

## *Lost*

She's dicking around in the coffee shop when she sees it: the sign. At first she only glances. She is distracted, her mind sloshing about like cappuccino foam, wondering when Aaron will get home tonight, if she should make dinner, whether or not she'll catch the pinched scent of lipstick on his ears.

The air is thick with sour milk and day-old eggs. The coffee shop clots with people, too many for her taste, and no one seems to notice her as they press past for cream and sugar, oblivious to their elbows and shoulders brushing against her arm. They do not say "sorry." She is a gossamer cutout, hardly even there. She jabs at the Sugars in the Raw with a thin plastic spear as she waits for her drink, the edge of the condiment counter pressing a groove into the soft skin of her arm. She finds it comforting.

A bright swatch of orange on the community bulletin board snags her attention. Heavy cardstock, thumbnail crimp on one edge, wedged between guitar lessons and yoga classes. Close enough to touch.

### **LOST.**

The handwriting so large it trembles.

"Nonfat vanilla mocha!" barks the barista. "Eileen?"

It's her vanilla mocha but her name isn't Eileen. She is amused by how often "Ivy" gets twisted into something else, turned into "Isla" or "Eileen" by a cacophony of grinding beans. This same barista has called her "Ima" on at least two previous occasions. It's always the *V* that goes missing. Sometimes, on nights when Aaron is working late, Ivy stands in front of the bathroom mirror and practices scraping her teeth across her lower lip. *Velvet. Vanish. Vivify.*

"Thanks," Ivy says to the barista. She takes the cardboard cup and rips the orange flyer from the bulletin board in one breath. The color of the paper appeals to her. So does the weight. It is sturdy, inviolable, with the exception of the teeth marks where the staple bit through.

The homeless man with dirt in the creases of his face is staring; Ivy feels the heat of his gaze. She folds the flyer in half, then in half again, slipping the fat square into the pocket of her yoga bag. She wonders how long it's been since the homeless man has been touched. Then she wonders: are we really so different?

Outside the coffee shop she nooses her scarf tight around her neck. It's the first one she ever made and the stitches are sloppy, the yarn cheap. The wool scratches her mole, or what used to be a mole, before the doctor took it three days ago. There are more moles on Ivy's back than stars in *The Starry Night*. Ever since her mother died of skin cancer, she watches her skin closely, has her nevi burned off whenever they veer into asymmetry or darken like a plum. But this one's only crime was that she picked at it, relentlessly, until it lost its mole-ness and became a bright smudge of blood on her collarbone. She had the doctor burn it off so she would stop picking, a prophylactic against herself.

Now the scarf has irritated the scab and the cold makes it throb. Ivy pulls one hand out of a mitten, licks the tip of her finger, and presses it against the tender pink skin. A tendril of pain shoots up her neck before the spit crusts into ice. She is freezing what was burned, she thinks, then frowns at her own dramatics. This is A Thing She Does, according to Aaron: finds increasingly histrionic ways to poeticize pain.

She can feel the flyer pressing against the fabric, aching to unbend. She takes it out and irons the creases with her thumb. She makes it whole again.

**LOST. "RUBY." MARMALADE CAT WITH SKINNY LEGS. BLACK NYLON COLLAR. WILL BE SCARED. CALL VANESSA 555-8029.**

There is a pixilated picture of Ruby in faded gray ink. Just as Ivy is admiring the choice of orange cardstock because it effectively stains the cat marmalade, she hears a mew.

She kneels beside the dumpster. Sets her bag and mocha on the ground and presses one bare palm into the frozen pavement. The stench rising off yesterday's garbage is powerful, coffee grinds mangled with *lengua* meat from the taco joint next door. But there, underneath, she sees a skinny orange cat.

The cat meows. Ivy's heart roars. She resists the urge to fist-pump the icy air. She is not one of those people for whom these sorts of things happen. Animals rarely notice her—dogs do not wag their tails or nose her knees when she walks by. Humans are even worse; they act like she is thin air, empty skin. But she barely notices them, either. When she does, she often misremembers the color of their eyes or the cut of their hair. It is a character defect, she knows, and partly why she is a mediocre artist: she does not see what others miss. She can't even keep up with her own keys, let alone some girl's missing cat.

If she could bring Ruby home to Vanessa, reunite frightened pet with grieving pet owner, what a coup that would be. She'd be one of those

animal rescue types, a goddamn hero. Hands down the most beautiful thing she'd do all month. Probably all year.

Ivy tries to coax Ruby out, offering various items from her purse: LUNA Bar, cherry ChapStick, runaway almond. The creature is temperamental and evasive, swatting at the bait. Ivy sits back on her haunches, frustrated and—she's ashamed to admit—hurt. She's only trying to help. Why can't the animal sense that? Isn't that what animals *do*? The cat is supposed to recognize her pure intentions. Why can't the little monster be grateful? Ivy would like to be reminded she is a good, whole person: Ivy Grandy, patron saint of cats.

Five minutes later, her hands are numb and her hair smells like taco grease. To hell with this. She starts to dial Vanessa's number, her frozen fingers leaden on the keypad, when the cat darts out and disappears down the alley. Fuck.

Ivy stands in the alley for a long time, watching the warped gray clouds of her breath. Should she call animal control? She briefly entertains the notion of going back inside the coffee shop and hiring the homeless man. She could offer him five bucks and together they'd form a search party. Maybe she'd even buy him a hot drink when they were done, either to celebrate their victory or lament their defeat.

What is she thinking? Most homeless people have mental problems. She read that somewhere, probably on *The Huffington Post*. Ivy flicks at the mole on her neck. She feels angry, angry with herself for getting her hopes up, angry at some unnamed force for dangling a sparkly goodie and then snatching it away. Her efforts to be a good person were rewarded by precisely this: Nothing. Nada. The universe couldn't care less. As usual, it gave a pile of shits on a cold winter day.

Ivy is six minutes late to yoga. The shrew at the front desk almost doesn't let her in. But she does, thank God, because Ivy would not miss her 9 a.m. vinyasa class for anything, not even an attempted act of heroism. "Focus on the breath," Lorenzo says as Ivy slaps her mat down in the corner, earning a scowl from the bendy body in purple tights. "Clear the mind," Lorenzo says.

Ivy's mind is anything but clear. She thinks about the cat. She thinks about the lines in the homeless man's face, dirt furrows in an empty field. She thinks about the breadth of Lorenzo's shoulders, the tantalizing width of his hands. Ivy suffers through the postures, biding her time until she can melt into corpse pose. Lorenzo's savasana assists are the cream and sugar of every class. It is nice to be touched by a man, nice

to be touched by a man on Tuesdays and Thursdays between the hours of 9 and 10:15.

Back at the apartment, Ivy dumps the flyer on the kitchen table with her keys and a pocketful of loose change. She sits in front of her computer until lunch, playing Minesweeper. She briefly considers rifling through the projects on her desk—half-knitted scarf, half-letterpressed card, the sum total of her halfhearted art—but she can't muster the energy. Art is the one thing she's ever truly wanted to be good at, and she considers it life's cruel irony how reliably she sucks.

She checks her Etsy page. Still no sales. Not even the bag she made out of empty condom wrappers. Last year she saved the wrapper from every time she and Aaron made love and sewed them all into a shiny plastic handbag. She called it "365 Days of Love," but the number of condom wrappers wasn't anywhere close to 365. The bag is very small. More of a coin purse, really.

The idea wasn't even hers. She stole it from a YouTube video by a pair of activists/performance artists in Montreal. Their bag could have fit a baby elephant.

In her heart Ivy knows she is not a true artist. She is a hack.

At two o'clock she plays Words with Friends. At four o'clock she scrolls through Netflix, trying to find something watchable. She flits between a chick flick and an indie drama. It's essentially the same story, except the characters in the chick flick slog through *their* troubles in couture. She wishes she had couture, or friends with couture, or even just friends.

Ivy eats a LUNA Bar for dinner.

Ivy waits.

Aaron is late again. Ivy is stirring a pot of midnight rice when she hears his key in the lock.

"Hey."

"Hey."

The silence between them could sink a submarine.

"Good day at work?"

"Fine. How's the art?"

"Mmm."

This is how they speak to one another: in sharp, loaded monosyllables. Aaron has a way of looking past her as if her skin were translucent gauze. He spots the flyer on the kitchen table and sets to work freeing it from its armor of spare change, restacking nickels and dimes with mad-

dening precision. This is what Aaron does every day: rearranges other people's money.

"I found that cat," Ivy says. "She ran under a dumpster but I'm going to find her and bring her home."

"Good for you."

Maybe what she and Aaron need is a wacky rom-com adventure. "We could go out together and look. If you wanted."

"It's twenty degrees. I've been working all day. I'm not going to crawl under a fucking dumpster."

Ivy plays the pity card. "She's probably cold. And scared."

"Clearly. The flyer says." He sees the scab on her neck. "Jesus, Ive—are you picking it again?"

The pot crackles; she has forgotten the rice. She spends the next five minutes scraping burnt nubbins from the bottom of the pan and flicking them into the sink. When they clog up the drain, she picks out each grain with her fingernails. This is what it means to be a grown-up: digging soggy refuse out of your sink strainer while your hypersanitary boyfriend watches with thinly veiled disgust.

That night Ivy has the same dream. She is five years old, feet crammed into the toe-pinching red slippers she refuses to give up. A tiny dream-sicle of a girl, too small to be important. Her mother has three pots on the stove, busy, always busy. She doesn't notice the pot that falls, scalding Ivy, carving the topography of her skin into blisters and boils.

Ivy screams. She claws at her mother's legs. Her mother is oblivious. Desperate, Ivy peels off her burnt skin, leaf by leaf, tearing at the meat of her own flesh till there is nothing left but bone.

She wakes up covered in a cool sheen of sweat. Aaron sleeps with his mouth open. He never snores.

Ivy lies in bed at 6 a.m., pretending to be asleep, as Aaron tugs on his lime-green running shoes and slaps an iPod to his biceps. The floorboards of their bedroom creak, no doubt straining beneath his marathoner's legs. Lately Aaron's gym obsession has reached epic proportions. Even his calf muscles have calf muscles. What kind of person has calves like that? He laughed at her that time at the bistro when she didn't know the edible part of a chicken was its muscles. "What part did you think we eat?" he said. "The fat? The bone?"

Ivy waits until she hears his size-elevens pad down the hallway. Then she pulls on her coat and boots and trudges back to the coffee shop.

At 6:15 there are already people inside—two baristas and the local caffeine diehards. No homeless man. Ivy tells herself she's earned a nonfat

vanilla mocha simply for being up so early. She gazes out the window while she waits for her drink. The heat from human breath and frothing milk coats the glass so thickly she could carve her name in the steam. But she doesn't have to. The barista does not botch Ivy's name this time, only because there are so few customers he doesn't need to ask it.

Ivy holds her mocha in the crook of her neck, letting the warmth lick across her collarbone. Once the heat penetrates her core, she braves the cold again. Today the dumpster is stacked high with shiny tumorous trash bags smelling vaguely of curdled milk.

Ivy kneels. "Ruby! Ruby! Here, sweet kitty cat." The asphalt is knife cold but she doesn't mind. She looks forward to the winter, the way the chill grazes her neck and nips at her ears like an eager lover.

Ruby is not there. Ivy is upset but not surprised. She bites her lip, deep enough to draw blood. Yesterday was beginner's luck, a total fluke. In real life nothing goes the way she intends.

She trudges through three blocks of frozen road sludge and is almost back at her apartment when she sees a muddy orange tail trembling beneath a hydrangea bush. Holy fucking shit. Ivy is grinning, then laughing, then doing a one-two step in the dirty snow. Her building manager glares at her from his window perch across the street, ready to rat her out if she takes an unsanctioned pet up the stairs. But who cares? Ivy is on a good-luck streak. No one can stop her now.

The cat is either too scared or too hungry to run as Ivy folds it gently up and away. Ruby holds her body sharp and rigid, her heart sending tremors through matted fur. With every step Ivy takes up the stairwell, she feels as if she is being stabbed by a bag of brittle bones.

Inside the apartment she rummages through the refrigerator, looking for something that isn't whole grain or sprouted. Aaron's the health freak, not her. She pours unsweetened soy milk into a ceramic bowl, and the cat laps it up gratefully with her ruttled pink tongue.

After two bowls of soy milk, Ruby retreats under the bed. "Ruby!" Ivy calls. "Come out, kitty!" But Ruby cowers behind Aaron's guitar, the one he used to play before it became a permanent fixture of the underworld, shrouded in cobwebs and dust. He majored in classical guitar in college, back before business school, and when he and Ivy were first dating, he spent many pleasant hours strumming on the couch. He said it relaxed him after a long day at work. But after a while his fingers grew clumsy, and any joy he might have felt was sapped by his frustration over the talent he had lost.

These days Aaron makes various excuses: too busy, too tired. Ivy has her own opinions on why he quit. When you pluck the strings of a guitar, no money falls out.

Ivy dials the number on the flyer. A woman picks up on the second ring.

“Hello?” Her voice is thin and wobbly, a rubber pencil in a magic trick.

“Vanessa? My name is Ivy. I think I found your cat.”

“Shit,” Vanessa says, her voice swelling by the syllable. “Holy shit. Ruby’s with you? Is she okay?”

When Ivy assures her the cat is fine, Vanessa says “you’ve made my day” so many times Ivy figures she’s made Vanessa’s whole week.

It is only after she has taken down Vanessa’s address, when she has lured the cat out from under the bed with more soy milk and is wiping the dirt off her face with a warm washcloth, that she notices the collar. It is beige, not black. Hemp, not nylon.

Ivy cradles Ruby-not-Ruby to her chest, craning to see between the hind legs. Maybe, if she finds evidence, she’ll know for sure. The cat snarls and juliennes her shoulder with taloned claws, but she sees it. The tiny feline penis.

Ruby is a he.

Aaron shoots through the door, high on endorphins and Jay Z. “You’re up! Shit, you’re bleeding.”

He pulls a ribbon of toilet paper off the roll. Ivy sucks in her breath, waiting to see if he will touch her. But he doesn’t. He folds the toilet paper neatly into pleated squares and holds it out to her from a distance.

“Thanks,” she says. Aaron hates the sight of blood.

“Is that Ruby?”

The excitement in his voice makes her wildly jealous—of a cat, for Christ’s sake. Sometimes Ivy wishes Aaron would look, just fucking *look* at her for once. But he never does. Not really. He only sees her scabs and scars and bleeding. He never sees her whole.

She presses the toilet paper to her shoulder, a slash of red seeping through the white. “Yeah. It’s Ruby.” The lie floods her mouth with the metallic taste of blood. Savage. Sweet.

Discreetly, she unhooks the cat’s hemp collar and lets it drop into the trash.

“I’m just finishing up. Five minutes and the shower’s all yours.”

She closes the bathroom door. The cat cries, but Ivy’s compassion is all twisted up inside. She has just thrown a wrench into Aaron’s perfectly calibrated morning—and this delights her. Seized by a sudden urge to rearrange his items in the medicine cabinet, she swaps the toothpaste



for the shaving cream, the vitamin B for the men's multivitamins. She resents living according to his rules, straitjacketed to his obsessive sense of order. She is a girlfriend in a gilded cage. Aaron pays the rent and buys her yoga classes, stocks her art cabinet with skeins of multicolored yarn. She knows he thinks her art is asinine, but he deigns to support her creative "habit," maybe as a way to distract her. How charitable.

Ivy's fingers glide across his stash of prophylactics. Aaron keeps his condoms in the medicine cabinet; of course he does. Her former lover kept his rubbers crammed into the leather wallet he carried in his pocket, right next to his cock. Sometimes when Ivy tugged one out before they made love, the plastic was still warm. It seems fitting, somehow, that Aaron keeps his condoms stacked neatly between the Tylenol and the Pepto-Bismol, as if sex with Ivy falls somewhere between a headache and diarrhea.

The cat wails, needing comfort. Yeah, well, Ivy thinks, looking at his pathetic little face. Don't we all.

She and Aaron have been together for six years and still he won't come inside her. He won't even let his naked cock graze her skin. He is fixated on STDs, horrified by the possibility of infection. Ivy finds this insulting, considering she hasn't been with anyone else for six years.

She doubts he can say the same.

After Aaron goes to work, Ivy takes his razor from the medicine cabinet and slides in a fresh blade. The cat whines and mewls as Ivy shaves him, careful not to nick his skin, shearing his fur down to the bone. This is good, she thinks, this is brilliant. And when her work is done: *this is art*. Sometimes the best disguise is not to add something on but to strip something away.

She leaves the fur around his man parts. Codpiece. Cockpiece. Only, she isn't trying to accentuate his little furry penis; she's trying to hide it. Once the shaving is done, she thinks maybe this was not the best idea. Another failed art project. At least this time the idea was her own.

But it's too late to go back now, so she bathes the imposter, despite his howling. Then she drains the bath of mottled orange cat fur and refills it for herself. She adds fancy salts and a fizzy bath ball that transforms the water into rose-colored cream. While she soaks, she picks at the toenail polish on her big toe, the last remaining artifact of a pedicure, eventually peeling off the whole strip and watching it swirl around the suds like a turquoise tapeworm. Nubs of dead white skin bob in the water alongside it. Her skin.



Ivy climbs out dripping and grabs a towel from the heated rack. The cat is wet and angry in the corner, impossibly thin with his new haircut. She shuts him in the bathroom. While he dries, she sits naked on the sofa, watching a few uninspiring art videos before succumbing to the allure of YouPorn. She usually searches “sweet young couple,” but today she searches “hard wet fuck.” She comes in seconds.

Afterward, she pops another blade into Aaron’s razor and, careful not to nick the soft skin of her groin, shaves herself.

Vanessa lives in the adjacent neighborhood, the one where cars have more dents and yards have fewer flowers. Ivy snugs the cat into a canvas Whole Foods bag and decides to walk. She passes her homeless man, but she hardly recognizes him: his face has been wiped clean. She almost says something before catching herself. What the hell was she going to say? Wow, sir, you finally washed your face?

Instead she watches him from behind a brick wall with peeling yellow paint. His cold and careful hands are sorting through a plastic bag of bottle caps. It is an embarrassment of riches—Ivy could make a goddamn masterpiece out of all those bottle caps. A fedora, maybe, or a hipster tie. She could partner with the man, pay him a tidy profit for his whole collection. He lovingly cradles each cap between his fingers, and an unpleasant thought coils in Ivy’s stomach: What if he said no? She wonders what that would be like, to love a tiny little thing, invisible to almost everyone. To love a plastic throwaway more than profit.

She checks Google Maps on her phone. Three minutes later she is standing in front of a miniature white house, shutters like broken teeth. A woman who can only be Vanessa waits anxiously on the porch swing, bundled up in a shabby coat, a coffee cup listing between her knees. Her ears perk up as Ivy walks up the sidewalk. Something is off about her, though Ivy can’t quite put her finger on it.

“Is that my Ruby?”

Shakily, Vanessa stands, opening her arms to receive the cat. Ivy waits for the inevitable. The implosion, the grief, the shattered hope.

But Vanessa buries her face in marmalade fuzz. “Oh my God. Did someone—is she—”

“Shaved. Can you believe it? Some sick bastard.” To Ivy’s surprise, the lie flows like sweet cream. Which is strange, considering she’s never been a very good liar.

“My poor baby,” Vanessa says. “You’re so skinny. All skin and bones.”

Vanessa looks up, her eyes milky and unfocused, and only then does Ivy realize she is blind. Something pops in her chest. Duping a blind

woman feels different than duping one who can see. Deep down, Ivy imagined this as some kind of cosmic joke, a way to pass off the wrong cat as the right one, something she and her new friend Vanessa would laugh about over pom-*açai* martinis. A hilarious mix-up from a Russian novel! A comedy of errors and mismatched cats! But this—she wasn't expecting this.

A new feeling flickers in Ivy's chest. Something unfamiliar. A hiccup of unfair advantage, perhaps. A feeling she has only ever imagined in the bright recesses of her mind, glorious and orgiastic: the cogs of the universe clicking silently into place.

"I can't thank you enough." Vanessa fumbles in her back pocket with her free hand, still clutching the cat to her chest. She pulls out a hundred-dollar bill.

"Oh no, no," Ivy says. "I couldn't."

"Please." Vanessa presses the money into her palm, her fingers lingering on the soft part of Ivy's wrist. "You're my angel today."

Ivy looks into her dull white eyes and sees what others miss: something lovely and untarnished. A blank canvas. A clean slate.

Vanessa wants to pay her for her kindness. She is offering a hundred-dollar commission for Ivy's keen artistic eye, her generosity of spirit. What right does Ivy have to spurn these just desserts?

"Okay." She folds her fingers around the crisp bill. "I accept."

Ivy can still feel the heat of Vanessa's touch when she walks into the tattoo parlor two streets over. Ink. This is what she has decided: her very first tattoo. Suddenly she's got a hundred dollars and nowhere to be.

"I want a V," she tells the man behind the counter, the letter humming on her lower lip. "A big fat one."

People say tattoos hurt, especially near the heart. But for Ivy the rat-a-tat of the gun feels like silk against her skin. The tattoo artist is young, Irish and sexy as all hell, both lean arms obliterated with ink. She undresses him with her eyes. When his fingers graze her nipple, he stammers a charming, "Sorry." *So. Ree.*

She grabs his hand and presses it into her breast. "Don't be."

They fuck on the shiny black tattoo chair, Ivy on top.

The skin between Ivy's legs hums as she walks down the street. The windchill has melted, leaving in its wake a bright, brisk winter day. The gauze on her left breast is white and sticky, crusted with brown blood as Ivy walks down the street. She doesn't mind. There's poetry in it, that

art can be a wound. She says it aloud, savoring the words against her tongue, no boyfriend to call her histrionic.

She buys a Diet Dr. Pepper at the convenience store and then marches back inside and exchanges it for a regular Dr. Pepper. She buys gum, a pack of condoms, peanuts, and a Baby Ruth and drops the whole stash into the homeless man's lap as she passes by. She tosses him the bottle cap from her Dr. Pepper, too—the cherry on top. "Have a great day," she crows, and she means it.

*Ding.* A text from Aaron. "Working 18. Go ahead eat chicken kale soup in fridge."

Ivy goes to the diner and orders a greasy burger and a steaming heap of cheese fries. Afterward she slurps down a beer float made of nut-brown ale and full-fat vanilla ice cream. She doesn't care if winter quakes and gales outside; she can feel the heat pulsing through her, the touch of the tattoo artist a ring of fire between her thighs. Ivy feels full for the first time in ages. She strokes the soft skin of her arm, tracing the major artery, a gossamer thread of eggshell blue. How strange it is to be human, to have delicate blue veins shunting pints and pints of fiery vermilion. The warmth of Vanessa's touch lingers, a halo around her wrist.

Did she take something away from a blind woman? No. She gave her something. She gave her a body to touch, to pet, to hold. Who cares whose body it is? Who the fuck cares who it belongs to?

Ivy peels back the gauze and stares at her tattoo. She can't help it. The ink is beading. The ink is bleeding. It's goddamn beautiful.

She walks home, slightly tipsy from the beer, slightly queasy from the ice cream.

On a telephone pole, a wind-chewed flyer catches her attention.

### **LOST PUPPY.**

Something blooms in Ivy's chest. Gently she frees the flyer from its staples. She folds the paper and tucks it inside her bra, the edge sharp against her fresh wound, a warm caress against her skin.