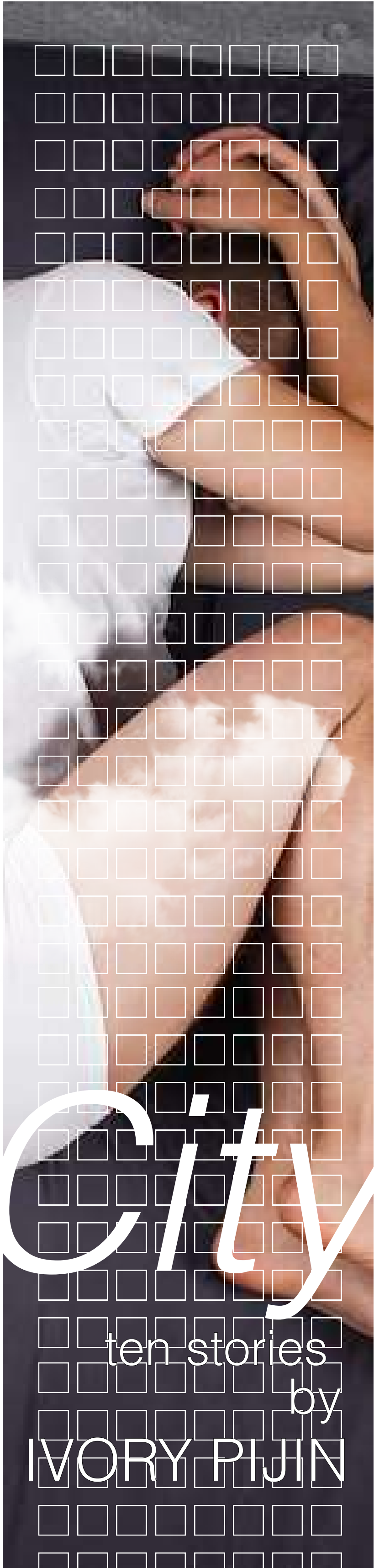
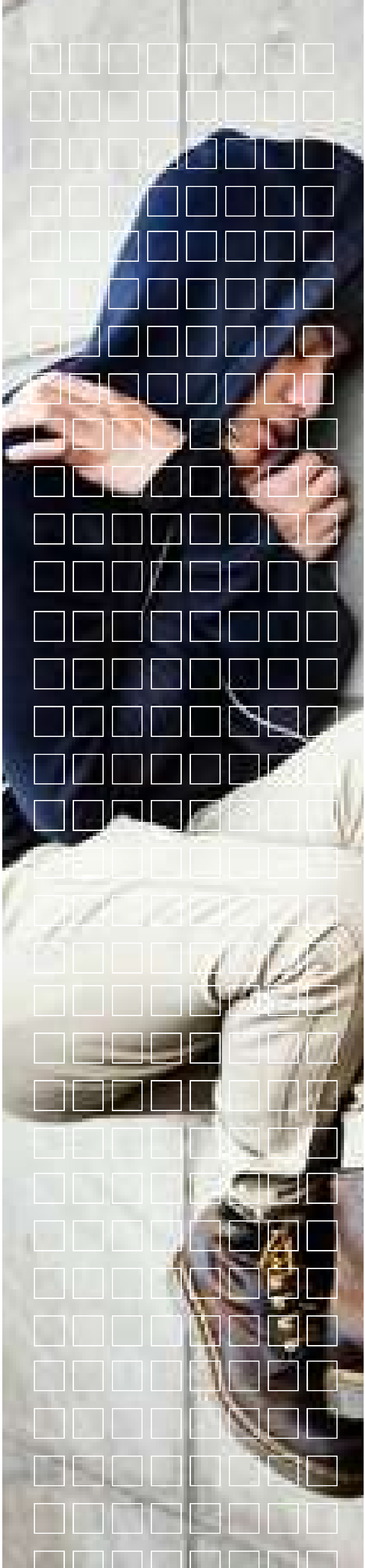


City,



City

ten stories
by
IVORY PIJIN



000001
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01

You see me.

Yes, I am guilty of loving
food from the gas station.

Once I had a job and a
phone and an apartment
and a girlfriend.

It was too much thinking for
me. Now, I got Jimmy Cliff,
Bobby Vinton, Neil Young.
1000 songs in my pocket.
I've got my own place.

Next time you'll see me, I'll
be in the park a few streets
away.

I won't talk, I'll listen. I don't
bother anyone, no one

When my head starts turning, I put on my suit.

Then it stops.

I am dreaming of a juicy burger from a grocery store. Or Diazepam.

The night I was on the prowl, I was dreaming of the bins going open and close, the restaurants shut and the noise dwindling. The manna. The chefs spilling out, me in.

There was nothing I could do in that pile of twisted metal and smoke. The entire front was torn off in the collision, leaving behind a trail of hubcaps, headlights and evil. The whole street smelled of burnt rubber. Somehow his suit was intact.

The blood was still

So I dragged him onto his stomach.

His chest spasmed once, splattered with food, and a stain growing from his pants.

I wandered his pockets, turning him over.

I found the wallet, real snakeskin leather.

His portrait grinned back with a set of pearly whites.

'If found, please return to...'

I looked back at the suit again.

It peeled off.

The first day I wore it, they welcomed me into those nice grocery chains with the delis. One day, I just walked out with my food. Nobody cares.

Last Christmas, I spent the month in Soho. 'Can I please try out the bla bla bla,' pointing to the porcelain menu.

I shake her hand. Hers is warm, powdered, and cared. Mine are cold, firm, learned. She's looking at my cufflinks. Carat gold. Department store. My cuffs are whiter than the tablecloth. She's looking at my hair. It's slicked back, cut, perfect. What she doesn't know is I've got ten eyes. Two on her, two on the hostess, two on the doorman with a radio, two on the customers next to me, and two on the steak.

It'd be too late.

Today, I ate nothing but an apple. The suit was at the tailors. When I'm not wearing it, life gets pretty still. I watch the clouds ahead of me. Maybe take a Zopiclone.

By the time I got home, the Sun was already setting. The oranges and pinks made way for a purple that blanketed the sky. The Moon shone dully, barely piercing through the smog like jazz.

It wasn't long after I jolted
awake.

Pitch black.

I stirred around.

'I am home, I am safe'

I laid my head down
again on the mattress and
drew the blanket over my
face.

I shut my eyelids and
drifted back off into...

Skrink!

My ears rang hot.

I shot up out of bed.

I felt like I was on fire.

Skrink! Skrink!

I was stuck in my bed.

The sound boomed from
the corner of the room.

The blackness was thick
like gasoline, suffocating
me.

Skrink!

Skrink!

I could make out some of
my stuff.

The bare mattress on the
floor.

My sneakers. Alongside
my jersey.

My iPod.

My suit by the pillar.

My bag.

All together, a concrete box
with an aperture and glass
door,

barren aside from
my stuff, the rusted rebar
that snaked the ceiling
and,

the broken glass that
tinkled on the floor like
snowflakes

and the hammer held by a
glove, penetrating the
room.

Beyond the room, were
many others like this on, on
this floor, at least, full of
nothing but concrete,
glass, and rebar. All part of
a complex that never came
to be. Untouched. Not even
the taggers knew about it
yet.

Just me in my fortress,
and now, the person
smashing the tempered
glass door in.

Skrink!

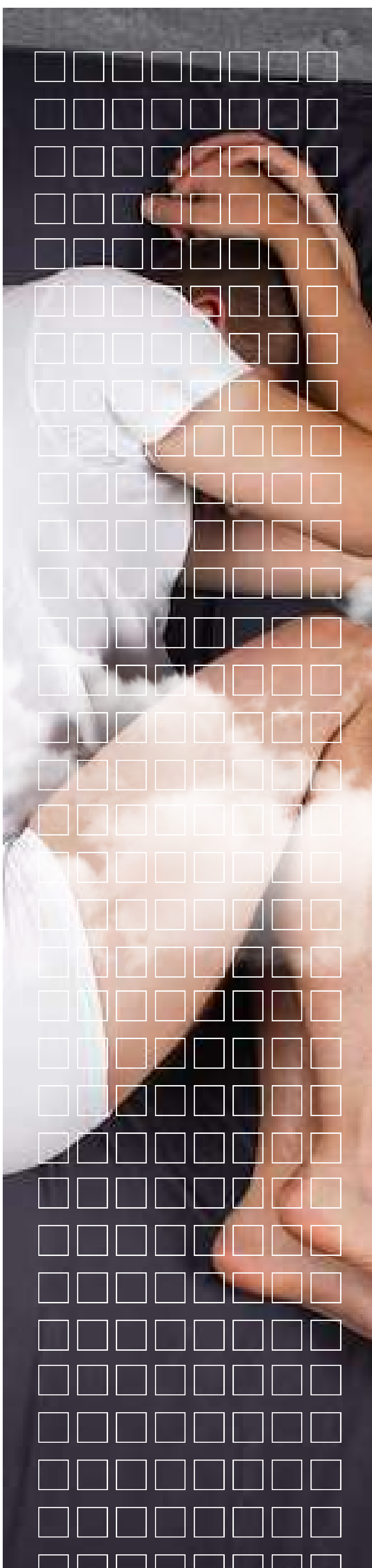
I had maybe five more
seconds

I searched every floor,
every room,
in the whole building from
top to bottom. Nothing
showed up.

When I finished,
the Sun began to rise and
my room was flooded by
the skylight.

The glass on the floor
twinkled like stars.

1000
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02

At 06:30 AM, I arrive at work.

The door creaks, and Jamie, the bartender, slides into the room with five cups of black coffee.

As he leaves, he nods. We tap elbows.

It was time to reload the machine.

I tinkered with the buttons, and it churned out the drone song ending in two beeps.

Boiling water flooded its guts and blasted the

chrome walls.

A pause.

Vapour escaped to the ceiling and the clouds crumpled.

Then all the spittling died down,

and the whirring fell to one

final

beep.

Cautiously, I jerked the lever.

Clouds came crashing out of the innards, choking the room in a silver bubble.

It was one of the few things I liked about work.

Not great when the waitresses threw dishes in the sink.

Sometimes, they'd break. Once it slashed my palm. Even after I got plastered, I still cleaned. The copper smell never left me.

I don't like it when the chefs are in a mood.

Sometimes, they'd shout at each other; then at me.

They'd say sorry after service was over and we'd be in the back smoking cigarettes.

At 07:00 AM, the others come, taking their coffee.

Chef Sam came in with sous, Rachel. He waved. She mouths a hello.

Two days ago, in the basement, Felix told me they were having sex.

'Can you not see? It's so obvious.'

'Hey!'

'Hey, Maryam'

Her hair's in a bun.

She called in sick a few days ago.

She's tanner now.

I was glad I could watch as she chased down tickets, chopped carrots and went a bit crazy. I'd stare as she strapped up her apron, hoping if she had just a moment, she'd glance and smile back at me.

I feel the letter's roughness in my back pocket. The creases on the corners, and how the edges poke when I move. I'm reciting the words in my head.

The whole day, I washed.
On and on.
Everything entered the machine, then
came out humming.

03:00 PM, lunch: spag bol & meatballs.
We broke bread, feasting on the
benches in the back, the tiny
encasement in the restaurant,
where we dressed and dined.
It was damp and cold, built for mice,
occupied by humans.
Low ceiling,
a singular lightbulb washing all of us in
a blonde veneer.

Rachel poured some house red into
disposables.
A week ago, Maryam and I went for a
smoke
and she ate her face off talking about
actresses.

She sneezed a couple times and I smiled.
And we stared at each other for a second.
And then she kissed me.

I hadn't seen her since.
When she was away, I wrote her the letter.

Now, we were tumbling on each other drunk
like choir girls.
Nina Simone on Felix's boombox, we
swayed hand-in-hand to the others' wooing.
Maryam whirled me around and I dove, still
in slippers.

Chef turned off the music. 'Okay, enough.
Dinner's on,' and with that, he left the room
and
Rachel filed out after him then Felix
abandoned his boombox, making faces at
us,
leaving Maryam and me
alone.

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abandoned his boombox, making faces at
us,
leaving Maryam and me
alone.

She half-collected her things, pretending to
need more time.
I was under the lightbulb, laughing hand
over my chest.
She's behind me.
Her lips to my ear, whispering
I heard you wrote me a letter
Who told you? I asked.

She shrugged.
'When will I read it?'
I shook my head,
You won't.
She winked, her lips to my ear.
Her warmth.

She tiptoed closer.
And then, she kissed me.

Her lips smelt like coffee beans,
tobacco, and orange skins.
She pulled me closer.

I gasped as she fell deeper into me.
Our tongues interlocking into a braid,
rushing past.

Daniel and I came on the boats.
He was so much stronger then.

The night spun out into a seeping blue.
Short violent gusts encircled leaves and
dust on the pavement into small tornadoes.
Sedans blurring under my dull metal heart.

I fished out the letter from my pocket.
From my lips, I let the words out, flowing.
Then the envelope hit the trash can.

I turned the corner into our apartment
block,
Over the pothole. I got to our steps, undid
my shoes.
My fingers wrapped around the doorknob, I
took a breath.

Daniel...
My nails were dug down to the cuticles.
He was on his desk.
And from his computer,
sterile rays were piercing
his slumped-over head.

He snored,
Shadows pooling on his cheek, his chest
rippling.
My wrist brushed his forehead. Wake up,
Yes,
His eyes were burnt out from the blue light.
I put his hand over me.

I removed his shirt and felt his torso.
I sat over him.
I kissed his cheek then undid the zipper.

And the next day, I arrive at 07:00 AM.
Plates were piled in columns near the sink.
Cutlery floated, heaping into the basin.
The bin overflowed with tins and peels.
Chef was chopping figs and spilling them into
a bucket.
Dessert day.

In the same bucket, Rachel spiralized oranges.

Plucking grapes was Felix.

Time, chef, tutted Maryam.

Frowning, pointing at her watch.

She brushed past.

I couldn't muster something to say back.

The machine groaned into gear, hissing grimly.

I tugged the lever upwards. Flames arrived in waves.

The tears came.

Bent over the toilet.

And vomit splashed into the bowl.

Crawling back outside.

I fastened my apron, put on gloves, and began to scrub the dishes.

I looked across the room and my eyes met with Maryam's.

She smiled at me.

At 06:30 AM, I get to work.

The new bartender, Julien, brings in 2 lattes, 1 cappuccino, 2 Americanos, and 1 green tea.

The green tea is for me.

Nina Simone is playing from my speakers.

Stephan, Kevin, and the temps walk in and start prepping for service.

At 01:00 PM, I clock out.

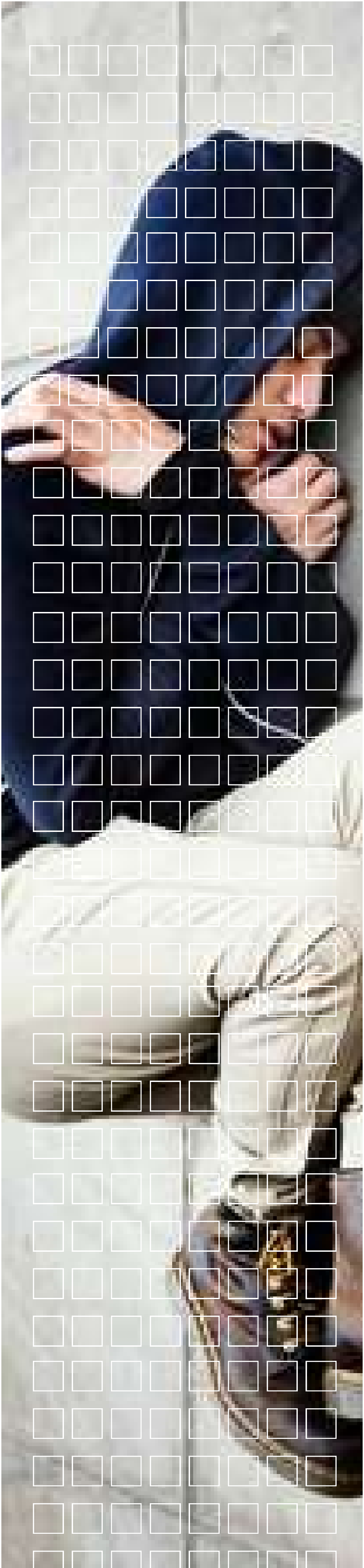
I walk to St. Paul's Primary by the church on Leonard Street.

It's only about ten minutes.

The kids got let out early, they trickled over the steps, laughing and screaming.

I spot Noah from the crowd running to me with his arms stretched out.

My dear boy, my dear boy.



03
05
07
09

03

The first time I jerked off, Caleb was in the room with me.

We were sitting on the computer in his dad's library.

On the screen was a cartoon octopus with a woman.

We locked the doors.

He told me to take off my briefs.

My nose flared.

The octopus wrapped its mass around her.

Caleb had one hand in his boxers.

She let out a moan and

I held my breath and
squeezed.

He came, then I did.

We both went to St.
Edmunds School for
Boys.

I only just moved the
summer before last.

One day, my dad came
home early from work with
a box of his things.

On Saturdays, we went
from watching cartoons to
men with graphs.

The new house had a
smaller TV.

I liked to sit out on the
lawn.

That summer, I drew
twenty clouds. Our street
had sixteen houses.

Eleven had awnings. After
the asphalt, it curled into
endless stretches of
green.

If you kept going down one
of these paths, past the dirt
and mud puddles, the
pebble stream, past the
river, and the rusting
bridge,
you'd find the island.

One time, people
honeymooned at Ellen's.
'Half a football field' a sign
read with sketches of
couples in Sunday suits
and ballgowns flying in the
sky.

Now, it was deserted,
overflowing bushes spilled
out into the water.

A tree jutted out of the cottage.

As the days started to grow from dark to light, I'd be there, watching the grass grow.

We had to read Catcher In The Rye, so I read Catcher in The Rye on the island.

I'm on page one forty four. The trees rustled. I stared back into the trees.

<Hey, boy!>. I got up from my stump and crossed back into the forest.

<Jacques, come here!>

<...Jacques!>

There was a splash followed by barking, thundering through the bushes.

Wings flapped, ricocheting off the branches, sending squirrels tumbling back down to earth.

'Yo!' I shouted.

<Hey! I need help!>

I leapt out the bush and he was sitting at the fringe by the perimeter.

In the deep, a Border Collie yelped and shrieked, scrambling its paws.

<He's->

I dived in with my clothes on.

But I didn't time it right, so my head rang.

My fingers broke the surface and I sucked for air.

The dog scampered not too far. I snapped him up in my arms.

It took me a few seconds to wade back to the bank.

The boy reached for me.
As I lay next to him
panting, soaked in my
jeans,
he thanked me, smiling
from ear to ear,
and the dog circled him,
leaping at his knee.
<You go to St Edmunds,
don't you?>
I nodded.
<I'm Caleb.>
We shook hands.
His hands smelt like
talcum.

In school, we'd wave at
each other. We'd say a
few words here and there.
But he never mentioned it
and neither did I.

<So my pops goes "Don't
go hanging around that
kid"> Caleb, <I wonder
when my dad became so
gay!>

His dad was a senator,
both his parents were mad
about me.
His dad thought I was the
one buying him drugs.
Caleb bought them all
himself.
<You know I love you,
man>

<What's up?>
'I'm moving'
and I told him how my dad
got a new job in a new town
with a new school.
Now we have to leave in
thirty days and pack
everything back up again.
All my books, jeans, and
posters in new boxes. Our
SUV for our new place with
the new school and for my
dad's new job.
Then I left and I didn't see
him again.

The orchids came in fresh this morning. All from Greece. I ordered them. I heard they were in season. We sold a few today. I picked one out for the car dash then I wrapped some chrysanthemums for Lisa. She'd place them in a vase by the sink and mist them so the smell phantomed through the whole apartment.

I glanced at the clock, four o'clock. I turned on the AC and cleared the till.

The floors were already swept.

Now, I just needed to wash my hands. I turned on the tap.

Then, the bell rang.

<Hi! Is this East Flowers? You guys still open?>

The voice was out of breath. His abdomen heaved.

He held the door, rubbing the sweat off his forehead with his jacket.

'We close in five. How can I help you?'

<Have you got any> He snapped his fingers.

<White lilies?>

'You're in luck.' I pointed to the top left corner.

<Perfect>

I picked out a bunch, laid their bodies down, trimmed the stems by the till.

He leaned over, <You don't know how much I needed these, my wife, man>

I glanced back up at him.

He smiled <Ladies, huh> I smiled.

<She told me she was gonna go back to her mom's place and I told her, look, it's gonna be OK, everything is gonna be good, I'll go to rehab or whatever> He grinned.

'Paper or transparent?'

<Plastic>

I wrapped the flowers and gave him the price.

He stripped away a couple of bills from his pocket.

<Keep the change>

'Thanks.'

He let out his hand to shake me.

My eyes met his.

His hands smelt like talcum powder.

'Caleb'

We both took a step back.

Wow.

<What are you up to now?>

'i-I work here'

<I guessed. No, I mean right now?>

'I'm closing up for the night'

<Let's get something to eat>

'I'm a bit hard up'

<No worries, it's on me>

'You sure?'

<I insist>

'Thank you.'

<Let's go to Menendez?>

'Okay, I should call Linda to tell her-'

<Is that your wife?>

'Yep'

<Let's walk this way. How'd you meet her?>

'College, yours?'

<At a bar, we both ordered peach iced with vodka. She told me that it was a girly drink then two, three rounds on me and we got Arnold then we got married by the beach>

'Arnold, is that your boy?'

<Uh-huh, I've got a picture here. He's handsome just like his dad>

'Sweet'

<Tell me more about your shop of yours>

'What about?'

The pedestrian lights change and I didn't notice.

'I liked horticulture'

He took one last drag.

“Hiya, welcome to Menendez, have you got a booking tonight?”

‘No, I don’t’

“That's all good, just you two then?”

<Yup, us two!>

“Any drinks I can get you two?”

<I’m gonna have a double shot peach iced with vodka>

‘Can I get a Guinness?’

“Sounds good, I’ll be right with you guys soon”

‘...I thought you said you’re going to rehab?’

<Yeah, next week>

‘Okay’

<Hey, we’re celebrating, it’s not a big deal>

‘Okay’

<So how long have you been in flowers?>

‘About four years. We turn five in a month, gonna do a party for it’

<Oh nice, that sounds awesome...have you got a kid?>

‘Nah’

<How come?>

‘Linda couldn’t’

<Sorry, I...>

‘Thanks’

“Ready to order? What food can I get you guys?”

<Could I get the lamb, steak and a couple rolls>

‘Just the burger, thanks’

“We only have the veggie today.”

‘Sure’

“See y’all in a second”

'Like the butchers?'

<Yeah, I do sales>

'You like it there?'

<It pays well but yeah, I actually got it thanks to my dad>

'How's he?'

<He passed away last June>

'I'm sorry to hear'

<It's alright>

'What happened?'

<Cancer>

<He never said he was sick while we were in school. He never talked about it.

How's your dad?>

'Retired'

<Nice. You see him much?>

'Not really'

<How come?>

'We just don't get along'

"Okay, so I have the rolls, one steak and one lamb. Then the veggie burger?"

'Thanks'

<Mhm, mhmm, you want that roll? This stuff is so good>

'Go ahead' 'This stuff is pretty expensive'

<Don't mind if I do. We're celebrating>

'Yeah'

<You know what I was just thinking of just now?>

'What?'

<Remember when we entered that tunnel and there was a train at the other end? That was fucking nuts. I almost died laughing. You were so fucking scared!>

almost died laughing. You were so fucking scared!>

'We'd have been killed'

<Oh, yeah?>

'You were on the tracks too!'

<You made me thank you for a whole month, man>

'Because you didn't even understand what was happening!'

<Yes, yes, thank you, thank you, thank you oh, so much for everything>

"Oneee peach tea and one Guinness"

'Thanks.'

<My dad gave me the Mercedes before he died. That's all he left, that and some cash>

'The SL?'

<Yeah, man>

'That thing's a beaut. You ever take it out?'

<No, I...crashed it>

'How?'

He shrugged.

'Well, that was a silly thing to do'

<Maybe> <You gonna have your fries?>

'Go ahead.'

<Don't mind if I do>

'It's getting late. I'm gonna get the bill'

<Go ahead>

I shot my hand up.

Caleb locked his eyes on me and they narrowed again, the pupils shooting between my hand and me. He sucked slowly on his straw, pulling in air. My Guinness was warm. Under the table, Caleb was shaking a leg.

He pulled out the picture of his kid, stared at it, then hid it back in his pocket. I kept my look over his shoulder, ignoring his gaze to find the waitress. She nodded and click-clacked on the tiled floors all the way to our booth. She placed the holder between us and stood there, blocking the light.

The check stuck out the compartment. I latched it open.

And I turned back to Caleb.

<How much is it?>

I handed him the check.

He looked to the ceiling, then to the table, then nowhere in particular.

He patted himself, going from his thighs to his torso, finally, he dragged his trouser pockets out. He said he forgot to bring his card.

I rubbed my eyes and took a breath. When they opened, the waitress was glaring at me. I swallowed and asked Caleb if he had any more money.

He shook his head.

I dug into my pocket and brought out some cash.

I placed the cash on the bill.

“Thank you!”

‘Thanks.’

Caleb coughed then handed out a 20 to the waitress.
<My tip. Guess it was in my back pocket the whole time>

“Thaaaaaank you”

Caleb stirred around. He opened his mouth to say something but then he shut it and turned away.

‘Excuse me.’

I walked past the booths, and the kitchens, and the private room and down the stairs into the restroom.

The door opened and Caleb walked in.

His eyes darted around then settled on me. He moved slowly, his steps heavy on the sticky floor.

He took the urinal beside mine.

His eyes kept flickering to the door, then back to me.

He pulled his zipper down and groaned.

I saw him looking at me, smirking.

‘All good?’

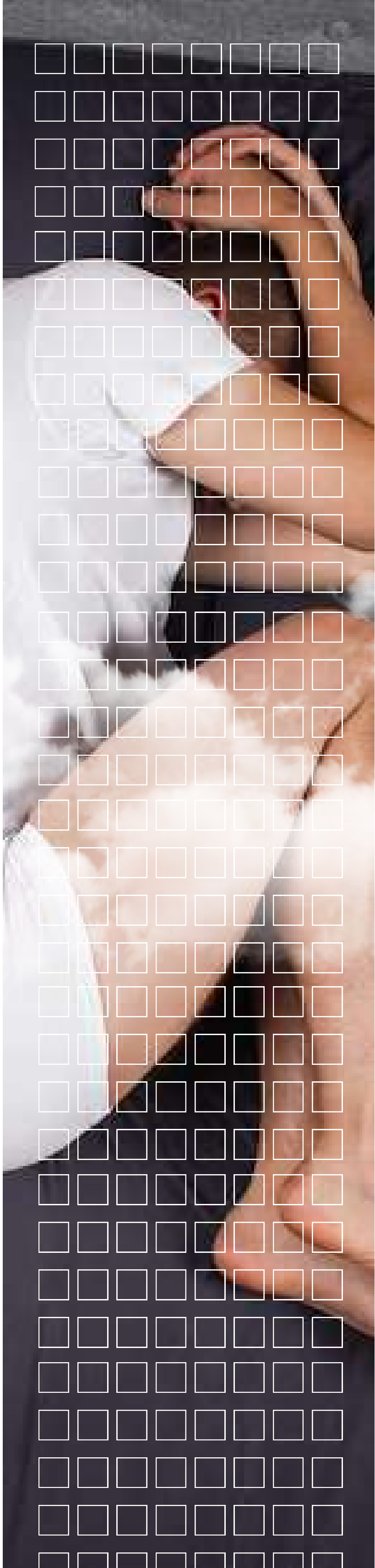
The whirring of the fan and the sound of forks and knives tinkering in the restaurant, the only breaks in the silence between us.

Then he spat, shook his head and rinsed his hands, clapping me on the shoulder.

<You take care, man>

'You too'

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1004



04

Usually, I'd jump right in.
Today, I stared at the deep
end.

Chlorine swirled in my
lungs, the radiator buzzed
somewhere distant, the
bubbling beneath the glass
finish called my name.

I looked up and met
Samuel's eyes.
He smiled at me.
I dived in.

You feel it rush up to your
knuckles, past clenching
nostrils,

gurgling after the
chest, and the
cold tickles its way
up your knees.

All this in a second
or less.

I come up,
gasping for my
next breath.

A few lanes away,
a couple of girls
began their laps,
shattering the
mirror.

I remind myself not to change my speed, and not to think.

To my right, pebbles of air from the girls masked the lanes with a glittering sheet of silver. Soon, it would fill with people asking questions.

Don't think.

Asking questions about Amy.

What were you doing when it started?

I kick.

I splash.

I gulp.

I choke.

My fingertips caught the wall and I flopped over the edge, panting.

I gave the lifeguard a thumbs up.

I took a moment to catch my breath.

'Everything alright down there?' he said, grinning.

I nodded back.

I climbed out of the pool and padded to the towels.

I held my knees and I coughed up a bit more.

I shook myself and padded away.

Bodies swung to and fro in the lanes, butterflying and diving.

All lenses were on the farthest lane, where Jessica swam, quick and effortless.

Each lap was made in perfect precision, transitioning without a single flaw.

Only once did she come up for air.

When she leapt out,
an army of young
swimmers and
journalists surrounded
her, clamouring for her
attention, and she
returned it warmly.

Her apartment
overlooks the river.
The doorman nodded
as I walked in, asking
about my day, asking
how she was.
She's in the penthouse
suite.
The unit sat at the end
of a stark hallway, cold
bulbs, brushed metal
plates, a tribal rug
running down the
centre.
I knocked.

I knocked again.
I fished the spare key
from under the mat
and stepped into the
smell of day-old food,
sweat, cheap
marijuana. Aside from
slivers of light stroking
in from drawn curtains,
I was plunged in
darkness.
I stepped forward,
putting a hand to the
wall.

Ahead of me, I recognised the framed poster.

One for Splash Magazine.

She held the trophy she won at the heats with the biggest smile on her face,

and I stood next to her.

Above us read, 'TIGER TEAM ROARS INTO THE OLYMPICS'.

She won gold that year. She called me an asshole. I called her weak.

'Mom!'

The sound poured out from her bedroom.

I rushed in and there she was, lying on her bed, with the sheets over herself.

The air was stale and the floor was cushioned with dirty laundry.

Below the dresser, a mountain of delivery boxes were stacked, tapered with mould. She kicked a small vial into a pile of underwear, then sat by the foot of the bed.

In turn, I drew back the blinds, and opened a window and she squinted, putting a hand across her eyes.

'Why are you here?'

There was a bird outside on the sill.

It danced around on the ledge and sang.

She muttered, 'Aren't you going to say anything?'

The bird flew away.

She coughed. 'Look, Mom, I'm fine, okay?'

She marched away and I followed.

Her arms and ribcage were bigger.

She planted her feet firmly with each step. Her thighs were thicker now.

As she turned on the tap, I drew more of the curtains.

She drank half of her glass in a gulp, eyeing me as it went down.

'Did you have a look at the brochure I sent you?' I asked.

She swallowed, 'I'm not going.'

I sat on the couch, picking socks off the seat. 'Amy, it's temporary.'

'I said I'm fine!' she screamed. She slammed the glass on the counter.

'Look at your arms,' I said. 'You're killing yourself.'

She looked up from the counter. I rotated away.

'Jessica was at the pool today,' I said.

Amy's face lit up, 'Did you say anything to her?'

'No,' I answered.

'How was she?'

I said, 'She seems sweet.'

Amy went quiet.

I continued, 'She's got it.'

She snapped, 'I've fucking got it.'

'I can't force your hand.'

I heard the faint whirring of the tape recorder in my jeans.

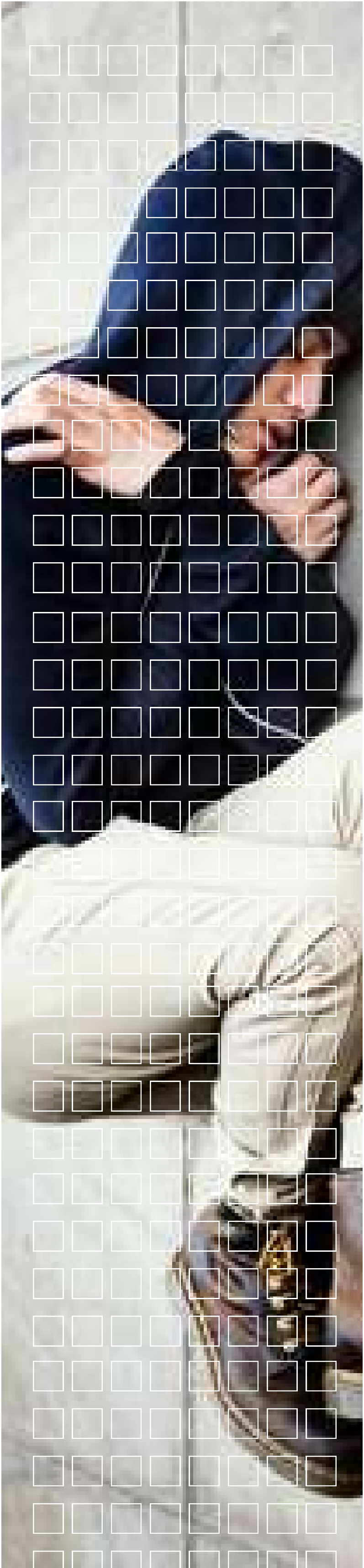
She pointed at me, 'What would your mom have done now?'

'Stop.'

'Or what?' she inched closer.

A glass hit the wall beside me and exploded.

One
shard
grazed
my
cheek
and
drops
of red
fell on
my fist.



05
07
09

05

I can feel the world with me inside this toilet.

I took my finger and worked the back of my throat. Nothing came. I pulled harder until my eyes welled.

Finally, a rumbling came from my stomach, burning through my pipes and spilling the bowl.

Luckily, none of it grazed my new jeans or the floor. I leaned over, hit flush, and the mess disappeared.

However the smell stayed

No hangover tomorrow. I wiped my lips, gathered myself, my empty satchel with a blank notebook.

After a glug and spritz, I unlocked the door.

Steaming out the kitchen was the roast smell and Nat King Cole's Unforgettable.

Mist hung in the kitchen. Vicky was by the oven.

Mac and Jade were up by the window, sharing one cigarette.

She leaped up, nudging her head under my chin, and asked softly, 'Are you okay?'

I shrugged and fanned my nose.

She brandished a new bottle of red from the table and poured a glass.

'Want some?' she said, fluttering her eyes at me.

'Any clue when the bartender is coming?'

Jade called from the window.

Mac put out his glass and I gave him some.

She said she'd cured it in rosemary salt.

She lit the candles, set the table, made tiny hats we were expected to wear.

Jade thought to bring dessert, but she forgot. Mac's potatoes were fine.

I had another glass of vino before the bartender arrived.

Mac tried to play footsie with me under the table.

Without looking, I stamped on his sneakers

Without looking, I stamped on his sneakers.

After the buzzer, the bartender came in, her messenger clinking.

‘Hi everyone, I’m Jennie!’ We waved at her.

My brain was blinking off. We were by the sofa listening to music from the ceiling.

Jennie broke the silence. ‘It’s cocktail o’clock!’ She whipped around with a grin.

She handed us the glasses.

‘Have a sip, tell me what you think.’

Vicky held up hers. ‘Cheers!’

‘Wow, this is so good!’ Mac belted.

Jade agreed, ‘I love the yuzu. How did you know I’d love that?’

‘So fucking amazing, Jennie, wow,’ Vicky shook her head, doing the mhm-mhmm-mhmm thing.

I chirped, ‘Quite swell?’

‘So, how did you start as a...’ eyes to Mac,

‘...mixologist?’

‘I’ve been working at The Cleo for maybe two years now? The one in Soho. I needed the money, so I thought it would be cool to try it, like, I started as a bar-back which was fucked. But, yeah, I’m a mixologist now. You learn a lot about cocktails and wine, and you get discounts.’

‘The restaurant, you said it’s Michelin-starred, right?’ Vicky asked, eyes parsed.

Jennie nodded. Mm-hmm.

Jade quizzed, 'How many?'
Jennie raised a couple fingers. 'Two.'
'Very nice.'
Mac broke in, 'I used to work in a bar. I imagine it's freaky over there.'
His fingers slipped off the glass and onto my arm.
Jennie smirked. 'I've done it with a few people, but-'
Vicky cut her off sharply, her voice low. 'I thought you slept with YOUR manager?'
We all turned.
Legs crossed, eyebrows lowered, and a smile spreading across Vicky's face.
Jade muttered something under her breath.
Jennie with teeth clenched, 'Dammit, Vicky, that was a secret.'
She beamed, 'Whoops!' sipping her cup.
Jennie got up. She lifted the pitcher, pouring another glass.
'He told me he loved me. I don't know - I felt bad. ...I don't want to talk about it.' Jade faced away.

I was counting in my head how long I could wait before the yawn and my jacket. Vicky would want me to stay, though. I could see her through the candles as she stared into space, which meant staring at me. Jennie was making another cocktail in a jug. The sound made me thirsty. Mac was lying on the rug, feet in the air, and Jade had another cigarette by the window. Out in the distance, the lights were glimmering. From the floor, Mac said, 'Anyone got cash?' Jade shook her head.

Jennie didn't reply.

I drew out my pockets. There was only some string and a piece of lint.

Vicky said, 'I only have my card, what's it for?'

Mac closed a nostril, 'My guy said he'd be here soon'

Jade shook her head, 'I don't want to go too hard before NYE'

He breathed, 'It's just ket'

'What kind?' Vicky probed.

'The good kind, from Ketty Keith,' he answered.

I glanced at Vicky, 'How far's the nearest ATM?'

Vicky pointed left. 'There's one a few mins from here.'

I took my jacket from the sofa, 'I'll go,' I said, putting on my gloves.

Vicky stumbled to get up, 'I'll come with you'

The ATM was in a corner shop. As we entered, the guy gave us a nod and then carried on watching the TV on the ceiling. I didn't understand what any of the actors were saying. I only noticed Vicky was drunk when I saw her tiptoe through the aisles. I'd forgotten I was too. I punched in my code. 8008.

The cash machine piled some notes in my hand.

Outside, she began sticking the stickers she'd bought onto her face.

A Hello Kitty one on her cheek, 'Cute, right?'

I smiled. She stopped.

Now, she was under the street lamps, glow encircling and forming a halo in the snow. Her coat was flapping in the wind. She balled up her hands to her chest, and as I squinted, I saw she was shaking.

'Vicky, what's up?'

She dropped her hands, and they fell to her sides.

'You don't love me.'

'Vic, don't.'

'Be a man and admit it.'

'You don't love me anymore.'

A single tear rolled down her cheek and splashed on the sidewalk.
'Let's talk later.'

But there wasn't much left to say.

In the elevator, we stood on opposite ends.

Jade opened the door, staring at us. Vicky excused herself to the toilet to wash her face, leaving Jade and me in the hallway. Mac was still on the floor. I flopped down on the Eames chair that took up the corner of the dining room. It smelled of the incense Vicky got on holiday.

She bought tons of the stuff. It smelled nice with all the wood in the house.

Paintings lined the wall, some abstract and some of the beach; they circled a much larger portrait, a painting of her and her dad.

Vicky was sitting down, hands in her lap and cross-legged, and her dad stood above her, one hand with large silver rings over her shoulder.

It always felt like the bastard was staring at me.

The floorboards in herringbone, the Le Corbusier coffee table, leather-bound books and old copies of magazines, the purple velvet sofa, and the Victorian school chairs.

All 'collected,' as Vicky says.

I began to wander off, watching the buildings again from the window.

The candles were shrunken, leaving small flames dancing off the ceiling.

Before I could, Vicky came in, turning on

on a lamp.

She brought out more candles and a pack of cards from the table, 'Come round, let's play snap.' She beckoned me too.

Jade won the first round.

Jennie started the next, 'Vicky, you know I haven't played Snap since dorms.'

I played the next card after Jade, 'You guys went to school together?'

Vicky submitted a card, 'Yeah, that's how we met. We both studied fashion.'

Mac put in his turn, 'Were you good?'

She answered, 'Jennie, your lace dresses were so cute. You always liked bows, right?'

'They'd have done well at showrooms.'

Jennie blushed, 'Oh, thanks, they weren't anything. It's hard to get funding. But you, I mean, you must be so happy, I mean....'

She waved her hands, '...With all this'

Vicky smiled and then placed another card. She glanced at the portrait.

I tried slamming my card down each time, but I was too slow.

'Snap!'

Mac won the second round.

Later, Jennie went around with a tray of whiskey sours. I declined.

Vicky grabbed one and then asked suddenly: 'You ever think of the clown?' cutting off Jennie mid-sentence.

Mac sat up, 'Who?' Jade huddled in close. Vicky beckoned to Jennie, 'You should tell the story, the one when you were coming back from class.'

Jennie sat, grabbing a cigarette off the table, 'Mind if I smoke here?'

Vicky shrugged, 'Mi casa, su casa.' Jade offered her a light.

Jennie bent down, moving her face close to the flame, took a drag, then exhaled.

‘The first time I saw the clown, my parents had just fucked off and left me at my dorms with all my stuff. So I came down to the kitchen to get a drink, and there they were with the long shoes, striped socks, suspenders, and a big red nose,’ she guffawed.

‘They were sobbing, their makeup running, making dark streaks down their face.’

She pulled her fingers down the ends of her lips.

‘I was kind of scared at first. Is this a joke? So I asked, hey, is everything alright? And they start miming! My roommate is a fucking mime clown!’ Mac roared, laughing.

‘And, I start to think, this has to be a prank or something, right? Apparently, they had just split up with someone’ Jennie made a broken heart with her fingers. ‘I didn’t understand the rest, so they threw their hands up and left, slamming the door in my face.’

Vicky cut in, 'But what about the time when you were coming home?'

Jennie paused, then another drag, 'I was coming home one night. I was closing up the restaurant. It was a bad shift. Like, really, really bad. Vicky, I wished you left the key like I asked you to.'

Vicky clocked a strong look at Jennie, who was staring outside.

‘I was stranded outside, trying to enter the house, but the door was locked. So I ended up crawling through the window from the street.’

‘But there was someone inside, the clown saw me, jumped, then grabbed one of their baseball bat props, a real baseball bat, and hit me across the head.’

Vicky took a sharp breath.

‘When I woke up, I was in their room. They were very, very quiet. My head was in a towel; everything was kinda spinning. It’d been months, and I had never seen the inside of their room before. The walls were covered in all these crazy patterns, polka dots, zig-zags, stripes. And so many dolls were on the bed that they piled up high on the wall. I was freaked out but also kinda at ease, you know? They spoke for a bit, but said very little.’

Jennie took another drag from her cigarette, surveying the room. The candles were in their dying breaths. We were more shadows than anything else.

Vicky was staring into space. Mac yawned. Jade rolled another one.

I had the hiccups.

‘What did the clown say?’ Vicky focused. Jennie hesitated, exhaling a plume of smoke.

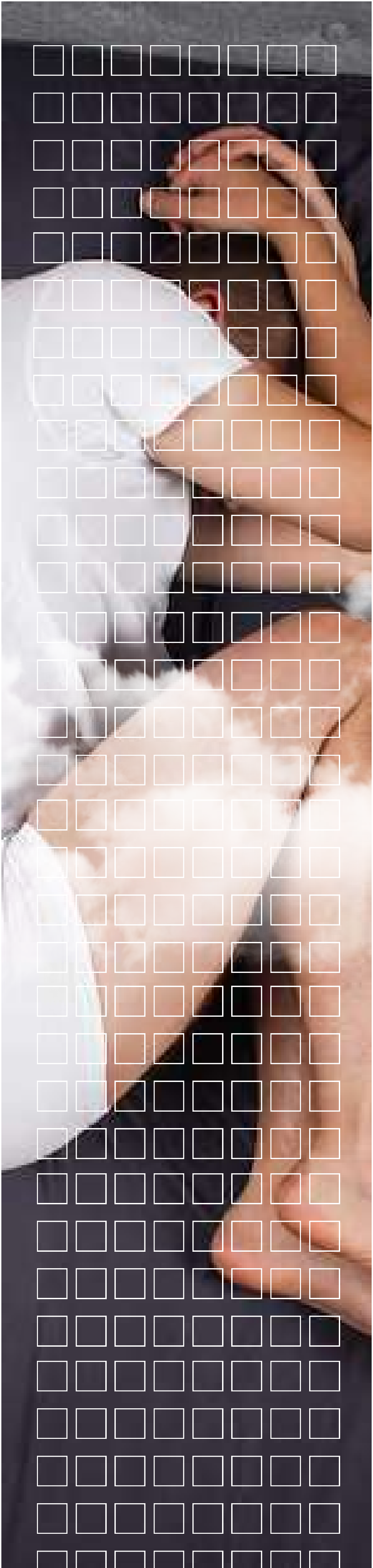
And then, with a sigh, she finished.

‘They only said a few things: that they weren’t from here. They weren’t doing so well. That it was hard to perform in the city. As they spoke, I thought, If you didn’t want to be in the city, why did you come here in the first place?’

The doorbell rang after that.

It was Ketty Keith.

06
10



06

There's a monster living
under the streets.
He looks like me.

Every night, after the trains
crush through the tunnels,
after the salarymen scurry
into their apartments,
groans bellow from the
underpass, hungrier each
hour, rumbling through
slop, draining the taps dry.
And then they scream:
wake up. Before the sun
comes.

You thought you'd
seen it all.
You were not
prepared to see
Eye.
You try not to think
about it.
He burned a hole
in your brain so
large you keep
trying to fill it.
Have you ever felt
it?

No cops or inspectors.
You push through the
barriers, scaling down
the steps.
Today the platform was
deserted.

The carriage holds
seven people.
A red-faced man, two
university kids with
purple lanyards, a
woman combing her
long black hair, an
elderly couple in
matching baseball
hats shivering
together.

Eye was there.
He commanded the
coach.
Everything stopped.
The silence landed.

On the platform, he
was alone.
He was staring at you.

The doors swung
open, and as the beep
sounded to leave,
he entered, towering
over the exit.

You shifted away,
searching between
ads on the wall,
looking at the map for
the billionth time.

An ad for medication
makes you think of
your aunt, her
husband's shifty leg,
shifty people, a co-
worker who double-
crossed you.

Eye.
But there he stood,
staring at you.

The entire saloon
offered him glimpses.
But you felt the gazes
return to you asking,
What did you do?

You want to stand up
and say,
What's your fucking
problem.

You were stuck in the
chair.

Smile.
It was just you and him
on the train, between a
brick wall of quiet,
growing louder.

At the next stop, you
hopped off the
carriage and joined
another.
Then heat burned into
the back of your skull.

You rotate to meet,
beyond the inter-
carriage doors,
Eye,
his face pressed
against the glass,
unmoving.

It was the last train.
If you left, it was forty
minutes home.

You shake your head,
roll your neck left and
right.
It's time to confront
him,
but by the time you
look back,
he was gone.

Two stops, and the
train was now above
ground.
You step back into the
cold steel air.

Snow crunched behind
you.
You whipped your
head around
and right behind you
it was him again.

Eye.

He reached out and
grabbed your arm.
His grip was firm.
You froze, hypnotised.

Your breath fell short
as your face was now
inches from him,
waiting for him
to say something.
Do something.

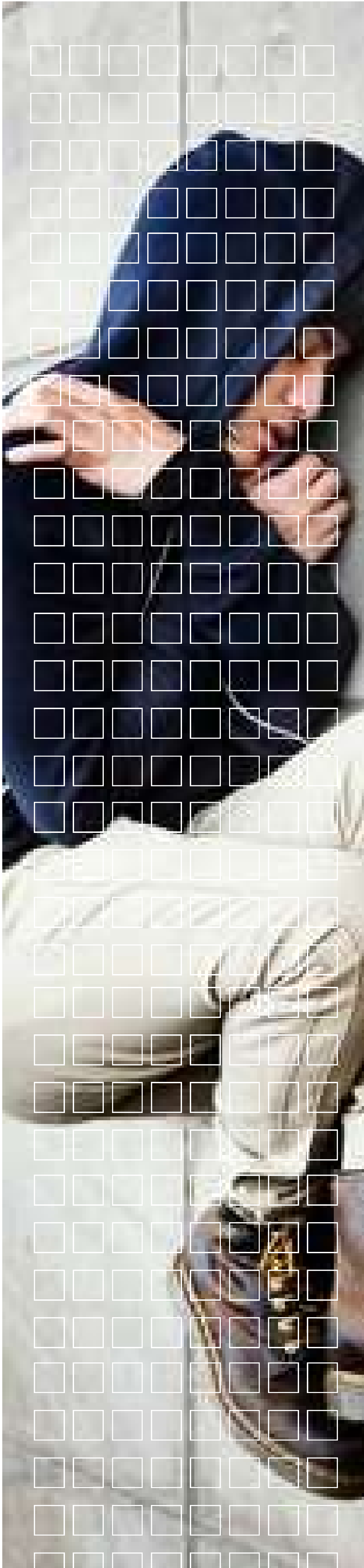
His face contorted
under the moonlight,
melting, twisting,
thickening the air.

God.

And then
he let go,
and you ran.

Looking back, you see
him standing on the
platform, his hand still
stretched out,
watching his image
disappear into the
darkness.

You remember he's still
looking at you.



87

07

Yesterday, 200,002 people
passed by the office.

Today, 201,587.

WORK is one room.

There's 1 door to get in,
under a billboard for an
international cola company.

There are no meetings.

WORK sits in the most
heavily surveilled area, and
it is listed nowhere.

We're collecting data.

What I find won't make it to
the news.

I work on the 7th floor.

What matters is a door,

a hallway,
an elevator,
my cubicle,
and
my paycheck.
Anything else, I am told, is
not important.
I just have to complete my
report.
Anything else, I am told, is
not important.
I just have to complete my
report.

The report began with 1
bunch of CHIQUITA
bananas.
Yellow with brown spots, 6
in number.
I weighed them on my hand
and placed them in a long
ceramic dish.
They were black now,
mushed and soaking out
ooze from the slightest
touch.

I was meant to have
finished the report 1 week
ago.
My mistake.
I will complete the report.

My eyes rested on the dish, I swung them back to my desk.

They began dotting between the bananas and the clean crisp page.

I flicked the paper along its edge until my finger went numb.

I did it again.

Then again.

I propped the paper back on the desk.

He said he would call in twenty minutes. Twenty-one passed.

I grabbed my pencil and held it between my thumb and index finger.

Clack, clack, clack.

The rules on keepsakes are strict.

A model train looped endlessly around the desk.

1 cubicle down, Sammy-Boy was clacking away.

Clack, clack, clack went the whole office.

I leaned over the next cubicle. 'Have you finished

your report?' I called out.

No answer.

I knocked on the partition, 'Sammy-Boy?'

Fed up, I kicked my chair back and peered around the corner.

But there was no one there. The desk was clear.

His computer was missing. His books, his bag, mugs, all of it, gone.

I returned to my chair and picked up the sheet again.

The envelope was neatly set in the corner.

Behind read, 'PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL', in classic Manila.

I retrieved a penknife from a desk drawer and sliced the edges open.

A folded white paper lay inside.

I unfurled it revealing a white blotted sheet seeping with letters.

“
A sample of 500 CHIQUITA bananas was examined. Measurements include moisture, ash, and lipid content. Additionally, DNA testing and gel electrophoresis were employed to detect [REDACTED] compounds. [REDACTED] was analyzed through [REDACTED].

This document outlines preliminary research into the genomic characteristics of 500 CHIQUITA bananas.

We are currently conducting further investigations for validation.

Notably, a subset of three CHIQUITA bananas showed near-insignificant concentrations of any nutrients, indicative of a dearth in nutritional content.

Simultaneously, analyses unearthed evidence suggesting the presence of a water-based fructose and a [REDACTED] compound within the banana samples.

While 497 bananas proved fine with regular levels of macronutrients and micronutrients, a few had incredible outliers.

This preliminary study posits the hypothesis of some CHIQUITA bananas exhibiting diminished nutritional content and the plausible presence of a [REDACTED] compound. These findings necessitate continued scrutiny.

”

I tossed the envelope and flicked the paper on my desk again. I took my cup down the hall.

The turquoise carpet stretched endlessly, cubicle after cubicle. Fluorescent panels locked into the ceiling grid, humming softly.

The machine was still wrapped in its plastic skin. Chrome. Mirrored steel. A glowing display. Mocha. Cappuccino. Espresso. Flat white. The liquid sputtered. I burned my tongue on the first sip and carried the mug back.

The office was silent. Back at my desk, another envelope waited.

PRIVATE AND
CONFIDENTIAL.
FINISH THE REPORT
IMMEDIATELY.

I tore the note off, slit the envelope open, a envelope open, and removed a yellow card with tweezers. Tiny strips of paper were taped to its center.

I fetched my magnifying glass.

“
REPubLIQ FARMS - DATABASE COLLECTION

Q1
7,812 BANANAS PRODUCED
149 BANANAS LOST VIA FUSARIUM WILT
Q2
5,668 BANANAS PRODUCED
711 BANANAS LOST VIA ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS
322 BANANAS LOST VIA FUSARIUM WILT
Q3
4,313 BANANAS PRODUCED
469 BANANAS ADDED VIA OTHER
0 BANANAS LOST
”

“
TRANSLATED: No safe.
”

“
RECEIVER: SORRY, [REDACTED]. Some of my best guys are out of commission,
We don't know what's happened. They think it's the [REDACTED]
”

“
REPubLIQ UNION - DATABASE COLLECTION
1,607 UNION MEMBERS
513 MEMBERS AGED 30 OR BELOW
446 MEMBERS AGED 50 OR OLDER THAN 30
648 MEMBERS AGED 51 OR OLDER THAN 51

OF THE 648 MEMBERS, 579 ARE REGISTERED UNDER HEALTH INSURANCE SCHEME.
OF THE 579 MEMBERS, 401 ARE IN ACTIVE CARE.
OF THE 401 MEMBERS, 282 HAVE REPORTED LOSS OF MEMORY.
”

“

J.DOE #1: When did you discover this?

J.DOE #2: Three years ago.

J.DOE #1: How long has this been going on?

J.DOE #2: Three years.

”

I loosened my tie.
I needed to stretch my
legs.

I left the page on my
desk and went off to
the water cooler.

In my stride, I
hummed to myself.

I tugged on the water
cup stack and
pressed a cup on the
tray.

Water trickled down
and it almost
overflowed.

I grabbed it just in
time.

I took a large gulp, bit
into the styrofoam and
then threw the cup in
the trash.

I looked around.

Empty.

I dragged my feet
back to my desk,
leaving a thin trail in
the carpet.

Another envelope.
Inside it, smaller
cards. Smaller text.
My magnifying glass
again.

"WHAT IS
CHLOROFLUOROCARBON MONOHYDRATE-FAA?"

'1.2 Origins and DERIVATIVE
CFCM-FAA is synthesized through [REDACTED]'
'2.9 Physical Properties
Its [REDACTED] is [REDACTED], AS [REDACTED] is [REDACTED].'
'7.8 Further Properties
CFCM-FAA lacks [REDACTED], making it unsuitable as a source of essential nutrients.'

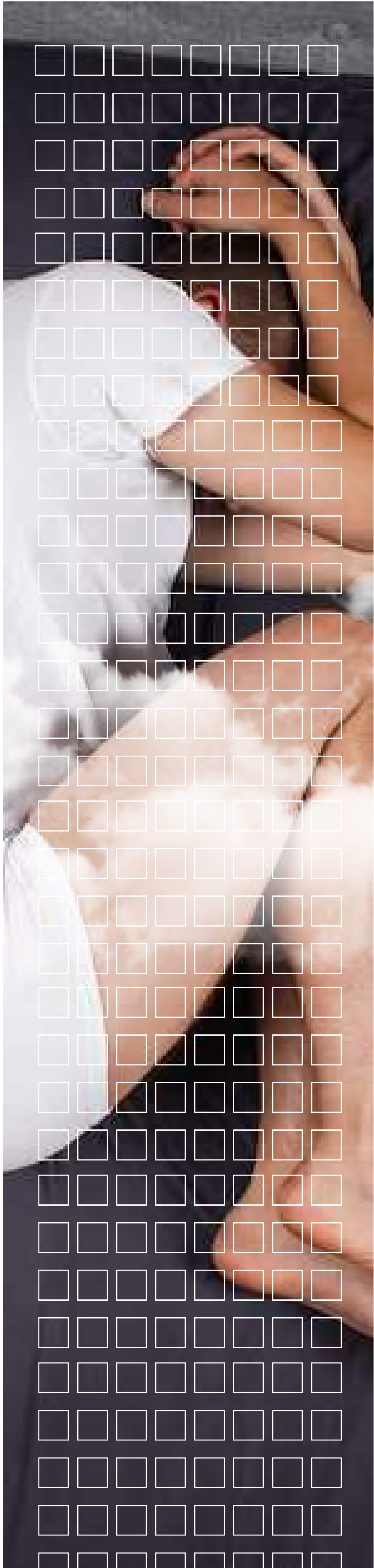
'5. Considerations
Studies on rats have indicated that prolonged exposure to CFCM-FAA,
particularly through ingestion, may be linked to memory loss.'
'CHIQUITA BRANDS TO ACQUIRE BIO-ENGINEERING FIRM, SHANRA FOR
UNDISCLOSED SUM'

'address short-term inventory losses'

A drop of water splashed onto the page.
The ceiling above me darkened.
Another drop. Then another.
Ink ran. Letters slid away.
I grabbed my white paper with 1 hand and my
pencil in another.
And I began to jot.
I wrote until my fingers bled. I switched hands.
The words came faster than I could think.

I completed the report.
The phone rang. I snatched it up
and listened for the robotone to
belch: 8-3-7-3-4-2-8.
I entered on the keypad: 7-4-7-7-8
then slammed the receiver.
I grabbed my jacket and ran.
Down the elevator. Past the hallway.
Through the door.
It was raining.
It was not meant to rain today.
It was okay, I knew by the time I got
home, my check would be there
waiting for me.

98



08

When I woke up, the bed was empty, but the sheets still smelled like him.

Yawning, I picked up T-shirts and jeans, socks and pantyhose, and finally made it to the kitchen, where I plopped down on the sofa, and lit an American Spirit.

There was a note from Ed on the coffee table. I leaned over,

‘At the dojo - please buy eggs. Thanks.’

Motherfucker. We fought till 2 a.m.

I took another drag and let my head fall back. The ceiling stared back at me. Ash from the cigarette toppled over on my leg, and I batted it off angrily.

Past the voile curtains, the Sun was beating bang on my face. It was never this warm in February. I left a voicemail for Frances, who was at her grandmother's, grabbed my keys, and hailed a cab.

On the way there, I was mouthing the words of the script, *'If I fall asleep, I'm done for. You're gonna have to keep me up... all night.'*

The Sun followed the car up the hills until we crawled into the parking lot of Golden Bridge Yoga.

'Can you pull up here, please?' I tipped the guy extra for not talking. I put on some dark shades and found the yoga teacher waiting for me at the entrance. Her white turban was wrapped tightly across her head.

'Mary, hello!' I stretched out my arms for a hug, 'Sorry I'm late, I was-'
'It's Gurmukh, call me by my former name again, and I will have you expelled from the centre. Two, you're over an hour late. I don't do late students.'
'Sorry, Mom.'

But she didn't take.
'When will you learn
there are two ways to
live? Die by your word
or live as a deserter.'
I gulped.

Gurmukh ushered me
in, past the white
arches fencing the
door. She walked
animatedly with one
foot after the other. I
trailed behind, through
empty rooms of brown-
paneled flooring into
her back-room office,
as cold as ice. It was
completely bare
except for a smiling
Buddha statue in the
corner and two mats,
back to back. I took a
breath, whipped off my
shades, and knelt
slowly on one of the
mats.

'How are you feeling?'
Gurmukh lit a candle
and sat opposite me.
'Like shit? I don't know,
I haven't...thought
much on it.'
Gurmukh smiled, 'You
should see the forest
for the trees.'

There was only one
window in the office,
large enough that it
covered the entire
room with blinding
sunlight, casting a
glare on the grinning
gold Buddha sitting
cross-legged in the
corner.

Gurmukh found my
gaze, 'Close your
eyes; let us begin'
I pressed my
eyelashes together,
but I could still see the
light beneath my
eyelids.

'Let's begin by taking a deep breath,' I sighed and started. The air passed, ducking under my nostrils and then rolling out between my lips, clearing the fire in my lungs.

'Now, repeat after me. Ong namo guru dev namo.' Gurmukh's voice reverberated in my skull.

'Ong namo guru dev namo,' I echoed, my voice fracturing.

'Let us breathe, pranayama.'

Pranayama.

My back straightened, my shoulders tightened.

The white noise transformed into a pit. I inhaled sharply, filling my stomach, and pushed all the air out completely.

I did it once more, and I sank slowly into the floor. Images flashed across my mind, of people and places, dots across the map of past fights and flings, demons, and beauties, and finally, it landed on him.

He and his yellow hair, matted full of sweat, just like I remember, oscillating like a pendulum, stringy and sweet, masking the howling mouth beneath it. All that pain, that entire world of chaos.

Then, the greenhouse, barren, aside from me, weeping willow mourning.

No moon or stars but my shivering mass, just a vessel.

And I watched it
all, consumed
by fire and ash.

'Gurmukh, I feel weak.'
'Okay, let's end it here,'
Bridge pose, archer pose,
camel pose, frog pose,
bow pose, plow pose, I
had had enough of
posing today.

Gurmukh transitioned into savasana, corpse pose, letting me finally rest on my aching back. She lay a blanket over my body and bid me a Sat Nam, with both palms collapsed to each other.

I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and gulped it down greedily. Gurmukh had barely broken a sweat, watching me silently from her lotus. Her face was always in a Sissyphian half-smile, half-frown, so you never knew what she was thinking unless she told you. She rarely showed her teeth, white, pretty pearls, perfect in every way.

I fished out my sunglasses from my tote and hailed another cab, telling him to stop at the nearest organic store.

We pulled into the organic store and I scanned the aisles for bananas, pickles, and the eggs. I ducked between the shelves, I saw one of the guys from the Times wielding one of those giant SLRs.

When I returned, I threw a banana at the taxi driver, who looked at it confusedly. 'Eat, please,' I said. He stripped the skin back, took a bite, and gave me a thumbs-up.

Across the street, two guys were fighting; one was pummeling the other on the ground. Beside them, a sedan was engorged by another. The driver and I watched without saying much, he, with banana in mouth; me, pressed against the glass for a better view. The guy continued to bludgeon the other, smacking his head on the floor and leaving dark splatters on the concrete. We drove off once we heard the sirens.

At home, I made a strawberry smoothie. While the blender whirred, I hopped in the bath, cooling off in the hallway.

I walked the house in nothing but Chateau Marmont slippers, cigarette in my mouth, unlit, then the gas stove, ashing on an overpriced Yoshitomo Nara porcelain tray.

Brrring! My meditation was being interrupted. The phone glistened under the sunlight aggressively.

Brrring!

I sighed.

'Hey,' went the receiver.

'Hey, Gus, how's it going?'

I met Gus after an awards show after-party after he'd won the top prize for Good Will.

'I'm here with Brad!'

'Cool, what's up?'

'Brad wants to do a movie about music!'

'Cool...'

‘Come to the studio,
let’s chat!’
I told him, ‘I’ll be there
in 30 minutes.’

I got to the movie
studio in an hour and a
half.

Limos lined the street,
trailed by SUVs, Rolls
Royces, Gus’ van,
more SUVs, and Brad’s
bike. I asked the driver
to drop me off by the
entrance. Security
looked us up and
nodded after I stuck
my head out of the
window.

Room 9, third floor, up
the elevator, down the
hall, first left then
another left.

I turned the corner
past Harvey’s office.
Another left then I
knocked on the door.
Hushed voices.
‘Come in!’

I turned the knob.
Inside, they were both
still as a portrait.

Gus was on the left,
with his head to the
side, so I could only
see his eye, blinking
softly and his slightly
ajar mouth holding a
pencil, hanging off his
square jaw. There was
a stack of papers
beneath his hands.
The whole table was
covered in piles of
paper, scattered
haphazardly, some
teetering off the edge
of the table, some on
the carpeted floor,
some sellotaped to the
wall.

Then there was Brad,
sitting at the end of the
table with white oval
sunglasses
and hands stretching
to me.

His hair was longer, combed down, wavy, and slick. It met his shoulders and fell neatly over a limp green sweater.

He shook his hands and yelled, 'Ta-da!'

Then, it clicked.

'What the hell is this?'

Gus checked his nose, then ran his fingers through his hair, 'We're thinking of making a movie about, you know,'. He shrugged, 'All the stuff that had happened with you and -'

I turned, 'Bradley...'

Beneath the glasses, his eyes went black, but he was still smiling.

I took a breath. Then I

made a face, 'Fuck you, I don't do Faust'

Brad took the glasses off and laughed. He

grabbed a pack of Marlboros, but before he could light one, I

was out the door

storming down the hall with tears streaming down my cheeks.

I made it to Conway an hour and several cigarettes later, but I was right on time. It was just Eric and I today. I found him outside scoring from his guy. I watched him talk to the hoodie, do the exchange, then limp over to me, stashing the bag down his pants.

'Viper, tonight?'

I shook my head.

He placed a cigarette in his mouth and offered me one, and I accepted.

He flicked out a Zippo and raised the flame for both of us then put his back again on the wall.

We watched as the cars sped by down the ave.

'Have you packed?'

'Nope, have you?' I asked, taking a long drag.

He didn't answer. A van was parked next to us. A flash popped inside.

'Nah.' He threw the butt out on the street and then looked back at me,

'Are you having fun?'

'Nope.'

'Maybe you could see the forest for the trees,' I turned to look at him,

'Is that the new thing everyone's saying?'

He shrugged, smiling sheepishly.

We did a couple of songs in the studio. Eric and I argued about the name again. Eric played a beautiful melody on the guitar. I did some more singing, and then I was back in the cab, humming the melody Eric played while we hightailed it down the freeway.

The Sun was setting now, and there was only one cloud in the sky, a white blot on a perfect canvas. The palm trees looked golden and pink, and the headlights from the cars ahead looked beautiful on the cool-blue roads.

I spent the rest of the evening smoking and looking at the orchids in the living room. They had all bloomed, basking the room in splendid yellows.

I was on the couch reading a nature magazine when Ed came in. His hair was still growing from his last movie, stubby, brown, and short, unlike his beard, which had quickly set in, overtaking his mouth. When I met him, he was still this Ivy Leaguer freshie, and now he had hair growing where they hadn't before. He grabbed a beer from the fridge and uncapped it between his teeth. The lines across his forehead were more visible, and the plaster on his temple didn't do him justice either.

He took a swig and ahh'd, just like the commercials.

'I got the eggs,'

'Thanks.'

I bit my nails. 'Are you okay?'

'We had a meeting about the movie today.

Brad, David, and I.'

He placed the bottle on the table with a dull thunk.

I could feel it coming.

I offered, 'Nerf basketball?'

He looked at me and shook his head.

'No. Brad said he saw you today with Gus?'

I nodded.

Then, a tear ran down his cheek.

'Edward.'

He covered his face, raised his hands and cried,
'I don't have the power.'

The phone rang.
I looked to Ed, he was staring at the table.
The phone rang again, this time causing the table to shudder.
I picked it up.

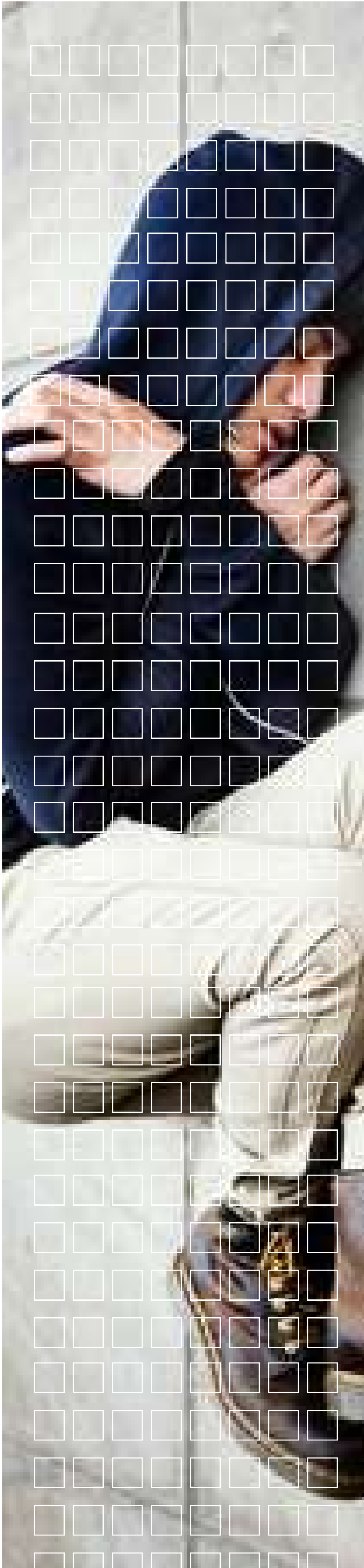
'Hey,'
'Hey, David,' I replied.
Ed covered his face with his hands.
'I'm going to be straight with you. We can't have you on the film anymore.'
'Okay.' I dropped the phone and grabbed my suitcase.

Ed stood up quickly and held my arm,
'Where are you going?'
'The airport.'

The tree outside rustled in the wind.
'Okay.' He paused, 'You know... the forest thing. For the trees.'
'Bye, Ed.' I kissed him on the cheek and went outside to the driveway.

The driver was already waiting for me in the car.

As we headed to the airport, I stared at the cloud.



09

09

Me and my mom and my dad live on Peachtree Avenue.

My sister, Maya, lives there. We used to go cycling by the river and listen to Tears For Fears.

One day, my mom and dad left.

When they came back, they were with Aaron.

Aaron was very quiet.

My mom and dad found out he wasn't talking, so they took him to the hospital.

After that, it was me and Maya and Grandma at home more often. Mom said we had to be nice to Grandma because she was very smart. I wanted to be smart too, but Maya said I did not have a brain. I heard Mom telling Dad I might need a tutor. Dad said I was smart in my own way. Before he left, he bought me a paint set.

We have a big garden in the back. There are lilies and sunflowers. Mom grew them. Grandma helps now. Grandma says you have to be delicate and treat plants like a friend. She told me she used to grow lots of things when she was younger, even tomatoes. They hurt her back now. One day she told me she would die. Everything dies eventually

She told me this before the ant thing. Maya was off school that day. We were running around the garden when she said we had to collect things. Whoever had the best thing won. Maya went first. She picked a sunflower. I told her Mom said we were not allowed to pick them. She called me annoying. I picked a rock from the gutter. It was shiny. Maya said it was cool. Then Maya picked up a toad. It went ribbit. I laughed.

I ran around the garden looking for something better.

The grass made my feet wet.

Maya started counting.

Ten.

Nine.

Eight.

I looked in the hedges.

Maybe a snail.

Not as good as a toad.

I bent down and saw an ant walking toward a small hill.

I opened my fingers and picked it up.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

I ran back to her and held it up.

'It's an ant,' I said.

It wriggled between my fingers.

Maya shrieked and said it was gross.

I looked at it closer.

Its antennae were moving in circles.

Maya dared me to kiss it.

I had never kissed something before.

I remembered Sleeping Beauty.

I brought my hand to my mouth.

I shut my eyes.

I gave it a peck.

Maya screamed.

I looked at my fingers.

The ant's head was gone.

I was still holding the body.

I ran out of the garden, upstairs, and into the bathroom.
I sat in the bathtub with my hands on my knees and waited.
Grandma found me there.
I told her what happened.
I told her I picked up the ant and its head came off.
I cried while I told her.
She smiled, which confused me.
Then she said the ant had died.
I asked where it went.
She said, 'Somewhere else.'
She gave me a tissue and led me back into the garden.
The ant's body was still where I dropped it.
Grandma said we had to dig a grave.
I used my fingers to make a small hole.
Grandma placed the ant inside.
She told me to cover it.

Then she put a lily on top.
'He's going to be okay now,' she said.
A few days later, Aaron came home with a new thing
in his ear.
Mom and Dad were back.
I did not tell them about the ant.
How I killed it.
Or that we buried him.

10



10

Voices. Muffled. A radio
somewhere outside the
door.

‘What is this place?’

I can move my lips, my
tongue’s like sandpaper.
Then, the souvenirs flooded
back to me of daffodils,
lakehouse, bubbles under
my nose, floating to the top,
pop, popping.

My palms are wet.
My calluses are
clammy.

Hair tufted from
knuckles on the
white sheet.

The sheet was as
white as my
fingernails.

I looked around.

I was tightly
cocooned, miles
above the stained
floorboards.

Necking forward, I
smacked my lips,
peered around, but
there was nothing for
me.

I turned right, then left,
just the white bed,
walls, and window.

The window was
calling out to me.

I dug under the
sheets.

Then, pain snapped
me awake.

Small droplets falling
on my cheeks.

I rolled my eyeballs
around, trying to keep
steady
and they landed on the
blinds.

They were curling up
with the wind, waving.
I flung myself on the
sill.

The noise swelled.

Then burst, blasting
me away from the
ledge.

Screaming taxis and
buses, tornadoing past
barren blocks of
concrete, reeking of
shit and piss from the
people below.

‘Help!’
...quick breath...
‘Help!’

On the floor, my chest
spasmed. I curled up,
gripping my jaw,
gasping. My tongue
found the floor and
dragged across it.

When my eyes
opened, I was in
bed. Stubble
rasped against the
pillow. The blinds
were drawn, the
room rinsed in grey.

The floorboards creaked. Not in this room. Somewhere beyond it. Past the door on my left. I pulled the sheet up to my eyes and stared at it. The creaking came again, closer this time. I pictured a bottle rolling through the road, carried by rain. It crossed my vision and vanished. The door opened. She was beautiful. White smock. Hair pulled into a bun, glossy with pomade. I lifted a finger toward the window. She took my hand and tucked it back under the sheet. Smile, please. She didn't. 'I need you every day,' I tried to say. It came out broken. A hoarse sound. '...Tuh.'

I swallowed and tried again. 'Need... every day.' She watched me. Then she raised one finger, just for a moment, and left. She returned with a tray. Pills on a saucer. Water. Soup. She opened her mouth. She nodded. 'Apple compote.' It ran down my chin and into the sheet. 'Okay. No more.' She placed a finger in her mouth and opened again. Open wide. She had good teeth. She pointed to her tongue. I showed her mine. She placed the pills on it and pointed at her throat. Swallow.

She stopped. Then she laughed.

She left the room without a word.

She did not come back.

Dark shadows coated me, two figures looming over the bed. I rolled over on my side and stretched my arms out as they observed me silently. Finally, one moved. 'You think he understands?'

'We're not sure,'
'It's hard...to see him like this.'

'Take your time.'
I tracked their lips, but I couldn't pick up the rest.
Hot air.

One came down and grabbed me by the shoulders, lifting me off the bed.

His face was hot, swollen like a balloon about to burst. My ears pulsed. Words came out of his mouth but I couldn't catch them. Something. His eyes were bloodshot.

My feet dangled, kicking, scuffing the linen. He shook me. I coughed. '...Wha?'

Tears slid down his face, spotting his chest. Then his eyes dropped.

Quickly, he let go.

I hit the mattress and it bounced. A yellow bloom spread across my legs.

The other figure emerged in white and placed a hand on his shoulder.

They backed away together, blocking the light.

I dug my heels into the mattress. Heat climbed out of me.

On the floor, a bowl caught the light.

I hooked my fingers under its rim and threw.

The glass blew out. Shards snapped off the walls.

They dropped to the floor.

Noise rushed in. Sirens. Shouting. Feet hammering. Metal screaming. Engines choking.

White flooded the room.

Hands locked my wrists to the bed.

One of them shut his eyes.

The other slid a needle into my elbow.

Sleep hit.

An acorn fell a few feet away from me, and the squirrel scampered off. Leaves drifted down from the chestnut tree above us. One landed on my foot, another in her hair.

Hi, Evelyn.

My head rested in her lap. When she turned, her hair fell over my face.

She shifted under me, adjusting, neither of us quite comfortable.

I knew she was thinking about what we'd said earlier. I ran my fingers through the grass, tearing little blades out.

'Would you like a fig?'

I took my glasses off and nodded.

She wiped her fingers on her skirt before offering me the fig.

I made a joke. She laughed, then checked my face to see if it was enough.

The gardener trimmed the hedges nearby, his shears flashing in his hands. Sweat ran down his face. He stacked the branches, stepped back, wiped his brow, and nodded at us. We smiled back.

Our spread was nearly gone.

Only a few drops of wine left. The fruit reduced to skins.

'Would you like any more?'

I shook my head.

I just wanted her to kiss me.

Thankfully, she did.

'He only eats apple compote.'

'We can't just feed him apple compote.'

'Then make him.'

They put bars over the window,

so the light was sectioned up, splitting the room and me.

It didn't matter because it was cloudy.

Deep welts lined up in my arms, flashing hot pink, all the way to my bandaged right hand.

Each eyelid unbuttoned one at a time. But I quickly gave in to sleep.

The whole time, two figures were watching me.

Shadows materialising, discussing apple compote, eights.

'Bullshit!'

They paused their conversation, and one of them leaned close.

He gave a gloved thumbs-up and patted his smock. The other one walked quickly and exited the door.

He returned, pulling the hand of a boy.

He sat by the window, with his hands on his knees.

His helper trooped to the bed's side, fishing a card from his jacket.

It was just a picture, shapes wiggling into one bigger shape.

'Look!'

I turned to the ceiling and pushed the card away. He was crying now.

The man fell back into the dark to discuss with the one in white.

The boy looked out the window.

Leave me be, shadows. Leave me be.

Dance with me, come
on. One foot after the
other.

Left. Now right. Spin.
Now spin again. One
more time.

Now me.

Fall into my arms; let
me rest on yours.

Hold me. Hold me
tight.

Dance it all away.

Count.

1,

2,

3.



The door was open.
And so was the window.

I felt around my arms and legs, picked myself off the bed, and slipped on my slippers. The room held an unbroken glow from the lights outside. I walked to the window, shielding my eyes.

The moon gleamed in the distance, laying a pale face over the horizon. Trees swayed slowly, freezing, then tumbling back into shape. Leaves revolved in the air in slow motion and I watched the grass whip across the hill.

The horizon stretched as far as I could see. Endless trees, all swaying, so peacefully.

Then a dull knock.

A basket in the corner.

I stepped closer. It knocked again. The lid shifted. Something scratching the raffia. I took another step. It hissed.

I snatched the lid and jumped. I crawled away as the snake unfurled, hissing, spilling onto the boards.

I fled to the window, covering my mouth. In the light, it appeared. Thickly coated. Black.

As it slithered, it grew darker. Oil leaked from its body, splashing across the floor.

The glow outside rose suddenly. The serpent dropped, folding in on itself, retreating into a tight spiral. I heard it slide back into the basket, wrestling itself into its nest.

I wiped my soaked face and steadied myself.

The room was blinding now. One foot rested in shadow. I pulled it back. The light fell.

I heard the hiss.

I placed my foot in the shadow again. The light returned.

I stood still for a moment. Then I left the window and got back into bed.

I sat on the edge, fluffed my pillow, tucked my feet beneath the duvet, and wrapped the sheet around my body. After, I pulled my knees to my chest, hand under my head, the other against my cheek.

I am awake.

Tonight, I will dream.

'You don't have to smile for a passport photo,'

'Okay.'

Afterwards, he rushed me outside of the house.

Or perhaps I rushed him.

'Seth, hand me my stick,' I said.

He grinned.

'And wear a hat.' I passed one from the storage room. 'It's cold.'

He put it on and winked.

The door closed behind us while I was still on the porch.

We went down the stairs and into the hedges.

More flowers were coming in, despite the frost.

We walked for a while, circling the grounds.

It was a fine day.

The boy was jolly.

My hands were behind my back.

His were in his pockets.

I inspected the trees.

All was well, except for a few hollows.

A drink would be nice.

Water. Tea.

Toast with compote.

Or something else.

I thought about asking one of the people.

The maids always knew these things.

The boy is funny.

He was quiet just then.

Maybe we could head back.

'How are you doing?'

'Not bad.'

'That's good.'

'How about you?'

I nodded.

The gardener was shearing the bushes.

I waved.

He bowed.

'How's work?' Seth asked.

I shook my head.

'Not today.'

Weather. Sports.

School. Teachers.

Classmates. Lovers.

Then he said he loved me.

I stopped for a moment, smiled, and said it back.

'I love you too.'

We walked back toward the main house.

'Look, here.'

He took out his phone and showed it to me.

A beach.

Palm trees.

A burning sun.

No people.

'What is it?' he asked.

I looked closer.

'Is it a painting,' I said,
'or a photograph?'