intensely about churches and religion. I am especially ruminating on the concept of hell.

I blink. I start to think intensely about fire, and about what it might feel like to burn to death. I picture blazing, effulgent flames. I picture sweltering, blistering skin.

Every time I try to roast a marshmallow, they always catch on fire. The white chewy sugar and gelatin bubbles golden before it engulfs in flames, and it doesn't burn or turn black until the flames have encased it for a while.

I start to imagine what might go through a cat's mind in a house

fire. I picture hot flames latching on to strands of cat fur. I think about scorching cat skin and singed cat bones.

Cats sleep all day. They like to lie on pillows in warm patches of sunlight. They are timid animals; they are easily spooked. They hide under beds and in corners of closets when they are scared.

I sit up. My heart is beating irregularly.

Am I having heart palpitations?

I put my hand to my chest.

I feel the speed of my heartbeat increase rapidly.

I feel like my ribs are a birdcage and my heart is a bird on fire.

The doors to the emergency room open automatically when I stand in front of them, confirming that I exist physically. This is a comforting affirmation.

I head toward the receptionist's desk. The nurse sees me coming. I watch her deflate as she exhales.

She is exasperated by me. She thinks that I am a hypochondriac. She thinks I am wasting her time.

"What's the problem today?" she inquires coolly.

"I think it's my heart," I explain.

"Mittens?" I call out from the sidewalk.

I kneel to view under a car. The cement is cold.

"Mittens?"

"Are you down there?"

"Can you hear me?"

My mom is organizing our family photos. There are hundreds of photos of my family spread out on the kitchen table. They are being placed into piles by year.

My old report cards are also stacked on the table. They must have been stored in the same box. I flip through them. I see that I earned high marks before the sixth grade, when things took a dip. My report cards from earlier years have comments like “Gilda is a quick learner,” and “Gilda is a pleasure to teach.” They describe me as “curious” and “inquisitive.” After the sixth grade, the comments change. They say, “Gilda is socially withdrawn,” “Gilda has difficulty concentrating,” and describe me as “low energy.” I notice a particularly stark comparison when I see that my third-grade teacher recommended I be placed in a gifted program, whereas my seventh-grade teacher recommended I be put in a class for slow learners.

“How are we supposed to eat dinner here?” my dad snarks, looking down at the piles of pictures and papers.

“Oh, just look at you two!” My mom ignores my dad, holding up a picture of Eli and me at the beach. Eli is wearing goggles and I have bright orange water wings on.

“You look insane,” Eli snorts at me.

My mom frowns. “She does not, Eli. Come on.”

“Everyone in our family is perfectly sane,” my dad says.

I take the photo from my mom to examine it up close. I look at my fleshy child face, and at how wide Eli is smiling.

Sometimes I wonder if I have really been the same person my whole life. I stare at the picture, and think: Is that really me? I have this bizarre feeling like I was a different person at every other stage of my life. I feel so removed from myself then. Sometimes I feel like I was a different person a month ago. A day. Five minutes. Now.

“Why would you paint that, Eli?” my dad said.

The high school was doing an art show. Eli’s art was on display in the front hall.

He painted a self-portrait of himself dead. It was a startling oil painting. It was incredibly realistic. From a distance, I thought it was

a photo. He painted pale, waxy skin. His eyes were open, but lifeless. His arms were crossed on his chest. You could tell he was dead.

“It’s a really good painting—” I started to say. It was very detailed; you could see all the pores in his skin.

“It’s horrible,” my dad interrupted me.

My mom cut in. “It’s a horrible, good painting. You’re so talented, Eli. We just wish you had painted something less morbid—”

“All of your teachers are seeing this,” my dad remarked, exasperated. “They’re going to think you have a screw loose. You are embarrassing us. I’m disappointed in you.”

“When I was your age, I was paying a mortgage, working forty hours a week, and raising you and your brother,” my mom tells me while handing me a large mug of orange pekoe.

I wrap my fingers around the mug, realizing as I do that it is too hot to touch. I rush to put the mug down on the counter. I shake my hand after putting it down in a vain attempt to fling the burning sensation off.

“How are you going to support yourself if you can’t keep a simple job at a bookstore? I really hope that you don’t plan to just marry some rich man, sweetie. I can’t bear to think—”

“I’m gay,” I remind her.

“Exactly!” she retorts. “It would be especially dishonest.”

“Is it worse to be dishonest or to be unemployed?”

“What?” She contorts her face. “What kind of question is that?”

“Would you rather I be honest, or that I be employed?” I ask again.

She shakes her head. “What I would prefer is that you sort that kind of thing out for yourself. You are a grown-up.”

There is room on my credit card for twenty dollars. I am about to purchase a sandwich, reducing that number by five.

Today marks one month since I was fired. The only food left in my fridge is rotten.

“Is this everything?” the cashier asks me, nodding at the sandwich I have placed on the glass counter between us.

I nod and begin to enter my PIN into the debit machine. I consider while doing so that my rent is eleven hundred dollars and that it is due in two weeks. I think about my car, utilities, credit card, gas, internet, grocery, and phone bill. I think about how I was ticketed last month for parking five minutes too long on a deserted residential street. I think about the cost to repair my car. I think about my depleting shampoo bottles and deodorant. I think about the cost of fruit, vitamin D, and about how I need to buy ibuprofen.

“Thank you,” I say to the cashier as I leave the store poorer.

I wish that I hadn't lost my job at the bookstore. I knew that if I did not go to work I would be fired, but I still didn't go. I don't know what's wrong with me. I've been exhausted. I don't have the motivation to wake up in the morning, let alone the drive to go to a bookstore and interact with people.

What's an easy way for me to make some money? Should I take up sex work? I doubt there's much of a market for lesbian sex workers, and I am a bad actress—so straight sex work is out of the question. I suspect that it would not be hard for my male clients to discern through my gagging and crying that I was not enjoying our business transaction. That said, I'm sure some guys would be into that. Maybe that's my niche market—gross men who like to revolt sad gay women.

Alternatively, I could just go along with working at the church. Like the sex work option, I would have to play a role, but I think I might prefer to deceive the Catholic church than to have sex with sordid men.

An infomercial for butt pads is blaring on my TV. I fell asleep with the TV on because my remote is broken, and I was too tired to stand up to

turn it off. Instead of standing up, I added the cup I'd been drinking out of to the dirty-dish tower in my room, and fell asleep.

The volume of the infomercial is louder than the program that played prior. The host of the infomercial is screaming, "Call now and you'll get a second butt pad for free." Women on the TV are modeling jeans before and after wearing the product. One woman is telling the audience tearfully that these things changed her life.

I look at my phone. There's a text from my brother. It says, fjmekr.
I frown at the text for a second before replying, Is everything okay?
He replies: j4riiiiiir.
Where are you? I text.

Eli's eyes are glazed over in a way that reminds me of our dead bunny's eyes. I keep looking into his face, searching for his usual eyes.

It's after midnight. We are sitting in a booth in a bar with a tin ceiling. The table is sticky and the room smells like soured beer. There are white Christmas lights strung around the bar, and a red neon sign on the wall that says: BOTTOMS UP.

Eli is chugging his beer like it's water.

I stare at the tracks his fingerprints make in the condensation on his glass. I notice his fingernails look like they have chipped nail polish on them.

"Have you ever considered what thoughts go through cats' minds?" I ask.

He sips his drink.

"Do you think they think about death, or anything like that?" I ask.

"I doubt it." He sips his drink again.

I look at his depleting glass and at his foggy eyes.

"I think maybe you've had enough—" I start.

"Do you ever wish that you were someone else?" he interrupts me, sipping his drink again.

I nod. "Yeah."

We sit quietly for a moment.

“Do you think I should accept a job at a Catholic church?” I ask him.

He laughs. “What the fuck?”

He leaves the table to go to the bathroom. When he’s out of view I drink what’s left in his glass and then chug what’s left in the pitcher.

I am balancing on the curb like it’s a tightrope. I keep losing my balance and falling off.

“Hey, Eleanor, guess what?” I hear myself slurring.

There are no cars on the road and it’s dark out. I am walking in the shadows between the streetlights.

“I got a new job. Don’t ask me where.” I hiccup. “You don’t want to know.”

I dip a toe into the church like I am testing the water in a hot bathtub. It has been two days since I had my accidental job interview here. I stand at the entrance, waiting to see if my body boils before fully submerging myself in the building. God shows no signs of planning to smite me as I completely enter the church, ready to begin my first day as an undercover atheist.

I am wearing the only dress that I own.

I wander through the building until I locate Jeff’s office. I knock when I find his door.

“Come in!”

He looks up at me as I enter. He has large, thick glasses sitting low on his nose. He is wearing a red knit sweater vest. He says, “Oh dear it’s you.”

I am not sure if he was using the word “dear” as a term of endearment, like “sweetie” or “honey,” or if he was saying, “Oh dear” as in, “Oh no.”

I smile uncomfortably and remain silent until I can better gauge the tone of our interaction.

He stands up. “I failed to ask you some pretty critical questions when we met earlier, didn’t I?”

I stare at him, concerned now that he’s unearthed something about me.

“Like for example . . .” he continues, now looking at me over the rim of his glasses. “What is your name?”

“What’s my name?” I repeat.

He smiles. “Yes, forgive me, but I didn’t ask! What is your name, dear?”

I exhale, relieved that my cover has not been blown.

“Gilda.”