

## *So What If I Love You That's None of Your Business*

In June, I dreamt of Winwoodie, again. The one where he's wearing a black fireman's jacket, I'm in a voluminous ballerina skirt, and we're hurtling through my ancient history in a glass-domed train. Landscapes of inglorious transgressions flicker outside the windows: the author riding shotgun with plastered bastards, the author breaking her face against comic book fists, the author daring strangers to untie her from railroad tracks. While Malachy Winwoodie narrates the ineluctable mistakes I've made with fingertips and mouths, I reach out to unlock the brass hooks and D-ring buckles that secure his flame-retardant coat. Winwoodie deflects my touch, points to stock footage of me waking up alone. "Self-exile, huh? That's a loser's game." With a single spark of his eyelashes, a chalkboard appears. In lieu of chalk, Winwoodie lights a cigarette, sketches a pyramid in ash. "Behold, your fallen empire." Smoke and cinders fill the train and set my skirt ablaze. I wait for Winwoodie to save me. "Relax," he says. "You're just smoldering."

When I finally mentioned my dream to Arlo, he said, "Well, the nice thing about that dream is that we don't have to interpret it."

In an effort to disclose every awful reason to dislike me, here are a few facts: I am a writer. I am a writer of moderate success. In his blurb for my first novel, Arlo refers to me as "a great new American talent." Strangers often pay me nothing to fly to distant cities, stand at amplified podiums, and read my widely unread stories to sparse, fidgety crowds. After these readings, my hosts insist on taking me out for pad thai to apologize for the poor attendance/weak book sales and to ask when I might take it upon myself to write something "more uplifting." For most self-hating novelists, this level of accomplishment would seem positively triumphant. But if you asked me about the defining contours of my life, I would tell you that I'm newly orphaned, that I'm recovering from long-overdue surgery for "maxillofacial trauma," and that I know better than to begin a story with a dream.

At the start of the summer, I was still sluggish from the anesthesia, having gone so far under, I had yet to resurface. In the hopes of dis-

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*Photograph by Josh Kwok on Unsplash*

tracting me from my father's recent passing and my own post-surgical depression, Arlo had insisted I move into the guest bedroom of the mid-century modern ice storm he shared with his husband, Vance. We declared this "Our Summer of Vintage Atari," of Arlo procrastinating with me, *Missile Command*, *Blasteroids*, and *Rampage*. 3-D technology gave us motion sickness. We preferred simple point-and-shoot missions through poorly pixilated worlds. The flat fastness of *Millipede* calmed our wild anxiety. After joysticking our mornings away, we'd redeem ourselves by walking Arlo's pugs, Ghost and Ms. Pac-Man, through the privileged woods of Connecticut. Arlo and the pugs had long succumbed to Lyme disease, so we hardly worried about ticks. We worried about meeting our deadline. Arlo and I had begun collaborating on what only the most committed novelists dare to write: a television show.

Every morning, before heading into the city, Vance checked the sutures in my face, irrigated my nostrils, and changed my blood-soaked gauze, then I sucked on a bubble gum-flavored morphine lollipop, Arlo toked on his vape pen, and together we cannibalized drafts of aborted short stories, searching for scenes where overly verbal idiosyncratics indirectly communicate their irresistible genius—all of this in the hopes of monetizing our least commercial work. Our agents had convinced us that television was a sacred realm where show runners were lauded as gods. We'd given ourselves until September to conceive an entire TV series and prepare a pitch for executives who would either discount us or make us monstrously rich.

Arlo carried himself with an intellectual glamour: button-down handsome and brilliantly dismissive. Mean in the best possible way. I trusted his opinion on what to wear, when to protest, and whom to love. We'd first met in grad school at a party for a Pulitzer prizewinner neither of us had read nor, in truth, ever heard of—a bigheaded blowhard who greeted his party host by asking, "Where are the Workshop sluts?" That night, Arlo was tracing hard on bourbon and ditch weed, while I was sober as fuck. Back then, I never drank, never smoked. This made Arlo suspicious. To show him how truly dangerous I could be, I dared Arlo to jump onto a trampoline from a second-story balcony. Arlo bragged that in high school, he'd survived a rooftop drop into a brackish swimming pool. "I was pushed in by some preppy cunt. Actually, she looked a lot like you." Thus began our singular friendship.

Even on our nature walks, Arlo wore fitted Oxford shirts, selvedge denim, and musky cardamom cologne hand-mixed by Venetian monks. He curated his life with focused care. Arlo overpaid for classic video game cartridges, vintage circus punks, and Scandinavian furniture. He railed against the evils of Monsanto and Made in China. Arlo was a

novelist, but he'd scored his real fortune doctoring screenplays. The villain's catchphrase uttered moments before the helicopter explodes? Arlo wrote that. The hero's confident retort? Arlo once again. Though I was often content to stare at my thin wrists and survey my own weak pulse, Arlo put me to work, coaching me on *Comme des Garçons*, Brutalist architecture, snappy dialogue, and the dangers of pesticides. We spent hours browsing discount Italian fashion websites and signing online petitions to ban Roundup. But we also went to MoMA to see Tilda Swinton sleep in a glass coffin. We argued over whether we were too smart or maybe not smart enough to write a television show.

While we hiked among the hickory and sumac, the fawn-coated pugs darting over our feet, Arlo confided that he and Vance were once again in the throes of attempting to adopt a child, any child. Their first failed bid had nearly ended their relationship. A second strike led to Vance spending less time at their country home, sleeping most weeknights in the City, where he hedge-funded his way through their marriage. The last gasp would end with either a baby or a divorce. Vance had a swimmer's body, an obscenely sculpted chest, and arms that never failed to make me feel safe. Though Arlo was my closest friend, I feared a life without Vance. He managed always to smell like the ocean, like my own lost father after a day of sailing: Bay Rhum and sea air but also honeyed diesel fuel.

I was happy for Arlo, certain that he and Vance would make outstanding fathers, but earlier that morning, after a fitful sleep, I'd heard Vance say to Arlo: "Whatever you do, do not allow her to read the Wedding Section."

My ex-boyfriend, The Poet, who'd broken my nose if not my heart, and a former acquaintance, for whom I'd once purchased bleach cream (for her moustache), had married. A voluptuous production in the Hamptons that *The Times* billed as "A Medieval Moroccan Equine Fantasia."

I asked, "Would you really want the word 'equine' in your wedding announcement?"

Arlo said, "No one that out of shape should get married in his pajamas while riding a white horse."

I paused and looked off into the middle distance of the woods. The wedding column had left me feeling party to a crime. Arlo was saying everything I wouldn't allow myself to think. The Poet did look chubby and ridiculous in his sparkling gold tunic astride a listless, likely flatulent gelding. That morning's morphine lolly had already worn off, leaving me with nothing more than a mouth full of sickly sweet spit. I could feel the tiny surgical stitches holding the inside of my face together. It was hard to reconcile the frivolity of the wedding pages with the forever

memory of my ex-boyfriend's knuckles slamming against the parts of me he hated most. I turned back to Arlo and said, "I want to find that white horse and save him. That horse is the only one who truly understands what I've been through."

The hardest part was seeing so many friends smile across the slide show of the Wedding Section, toasting a man who had once beaten his girlfriend so badly that she could hear the big bang of her face fracturing into white stars. There was no etiquette, no announcement section for what she'd been through. She could take a hit—was even proud of this fact—but just a few years later, she would not only still feel the break inside her head, she would suffer a near-fatal collapse because of the scarring from those wounds. I hated thinking of myself in the third person, but it was difficult to admit that my persistent intractable headaches and grand mal seizures had come at the hands of a poet.

That night, for the first time in years, I dreamt of Winwoodie.

It had been well over a decade since I'd last seen him, but, even in my sleep, I recognized his sneer, the sexy way he looked down on everyone. Malachy Winwoodie stood over me smoking, while I knelt before him braiding garlands of ivy and extension cords. "You're doing it wrong," Winwoodie smiled. He inserted the plug from one of the cords into his palm, illuminating a string of starry lights that warmed my face and brightened his pale eyes. Winwoodie tossed pieces of pink candy at me, and, like a child chasing a parade float, I caught the treats. As I unwrapped the foil, each lozenge turned into a numbered polyhedron dice. I asked, "What was my first mistake?" Winwoodie clutched his free hand over my fists and shook the dice in my palms. "Lose first then be rewarded."

The initial dreams felt like a side effect of the morphine lollipops, of sleeping in a guest bedroom in a glass house that whistled and shook with the wind. But soon, other dreams of Winwoodie followed: a misadventure in a forest with invisible hunters shooting arrows, a shoplifting spree involving squadrons of fluorescent army men, a space-age fantasy of Winwoodie in a flying saucer strafing Martians with miniature rockets. Winwoodie wasn't affectionate. Even in my dreams, I couldn't conjure kindness from him. Once, he tucked flyaway strands of bloneness behind my ears and said, "You'd look better as a brunette." Another time, while I tripped down a fire escape in a ball gown, he leaned against a brick wall, the type of wall you execute people in front of, and warned, "Keep your distance." When I dared to approach, Winwoodie slid his

warm hands down my exposed back, looked me dead square and said, “I won’t dance. Don’t ask me.”

Despite Winwoodie’s lack of romance and my inability to incite affection, these dreams felt oddly erotic. A valentine from my imagination. My unconscious mind whispering, “This is the boy you should have loved. The one boy strange enough to love you.”

It was mid-July before I mentioned the dreams to Arlo.

We were stoned and wandering in our woods having made marginal progress on our pilot script—a post-apocalyptic love triangle between an intergalactic mailman and a gender-shifting computer scientist. During some episodes, the scientist would be male, other weeks female, but, either way, the mailman would deliver his love. We called it *Space Oddity* after Bowie. Our computer scientist was inspired by Jamie Fenton, the transgender software designer who had created Arlo’s favorite video game, the impossible-to-win *Gorf*. With every wrong move, the game admonished its players with our favorite insult: “Bad move, Space Cadet!”

I kept proposing we switch our focus away from scripted television toward developing a reality show. All we needed was a concept and a catchy title: *My Fat Wife Can Beat Your Fat Wife*. Zaftig brides battling it out, while their skinny partners urged them onward.

Arlo suggested, *Wife Fight*. “That way, no one’s offended.”

I said, “We can pitch the show with the tagline, ‘If you love something—let it fight.’ Even Winwoodie would approve.”

Arlo chased after Ghost who chased after Ms. Pac-Man who chased after an imaginary deer. “Why didn’t I know that you and Winwoodie were friends?”

“It was grad school—we flirted at parties sometimes. Once, when we were waiting in line for the bathroom, Winwoodie told me my name was an anagram for ‘Bad Men Tremor.’”

“Ah, poets. I thought you were done with poets.” Arlo smashed down the backs of his Sperry Top-Siders, and I could feel him contemplating his words before suggesting, “You should friend him.”

“I did.” I pointed to a circling turkey vulture. “He hasn’t responded.”

“I always worry about raptors sweeping down and carrying off Ms. Pac-Man. Ghost could frighten them away, but Ms. Pac-Man would be mincemeat.”

“Right now, if a claw descended and lifted me up to the heavens, I’d be grateful.”

The turkey vulture landed on a bare tree branch, and Ghost barked. Another tree, covered in black leaves, shook in response, and then a

chattering of starlings lifted all at once to reveal a barren oak. I marveled as the restless life abandoned the dead tree.

Arlo leaned down and rubbed Ms. Pac-Man. “Winwoodie is kind of a dick or maybe more of an asshole. But he’s cool and Rhodes-Scholar smart. I don’t think he accepts many friends. You know, he lives in San Diego. With his girlfriend.”

Arlo was willing to indulge me but only up to a point. The summer sun had scorched our woods. Without the luxury of shade, there was nowhere to hide.

Breathless and overheated, still unable to breathe through my nose despite my surgery, I felt our woods burning, a great conflagration exhausting the air. I hadn’t had a seizure in weeks, but inside my skull, I felt an approaching storm of electricity spark, an aura of black and green similar to the Midwestern sky before a tornado. A metallic taste trickling down my throat as if from balancing a ball of mercury on the tip of my tongue. Collapsing onto our beaten path, I thought of the forest service hotshots who literally fight fire with fire. Where was my fire? My fight?

When I awoke from my fit, Ms. Pac-Man and Ghost sniffed, yelped, and licked my face. Arlo kneeled beside me and asked if I was okay.

It took me a few minutes but I regained enough of myself to nod and say, “Why won’t Winwoodie be my friend?”

“You’re right, we should do a reality show.” Arlo helped me to my feet and said, “Here, watch as this brilliant young woman is diminished by a series of unworthy men.”

“Isn’t that every reality show?”

As we slowly made our way back toward home, Arlo snapped a photo of Ms. Pac-Man mounting Ghost. “Look,” Arlo said. “We’ll fight for the heart of Winwoodie. I’ll tag both of you in a post. When he sees that we’re friends, I bet he accepts your request.”

“Thanks,” I smiled. “It’s just like a Henry James novel.”

Arlo and I spent the next morning tour-guiding through websites loaded with pictures and profiles of children in foster care. In the photos, most of the potential adoptees folded their arms against their solar plexuses and smiled without showing their teeth. In my arrogance, I thought I knew how they felt. Protecting themselves from being unwanted.

I said, “Put them all in my cart, and we’ll check-out using PayPal.”

“I wish,” Arlo scrolled through pages of abandoned toddlers, neglected tweens, motherless teenagers. “The social worker claims Vance and I would be a better fit for an older kid, but Vance really wants a baby. He keeps talking about surrogates.”

“If you insist,” I said. “I will carry your child.”

“And ruin your beautiful body?”

“We’ll work thermal liposuction into my contract. Also, you and Vance both have to fuck me. None of this turkey baster bullshit.” I paused. “You know, we really should write down our dialogue and work it into the pilot.”

“That’s gross.”

“When The Poet and I fought, he complained that everything I said sounded scripted. Ironically, he also claimed I wasn’t a real writer.”

“Yes, and don’t forget, you finished writing your books once you were single.” Arlo showed me a fifteen-year-old with a faux hawk and an eye-brow piercing. “The hardest part of adoption is that you can’t believe you’re actually saving someone’s life.”

“Not even your own?” I asked.

“Especially not your own.”

After window-shopping for children, Arlo allowed me to scroll through Winwoodie’s profile. I wasn’t surprised to discover that he liked obscure Japanese girl groups, *Creature Double Feature* horror flicks, the Sword and Sorcery stories of Robert E. Howard, and Cheap Trick, but I was impressed that he had a weakness for videos of baby elephants taking baths. This is how we loved now: in a quiet stalker-ish way that enabled us to learn, at a distance, far too much about those we desired. To my great disappointment, there were hardly any photographs of Winwoodie, and though I restrained myself from searching too hard for them, I did stumble across a few pictures of a woman I assumed was his girlfriend. She had straight, dark hair and looked as if she shopped in the petite or juniors’ section at Macy’s. I would have towered over her. In the years since I dated The Poet, I often studied women’s faces, wondering if they’d ever been hit. By her sweet smile, I could tell that this woman had been loved, was being loved. If a man brought his hand up to her face, she would not flinch, she would assume that he meant to stroke, not bruise her cheek.

Though it was difficult to gauge just how Winwoodie had aged since grad school, in my dream life, he would always be a dark Viking, a punk-rock loner with eyes so blue they were green. If I could, I would have clicked on his full lips “Like,” his sideburns, “Like,” his savage intelligence, “Like,” his lack of vanity, “Like,” his contempt for humanity, “Like,” his high forehead, “Like,” his mistrust of false sentiment, “Like,” his spleen, “Like,” his brutal heart, “Like,” his quickening pulse, “Like,” his thick cock, “Like.” And that too was part of my desire: Malachy Winwoodie looked like he knew how to fuck. Like he might fuck away all of my disappointment.

One night in August, Vance came home early in anticipation of a phone call from the adoption mafia. Connecticut was notorious for its dropped cell-phone calls, and the living room had the best reception. Although Vance and Arlo had both instituted a ban on eating Funyuns on the Finn Juhl Poet Sofa or drinking Shiraz on the Eero Saarinen Womb Settee, the three of us tucked into the living room with our bowls of gazpacho and waited in museum silence while the pugs sat at our feet. After dinner, we stayed in the living room. Arlo and I studied our laptops and shuffled notecards with various scenes from our TV pilot: our space mailman smuggling stolen orphans across the galaxy, our computer scientist leaving an abusive spouse. Vance gently surveyed my face and commented on how well I was healing. Just a little swelling and tenderness. I could almost breathe again. Vance asked, "So, have you heard from this mysterious Winwoodie fellow?"

I said, "No. The best love stories do not include me." Annoyed by my own self-pity, I added, "Plus, we all know that the internet was not created for bookish straight girls."

"True," Vance smiled. "The internet is part of a vast Christian conspiracy to entice homosexuals into a life of sodomy."

"Amen," Arlo raised his glass. "I wish the internet existed when I was a teenager. Would have spared me the trouble of tearing up my father's *Golf Digest* and jacking off to ads for Paco Rabanne."

Vance picked up his cell phone and studied it. "When I was fifteen, my parents took our entire family to New York City. It was Christmastime, and I wanted to parade down Christopher Street. Trouble was, I couldn't escape my family. On our way to the Frick, we passed a bar called Swinging Richard's. I knew exactly what sort of place it might be."

Arlo and I squealed, "Swinging Dicks."

Vance nodded. "We were lucky enough to stay at The Pierre, and just before we left for the airport, I took the Manhattan Yellow Pages from the bedside drawer and tossed it into my duffel bag. When we got back to St. Louis, I couldn't wait to hide in my room and study the names of all of the bars and nightclubs in Manhattan. I still remember: 'The Manhole,' 'The Mine Shaft,' 'Woody's,' 'Stud's,' 'Hercules.' All through high school, on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, I would call one of the bars, chat with the bartender until he got too bored or too busy, and then I'd ask him to hand the phone off to one of the patrons. I'd get off while these old men told me all of the remarkable and filthy things they'd love to do to me."

I turned to Arlo and said, "You realize, your husband invented phone sex."

Ghost and Ms. Pac Man barked at me.

Arlo calmed the pugs. He cocked his head and gave a half smile. “And what did these men want to do to you?” He looked as though he’d never heard this story before.

“The usual. They wanted me to describe myself, my chest, my ass, my prick. I got to know a few of the regulars from various bars and became a kind of club mascot. One of the old geysers actually wrote me a letter of recommendation for Columbia. You should just reach out to Winwoodie. Why not call him?”

“Maybe,” I said. “It’s a better story if Winwoodie never accepts my friendship request. If I just keep waiting and waiting.”

“There are plenty of other handsome primates,” Vance said.

I put aside my laptop. “But I think my father would have liked Winwoodie.”

Arlo asked, “Did you ever tell your dad what The Poet did to you?”

I nodded. “He threatened to kill The Poet, which was funny because at the time, my dad had these oxygen tubes stuck up his nostrils and a set of magnets where his heart should have been.”

Vance said, “Never date a poet.”

“It’s not that Winwoodie is anything like my dad, it’s just that I can imagine them in a room together enjoying each other’s company. I still think about these two stories Winwoodie told me. One was about this video game he played that involved an astronaut landing on a planet and fighting aliens. When he arrived at the final level, just when he thought he’d saved the planet, this alien came out of nowhere and frightened him to death. Winwoodie literally jumped up and hid behind his couch. I can’t remember the name of the game, but the way he described it, well, it was the first time I’d ever heard a boy my age be vulnerable.”

Vance did not look impressed. “Okay, what was the second story?”

“I only heard part of it.”

From what I could remember, a highstorm of knights had discovered a forest of trees painted with archery targets. Shot through the dead center of each bull’s-eye was an arrow. The king, terrified of any threat to his kingdom, ordered his knights to find this marksman with the perfect aim. The knights found an old hunter and brought him to the king, and the king asked the hunter his secret for hitting bull’s-eyes.

“And what did the hunter say?” Arlo asked.

“That’s the problem, I never heard the end of the story. I think you had one of your Paxil meltdowns and begged me to leave the party.”

“It’s probably just some dumb Dungeons and Dragons parable.”

“Maybe, but it’s always bothered me.”

Arlo rearranged our notecards. “Why don’t you just write to Winwoodie? I bet he’ll be flattered that you remember him and that you want to know how his story ends.”

When my surgeon first examined my head, he knew that I’d been beaten. “Someone did a real job on you.” It was a relief to not have to confess, to simply nod in agreement. Then he said, “I don’t know how you managed to live so long with these injuries, but you would not have been able to live much longer.” When I told my father this story, he joked that I was bragging and that I was only proud of the worst things in my life.

I said, “The Poet and his bride are going to have a baby.”

“How do you know?” Arlo asked.

“Why else do people marry? For the kids.” It terrified me to think of The Poet with children. “Plus, one of the last things he said to me was, ‘I want to be a father, and by the time I’ll want to have kids, you won’t be able to give them to me.’” My voice broke. “I walk around every day with lines like that burning inside my head.”

Vance put down his cell phone and grabbed my hands. He ran his palms over the backs of my arms like a fortune-teller coaxing the future from a crystal ball. I waited for him to say something. He and Arlo both said nothing.

“What do we do?” I asked. “Where do we put every awful thing that anyone has ever said to us?”

“Don’t put it in a story,” Arlo said. “Look, I’m sorry The Poet was so awful to you. But you need to stop thinking that’s all you are.” Arlo leaned forward and held my cleft chin in his hand. “And you need to stop telling that story about buying the bleach cream for what’s-her-name’s moustache.”

“I could still have a baby,” I said.

Arlo sat back and picked up Ghost. He held the pug on his lap and rubbed his soft belly. “You don’t need a child to love and be loved.” Arlo looked at Vance who looked away.

Vance said, “It’s late.”

Just then, my laptop made a soft birdsong. Arlo glanced over at the screen and smiled. “You have a new friend.”

“Now what?” Arlo and I were on level five of *Millipede*, battling swarms of dragonflies and earwigs, when he and Vance finally received their call from the social worker. Vance hated that we still messed around with video games—convinced that all we did in his absence was smoke weed and play *Pong*. Vance actually smoked more weed than Arlo and I combined, but he’d stopped for the adoption.

“We’re number one in line for this baby.” Vance swept into the den and turned off our game. “Please get dressed.”

Arlo and Vance, the sole contenders for an eight-month-old baby girl whose parents had been arrested.

“What were they arrested for?” I asked.

“That’s confidential. We can’t discuss it,” Vance said.

“Drugs,” Arlo said. “Probably meth.”

Vance pointed at me. “Have you told her she’s going to have to move out?”

Though I’d understood all summer long that it was coming, I was stunned by Vance’s words. In theory, I knew that I slept in the room that was meant for their child, but Arlo and Vance’s bedroom was upstairs and mine was downstairs. How would they hear the baby crying, and wouldn’t they need me to play night nurse? They didn’t even have a crib—they joked about using one of the drawers from their George Nelson dresser. Plus, Arlo and I still had to finish our pilot script.

Vance failed to invite me along to the hospital. He just kissed me on the forehead and said, “Wish us luck!”

They weren’t gone for twenty minutes when Arlo called and asked if I would meet him in the city for lunch.

“The baby’s grandmother came forward. Vance went to work. I just want to wander around Barneys in search of a stylish noose.”

At Barneys, we avoided the top floor’s extravagant displays of designer cribs. Arlo told me that Vance was inconsolable. “We were five minutes away from the hospital when the social worker called. I’m just glad neither of us saw the baby.” We ducked into a dressing room, and Arlo pulled out a gold-and-black vape pen. He took a hit. “To be honest, I’m relieved. I’m not sure how the pugs would handle being around a baby. They’d probably be jealous.” Someone had left several Junya Watanabe black puffy jackets in the dressing room. Sculptural nightmares with scalloped wings. I tried one on and Arlo said, “You look amazing. Like a blown-out truck tire. I will feel so much better if you buy that jacket and never take it off.”

We sat in the dressing room and got stoned. The hash oil numbed Arlo, but for me, all it took was one hit off the pen, and suddenly everything I felt, I felt much too intensely.

I distracted Arlo with the news of Winwoodie’s first message to me. “He told me he checked my novel out of the library.”

“Cheapskate.”

“No, I like that he goes to the library. It’s sweet to think of a grown man paying fines. I’m going to mail him my short story collection. I don’t think he writes anymore.”

“So, you guys had a real conversation.”

“It’s just typing.”

Arlo stared at the mirror. “Promise you won’t fall in love with him.”

“I have an intuition about Winwoodie. Always have.”

“You forgot about him for nearly twenty years.”

“But then I remembered him all at once.”

We sat together judging ourselves in the mirror and rubbing the backs of our hands over the coarse carpet.

“I never really forgot about him. Winwoodie is the one I should have dated—not The Poet. Winwoodie’s the one that got away. Don’t you have one of those?”

“I’m married, and Winwoodie has a girlfriend.”

“They all have girlfriends. More importantly, they all have ex-girlfriends. Most importantly, we are all ex-girlfriends. Maybe I’ll write a story about him.”

Arlo stood up and tried on one of the other black puffy jackets. He looked like a trash-bag matador. “You can’t write about this.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because there’s no real story. What? You’re hung up on some guy who wouldn’t accept your friend request?”

“But he did.”

“Only because of me.”

“Then I’ll write about you, as well. You’ll be my second story. I’ll juxtapose my infatuation with Malachy Winwoodie against my real love for you and my sadness over the fact that you and I failed to have a child together.”

Arlo took off the jacket and tossed it near me.

“We were never going to have a child together.”

“Well, I’m going to need to make some things up. Fiction writers speak for a world that doesn’t exist. In the story, I could be your surrogate.” I gathered the jacket he’d thrown and held its warmth against my belly. “Winwoodie is one of those ‘get your coat’ people.”

“You are refusing to make any sense.”

“Like, if I was at a party and he looked at me and said, ‘get your coat,’ I would leave with him.”

“And where would you go?”

“I would curl up on Winwoodie’s couch and watch him watch the *PBS News Hour*. I’d play *Dungeon Master* to Winwoodie’s *Anti-Paladin*. I’d restring Winwoodie’s Doc Martens and iron his black T-shirts. I’d orga-

nize his Micronauts. I'd make sure everything in Winwoodie's home was earthquake resistant. I'd dust his Bo Diddley records and watch him listen to *The Stooges*. I'd do anything Winwoodie asked, and then I'd fold myself into a paper swan and rest in his arms. That's love, right? I forget the precise dimensions."

"Winwoodie, Winwoodie, Winwoodie. Will you please stop saying his name?"

"It means, 'The Castle of the Dismal Gallows.' Isn't that cool?"

"This version of you, the girl who's obsessed with Winwoodie, I don't care for her one bit."

Arlo was correct; I was obsessed. After weeks of the morphine numbing my sensitivity, the hash connected me to every universal truth. I'd always been in love with Malachy Winwoodie. I would always be in love with Malachy Winwoodie. I didn't need to see him to know that he was perfect. He existed so deeply in my imagination that I could conjure him. The unflattering lights in the dressing room were Winwoodie; the mirrors on the wall reflected Winwoodie; the couture clothes were sewn from Winwoodie; when I breathed in the vape pen, I exhaled Winwoodie; the sky outside was clouded with Winwoodie; the hot summer rain stormed Winwoodie; the lavender top notes wafting from the perfume counter were from flowers picked along the Highlands of Winwoodie; when I swam, I swam the River Winwoodie; I walked the Boulevard of Broken Winwoodies; the baby elephants at the zoo were playing with straw made from Winwoodie, dining on Winwoodie, shitting Winwoodie, bathing in Winwoodie. I too was Winwoodie. The stiches now long dissolved in my head were made from Winwoodie. The electricity and aura from my seizures were a spectrum of Winwoodie. The warmth rising in my face was the temperature of Winwoodie. When I dreamt, I dreamt the Dream of the Unified Field of Winwoodies.

Arlo looked at me. "I think you're just longing to be in love."

"And I think that you don't really want to adopt a child."

Arlo didn't blink. "Why don't you try dating someone who's as smart as you are and who lives near you and isn't a projection of your imagination?"

"That," I said, "is a hurtful piece of advice."

We were stoned, but there was no stench of weed to indict us.

"If you write this story," Arlo said, "you have to change my name. And you have to make me the best-dressed character. Now stop crying. We need to go home and walk the dogs."

I bought the overpriced, over-designed coat and wore it out of the store just to make Arlo laugh. He couldn't stop touching the cushioned pad-

dings. I knew that on the train ride home, he would fall asleep in the silent car against my pillowed chest.

With over an hour to kill before our train departed, Arlo led us to a pizza arcade that smelled like burnt garlic and lemon disinfectant. Hungry and defeated, we needed to claim a high-score victory. “This place has the only *Gorf* in the city with a working voice box.” We spoke in our best robot voices, “Bad move, Space Cadet.”

While some rich-kid poseur monopolized *Gorf*, we played several rounds of *Ms. Pac-Man*. Arlo had the game memorized all the way up to the infamous kill screen. He beat me every time, but then he apologized by inputting my initials for the high score. We bought more tokens and stood in front of the claw machine contemplating the cheap furry toys. I told Arlo how The Poet was the only person I knew who had ever managed to manipulate the crane’s claw well enough to win a prize.

“What did he win for you?”

“A unicorn. He caught it by its horn only he didn’t win it for me. He kept it for himself.”

“I wish that kid would stop playing *Gorf*.”

“Why do you like that game so much?”

“I like that it’s five games in one, and I love that the machine taunts the player. Did you know that Jamie Fenton made a *Ms. Gorf* game right before she transitioned from male to female?”

“Have you played it?”

“No. It’s written in a computer language no one can read anymore. It’s a readerless text.”

“Who in this conversation isn’t a readerless text?”

“Yeah.” Arlo put some tokens in the claw machine, tapped a few buttons and aimed for the tail of a shaggy puppy. The crane dipped into the pile of faux fur and came up empty-clawed. “I bet the only thing you love more than Winwoodie is the reader. That’s your true love, the only love worth chasing.” Arlo pushed the doggie door on the bottom of the claw machine. “Have you ever seen those stories where little kids climb into these suckers? How do they do it?”

I said, “I bet their parents help them.”

“Why would they?”

“To turn their child into an internet star. Actually, that would be a great reality show. Footage of children crawling inside these claw machines and giving away toys.”

“That’s just the inciting incident. The real show is what happens after the parents are arrested. When we take their children away from them and raise them ourselves.” Arlo paused. “You know you’re going to have to leave our house, right? Vance wants the guest bedroom back.”

I nodded and said, “I should move into my dad’s condo. Finally clean out the place.”

My phone buzzed. Malachy Winwoodie had sent a message. After our first chat, I’d written Winwoodie a long note asking him about his video game story and his parable of the archer. I should have stopped there, but I went on to describe my dreams, and soon I was writing my most eloquent and polished prose declaring my longstanding, unwavering crush. It was the kind of risk that seemed reasonable at two a.m.

The poseur abandoned *Gorf*, and Arlo sprinted off to play. I leaned against the claw machine and read Winwoodie’s message.

*Hey, Thanks for stroking my ego. I was surprised by your confession. In my dim memory of you, you disliked me intensely. I remember being at a party and telling you that your name was an anagram for “Bad Men Tremor.” You just scowled and turned away. Maybe it was some sort of boy/girl thing.*

*What’s funny is that your message is not the first of its kind. Three years ago, another woman from grad school contacted me. She wasn’t someone I really knew, and we’d never been friends. She was married, had children, had given up writing but was doing well enough professionally. Anyway, she was going to be on the West Coast, and she asked to see me, and then she asked to stay with me. When she finally arrived, she announced that she’d fallen in love with me (based on my internet postings—Ha!). I had nothing better to do at the time so I indulged her. It didn’t work out well for either of us.*

*Not to thwart your advances (I’m honestly flattered and a little stunned because you always seemed way out of my league), but I just thought I should spare you the trouble of liking me. I’m a bit of a basket case, and my girlfriend is kind of a saint for putting up with me.*

*Malachy*

*P.S. The game you are referring to is Rescue on Fractalus! And the story you mentioned, well, I think I was telling it as a cautionary tale to some lovesick loser. It ends with the king insisting that the archer reveal his secret for always hitting the bull’s-eyes. The archer is forced to cop to his own shortcomings:*

*“I shoot first, and then later I paint the targets around the arrows.” Kind of a perfect metaphor, no?*

In one quick rush, I felt an arrow pierce the bark of an ancient oak, felt the branches quiver and the starlings take flight. My pitiful notions of love were the naive delusions of someone who had spent too much time lost in books. I was always trying to write my way into a romance.

After weeks of being high, of coming dangerously close to an opioid addiction, I found myself thrown back to my days as the sober girl. What could I have possibly expected from my infatuation: late night sexting sessions, dirty Skyping, dick pics. At best, a rendezvous in some anonymous hotel. I had reached the outer limits of my imagination. My father wasn't coming back to rescue me, and The Poet would never unbreak what he had broken. There was no answer to the question of why I'd been hit, of why I'd been such a perfect target. My father had asked repeatedly for me to explain my reason for staying, for allowing myself to be beaten. “You're such a smart girl, why did you do such a dumb thing?” In the background, I heard Gorf say, “Bad move, Space Cadet.” Maybe I didn't want love. Maybe now, I just wanted all of the Bad Men to tremor.

Sometimes, a seizure can feel like a dream.

Enduring Reader, please believe me when I tell you that suddenly, I was very small. A tiny crawling cherub pushing herself up past the doggie door flap and into the narrow opening that led inside a wonderland of cut-rate plush toys. The chandelier arm of the claw machine dangled above me like the promise of a shimmering Deus Ex Machina. Only I wasn't going anywhere. I didn't need to be rescued. I was a blonde toddler and Arlo, my adopted father. From the other side of the plexiglass, he instructed me on how to slide the finest toys, the ones most tightly packed against the windows, the ones the claw could never dislodge and capture, down the narrow chute and out from the heart of the machine. Only they weren't toys, they were babies, and they were counting on me to save them.