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# SACRAMENTO



The boy's early memories are all of hospitals. White curtained windows, bright white lights, and pastel walls. He is holding green jello (his favorite) or yellowish pudding (his close second-favorite.) His mother is eating her fruit from a can. That's her favorite. She likes to eat things out of cans.

For some reason, all of the rooms contain one of two pictures. It is always a star on the beach or a foot in the sand. Both images are close-up shots with words he cannot read. He asks his mom to read them, but she doesn't answer.

She looks at him with all her tubes and bandages. Her eyes bobble up like black stones sinking down in the sand. He says, Mom, and she blinks, like his words are a dribble of water dripped down from the ceiling. Her face is a jellyfish drying up fast from the white of the sun.

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*The woman's early memories are all of being cold. Cold feet, cold floors, cold bed, cold blankets wet with fever residue.*

*Her mother dies in winter. It is difficult to dig the grave. She watches the men. She scrapes the bits of dirt beneath her fingernails. She sees the water slowly seeping through the layers of her boots, half-wishes she could see her toes turn black.*

*It is 1847. She notates the year in her Bible. The scratch of her pen on the page is the sound of the cold. The ground looks wrong. The people, with their scarves, their faces buried. That is why she wants to move to Sacramento.*

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The girl's early memories are all of churches. Dim rooms, windows of squares black green, brown bottle, jelly red. The pews, they smell of carpet stained with vomit-cleaning chemicals. The priest, he smells of sweat-stained polyester robes.

Her mother and her father work in factories. They look like the churches, their long windows sectioned the same.

Sometimes the whole world seems like it is framed by filtered light, and wherever she is, and wherever she goes, she feels she should be kneeling.

*The woman is reading her letter again. She has crumpled the crease from repeated unfolding. She stares at the letter. The letter says, hello, my love.*

*She thinks, hello, my love. She unfurls this phrase. She smoothes all its edges. Sometimes she believes she is mending the phrase, like a small bird her migrating words have abandoned. She is stroking its feathers. She's trying to help it be hers. But sometimes she is crushing the bird in her thoughts. And sometimes, she is breaking its wings.*

*The letter says, hello, my love. I am thinking of you, and when you will be with me. I am looking out onto the field where the seedlings are starting to grow. By the time you are here, all the seeds will be tall, and the seeds will be plants, and the plants will be ready. The earth and the sky and the trees will be new shades, perhaps shades that I've never seen.*

*She imagines the words like they're things she can crumple and change. She thinks, hello, my love, hello, my love, hello, my love.*

*She has never met this man. She has never seen his face. She can't imagine what his voice would sound like.*

*She feels stupid and flat when she thinks of these things, like a landscape unmarked and unwandered. A landscape you pass through. The landscape she'll cross if she's going to reach him.*

*The voice that repeats the words, hello, my love, is not his, or how she would imagine his voice. The voice that repeats the words, hello, my love, is her own.*

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His recent memories are all of beer cans stacked in towers. All the tower stacks have been arranged around a ragged army tent. It's like his mother tried to make a fortress. He admires that. He wishes it weren't such a stupid fortress.

Every day, he wakes up, gets up, and descends the basement steps. He's careful not to knock the rows of towered beer cans. It's difficult because they take up almost every inch of space. He has carved out a delicate pathway that seems to get thinner and thinner each time.

He says, Mom. He hears a wheezing little groan inside the tent.

He says, Mom.

She says, what do you want? But she doesn't emerge.

He says, Mom, he called today. What should I tell him?

She groans and she rustles around. She says, I don't know. Tell him that I'm dying. I am dying. Soon I will be dead.

He climbs the stairs back to his room and he looks at himself in the mirror. He thinks, I look fat, and he takes off his clothing to check. He looks back in the mirror. He thinks, yeah, I am totally fat. His stomach rolls are almost on the verge of drooping. He fixes his hair. There is still hope, he thinks, if I do something now. He thinks, I need

a girlfriend. I just need a really nice girlfriend.

He tries to imagine a girl who would want to date him. He doesn't want to think she would be fat, like him. He doesn't want to learn to like his fat, or someone else's. He thinks, maybe she'd be thin, but kinda weird. He imagines a girl with smooth hair and a pretty complexion. Then, he mentally tangles her hair and adds zits, scabs, and make-up. He imagines her wearing a black mini-skirt and black fishnets with black lace-up boots. He thinks, yeah, that's his favorite, but then he feels stupid again. So he pictures her wearing black jeans and a dark zip-up jacket, his close second-favorite. He thinks, yeah, that's more realistic, and he feels proud of himself.

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*The woman decides what to bring on her long trip west. She doesn't know how many miles lie between them. She knows she must pack light. She knows she'll have to cross a desert. She knows that she won't see him til she reaches Sacramento.*

*She packs her quilt, her Bible, and her diary. She packs her sewing needles and her knives. She takes a picture off the mantle, places it aside. She fingers through some less-used pieces of embroidery.*

*The woman looks out of her window. The morning is wet, cold, and gray, and the streets are deserted. The mud-paved road is thick and treacherous. The rooftops of the*

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*houses drip with melting snow. The church steeple points like a finger misguiding its followers.*

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She tries to imagine her boyfriend. She hasn't seen him in 6 weeks. It's 11 pm on a week night, too late to be walking alone, not asleep. She is tired of chewing her lip in the dark. She opens the fridge and the pantry. No food. She slides on her shoes and she shrugs on her shirt and her jacket.

She creaks the screen door and she opens her bag. She digs deep for her last cigarette. It is torn and tobacco has spilt from the tip, but she lights it up anyway.

A dark little pool of summertime sounds paints her memory black. The purr of insects, distant cars, and other things that do not matter. It's inviting, to be overwhelmed by all these sounds that do not matter. More inviting than the constant non sound of not him not there.

She's walking along the periphery of town, where all the neighborhoods turn into factories and industrial parks. The industrial parks are surrounded by trees that don't seem to know why they are there. She pokes through the trees like she'll find something. She doesn't find anything.

She calls him again. She knows he won't like it, but she doesn't care. She has to call three times before he answers. When he does, there is a pause before he speaks.

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Her ear fills with the crackled gauze of other people talking.

He says, hey, what's up?

She says, not that much.

He says, are you ok?

She says, yeah, sure. Are you ok?

He says, I'm fine. I'm at a party.

She says, where?

In Sacramento, he says.

She says, where is that?

He says, I don't know. I should go now.

She says, please wait. Can't you talk for just another minute?

He says, why, is something wrong?

She thinks about it for a moment. She thinks, maybe. Probably, there is.

She stares into that patch of pointless trees. She pulls off a branch and she breaks it up into her hand. She scatters the twigs and the pieces of bark and she opens and closes her fingers. She blows off the dirt from the palm of her hand and she thinks, maybe this is my wish.

She pictures all the trees that stand between them. She imagines a time without highways or paved roads or cars to cut swiftly through spaces. She imagines a time without telephone wires or invisible sound waves of distance.

She thinks of how much more it meant then, two

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people apart, or together. She wonders, do the trees absorb the years of sounds unspoken?

He says, hey, is something wrong? Are you still there? Are you still there?

Am I still there? She wonders. Where is there? She doesn't know.

He says, are you still there? She thinks, I'm not. She doesn't answer. He says, please don't call me if you have nothing to say.

I'm sorry, she says.

He says, have a good night.

She says, have a good night. Then, his voice is gone.

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*She sets out with a heavy wagon and a heavy stomach. Her footsteps feel heavy too, a little bit ridiculous. She wonders when she'll start to feel hungry. She wonders when she'll wonder why she chose to bring these things.*

*When they get to the river, the men take control of the wagons. She walks through the river. The water comes up to her waist. Her skirt billows out so she can't see her feet or the way they are moving. A part of her worries she'll drift to the edge and discover her feet have been carried away.*

*Her feet emerge slick with the slime of the river. She looks up at the sky. The sky is gray and white. The grass is brown. The whole world smells like damp dead grass and wet*

*warm breath of animals. She walks beside the oxen and she wonders what they're thinking.*

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They meet at party. She's wearing his favorite, which is funny. She doesn't normally wear things like mini-skirts and fishnets. She's trying to be sexy for the party.

She thinks about her boyfriend at some house in Sacramento. She thinks of all the cute girls who must be there. She pictures them in something like she's wearing. She pictures their flat bodies and flat-ironed hair. Their breasts are little exclamation points. Their bodies end their phrases with so much exuberance.

She doesn't know why she is there. He doesn't know why he is there. They are in a basement standing by the band. The band members are dancing, but basically no one is dancing. The lead singer sings like he's trying to make himself puke.

This is bullshit, he says. He is standing beside her.

She nods in response.

I mean all of this, he says, to clarify.

She says, yeah, I think you're right. They leave.

He wants to tell her he thinks she is pretty. He wants to tell her he likes what she's wearing. He wants to say, I can't believe how much you are my favorite. Her breasts look big and round and serious.

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He drinks from the 40 he stole from his mom. He says, want some?

She takes it and drinks.

He says, sometimes I wonder how long it will take for my body to fully decay.

That depends on a lot, she says absently. That all depends on the body, the place where it's buried. The temperature, climate. The age of the person. The state of his organs. The strength of his bones.

I don't think I would last very long in the ground, he says, reaching to her for the 40.

She looks over his body. She thinks, no, you probably wouldn't.

He walks her home. She doesn't feel like sleeping when she gets there. So they wander awhile, past the pointless trees and factories. The night is humid. All around, the smell of soil stains the air. The factories groan, and the leaves of the pointless trees whisper.

I don't have any friends, he says, tossing the 40 aside.

I don't have any either, she says, just my boyfriend. He's always on tour.

Let's be friends, he says, suddenly. She looks up, stunned by his words. How strange to hear a person's need spelled out so plainly.

Okay, sure, she says, and she smiles unsurely. He smiles a smile of relief. I don't know what to do now, she says. Should I hug you? Or what?

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I could go for a hug, he admits. So she hugs him. The hug lasts three seconds. He counts in his head. When she steps back, the smell of her fruit-scented hair product lingers.

You smell like green jello, he says.

She says, that's good to know.

They stand for awhile, not speaking. They've said all they needed to say.

He goes home and pulls out a freezer-burned dinner and nukes it and carries it down to the basement. He puts it in front of the tent. He has to set it on the floor.

His mother says, you smell like you've been with a girl.

He says, I'm moving out. I need my own space.

She coughs. Well, go figure. Well, I'm dying anyway.

He says, I'm dying too. I just get sick of watching.

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*A man sits by her by the fire when they camp. He is older, unmarried. He is strong and broad-shouldered, but quiet. He clears his throat and offers her some water. The shadows make his full gray beard seem dark, like looming mountains.*

*She says, thank you. She drinks.*

*He says, full moon. He drinks, but from a bottle.*

*She says, so it is. She looks at the moon, which is full, like a boil or blister. She looks at his profile, the glaze of his*

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*skin from the fire. His cheeks are flushed, but hollowed out. He sighs.*

*Her stomach aches with unfamiliarity. She's hungry. She no longer feels heavy. She is aching with the urge to fill her hunger. She is aching with the urge to feel full.*

*He says, best keep an eye peeled, when the moon is full.*

*She says, so I've been told. The moon makes me afraid.*

*He stares up like his eyes have been pulled open by the sky. Best keep an eye peeled, ma'am, he says, if you know what I mean.*

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The next night, he returns to her front door. She isn't there, so he waits for her out on the front porch. He waits for two hours. The air from the porch is refreshing. He likes where she lives. It is nice to be sort of inside of her house, but not really.

He likes it because porches are the opposite of fortresses. He could live on this porch if she let him. He wonders why most people don't live on porches.

When she gets home, she jumps when she sees him. She says, what the fuck.

He says, I'm sorry. I just felt so lonely.

He starts to leave, but she says, no, ok, wait, it's ok. Let's just walk awhile. I still don't feel like going in, she says.

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They walk that night. They walk again the next night. It becomes a nightly thing. He brings two bottles wrapped in paper bags.

They drink until the fields feel immense. They laugh at things they do not think are funny. They walk until it seems like they could walk across the borders of one state into the next into the next.

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*The days grow warm and long, which means more walking. The sameness of the landscape hypnotizes her. The roses of her calico look faded. They have turned from golden green to pale flax to grayish white.*

*She has \$40 left, but she won't need it. They will live on honey, fruit, and fresh new vegetables. She will not need these boxes of dried bread, these strips of salted meat. She will not need to pickle everything she picks.*

*The days grow warm and long, but she grows frightened of the nights. The darkness deafens her to all but sounds that should be threatening. She folds her hands and clutches at her heart. She thinks of when she'll have to share his bed. She wonders if she'll sleep with him. She wonders if she'll sleep. Perhaps she'll lie awake each night, in fear beside him.*

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One night, he admits he's a virgin. He says this when asked how he lost his virginity. He says, still got it. He hurls a 40. He wishes that he had a shotgun to shoot it.

I lost mine when I was 16, she says. I was out drinking with friends in the woods. I went to swim in the lake, and some guy was already there, pissing. I looked at his dick. I was drunk and I wanted to see it. We went and we fucked in the back of his car. It didn't seem fair to say no.

How was his dick? He asks.

It was so-so, she says. Kind of dry. It was shaped like a mushroom.

That sounds really gross, he says, softly. His own dick is hard.

Speak for yourself, she says. I'm not a virgin, at least.

There's a silence they fill up by digging around for more beer.

So, why are you a virgin? She asks him. They look at the ground and continue to wander. The ground is long dry yellow grass that is buzzing with crickets. It whispers and crackles beneath them.

He says, I don't know. Never met anyone that I liked enough.

She smiles a weird misshapen smile. But you like me though, right?

He looks back at her and he doesn't smile. He thinks about it for a moment. He says, right.

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*The days grow warmer, longer. They keep getting lost. They circle. She hums to herself. Birds circle them as they approach the desert.*

*This is the last river, they tell her. There will be no more, before the desert. You must take on all the water that you can.*

*She cups the water in her hands to drink it. She cups her hands around her stomach, bulging up with water. She tells her stomach, you can make it, like she's talking to a child that will die a little with each step she takes.*

*This is the last river, they tell her. You must retrain yourself, from here. Your body must change now, learn how not to want all the things that it needs.*

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He gets his own apartment on the edge of town, where things are cheap. He's going to make his home among the pointless trees and factories. Each hour, he can hear the bell tone of the changing shift. He wonders if that's how he'll come to count his days.

His apartment looks just like a one-hour motel that's been repainted white again thousands of times. When he thinks of this, he thinks, that totally is what it is.

He thinks, I need to get some shit before I go insane.

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I need to get some shit that girls would like. Specifically, his favorite girl. Some shit for her.

He goes to the thrift store and mills around. He touches things and smells them. What shit do girls like? He has no idea. He thinks they like blankets and flowers. He picks up a blanket with flowers and smells it. The flowers smell like cigarettes and oatmeal.

He picks up a framed antique landscape and looks at the image. Leaves of blackish green are climbing up the set of sandstone pillars. They are sheathed in rays of sunlight that seems strangely hesitant. The hills beneath the pillars—not the stones—seem to be crumbling.

Meanwhile, his mother's bottle drops and shatters. In her mind, she is a picture in a frame. She has picked herself out as a photograph, glossy, age 26, hair streaming down. She is laughing. She's hugging some flowers. Here, she is her favorite.

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*To make room for the water, she tosses her candles and candlesticks.*

*To make room for the water, she tosses her spindles and spinning wheel.*

*To make room for the water, she tosses her grandfather clock.*

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*To make room for the water, she tosses her grandmother's china.*

*To make room for the water, she tosses her boxes of beads.*

*To make room for the water, she tosses her hope chest of lace.*

*To make room for the water, she tosses her flour, ten pounds of her bread, meat, and vegetables.*

*To make room for the water, she tosses her silverware. Now she must eat with her hands.*

*To make room for the water, she tosses her mirror. She shudders when it shatters. Now she'll wake every morning and wash without seeing her face. She thinks, it's for the best. She knows she's giving up on something. She thinks, maybe now it's my turn to forget what I look like.*

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It has been a whole week since she's heard from her boyfriend. She calls then hangs up five times in ten minutes. He calls her back and answers, what the fuck?

Sorry, she says. This is off to a bad start, like always. I just, you know, wondered, you know, how you were doing.

I'm doing fine, he says.

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Oh, she says. I'm doing fine as well.

Jesus, he says.

What's the matter? She says.

Nothing, he says. I'm doing fine.

She pauses. I miss you, she says. But does she really?

A pause. Don't you miss me? She says. She thinks he doesn't.

His voice softens. Of course, yeah, he says. Yeah, I miss you.

So what are you doing? She asks.

I don't know. Nothing, really. He pauses. Nothing much.

Anything fun? She says.

No, he says, no. Nothing much. Nothing fun. Nothing anything.

Don't you want to know what I've been doing? She says.

No, not really, he says. I mean, no. I mean, no, well, you know, like, I mean, like, I think I can guess.

He pauses, as though to absorb the jagged tone of his own answer. She can hear a motorcycle passing through the line between them. He says, sometimes, I just wish I could hold you. Wish we didn't have to talk like this.

She thinks, we don't.

He says, babe, I'm sorry.

She is calling on a walk along the factories, of course. The branches of the pointless trees are moaning.

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Somewhere hidden in their depths are silent birds. She thinks about the birds and all the bugs within their feathers.

And the bugs in the feathers.

And the feathers in the birds.

And the birds in the branch.

And the branch in the tree.

And the tree in the hole.

And the hole in the ground.

He doesn't like to talk, she thinks. He doesn't like to talk. She recycles this phrase a few times in her head like she's stupid. He doesn't like to talk, she thinks. He doesn't like to talk. With each repeat, the muscles in her throat clench tighter, tighter. She swallows and her chest begins to feel concave.

And the bugs in the feathers.

And the feathers in the birds.

And the birds in the branch.

And the branch in the tree.

And the tree in the hole.

And the hole in the ground.

And the green grass grows all around.

By the 8<sup>th</sup> repeat and tighten, she can't swallow anymore. She can't clench any further. She unclenches and explodes.

No, she says. You know what. No. I think that's fucking bullshit.

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Through the phone, she hears his fingers drumming on a table. She hears the drumming stop and knows they're rising to his temples. Jesus Christ, she hears him say. Are you nuts? I didn't do anything.

I think I'm breaking up with you, she hears herself say. He says something back, but for some reason she can't hear him.

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*An elderly woman in the train is ill. She is coughing as she walks until she falls. The men fold her up into blankets and make her a nest in the back of her wagon.*

*The moon is full. The wind is heavy, and the night is strangely cold.*

*She lies awake and hears the woman coughing. Somewhere near, she hears another woman crying to her husband.*

*They unwrap the woman's body in the morning. Her face is covered in a rash of sores. The men exchange looks. One man takes off his hat. They say, just try to get as much rest as you can.*

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One night, he's too lonely to wait for her any longer. He imagines what she smells like, in those fishnets. He sits

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on her porch until she shows up. He still doesn't have her number.

He sits on her porch and he drinks. When she shows up, he's drunk.

He says, I don't like it, you know. The fact that I'm a virgin.

She says, yes, I know. I wouldn't like it either.

I'm a virgin because I don't like myself, he says.

She says, I don't know if I like myself or not.

He says, I have a new apartment. Do you want to see it?

She thinks for a moment about what he's really asking.

I bought a new painting, he says. It reminds me of you.

They stand in silence for another moment while she thinks.

His ears prick. What's that clicking sound? He says.

She is sliding the cap of her lipstick around in her pocket. Oh, nothing, she tells him. She takes the lipstick out and puts it on.

You look pretty, he says.

She says, thank you. She looks in the hand mirror.

You always look pretty, he says.

She glares into the mirror. She almost snaps. Instead, she starts to cry. I'm not, she says. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not.

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He pulls her to his chest with a resolve that startles both of them. He holds her and he stares into the distance. It takes him so much time to process what he's doing that he doesn't even hear her when she says, um, you can touch me.

She repeats, you can touch me, and he does.

He touches her hair.

He touches her chin.

He touches her neck.

He touches her shoulders.

He touches the lengths of her arms, which are naked and soft.

His fingers move around her wrists in small repeating circles. She looks up at him. His dick feels like a dead fish on a spear. He needs to burn this feeling. He says, let's go back to my apartment.

She says, okay. Let's go. Then her voice gets really gentle. He doesn't like how she sounds like another person.

They take the indoor staircase, which is deep red brown-stained carpet. In between each door there is a bright green shell-shaped sconce of light. She says, this hall is creepy in a good way, like a church. He thinks she doesn't really sound convinced.

He opens the door, which is also green, flicks on the light. The apartment is basically empty inside. There's a painting and four cardboard boxes. In the corner there's a pillow and a folded sleeping bag. He doesn't have a bed

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to sleep on yet.

She points at it. Doesn't sleeping like that hurt your back?

He says, no, it doesn't, but it does. He doesn't care.

He thinks of how he doesn't care. It makes his dick feel better. He steps back and he sits, then lies back on the pillow.

She says, should I lie down on there with you? He says, no. When she's close, his dick feels like it's scraping down a plastic slide. He doesn't like the fear of getting shocked and being thus exposed. He says, no. You stand there, if that's all right.

Okay, she says. Should I, you know, do something?

He thinks, then he breathes in. He says, yes.

What should I do first? She says. She is looking down.

He says, first take off your shirt. He's looking at her.

She takes it off and folds it on the floor, just like his sleeping bag. She folds her arms across her bra. She says, it's cold.

It isn't cold, he says.

She moves her arms back to her sides. She says, oh. I guess it really isn't.

He breathes in again. He says, take off your bra.

She takes it off and folds it by the shirt. Her breasts look like two frozen teardrops made of milk.

Her nipples are so light they almost blend into the

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rest of her. He wants to watch her touch them til they turn the shade they should be.

He says, nice. That sounds so creepy, he says, sorry.

She says, that's okay. What should I do now?

He says, touch your nipples. She brushes her fingers against them. He says, pinch them, but their color doesn't change.

He says, take your skirt off. She takes off her skirt. She's wearing cotton panties with a faded yellow rose print. He says, take your panties off. She takes them off. Her pubic hair is trimmed and shaved into a strip. He doesn't think he likes the way that looks. He didn't think she was the sort of girl who shaved that way.

He says, let me see your lips. He breathes. He says, I mean your pussy. She shifts her heels, adjusts her legs a bit. She parts her lips and holds them open, one hand on each side. She looks at her toenails and thinks of how she needs to trim them.

He says, wow, and she thinks of her boyfriend, her ex-boyfriend. She thinks about how she would never be thinking with him. She thinks how he'd be there, then inside her. She thinks of how sometimes he would be finished up already.

She says, should I take your clothes off?

He says, just take off my pants. His dick smells like strawberry mousse and it looks like pink play dough.

She says, are you hard?

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He doesn't look. He says, um, I think so.

She says, should I suck it?

He says, I don't know.

There is a moment of silence. She looks at his dick and she almost gives up and gets dressed. Instead, she undresses the rest of his body and presses her skin to his skin and she closes her eyes as she wiggles around on his lap as she's trying to fuck him.

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*By the time they reach the desert, she is feverish. Many people in the train now share the woman's rash. She scratches at her face. Her lips are cracked. She cannot drink. She cannot rinse her hands or wash the sand stuck to her skin.*

*She sees the carcasses of animals that other trains have left behind. Birds peck the sundried bones of mules and horses. If I die, she thinks, they'll leave me in the sun. She imagines a bird with the bead of her eye bleeding into its beak.*

*The bright sky bleaches out the earth. The cloudless sky looks white. The world is filled with long dark rifts that scream for rain to fill them. There's a haze on the horizon. She keeps seeing mounds. She wonders if they're bodies. Yes, of course. Of course they're bodies.*

*Bone pierced linens, shards of meatless ribs and emptied sacks, splayed ringless fingers, legs and hipbones, no meat in*

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*between them.*

*Someone's dog or just a dog is digging in the sand. It digs until it stops to leave a stream of red-stained urine. The piss stream trickles into shapes like stalks of wheat. She smiles. She thinks, that's what hope is, noticing these things.*

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She goes home and she goes straight to her bedroom. She digs through her dresser drawers until she finds his shirt. She carries it to bed. She strokes the buttons on its wrists. She plucks at the embroidered flowers. She fingers the frays of its ribboned lapels.

The shirt says, sorry. I just don't know what to say. She tells it, that's ok. You're just a shirt. Just let me hold you.

The shirt says, it feels strange to just be held. To not be worn. It feels like you're trying to make me something I'm not.

She closes her eyes and she ponders its words for a moment. It seems sinister, making things into things that they are not. Is she sinister? No. Is she doing this? Yes. She says, seriously, what if I am?

The shirt sighs and it says, okay. It curls up in her arms. The shirt smells like stale weed, warm bread, and boy's deodorant. The remnants of his odors smell like shirt, but not like him. The shirt smells her and wishes it

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could turn into a man.

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*She holds the letter in her tent at night. She holds the letter and she reads it in her head. Her thoughts are just mirages. She ignores them. She ignores this. She repeats, hello, my love, hello, my love, hello, my love.*

*She imagines he doesn't exist. She imagines she doesn't exist. She imagines these words as a soft bluish vapor that quenches her pain to the core.*

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He leaves his new apartment. He goes home. He tiptoes down the stairs and crawls into the tent.

He curls into his mother's arms. She's sleeping and he knows that she is dreaming about being someone else he doesn't know.

He tells her, I love you.

She tells him, I love you too.

He shuts his eyes. He pretends that the tent is surrounded by stars.

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