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Meeting

Love and Polar Bears

Ariel decided, spontaneously, to dye her hair. She was in an airport, on her way home, and she bought one of those tiny packages of Crystal Light—in the latest trendy health flavour, Pomegranate Acai—and mixed it into her Evian. She was surprised when it came out blood red, when the colour dripped and stained her hands from the tips of her fingernails to the inside of her palm. It reminded her of being in high school. When she was sixteen, she'd dyed her hair with Kool-Aid. She'd wanted to look just like Monique Powell, the singer from the ska band Save Ferris. She'd used a tub of cherry Kool-Aid, and it had turned her hair fire-engine red.

She'd worn a huge zebra fun-fur purse slung across her waist and bright silver steel-toe boots. She figured she looked tough. She smoked cigarettes sitting in the lower branches of trees, in the park across the street from her high school. Her friends were good students and refused to smoke or cut class with her even once. She learned to stop telling them what she was doing. She didn't want to drag them down with her. She didn't know what her future held then, but she didn't suppose that she was destined for the kind of greatness that they were. They were already picturing themselves in law school or med school; Ariel knew she'd be lucky to get into university. If she got there, she had no idea what she wanted to study. Drawing and writing poetry were the only things she was really good at, and she knew that those weren't real jobs. She had no idea what she'd ever be if she grew up. Some days she wondered if she'd even live to be twenty-one. She considered it one day, in a gazebo, sitting with the stoners, passing a joint around. She decided that if she lived to be twenty-one, she'd throw a huge party and travel the world. She'd actually think about things and make decisions about her life.

She was twenty-seven now. She hadn't thought about those days in a really long time.

After a few minutes in the airport bathroom, she had some fire-engine streaks and some blood-red hands. Crystal Light worked better than Kool-Aid, she discovered—you needed less of it. As an added bonus, it wasn't full of sugar, so it seemed less likely that bees would follow her around.

She wanted to look like a different person. If she returned home with one of those rubber noses and fake moustaches, or better yet, if she could get a plastic surgery makeover like on those MTV reality shows, she'd probably feel better. She stared at her face in the bathroom mirror. She'd never liked it that much anyway. She'd have liked higher cheekbones, fuller lips, teeth with fewer cavities. Darker, thicker eyelashes would be nice. Eyebrows that took care of themselves. Naturally perfect skin. The kind of face a man could love. The kind of face a man would want to see every day, the kind he'd be afraid of losing. She wished he'd felt that way about her.

When she had the energy to, she wished for a lot of things.

A friend told her that all everyone wanted to be was the hero of their own story.

"If that guy Aaron is staying with the woman he was with when he met you, he's obviously cast himself as the virtuous one, and her as the heroine, the one worth being with. You are obviously the villain here, Ariel, temptation, the whore."

She'd sighed, rubbed her swollen eyes to keep the tears from coming out again.

"Look kiddo," her friend had said more gently. "I know you. Your other friends know you. We know it's not true. But this isn't your story. This is his. Hers. Theirs. You stepped into it, by mistake. In your version, you can be the one who only wanted to give, the one with the good heart. The one who only had the best intentions."

Ariel bit her cuticles when the tears fell. When her index finger bled she got a Band-Aid.

She thought of a movie she'd seen a few days before, a medieval thing where a king propositioned a girl who worked for the queen. The girl protested, but the king charmed her. When his wife found out and confronted him, the king insisted that it was the girl who came on

to him. Her mouth had dropped. It hurt to hear how blatantly people lied when they were cornered.

Maybe all of this was the oldest cliché in the book. Her cheeks burned. She felt as dumb as she had in grade-eleven science. Of course she'd ditched that class often. It taught her not to participate in things she knew she had no chance of conquering.

She stared at her shoes. She sat in the airport lounge until they called her and the other passengers onto the plane. Her hair was still damp, and she shivered.

Her flight had been delayed for three hours.

The snowfall was dizzyingly white. There was nothing pretty or individual about each snowflake. They fell in clumps, like feathers from a giant duvet. Soft but in numbers too large to count. Out of control, like the rest of it. Her window was small, but big enough to see it all.

She couldn't wait for global warming to kick in. She pictured herself on a beach, in a not-too-revealing bikini, with a baby polar bear at her feet. Maybe they'd learn to shed enough fur and change their diets to stay alive. She pictured its skin feeling as smooth as a seal's. She pictured them eating food from a can or kibble like dogs, people keeping them as pets. Evolution, adaptation.

We all learn to adapt, she thought. We learn to discard our hearts and our skins, like useless layers we no longer need to survive. We learn to expect less. We learn that what we want and what happens often have no correlation. Life just happens, whether you like it or not.

She pictured the bear with his eyes shut, beads of sweat running down its forehead. She was sure that, like the bear, these instincts would eventually kill her too. *We're not meant to survive these kinds of things, my friend*, she thought, and shut her eyes as the plane took off.

Still there was a part of her that refused to give up on love completely. A tiny spark of hope that no one could control or crush, not even herself.

The Womanizer

We were standing in line waiting to see *Home Alone II*. I was with my older sister and her friends, and he was with his older brother, Johan, and his girlfriend. Riaan was in my class at school, but we had hardly ever talked.

He grabbed my hand that day and whispered, "Nandi, you're prettier than Michelle Pfeiffer," and I blushed even though I had no idea who she was. He leaned in and said, "Johan always says she's really sexy." We were nine, and something about the way he said the word *sexy* made my heart flutter like bird wings inside my throat.

We went to an Afrikaans school that was intensely Christian. We read stories with characters like little Rachel Van der Merwe, who got lost in the woods and found her way out with God's help. We learned about the Battle of Bloedrivier in history class, where the Afrikaners beat the Zulus, despite being outnumbered and outweaponed, because of divine intervention. We weren't smart enough to roll our eyes yet, but we were starting to shift uncomfortably in our seats.

When we were ten, we found a stack of Riaan's brother's *Loslyf* magazines stashed between his mattress and the floor. They were softcore porn magazines, with pictures of blond *boeremeisies* with their tops rolled up and their breasts out. Their vaginas were covered in dark hair, their insides impossibly pink. They smiled half-smiles, eyes glinting like they were in on a secret. In their interviews, they all said that they loved to make love. One said that her fantasy was to spend an entire Sunday in bed with a man. Something about it made my skin quiver.

Riaan and I exchanged a look, a tacit understanding that our personalities were similar. We too were low-lives with dirty fantasies that burned holes in our consciences and childhood identities. We touched hands under his kitchen table one day and I swore that our

fingertips were scorching each other's. The ends of our hair smelled smoky and singed. One day we would live life on the edge.



We met again years later the same way lots of addicts meet, as part of a throng crowding around a coffee table deep inside a stranger's living room. His hair was long and hung in his eyes. His irises were pinned: sharp little thumbtacks that somehow pricked a hole in my heart. He was wearing a Replacements t-shirt and jeans that dangled off his slender hipbones. He was bent over, delicately chopping lines of coke with smooth flicks of his thin wrists. It looked balletic. We were nineteen and addicted to near-death experiences. He ate fire and I swallowed swords. We were futureless, both on indefinite breaks from university. We were both single. If the crime in South Africa didn't kill us, we'd probably get AIDS. Figured we might as well have fun, anyway.

I snorted deep, once, twice, felt the delicious burn from the tip of my nose to my sinuses, then stared as he caught my eye, still a far off memory. Then it clicked.

"*Hoe gaan dit?*" he said, and gave me a tight hug that cracked my ribs. *How are you?*

"*Lank lass gepraat,*" I answered. *Long time no speak.* We used to talk about how we'd be on TV one day. I wanted to be a presenter. I'd practise introducing shows as we watched them together at his parents' house. I wanted to wear ball gowns and have strangers want to hear what I had to say. He wanted to be an actor. He wanted to be on magazine covers, to travel to America, to be in movies. We lost touch when he moved from Johannesburg to Cape Town. I hadn't thought about him in years.

He looked the same that night—an unearthly beauty that he wore casually, like a jacket that he wasn't sure he wanted, but was afraid to discard because it might prove useful. We lived in different parts of Cape Town now—me in the city bowl, him in Obs—and it had been a long time, but we discovered that we both loved to go out and we both feared sleep. We were afraid to be alone with our own thoughts for too long. We ate pizzas covered in magic mushrooms on the beach

in Sea Point, hooked up with strangers whose names we soon forgot, rolled joints in the sand and vomited into the sea together, swallowed ecstasy and dropped acid and went dancing in dingy clubs in town, falling into each other, tripping on side streets.

He was always calling or texting; I enabled him, and then helped him to sober up. By the time we were twenty we were snorting coke on weeknights too. We were cartwheeling through outer space one night, high on pure, expensive snow, maybe some LSD for good measure, it's hard to recall exactly. I was light-headed, dancing in my socks and underwear in the passage, having a cigarette, when I heard a bang. I saw him fall. I heard the back of his skull as it hit the ground. I saw his arms and legs shake, lightly at first, then convulse. I watched the colour drain from his face, his ashy skin turn blue like the veins in his neck. Everything stopped, and I stood there frozen and useless. Two guys came and picked him up, spread his body out like a starfish on the beige-tiled kitchen floor. Riaan's eyes wide open, dull, staring. I didn't realize I was screaming until our dealer friend grabbed me and pulled me away. A guy I hadn't noticed before, in a polo shirt and khaki shorts, pressed his hands down on his chest and started pumping, harder and faster. He tilted his head back and gently lifted his chin. His long eyelashes made him look like a demented Sleeping Beauty. The guy pinched his nose and covered Riaan's heart-shaped lips with his. He blew into his chest, and I stood there waiting for the fairy tale ending, the part where the prince magically awakes.

Riaan's legs started to twitch. I saw his chest rise. I saw him start to breathe, slowly and then faster. My relief mixed with the annoying elation of coke popping through my synapses. I felt manic. He opened his eyes. His hands shook as he reached up to play with his hair. It was a childhood habit I remembered well. He used to wake up from naps with two fingers flattening one of the long pieces in the front of his hair. I sat down next to him. I wanted to kiss his cheek.

Riaan reached for my hand. I helped him to sit up, slowly. He hugged me for what felt like an hour. I was crying. He looked at me like *What the fuck do you look so serious about?*

"You could've died, you fucking idiot!" I yelled. I slapped his cheek, hard enough to leave the infrared imprint of two fingertips.

He got up, shakily, went back to the table where they were cutting

more lines. “No, man,” he said. “I’m not ready to go yet.” He snorted another one, threw his head back and laughed. “Nandi, come and join me,” he said, and I shook my head.

I called a friend to pick me up. I was too afraid to keep watching.

A week later I finally agreed to go to rehab. My family had been pressuring me for more than a year. My sister drove me. I expected a cross between a hospital and a prison, but it was a big white house with a Spanish terracotta roof. It was on a hill surrounded by green mountains dotted with heavy white stones. You could see the ocean, turquoise and indigo, frothing with white around the rocks, from almost every angle. I had to stay for a month. I had to give up my cell phone, the internet, and I couldn’t get any phone calls for the first two weeks. They searched me for drugs. I had to give them my tweezers, metal nail file, and shoelaces. I was one of sixteen women and men who were living there. The staff was available twenty-four hours a day, they told me, if I needed them. One of them talked about surfing and hiking. I’d drunk two bottles of wine before I arrived that first morning and I vomited at her feet. I spent the first three days in bed, vomiting and shaking. My nose ran and my muscles ached.

Eventually, I started to feel human.

The psychiatrist prescribed me antidepressants, and after a couple of weeks taking them it felt like the clouds in my brain parted. For the first time in years, I could see a tiny bit of sunshine.

Riaan called me after two weeks. He said he had seen my sister, and she’d told him.

He’d tried it twice then stopped, saying that the Twelve Steps weren’t doing shit for him.

“It’s not about believing in them word for word,” I said. “It’s the idea.”

“What does God have to do with anything,” he kept complaining.

“Nothing,” I tried to explain. “It’s just a kinder way to think of it.”

“It’s a bunch of bullshit,” he snapped. “*Jy’s vol kak.*”

I didn’t disagree, except for some reason it worked for me. It felt good to admit that I was powerless. I was tired of feeling like a terrible person because I couldn’t control myself.

We kept talking when I came home. I asked him not to visit me. I went to an outpatient recovery program and to Narcotics Anonymous meetings in Greenpoint twice a week. Sometimes he’d want to come with me, and he’d have a week or two of being clean, but he’d relapse and call me, high and slurring his words, as soon as he got stressed. I always saw it coming, but no matter what I said, there was nothing I could do. Sometimes I’d let him sleep it off on my couch and bring him water and aspirin the next morning. His face would be grey, and his cheeks imprinted for hours with the flowers on my pillows. His hair would stand on end the way it used to when we were kids. I knew he needed me. His other friends were addicts—those who weren’t had walked away years ago. The girls he met were one-night stands. They’d fall in love with him, and he’d return the favour by forgetting their names. He felt like an annoying, wayward brother that I was somehow responsible for. I didn’t know how to get rid of him.



Over the next four years, we both went back and finished our degrees. We both got jobs as journalists. He became an editor at an online newspaper, and I wrote two columns, one about fashion and one about relationships. He played guitar in a band that actually developed a local following. I sculpted, mainly people, out of wood and metal. Sometimes I had small, well-received shows.

We rented apartments in the same neighbourhood, near the city bowl. We hung out every couple of weeks.

He invited me over for dinner one night.

“You look beautiful,” he said as he hugged me. “That olive green, it’s great with your eyes.”

He made me feel like a gold sequin sewn into a jacket pocket, a hidden sparkler waiting to be discovered by someone when they least expect it.

I smiled even though I didn’t want to.

A year before we’d both been in love, both living with our partners. My boyfriend was a photographer originally from Jo’burg named Braam. Riaan was involved with a librarian named Elisma

who played guitar and wrote music with him. We were stupidly optimistic about our prospects.

He'd say, "When are you going to get pregnant already?" and I'd laugh.

"When your girlfriend does," I said. It seemed like we were both finally going to settle down.

We were both the ones who ended our relationships. We were both convinced that something better was waiting for us.

He put his arm around me and mixed me a gin and tonic. It was the first drink I'd had all day.

I shook my head. "Just gin, okay?" I drank occasionally and managed most of the time to keep it under control.

He grinned. "Okay, that kind of day." I nodded.

We decided to take our drinks outside. We sat by the pool in the back of his building.

He said, "I'm writing music again. I have seven new songs."

"That's great," I said, trying to be enthusiastic. "I'm starting to write a book."

"Really? How far are you?"

I shrugged. "Halfway. Maybe. Dunno. It's frustrating."

He nodded again. "Are you writing about men?"

I grinned. "*Jy weet dit*," I said. *You know it.*

"I'm writing about sex because I'm not having any. I can't even remember when the last time was," I said.

He nodded. "So no one, for the past year?"

I sighed. "One. Some guy. I liked him, he didn't want a girlfriend."

He looked at me. "*Ag kom aan*. Stop feeling so sorry for yourself. Bullshit. One guy. I don't believe you."

I thought about it. "Okay, there was one more. An engineer. I was so bored I decided to have sex with him just to make the date end already. He took forever. Like, can you just finish already?"

He laughed. "I haven't had any in ages either."

I stared at him. "What about the other night, at the club. That girl. You know . . . the blond."

"Whatever. What girl?" He paused. "Oh, right. You know, I never even asked her what her name was. Really meaningful as you can

see." He paused again, thinking, seriously concentrating. "No, it was rubbish. Bad kisser. Sloppy, you know? Spit everywhere. Grabby hands, all pinchy you know? Terrible blow job. Acted slutty, then wouldn't even swallow. I couldn't wait to just come, just so I could go home."

I nodded. "Sounds about right."

He laughed, then looked sad.

I sighed. "What's wrong with us? Why isn't it fun to be slutty anymore? Why has everyone settled down? God, it's depressing being old."

He put his hand on my leg. "Are you drunk?" he asked me.

I nodded miserably. My tolerance for alcohol had become depressingly low.

"You always get so serious when you're drunk. Melodramatic. I just don't know what to do with you, sometimes," he added, a little more gently.

"Sorry," I said and gave him an obviously fake smile.

"It's okay," he said. "I just had a great thought." He paused. "Let's have sex."

I scanned his face for the hint of a joke. I realized he was serious. "What?"

"Seriously. We know each other. We'll make each other feel good. And we'll still be friends after. You know nothing will ever change that."

I thought about it for a few seconds. I got up and paced, chain smoked. I took my shoes off, stood over the pool, and put a toe in.

The water was icy, the smell of chlorine overpowering.

"You know what a pain in the ass I am in relationships," I said. "I'm a disaster. I'll be needy and want you to be around every day." I stared at my wet feet.

He laughed then looked at me like he was reappraising my intelligence. "You know very well that I'm not the type to fall in love with. I'm the guy who's had more than a hundred partners."

I smiled. "At least," I said and raised my eyebrows.

"Really, Nands. I'm the guy who's been with girls and guys. I'm the guy who loves sex. I'm the worst boyfriend ever."

I grabbed his collar and kissed him. I heard our lips smack, and it

sounded like the faintest rolling of thunder before a storm.

He slid his hand down from my cheek to my neck and then my collarbone, above my breasts.

He stood with his back to the water. I pressed the weight of my legs against his—he leaned back and we found ourselves falling full force into the water.

We kicked and screamed and splashed each other. My eyeliner streamed down my cheeks. He laughed so hard he bit the inside of his cheek.

“I don’t care how many other people you want to sleep with,” I told him. “I don’t believe in love anymore,” I said sputtering for air. “Friendship is a lot more dependable. I only want the things that last.”

He looked sad.

He stroked my damp hair on my way out. My clothes were dripping. He walked me home.

Two hours later, he texted me. “Nandi, if I was ever capable of being in love with any human being, if I was the kind of person who wanted that, it would only ever be you.”

There were tiny flickers of dread mixed with a growing sense of urgency to say something.

I started to type *I know*, but I stopped myself.

It took me over an hour to respond.

“I’ve always loved you,” I wrote. “If I was capable of being normal in a relationship, it would only ever be you.” I waited another five minutes and then I added, “Come over.”

Fifteen minutes later, he rung my doorbell.



The Keeper of Your Secrets

You are really bad at being single. Every sentence out of your mouth is a desire to connect with someone. As a kid, you got into trouble for talking during class. You'd chat to anyone about anything: what you were learning, how hot or cold it was in the classroom, what they had for lunch, what you were doing after school. As an adult, you talk to strangers sitting next to you on the bus, strangers in line at coffee shops, runners on the treadmill next to you at the gym. You make small talk about the weather, ask them what they're reading, how long they've been working out. You read people well, so you know when to be energetic and when to seem measured. Other people's lives distract you from what you're feeling. What you feel most of the time is a low-level combination of boredom and loneliness.

You live alone now, after living with two roommates, three boyfriends, and an ex-husband, in that order. You order chicken pad Thai and mushroom green pepper pizzas and flirt with whichever delivery guy happens to show up at your door. You watch too much reality TV because it makes you feel slightly better about your intelligence. You leave wet towels and dirty underwear on the floor for days. You wear shoes indoors in February and stain your carpet with salt. You don't wrap up your pads and tampons discretely before throwing them in your garbage. You smoke too much, a pack and a half a day sometimes, inside, with the windows closed because no one can tell you not to. You sleep too much or find sometimes that you can't sleep at all. You go for runs at three in the morning and find that everyone you dated was wrong: it's not dangerous at all. You find it nearly impossible to sit still and relax.

Inside your limbs, something is vibrating.

You are not cut out for dating. You are truly capable of falling in

love with anyone. You're a sucker for romance. If he buys you yellow daisies or peanut butter cups, forget about it. If he writes you a song, hell, if he makes you a mix of romantic indie rock songs, especially if it includes Mazzy Star's "Fade into You" or even the Beatles' "Gotta Get You into My Life" or Lennon's "Oh My Love," you're a goner. You see the good where your friends and family can't. If they misunderstand him, you feel he needs you even more. That guy who hasn't worked in a year? He's a genius who's just waiting for the right job. That guy who talks shit about his ex? He's got a great heart. You think about the times you've been lied to or cheated on, and you still stayed, for months or years longer than you should have.

You tell yourself that you are on the verge of finding true love. The past will be nothing but great anecdotes one day, you just know it. You're hoping it can happen instantly so you can just skip the dating phase. It's the getting-to-know-you stuff that kills you: the days or weeks or months of breath-holding uncertainty. The not knowing how either of you feels. The unsettling uncertainty that you might be wasting your time.

You download the Match.com and OkCupid apps at your friend's urging. She knows you love being in love. She wants to force you out of your inertia. You create a profile. You mention your favourite books and music. You write that you're finishing your master's and that you hope to start your PhD next year. You hope to become an English literature professor. You upload two pictures of yourself: one of your face, close up, and one of you and two of your best friends at a party. You are wearing a halter top and a short skirt. The apps tell you to choose a user name. Your name is Melanie, and you love writing lyrics and singing, so you choose the name Melodyfive.

Two men message you within the first half hour. One is twenty-two and his user name is GoJaysGo. Three of his photos show off his incredibly tanned six-pack. In one photo, he's posing in his boxers, grinning. He has great dimples and terrible taste in music. You picture him driving a beaten-up red Corvette, blasting house music as he nods his head.

You're beautiful, he writes to you.

You imagine your date involving beer and dancing before he takes you back to his place. You bet he has mirrors on his ceiling. You're

and you had to lean into his chest so you could hear him. He offered to buy you a drink. He asked you what you did, and you told him you were a student. He told you that he was an actor, in town for a few days. He appraised you, with your hair in a tight bun, and your tortoiseshell glasses.

“You have a great look,” he said. His eyes rested on your cleavage.

Every other guy you’d met always pretended that he wasn’t looking. You liked his brazenness. He explained that he used to work behind the scenes, but he dated one of the actresses and his reputation spread. Eventually, the director wanted to meet him.

He leaned in, his velvety voice vibrating in your ear. “I have huge talent,” he said.

It took you a minute to understand, but then you laughed and rolled your eyes at him. Still, you were curious. You’d never met a porn star. You met some of his friends and co-stars later, at a loft they were renting up the street.

“You look like a hot librarian,” one of them said.

One of the girls poured you a glass of prosecco and kissed you on the lips. Someone else grabbed your ass. They made you feel sexy and adult. You agreed to sleep with him that night. He kissed you hard and pulled your hair. He wasn’t exaggerating about his size, either.

He asked if he could film you, first touching yourself and then having sex with him, with a camera he kept above his bed. He said he wanted to remember you when he went back to New York. It occurred to you the next day, like a dawning hangover, that he might post or share the videos. But you drank water and bought aspirin and the morning after pill, and you tried to forget. Months later a guy you were dating discovered them on a website called rookiepornvideos.com. You watched yourself with a mix of horror and fascination. You looked great. He didn’t use your real name. There were over fifty thousand videos on the site.

It was depressing how little you stood out.

He texted you again a month or two later, and you found yourself responding.

The next time he was in town, he asked you if you wanted to film a scene professionally.

“We need to choose a name for you,” he said. “Did you have any pets as a kid?”

You nodded. “I had a dog named Amber,” you said.

He grinned. “Amber is perfect. What do you think of Amber Jaye?”

You nodded. “Sure.”

He took you shopping for clothes that were tight but not too revealing. “You don’t want to seem like you’re trying too hard,” he said.

The director loved you instantly. “She’s perfect,” he said, nodding approvingly.

Filming was cold and clinical. The lighting was harsh and unflattering. There was a lot of waiting around. An assistant came and adjusted your bra and bedazzled thong underwear. A makeup artist put smoky eye shadow on your eyes and covered a scar on your chest. It dawned on you that you were really going to do this.

He barely made eye contact with you as he took your clothes off. When you were done filming, he put his pants back on and went outside to smoke a cigarette. You were embarrassed to look at him. The director’s assistant gave you a cheque for \$3,500. You didn’t know what to do with it. It sat in your drawer underneath that pair of underwear for months. You couldn’t bring yourself to throw them out.

You never spoke to him again. Thinking about it made you cringe. You felt like a kid who thought that Tinkerbell was real and was shocked when she broke her arm trying to fly off the jungle gym. You were too afraid to google yourself.

You didn’t date anyone for about three years after that. You were afraid of someone recognizing you from your video.

His reaction is the one you’ve always hoped for: he doesn’t judge you. He says, “We all did stupid things when we were young.” He doesn’t make you feel like you’ve made him feel uncomfortable by telling him.

You find yourself saying, “That’s not all. I felt awful about myself for years after. I couldn’t look at myself. I started taking Ambien to help me sleep every night and Valium to help me function during the

day. Eventually I found a therapist who really helped me. I try not to think about it anymore.”

He kisses your forehead and tells you he’s had dark times too.

Your body collapses into his with relief. You talk and touch and spoon in your narrow bed that’s barely big enough to hold you alone. He says he’s glad the bed is narrow, that it would make it impossible to go to bed in a fight. He is both romantic and practical in a single sentence.

You tell him that you hope this will be the start of something—because it’s been one of the best nights of your life.

He responds that you’re his if you want to be.

You start seeing each other as often as possible. He texts you quotes from books he’s reading. He tells you that you warm him in ways he can’t describe.

Then, only a couple of months into your relationship, the flu that’s going around knocks you out. You knew you should have invested in hand sanitizer. They tell you that you have H1N1. Your throat burns, you cough, you sneeze, your fever hits forty-one. You shiver, your teeth chatter, you take Tylenol and Advil and nothing brings the fever down. Your clothes are soaked with sweat; you tear them off then find yourself freezing again. You faint at the doctor’s office, vomit on their floor, swallow Gravol and extra-strength Tylenol as they wonder out loud if they should take you to a hospital.

Your mom, who lives in another city, is so worried she offers to fly in to take care of you.

That night he insists you come and stay with him. His place is bigger, he reasons. It only makes sense. He makes you tea and gets up in the middle of the night to buy you popsicles and orange juice. He helps you shower, washes your hair for you as you shiver. He strokes your face and covers you in blankets, helps you change your clothes, gives you Nyquil, brings you tissues. He kisses you and makes you feel desirable even though you look like death. You sweat in his sheets and talk in your sleep, thrashing and kicking him in the shins, and he doesn’t flinch. He actually looks at you lovingly.

When you’re feeling better, he offers to give you a key. He smiles when you say yes, his zigzagged teeth full of personality. You trace his lips with your fingers. You smile when he brings you a cup of tea in

bed that night, and he tells you it makes him happy to know that he created that expression.

You listen to the blues and watch two-dollar indie movies you buy from the sale bin at Walmart. You drink red wine from a single glass because you never finish yours. You never drink when you’re happy. You make prints of photos of the two of you and put one in a frame on the table in the kitchen. You go for walks until one in the morning and laugh and laugh.

Sometimes you miss the spontaneity of your former life. Sometimes you wonder if you both are crazy. Still, your relationship feels tinged with magic and possibility. You are sure that there is something miraculous about the way you managed to find each other. You hope that, somehow, you’ll manage to keep each other.