

III

And because you are of a kind, the house knows
you. When you cry out,
the lights flicker, ghostly blue and ragged.
When she says you are *shut off*,
the light switches nod their white tiny
heads. Tiles creak *yes* beneath her
edicts—*something bad must have happened*
to make you this way, the way
where you don't want her. But the windows
rattle, disagree. In their honeyed,
blindless light, they see it—something bad
is *happening*.

—Leah Horlick, "Ghost House"

Dream House as Man vs. Self

Your mother once owned a tiny, trembling schnoodle named Greta, whom she rescued when you were in college. Greta was rotund and gray and the most neurotic dog you'd ever met, prone to fits of ennui and anxiety. When Gibby, your family's cockapoo, died from choking on a plastic bag, Greta mourned by moving elaborate piles of stuffed animals—some of them bigger than she was—around the house. "She just keeps doing that," your mother said mildly when you asked her about the behavior.

You once dogsat Greta when your mother was out of town and you were profoundly unnerved by her malaise; she spent most of the day lying in a particular spot on top of the couch, her face flattened into the fabric—except she wasn't sleeping; her dark eyes were open and fixed on nothing. She looked dead. Every time you moved her, she dangled limply, not extending her feet when you put her on the ground. When you took her outside to use the bathroom, she went to the closest spot, keeping her eyes on you the whole time, and peed with more lassitude than you experienced in the entirety of your teenage years. When you were out walking her on a leash she would lie on the ground and refuse to move, and more than once you had to carry her home.

One day, you picked her up, put her by the door, and opened it. "Greta," you said, "go on! Be free! Run!" She just looked at you with the saddest, most mournful expression.

She could have run. The door was open. But it was as if she didn't even know what she was looking at.



Dream House as Modern Art

That winter you go to the Brooklyn Museum, to an exhibition called *Hide/Seek*. You're in duress, in the city against your will. You did not want to go to New York, even for a few days, but she insisted. You agree to go to the museum because art has always had a balancing effect on your mind; it is a reminder that you are more than a body and its accompanying grief.

Inside, you wander ahead of her, far ahead so you don't have to feel her presence weighing on you like a pillow on the face. You find *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* by Félix González-Torres, a Cuban American artist. When you first see the installation—a pile of candy wrapped in multi-colored cellophane, tucked in a corner—you almost laugh. It is so strangely out of place in this space. But when you get closer and read the description, you understand: it is the weight of the artist's late lover as he began to die of AIDS. Viewers should take a piece of candy, the description says, and at some point it will be replenished. Someone has been replenishing the lost ones since 1991.

In 1991 you were five. You didn't know you were queer. You were living in a Pennsylvania suburb and you didn't know what AIDS was. You were muttering stories to yourself. You were resentful of your little brother and had newly welcomed a baby sister, of whom you were also resentful. You were so afraid of balloons you invented a device made of a soda bottle and straw that would keep the latex bladder from being sucked into your lungs. You were all mind; anxiety was your lifeblood, your fuel. You were young. You didn't know your mind could be a boon and a prison both; that someone could take its power and turn it against you.

In the new days of 2012, as you stand in front of the pile of candy you feel a direct line to its hopelessness, rage, grief. You read the placard. "An act of communion." You pick up one, spin the sweet from its wrapper, and put it in your mouth.

At that moment, she appears next to you.

"What are you doing?" she hisses.

You gesture to the sign, the explanation. She doesn't look. She gets so close to you it's like she's going to kiss your ear, except she's berating you under her breath, a steady stream of rage and profanity that would be indistinguishable from sweet nothings to a nearby stranger. You can't look at her. You can't look away from Ross, who is also *Untitled*, who is also dead, who will also always be alive, immortal. You suck and suck and suck on the candy, which you're realizing has no identifiable flavor beyond its sugar, and she's still telling you you're the worst, you're worse than the worst, she can't believe she brought you here. (This exhibit? This museum? This city? Her bed? You'll never know.) The candy goes from pebble to ice chip, and then it's gone—one more step toward Ross's disintegration. One more step toward resurrection.

Dream House as Second Chances

One day you are both napping off a hangover in the Dream House when she turns to you, wide awake—more wide awake than you thought she was.

“What would you say if I told you I wanted to apply to Iowa again?” she asks. “So I can move back, be with you.”

It is hard to identify the sensation in your chest, the simultaneous leap of excitement yanked back by a leash of panic. You smile, quickly, but she has seen something in your face, and hers collapses with displeasure.

“What, you don’t think I’m good enough? Or you don’t want me there?”

“No, I just—you spent all of this time and money getting to Bloomington, and you love it here. And you love your friends—why would you leave? This is such a great program. I think we’re making the long-distance thing work, don’t you?”

She pushes herself up off the bed and walks away. She doesn’t talk to you for the rest of the day. Not until you muster up all your sweetness and agree to help her. “I can’t wait for you to be there with me,” you tell her. You don’t question her logic again.

But you know. You know that, somewhere deep down, it isn’t about you at all.

You help her edit her stories for her application. One of them is about a man who is so possessive and jealous he wrecks all of his relationships. It’s pretty good.

Dream House as Chekhov’s Gun

You’d been staying at the Dream House for weeks over Christmas break, carless, careless. You shouldn’t have been so stupid; the warnings were already there, but the prospect of endless days of fucking for hours in a lavender bed and eating decadently and being with her was too tantalizing. You have always been a hedonist, and she is there to indulge with you, with an animal hunger that matches your own.

In the final week, you go to the local bowling alley with her and her writer friends. You’d driven there in her car—a sleek, luxury thing gifted by her parents—and she was supposed to be the designated driver, for once. So you’d been drinking freely of the pitchers of pale beer, the sort you don’t drink, except you never get the chance to get drunk around her anymore and you’re eager for that looseness in your limbs. She has a single beer, sips it slowly, smiles at you. You bowl the way you always bowl; your turns generally ending with no pins down at all, because you get too excited and the gutter slurps up the ball. But then every so often, a strike; so beautiful and devastating a crash that you get the sensation of being good at something, a sliver of confidence. You turn the ball in your hand, pearlescent and peach, and whip it down with that beautiful *thunk-whirr*.

She sits there, looking butch, and pats her lap. You sit. You haven’t had many boyfriends or girlfriends, and none of them—and certainly no flirtatious people in your past—have ever gestured to you like this. You feel calm, content, a little high. Just a girl sitting on her girl’s lap.

Her hands are running up your breasts before you can do anything about it. You clasp them in your own and push them down gently. She puts them up again. When you move them a second time, you can feel her anger; you can’t see her but the smell of her changes, like a cheap dish towel left on a live electric burner. She snaps around you like a Venus flytrap, pinning your arms against your torso.

She leans in to your ear. What are you doing, she says. It doesn't sound like words, like a question; it sounds like a purr.

"Don't," you say.

She tightens her grip on your arms. "I fucking hate you," she says. She sounds, suddenly, drunk, even though you've been watching her and you know she's had only the one beer. But you've had beer, too, and you don't know what to do. "I fucking hate you," she says again. The sounds of the bowling alley are coming from very far away; you feel like your heart is going to stop. You are not a parent; no one has ever told you that they hated you.

You stand up and look around wildly at the others, who are studiously looking elsewhere. "I think we need to go," you say. "I think—"

But when she stands, she does look drunk. How will you get home? You reach for your wallet, but you have no cash, and after a few minutes one of the poets comes up to you. "I'm so sorry," he says a few times, his speech slurred, though sorry for what he does not specify—but then he presses a twenty-dollar bill into your hand for a cab. You tell him you'll pay him back, but now that you think about it, you never did.

When the cab pulls away from the bowling alley, you see her car gleaming in the parking lot and pray that it doesn't get towed before morning. In the back of the cab, she closes her eyes, begins to mutter a monologue that lasts for the entire drive home. *You fucking cunt I fucking hate you goddamn you Carmen fuck you fuck your mother fuck everything you cunt you goddamn fucking slut fuck you . . .*

The sensation of pulling a sheet from the bed is terrible. You will sleep on the couch. That's what people do, when they're mad at the person who would otherwise sleep next to them. You've never done it but you have heard of it happening. You've seen it in movies. You can't find your pajamas. You go out to the living room, strip down to your underwear, and curl up on the broken couch with the springs pressing into your side. You pull the sheet around you. It's that soft, wonderfully stretchy jersey fabric, the same type you had in college.

She peels the sheet away from your body; you shiver.³⁰ "What are you

30. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type E279.3, Ghost pulls bedclothing from sleeper.

doing?" she asks, standing over you. You don't say anything. Then, when she doesn't move, you tell her, "I'm angry, and I'd like to sleep alone, please."

She kneels at the side of the couch like a supplicant with an offering. You think maybe she is going to try to kiss you, or maybe fuck you, though you won't let her, though you won't let her you won't let her you won't—

She leans over and begins to scream directly in your ear, like she's pouring acid out of her mouth and into you. You try to scramble away, but she is pushing on your body, howling like a wounded bear, like an ancient god. (An ancient bear; a wounded god.)

It is as if something has been cut loose. You roll off the couch, stand, and dart to the other side of the room. She vanishes into her bedroom and comes out again with your suitcase. With a tremendous yell, she hurls it across the room, where it crashes into the wall. She reaches down and grabs something—your very fancy ModCloth boot, the first pair of shoes you've ever spent that much money on—and throws it at you. It spins, misses. She throws the other one, and it also misses you but takes a framed picture off the wall, and later you will try to figure out if she never landed a throw because you were so quick to dodge them or because she couldn't aim for shit, but you will never come to any conclusion.

She reaches down to grab something else, and you find yourself delving into deep wells of childhood experience: playfully outrunning your little brother, who is determined to put something gross in your hair. The house is a circle, so you run away from her, toward the kitchen, and she follows you, like your brother would when he was seven, and you dart through the office and the hallway and then into the bathroom. You slam the door and lock it, and a millisecond later you jerk away from the knob when the whole door shakes, as if she's hurled herself against it. She is still screaming. You back away toward the far wall and slide to the floor. It sounds like she is trying to break the door down.

You are there for some time, but you don't have your phone and can't say how long, exactly. Eventually, the sounds stop. It is eerily silent. You stand and unlock the door. You come out trembling, crying. She is sitting on the couch, staring into nothingness like a doll. She turns and looks at you, her face slack.

"What's wrong?" she says. "Why do you look so upset?"

On that night, the gun is set upon the mantelpiece. The metaphorical gun, of course. If there were a literal gun, you'd probably be dead.

Dream House as Sniffs from the Ink of Women

Norman Mailer once said, "The sniffs I get from the ink of women are always," among other things, "too dykily psychotic." In other words, one woman writing is mad and a woman-who-loves-women writing is mad squared. Hysteria and inversion, compounded like interest; an eternally growing debt. Mailer's use of the adverb *dykily* suggests that, for him, disinterest in his dick must be a species of psychosis.

Narratives about mental health and lesbians always smack of homophobia. I remember watching *Girlfriend* in college—a rare Bollywood film about queer women—in which a wrench-wielding, butch lesbian seduces a gorgeous femme, but eventually the femme pulls away and falls in love with a dude and the butch goes ballistic, becoming possessive and violent before dying in a fall from a window.

I came of age in a culture where gay marriage went from comic impossibility to foregone conclusion to law of the land. I haven't been closeted in almost a decade. Even so I am unaccountably haunted by the specter of the lunatic lesbian. I did not want my lover to be dogged by mental illness or a personality disorder or rage issues. I did not want her to act with unflagging irrationality. I didn't want her to be jealous or cruel. Years later, if I could say anything to her, I'd say, "For fuck's sake, stop making us look bad."

Dream House as Haunted Mansion

What does it mean for something to be haunted, exactly? You know the formula instinctually: a place is steeped in tragedy. Death, at the very least, but so many terrible things can precede death, and it stands to reason that some of them might accomplish something similar. You spend so much time trembling between the walls of the Dream House, obsessively attuned to the position of her body relative to yours, not sleeping properly, listening for the sound of her footsteps, the way disdain creeps into her voice, staring dead-eyed in disbelief at things you never thought you'd see in your lifetime.

What else does it mean? It means that metaphors abound; that space exists in four dimensions; that if you return somewhere often enough it becomes infused with your energy; that the past never leaves us; that there's always atmosphere to consider;³¹ that you can wound air as cleanly as you can wound flesh.

In this way, the Dream House was a haunted house. You were the sudden, inadvertent occupant of a place where bad things had happened. And then it occurs to you one day, standing in the living room, that you are this house's ghost:³² you are the one wandering from room to room with no purpose, gaping at the moving boxes that are never unpacked, never certain what you're supposed to do. After all, you don't need to die to leave a mark of psychic pain. If anyone is living in the Dream House now, he or she might be seeing the echo of you.

31. Bennett Sims has a wonderful horror story called "House-Sitting." You have never forgotten this paragraph: "You are not being superstitious, you do not think. It simply stands to reason. For it would be like sleeping in a house where a family has been slaughtered: whether or not you believe in ghosts, there is the atmosphere to consider." It spoke to you, as an agnostic who still can feel when the air in an enclosed space is not quite right.

32. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Types E402.1.1.1, Ghost calls; E402.1.1.2, Ghost moans; E402.1.1.3, Ghost cries and screams; E402.1.1.4, Ghost sings; E402.1.1.5, Ghost snores; E402.1.1.6, Ghost sobs.

Dream House as Chekhov's Trigger

A few days after the incident at the bowling alley, and the day before you are to return to Iowa, she asks if you want to go to a concert at a local bar. You don't—you've hated live music for years, its many demands on your body and your bedtime—but you are afraid to admit that, so you go. This is your first mistake that day. You meet friends there. You buy a beer but sip from it only occasionally, because you want to be able to get in her car and drive at a moment's notice. It's a Chicago band, JC Brooks & the Uptown Sound, and they're actually all right. You sit through a set before you begin to feel exhausted. Being exhausted is your second mistake.

"I need to go home," you tell her softly, leaning into her ear. "I'm so tired, and my flight is kind of early tomorrow."

She seems pleasantly relaxed. "Do you want me to come home with you?" she says.

You relax—this response seems so normal. This is your third mistake.

"I don't care," you say. "If you're having a good time, I can take your car and leave you money for a cab. Or you can come home with me. It's up to you, my love."

"You don't care?" she says.

"Yeah," you say. "Either way is fine."

"So you don't care about me. You don't care whether I come or go."

"That's not what I meant. I just meant—"

"You don't care whether I live or die," she says.

Inside you, something stumbles to the edge of a precipice, falls off.

At the car, she tells you to let her drive.

"No," you say. "No. You're drunk. I won't."

"Give me the keys or I will kill you," she says. She is kidding, probably. You no longer appreciate the joke.

"If I give you the keys, you'll kill us both."

She gets into the passenger seat. The whole way home, you keep waiting for her to dart over the barrier between you and grab the steering wheel. Instead, she closes her eyes.

You walk inside with her screaming at your back. You are calm now. You've learned from the last time. You're already stronger.

In the bedroom you strip off your clothes, then go into the bathroom, lock the door. The shower hotter than you can stand. You are warmed immediately; the sound reminds you of a storm.

Then she's there. Maybe you didn't lock the door properly, maybe you didn't lock it at all—and she is still screaming. She rips the shower curtain down from its rings. You back up. You aren't wearing your glasses so she is just this fuzzy pale mass and her mouth is a red hole. The water falls between you.

"I hate you," she says. "I've always hated you."

"I know," you say.

"I want you to leave this house right now."

"I can't. I don't have my car. My flight is tomorrow."

"Leave this house or I will make you leave."

"I'll sleep on the floor. I'll leave first thing. You won't even know I'm here."

You slide down to the floor of the bathtub, sobbing, and she walks away. You sit there until the water hitting your body is icy. After a few minutes like that, you reach over and turn the handle to off, shivering.

She comes into the bathroom again. When she gets close to you, reaches toward you, you realize she is naked.

"Why are you crying?" she asks in a voice so sweet your heart splits open like a peach.

Dream House as Soap Opera

She doesn't remember, she tells you before you go to sleep. She remembers being at the bar, and then crouching over you naked. Everything in between is darkness.

Dream House as Comedy of Errors

The next day, you wake up next to her. You pack, and try to convince her to get moving, because she has the car and you have a flight to catch. She is sullen, angry, snaps at you when you remind her that the airport is over an hour away. She takes her time. Puts on her makeup. Drives, for the first time in her life, very slowly.

When you get to the airport, the security line is long, and the TSA agent confiscates your metal water bottle, which you have forgotten to empty. As you pull your heavy suitcase through the airport, you start to cry because of the water bottle, except it's really not the water bottle, and a kindly employee with crimped hair—in 2012!—stops to ask if you're all right. You feel terrible about thinking that thing about her hair; also you sort of want to hug her. And you want to cry and explain that the TSA agent stole your favorite water bottle because he wouldn't let you drink its contents, because perhaps he believed that the bottle contained the liquid from a bomb and by drinking it you would turn into that same bomb, or probably he was just on a power trip because his face didn't change when you begged him to let you keep what you already owned, and also you're afraid you're going to miss your flight because your girlfriend spent her time this morning putting on her face, an expression you've always found sort of funny and vaguely sexist but that now just strikes you as horrifyingly ominous, because it suggests that she has one face and needs to put on another, and you saw underneath it last night, when you were so afraid and cowering, and she was screaming, and you were hiding from her, hiding from the woman who once told you she loved you and wanted to have children with you and called you the most beautiful and sexy and brilliant woman she'd ever met, you had to hide from her in a bathroom with a lock on the door, and if your family found out they'd probably think it proved every idea they've ever had about lesbians, and you wish she was a man because then at least it could reinforce ideas people had about men, and how she probably wouldn't understand but

the last thing queer women need is bad fucking PR, and then you feel bad because for all you know this airline employee could be queer, she could understand.

You collapse into your airplane seat with minutes to spare, the last person to board the plane. You are sweaty from running, and you are crying, and you keep sucking snot back up into your nose. Your seatmate is a businessman in a charcoal-gray suit who is definitely regretting not springing for first class, and he keeps looking over at you. And as the ground gets farther and farther away you swear to yourself that you're going to tell someone how bad it is, you're gonna stop pretending like none of these things are happening, but by the time the ground is coming toward you again you are already polishing your story.

Dream House as Demonic Possession

You have always been interested in demon and possession narratives, no matter how cheesy or silly they are. It's the perfect intersection of your morbid curiosities and the remnants of your religious upbringing; a reminder of a time when you believed in that sort of thing.

After she blames those nights on a kind of amnesia, you do research while she mopes around. She feels bad, so bad, she says. There is remorse there, true remorse, and yet sometimes you catch her composing her face into sadness. You google memory loss, sudden onsets of rage and violence. The internet gives you nothing, except one article about how it has been shown that heavy marijuana use can, theoretically, trigger an onset of schizophrenia, if one were already genetically prone to it. This is terrifying; you feel deeply for her. You try to present your various theories, but she scoffs at all of them. She hasn't been smoking much pot, she says. She doesn't have schizophrenia. She says it with such disdain you begin to wonder if you'd exaggerated the events of that trip, whether perhaps you are remembering them wrong.

This is not to say that you seriously consider demonic possession. You are a modern woman and you don't believe in God or any accompanying mythologies. But isn't the best part of a possession story that the inflicted can do and say horrific things for which they'll receive carte blanche forgiveness the next day? "I did what? I masturbated with a crucifix? I spit on a priest?"

That's what you want. You want an explanation that clears her of responsibility, that permits your relationship to continue unabated. You want to be able to explain to others what she's done without seeing horror on their faces. "But she was possessed, see." "Oh well, that happens to everyone at one time or another, doesn't it?"

At night, you lie next to her and watch her sleep. What is lurking inside?



Dream House as Naming the Animals

Adam had one job, really. God said, "See this fuzzy thing? And that scaly thing there, in the water? And these feathery things, flying through the air? I really need you to give them names. I've been making the world for a week and I'm exhausted. Let me know what you decide."

So Adam sat there. What a puzzler, right? It's obvious to us, now, that that is a squirrel and that is a fish and that is a bird, but how was Adam supposed to know that? He wasn't just newly born, he was newly created; he didn't have years of life experience to support this creative enterprise, or anyone to teach him about it. When I think about him, just sitting there with his brand-new fist under his brand-new chin, looking vaguely perturbed and puzzled and anxious, I feel a lot of sympathy. Putting language to something for which you have no language is no easy feat.

Dream House as Ambiguity

In an essay in *Naming the Violence*—the first anthology of writing by queer women addressing domestic abuse in their community—activist Linda Geraci recalls a fellow lesbian's paraphrasing Pat Parker to her straight acquaintance; "If you want to be my friend, you must do two things. First, forget I am a lesbian. And second, never forget I am a lesbian."³³ This is the curse of the queer woman—eternal liminality. You are two things, maybe even more; and you are neither.

Heterosexuals have never known what to do with queer people, if they think of their existence at all. This has especially been the case for women—on the one hand, they seem like sinners in theory, but with no penis how do they, you know, *do it*? This confusion has taken many forms, including the flat-out denial that sex between women is even possible. In 1811, when faced with two Scottish schoolmistresses who were accused of being lovers, a judge named Lord Meadowbank insisted their genitals "were not so formed as to penetrate each other, and without penetration the venereal orgasm could not possibly follow." And in 1921 the British Parliament voted against a bill that would have made illegal "acts of gross indecency between females." Why would an early twentieth-century government be so progressive? "The interpretation of this outcome offered by modern history," writes academic Janice L. Ristock, "is that lesbianism was not only unspeakable but 'legally unimaginable.'"

But this inability to conceive of lesbians has darker iterations too. In 1892, when Alice Mitchell slit her girl-lover Freda Ward's throat in a carriage on a dusty Memphis street—she was enraged that Freda had, with the encouragement of her family, dissolved their relationship—the papers hardly knew

33. Legal scholar Ruthann Robson calls this a "dual theoretical demand," and adds, "the demand, of course, is in many cases more than dual. As Black lesbian poet Pat Parker writes in her poem *For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend*: "The first thing you do is forget that i'm Black / Second, you must never forget that i'm Black."

what to do with themselves. In her book *Sapphic Slashers*, Lisa Duggan writes, "Reporters found it difficult to sketch out a clear plot or strike a consistent moral pose: was Alice a poor, helpless victim of mental disease, or was she truly a monstrous female driven by masculine erotic and aggressive motives? . . . A love murder involving two girls presented an astonishing and confusing twist that confounded the gendered roles of villain and victim."³⁴ The story was simultaneously salacious and utterly baffling. They were . . . engaged? Alice had given Freda a ring, along with promises of love and devotion and material support. Should they execute her for murder, or put her in a hospital for her unnatural passions? Was she a scorned lover or a madwoman? But to be a scorned lover, she'd have to be—they'd have to be—?

"I resolved to kill Freda because I loved her so much that I wanted her to die loving me," Alice wrote in a statement her attorneys provided to the press, sounding every bit the possessive boyfriend from a Lifetime original movie. "And when she did die I know she loved me better than any human being on earth. I got my father's razor and made up my mind to kill Freda, and now I know she is happy."

The jury chose madwoman, and Alice spent the rest of her life in the Western State Insane Asylum in Bolivar, Tennessee.

Even when sex between women was, in its own way, acknowledged, it functioned as a kind of unmooring from gender. A lesbian acted like a man but was, still, a woman; and yet she had forfeited some essential femininity.

The conversation about domestic abuse in lesbian relationships had been active within the queer community since the early 1980s, but it wasn't until 1989, when Annette Green shot and killed her abusive female partner in West Palm Beach after a Halloween party, that the question of whether such a thing was possible was brought before a jury and became one for the courts.

34. It should be noted that Alice Mitchell was hardly the first woman to create such public confusion over her gender as it related to both her passions and her shocking act of violence. In 1879, when Lily Duer shot her friend Ella Hearn for rejecting her love, a headline in the *National Police Gazette* read in part, "A Female Romeo: Her Terrible Love for a Chosen Friend of Her Own Alleged Sex [emphasis mine] Assumes a Passionate Character." Sometime before the murder, a witness reported an exchange in which Lily said, "Ella, why will you not walk out with me? Do you not love me?" "Oh, yes, I love you," Ella responded, "but I am afraid of you."

Green was one of the first queer people to use "battered woman syndrome" to justify her crime. The idea of the battered woman³⁵ was brand-new—it had been coined in the '70s—but both *abuse* and *the abused* meant only one thing: physical violence and a white, straight woman (Green is Latina), respectively. The baffled judge eventually allowed Green's defense, but only after insisting on renaming it "battered person syndrome," despite the fact that both the abuser and the abused were women. Regardless, it was not successful; Green was convicted of second-degree murder. (A paralegal who worked with Green's attorney told a reporter that "if this had been a heterosexual relationship," she would have been acquitted.)

All of this contrasts sharply with the way narratives of abused straight (and, usually, white) women play out. When the Framingham Eight—a group of women in prison for killing their abusive partners—came into the public eye in 1992, people were similarly uncertain about what to do with Debra Reid, a black woman and the only lesbian among them. When a panel was convened to hear the women's stories to consider commuting their sentences, Debra's lawyers did their best to leverage the committee's inherent assumptions and prejudices by painting her as "the woman" in the relationship: she cooked, she cleaned, she cared for the children. The attorneys believed, rightly, that Debra needed to fit the traditional domestic abuse narrative that people understood: the abused needed to be a "feminine" figure—meek, straight, white—and the abuser a masculine one.³⁶ That Debra was black didn't help her case; it worked against the stereotype. (In another early lesbian abuse case, in which a woman gave her girlfriend a pair of shiny black eyes, the

35. It should be noted that the word *battered* (as in: battered wife, battered woman, battered lesbian), while woefully imprecise and covering only a fraction of abuse experiences, was the preferred term in this era. It is, of course, a specific legal term with specific legal implications, and I have never thought of myself as a "battered" anyone. The fact that the expression persisted for so long, despite the fact that the lesbian conversation in particular focused on many kinds of abuse that were not explicitly physical, is the perfect example of how inadequate this conversation has been—discouraging useful subtlety. (Other ways in which the conversation remains inadequate: devaluing the narratives of nonwhite victims, insufficiently addressing nonmonosexuality, rarely taking noncisgendered people into account.)

36. In a 1991 article about a white lesbian in Boise, Idaho, who successfully used "battered-wife syndrome" as a defense for killing her abusive girlfriend, the reporter emphasized that the defendant was a "diminutive 4-foot-10." The prosecutor in the case speculated that the reason for the acquittal was that the abused wife "seemed more heterosexual," and the abuser "more lesbian."

prosecutor acknowledged that while she was grateful for and surprised by the abuser's conviction, she believed that the fact that the defendant was butch and black almost certainly played into the jury's willingness to convict her.)

The queer woman's gender identity is tenuous and can be stripped away from her at any moment, should it suit some straight party or another. And when that happens, the results are frustratingly predictable. Most of the Framingham Eight had their sentences commuted or were otherwise released, but not Debra. (The board said that she and her girlfriend had "participated in a mutual battering relationship"—a common misconception about queer domestic violence—even though it had never come up during the hearing.) She was paroled in 1994, the second-to-last member of the group to achieve some measure of freedom. An ABC *Primetime* report about them barely talked to or about Debra compared to the other women. The Academy Award-winning short documentary about the Framingham Eight—*Defending Our Lives*—didn't include Debra at all.

The sort of violence that Annette and Debra experienced—brutally physical—or that Freda experienced—murder—is, obviously, far beyond what happened to me. It may seem odd, even disingenuous, to write about them in the context of my experience. It might also seem strange that so many of the domestic abuse victims that appear here are women who killed their abusers. *Where, you may be asking yourself, are the abused queer women who didn't stab or shoot their lovers?* (I assure you, there are a lot of us.) But the nature of archival silence is that certain people's narratives and their nuances are swallowed by history; we see only what pokes through because it is sufficiently salacious for the majority to pay attention.

There is also the simple yet terrible fact that the legal system does not provide protection against most kinds of abuse—verbal, emotional, psychological—and even worse, it *does not provide context*. It does not allow certain kinds of victims in. "By elevating physical violence over the other facets of a battered woman's experience," law professor Leigh Goodmark wrote in 2004, "the legal system sets the standard by which the stories of battered women are judged. If there is no [legally designated] assault, she is not a victim, regardless of how debilitating her experience has been, how complete her isolation, or how horrific the emotional abuse she has suffered. And by creating this kind of myopia about the nature of domestic violence, the legal system does bat-

tered women a grave injustice." After all, in *Gaslight*, Gregory's only actual crimes are murdering Paula's aunt and the attempted theft of her property. The core of the film's horror is its relentless domestic abuse, but that abuse is emotional and psychological and thus completely outside of the law.

Narratives about abuse in queer relationships—whether acutely violent or not—are tricky in this same way. Trying to find accounts, especially those that don't culminate in extreme violence, is unbelievably difficult. Our culture does not have an investment in helping queer folks understand what their experiences *mean*.

When I was a teenager, there was this girl in my sophomore-year English class. She had luminous gray-green eyes and a faint smattering of freckles across her nose. She was a little swaggery and butch but also loved the same movies I did, like *Moulin Rouge* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*. We sat diagonally from each other and, every day, talked until our teacher threatened to separate us.

I liked her in a way that made me excited to go to class, but I didn't understand why. She was such a good friend and so fun and so smart I wanted to rise out of my seat and grab her hand and yell, "To hell with Hemingway!" and haul her out of class; all to some end I couldn't quite visualize. From the corner of my eye, I stared at her freckles and imagined kissing her mouth. When I thought about her, I squirmed, tormented. What did it mean?

I had a crush on her. That's it. It wasn't complicated. But I didn't realize I had a crush on her. Because it was the early 2000s and I was just a baby in the suburbs without a reliable internet connection. I didn't know any queers. I did not understand myself. I didn't know what it meant to want to kiss another woman.

Years later, I'd figured that part out. But then, I didn't know what it meant to be afraid of another woman.

Do you see now? Do you understand?

Dream House as Undead

I think about Debra Reid so much—incarcerated, unpardoned—how powerless she must have felt. Even after Jackie was gone, she was still there. When Debra was on trial for her murder, Debra's brother brought her a dress to wear. Her first thought was, "Oh God, Jackie going to kill me if she saw me with this one."

Dream House as Sanctuary

The night she chased me in the Dream House and I locked myself in the bathroom, I remember sitting with my back against the wall, pleading with the universe that she wouldn't have the tools or know-how to take the doorknob out of the door. Her technical incompetence was my luck, and my luck was that I could sit there, watching the door test its hinges with every blow. I could sit there on the floor and cry and say anything I liked because in that moment it was my own little space, even though after that it would never be mine again. For the rest of my time in the Dream House, my body would charge with alarm every time I stepped into that bathroom; but in that moment, I was the closest thing I could be to safe.

When Debra Reid was eventually released on parole, she had to stay in prison longer than she needed to because securing housing was a condition of her release and she was having difficulty doing so. She told an interviewer, "I just want to get an apartment and turn my own little doorknob and use my own bathroom and eat my own food."

I can't get Debra or her doorknob out of my mind. I hope she got what she needed.

Dream House as Double Cross

This, maybe, was the worst part: the whole world was out to kill you both. Your bodies have always been abject. You were dropped from the boat of the world, climbed onto a piece of driftwood together, and after a perfunctory period of pleasure and safety, she tried to drown you. And so you aren't just mad, or heartbroken: you grieve from the betrayal.

Dream House as Unreliable Narrator

When I was a child, my parents—and then, learning from their example, my siblings—loved to refer to me as “melodramatic,” or, worse, a “drama queen.” Both expressions confused and then rankled me. I felt things deeply, and often the profound unfairness of the world triggered a furious, poetic response from me, but while that was cute when I was a toddler, neither thing—feeling, responding to feeling—aged well. Ferocity did not become me. Later, retelling stories about this dynamic to my wife, my therapist, the occasional friend, filled me with incandescent rage. “Why do we teach girls that their perspectives are inherently untrustworthy?” I would yell. I want to reclaim these words—after all, melodrama comes from *melos*, which means “music,” “honey”; a drama queen is, nonetheless, a queen—but they are still hot to the touch.

This is what I keep returning to: how people decide who is or is not an unreliable narrator. And after that decision has been made, what do we do with people who attempt to construct their own vision of justice?

Dream House as Pop Single

A year before I was born, the band 'Til Tuesday, led by Aimee Mann, came out with the single "Voices Carry." The breathy, haunting song about an abusive relationship was a top-ten hit in the United States. In the music video—which was in heavy rotation in the early days of MTV—the boyfriend is, for lack of a better word, ridiculous. A meathead in gold chains and a muscle shirt, he delivers his aggressively banal dialogue with the subtlety of an after-school special.

Throughout the video, he dismantles Aimee piece by piece. At first, he compliments her music and her new hair—punk and platinum, with a rattle. Later, in a restaurant that looks like it was borrowed from a sitcom set, he removes her elaborate earpiece and replaces it with a more traditional earring before playfully chucking her under the chin. There is a shot of Mann behind a gauzy curtain, her face pressed into it with desperation, which cuts to her leaving for band practice. Here he confronts her on the steps of their brownstone; when he grabs her guitar case, she tears out of his grasp.

When she returns, he scolds her for her lateness. "You know, this little hobby of yours has gone too far. Why can't you for once do something for me?" When she speaks for the first time—"Like what?" she asks, tilting her chin upward in a challenge—he attacks her, pushing her against the stairs and forcibly kissing her.

At the end of the video, they are sitting in a theater audience at Carnegie Hall. The boyfriend puts his arm around a now-polished Mann—sitting quietly, strung with pearls—before discovering her intact rattle and curling his lip in disgust. Mann begins to sing—softly at first, and then louder as she tears a stylish fascinator off her head. Then she stands up and is screaming, she is scream-singing—"He said 'Shut up' / He said 'Shut up'"—and everyone is turning to look at her. This final scene, Mann said in an interview years later, was inspired by Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, when

Doris Day's character lets loose a bloodcurdling scream during a symphony performance, to foil an assassination.

Long after the video came out, in 1999 the song's producer revealed that the initial demo of the song had used female pronouns—in the original version, Mann was singing about a woman. "The record company was predictably unhappy with such lyrics," he wrote, "since this was a very powerful, commercial song and they would prefer as many of its components as possible to swim in the acceptable mainstream. I wasn't certain what to think about the pressure to change the gender of the love interest, but eventually thought that it didn't matter any to the impact of the song itself. Would a quasi-lesbian song have had any effect on the liberation of such homosexuals, then as now several difficult steps behind the gays on the path towards broad social acceptance? I don't think so, but it was hard to judge at the time.

"If there is nothing social to be gained," he continued, "there's little point in risking that people might lose the main plot and be confused by something that might be peripheral to them. Maybe better to pull them in, subversively, as the best pop music does. How many more people are now sympathetic to gay people's issues because they responded to gay artists who didn't obviously fly the flag but expressed universal human sentiments that appealed to all? We respond to a song's humanity first, and that is what matters."

Twenty-seven years later—decades into her solo career—the pretense was dropped. Mann released an album, *Charmer*, which included the song "Labrador." The music video was a shot-for-shot remake of "Voices Carry," with the triteness heightened for comedic effect. The introduction—in which a greasy, boorish director admits he tricked Mann into doing the remake against her will—is genuinely funny. But the song itself is just as sad as "Voices Carry," if not more so: the speaker can't help but return to her abusive lover, doglike, over and over again.

"I came back for more," Mann sings. "And you laughed in my face and you rubbed it in / Cause I'm a Labrador / And I run / When the gun / Drops the dove again." The song opens addressed to someone Mann calls "Daisy."

Despite all of this—the suppressed representation, the hackneyed '80s weirdness of the video—"Voices Carry" portrays verbal and psychological abuse in a clear and explicable way. The mania of abuse—its wild emotional shifts, the

eponymous cycle—is in the very marrow of the music: dampened, minor-inflected verses without a clear key resolving into a shimmering major chorus before locking back down again. It is not the ironically upbeat prettiness of the Crystals' "He Hit Me (and It Felt Like a Kiss)"—produced in 1963 by Phil Spector, who later murdered actress Lana Clarkson for spurning his advances—though that is its own musical metaphor. Both songs, despite the darkness of their subject, are catchy and endlessly singable.

And I do. Endlessly sing them, that is. Every time I reread this chapter while writing this book, "Voices Carry" was in my head—and my voice—for days afterward. While working on the final draft, I took a break to stand on a beach in Rio de Janeiro watching blue-green waves curl in toward the shore. Around me people were playing soccer and dogs were running into the surf chasing after sticks and the light was amber-soft, and I realized I was singing it. *Hush hush, I sang to no one, keep it down now.*

Dream House as Half Credit

When I was a child, my father told me that if I ever was struggling to answer a question on a test, I should, instead, write down everything I knew about the topic. I took this advice seriously. Where I had doubt, I'd fill the space with what I remembered, what I knew to be true, what I *could say*. I waxed poetic on those scenes in a novel I could visualize clearly, instead of striving to evoke the ones I couldn't. I recorded everything I knew about a particular lab experiment when I couldn't correctly balance equations on my exam. When I couldn't explain how particular historical moments shifted the tide of major world events, I wrote down the little stories I did remember.

Let it never be said I didn't try.



Dream House as Exercise in Style

It would make sense if, during the time in the Dream House, your work suffered. Why not? You were miserable; you spent what probably added up to weeks or months of your life crying and snotting and howling in agony.

But instead, your creativity explodes. You are brimming with ideas, so many that you sign up for six workshops in your last semester of school. You begin to experiment with fragmentation. Maybe “experiment” is a generous word; you’re really just unable to focus enough to string together a proper plot. Every narrative you write is smashed into pieces and shoved into a constraint, an Oulipian’s wet dream—lists and television episode synopses and one with the scenes shattered and strung backward. You feel like you can jump from one idea to the next, searching for a kind of aggregate meaning. You know that if you break them and reposition them and unravel them and remove their gears you will be able to access their truths in a way you couldn’t before. There is so much to be gained from inverting the gestalt. Back up, cross your eyes. Something is there.

You will spend the next few years of your career coming up with elaborate justifications for the structure of the stories you were writing at the time—telling them to young readers in classrooms and audiences at bookstores; once, to a tenure-track job search committee. You say, “Telling stories in just one way misses the point of stories.” You can’t bring yourself to say what you really think: I broke the stories down because I was breaking down and didn’t know what else to do.

Traumhaus as Lipogram

It’s hard, saying a story without a critical part. Thinking you can say what you want as you want to, but with a singular constraint. Loss of the function of a particular orthographic symbol—it’s a situation, hmm? A critical loss. Not just a car with bad paint, a lamp with a crack, sour milk. A car that can’t stop. A lamp that sparks. Milk cut with shit. A woman hid my *thing* and I can’t find it again. That’s just how it is. I cannot find what’s missing. I am trying and trying, and I cannot; as I fail, I shrink. I shrink down into dirt, wood, worms.

It is an awful thing, that missing symbol. Folks *know*. Folks can pick up on words of rock. Folks will know you for your wounds, your missing skin. Folks say nothing but *Why didn’t you go / Why didn’t you run / Why didn’t you say?*

(Also: *Why did you stay?*)

I try to say, but I fail and fail and fail. This is what I did not know until now: this constraint taints. It is poison. All day and night, until I ran, I was drinking poison.

Dream House as Hypochondria

You tell her she has to go to therapy or else you're going to leave her. Sullen, she agrees.

She does go, for a while. The first morning, you make her coffee and breakfast, so that she's ready to head out into the world. You feel like a mother on her child's first day of school. You sit there in your underwear and robe, contemplating the winter morning from the plate-glass window in her kitchen.

She returns in a cheery mood, holding a second coffee; her nose and the tops of her ears blushing with winter.

"What did the therapist say?" you ask. "I know I shouldn't be asking, I just think—"

"We're still getting to know each other," she says. "It's too early to say."

Things get better for a little bit. They really do. She is attentive, kind, patient. She brings you treats—little foods, dips and things, your favorite—and leaves them for you to find when you wake up. A few weeks later, she tells you over the phone that she's not going to continue therapy. "It's too much time," she says. "I'm really fucking busy."

"It's one hour a week," you say, gutted.

"Besides, he says I'm totally fine," she says. "He says I don't need therapy."³⁷

"You threw things at me," you say. "You chased me. You destroyed everything around me. You have no memory of any of it. Doesn't that alarm you?"³⁸

37. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type X905.4, The liar: "I have no time to lie today"; lies nevertheless.

38. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type C411.1, Taboo: Asking for reason of an unusual action.

She is silent. Then she says, "I've got lots of things to do. You don't understand how hard I work."

You remember your promise, to leave her if she doesn't get help. But you don't push the issue. You will never talk about it ever again.

Dream House as Dirty Laundry

One day she asks, *Who knows about us?* It becomes a refrain. It's strange—in some past generation this could have meant so many things. Who knows we're together? Who knows we're lovers? Who knows we're queer? But when she asks, the unspoken reason is awful, deflated of nobility or romance: Who knows that I yell at you like this? Who's heard about the incident over Christmas?

She never says exactly that, of course; she just wants to know who you're talking to, who she should be avoiding, who she shouldn't bother to try to charm. Every answer enrages her. When you tell her, "No one," she calls you a liar. When you say, "Just my roommates," her eyes go flat and hard as flint.

Dream House as Five Lights

In the sixth season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Captain Jean-Luc Picard is captured by the Cardassians during a secret mission to Celtris III. Early on in the second episode of the two-episode arc, the Cardassians use a truth serum to interrogate Picard on the details of his mission.

Gul Madred ostensibly wants cooperation; information about the defense strategy for the Minos Korva planetary system. When the serum does not give him the results he desires, he implants a device in Picard's body that, when activated, produces excruciating pain. "From now on, I will refer to you only as 'human,'" Madred tells him. "You have no other identity." They strip Picard naked, hang him from his wrists, and leave him there overnight.

In the morning, Madred is unctuous, measured, unflaggingly polite. He drinks from a thermos like a weary bureaucrat. He turns on a string of lights above him, flooding Picard with illumination. Picard flinches; holds his arm like a wounded velociraptor. Madred asks him how many lights he can see.

"Four," Picard says.

"No," Madred replies. "There are five."

"Are you quite sure?" Picard asks.

Madred presses the button on the device in his hand; Picard buckles, staggers, and drops to the ground in agony. The scene is a pastiche of one from 1984, but there are also some beats lifted, very lightly, from *The Princess Bride*. Madred is inordinately fond of his machine. *That was the lowest possible setting.*

"I know nothing about Minos Korva," Picard says.

"But I've told you that I believe you. I didn't ask you about Minos Korva. I asked how many lights you see."

Picard squints upward. "There are four lights."

Gul Madred sighs like a disappointed parent. "I don't understand how you can be so mistaken."

Picard squints against them and says, "What lights?" He spasms so hard his body leaps from the chair, strikes the floor.

Lying on the floor, Picard mumble-sings a French folk song from his childhood. "Sur le pont d'Avignon, on y danse, on y danse." *On the bridge of Avignon, we're all dancing, we're all dancing.*

"Where were you?" Madred asks.

"At home. Sunday dinner. We would all sing afterward."

Madred opens the door and tells Picard he may go. But as Picard prepares to leave, Madred tells him he'll torture Dr. Crusher instead. Picard returns to his chair.

"Are you choosing to stay with me?" Madred asks.

Picard is silent.

"Excellent," Madred says. "I can't tell you how pleased this makes me."

Later, Madred feeds Picard. Boiled taspar egg, "a delicacy," he says. When cracked open, it is an undulating, gelatinous mass with an eye at its center. Picard sucks the contents from the shell. Madred has his own meal; shares a story of his own childhood as a street urchin in Lakat, on the Cardassian homeworld.

"In spite of all you have done to me," Picard says with clarity, "I find you a pitiable man."

Madred's cordial attitude vanishes. "What are the Federation's defense plans for Minos Korva?" he shouts.

"There are four lights!" Picard says.

Gul Madred turns on the device, and Picard begins writhing. "How many do you see now?"

Picard screams, weeps, sings. *On the bridge of Avignon, we're all dancing, we're all dancing.*

...

Back on the *Enterprise*, the crew has negotiated Picard's release. In the final scene between Picard and Madred, Picard grabs the device that controls the pain, smashes it against a table. Madred calmly tells him it doesn't matter; he has many more.

"Still," Picard says, "it felt good."

"Enjoy your good feelings while you can. There may not be many more of them." Madred goes on to explain that a battle has commenced, and the *Enterprise* is "burning in space." Everyone will assume you've died with them, Madred says, and so you will stay here forever. "You do, however, have a choice. You can live out your life in misery, held here, subject to my whims. Or you can live in comfort with good food and warm clothing, women as you desire them, allowed to pursue your study of philosophy and history. I would enjoy debating with you; you have a keen mind. It's up to you. A life of ease, of reflection and intellectual challenge. Or this."

"What must I do?" Picard says.

"Nothing, really," Madred says. He glances upward, like he's looking for rain before stepping out from under an awning. "Tell me . . . how many lights do you see?"

Picard looks up. He is unshaven, unkempt, covered in a glaze of sweat. His face is a rapidly shifting picture of bafflement and denial, of confusion and agony.

"How many? How many lights?" Madred repeats. Off-screen, a door opens, and Madred's face gets a little frantic. "This is your last chance. The guards are coming. Don't be a stubborn fool. How many?" It is the first time he's seemed weak; exhibited a real need.

Something in Picard's face shatters. He screams: "There—are—four—lights!"

Every time I watch this climax, something inside me grinds a little, like the unglazed edges of a broken mug being shoved together. It is not a triumphant scream. It is broken, humiliating. It cracks like a boy's. The final word, *lights*, is practically oatmeal in his mouth.

Later, safe on the *Enterprise*, Picard talks with Counselor Troi about his experience. "What I didn't put in the report," he tells her, "was that, at the end, he gave me a choice between a life of comfort or more torture. All I

had to do was to say that I could see five lights when, in fact, there were only four.”

“You didn’t say it?” Troi asks.

“No. No,” he says. “But I was going to. I would have told him anything. Anything at all. But more than that, I believed that I could see five lights.” His gaze rests, lost, in the middle distance.

Dream House as Cosmic Horror

Evil is a powerful word. You use it once, and it tastes bad: metallic, false. But what other word can you use for a person who makes you feel so powerless?

Lots of people in the world have made you feel powerless. Run-of-the-mill bullies; both of your parents, and most adults, when you were a child; unflinching bureaucrats at the DMV, the post office. A doctor who didn’t believe you were sick, approximately two minutes before you projectile vomited against the wall. A cadre of nurses who pried your arms away from your body to take your blood when they thought you had cancer. (You didn’t have cancer, but they never did figure out why you spent so much of your childhood cramping with agony.)

But did any of them seem to enjoy it? Did any of them make you feel complicit in your own suffering? You’ve outgrown parents and bullies. You’ve railed against the everyday tyrants to friends; you chastised the doctor while dropping a long line of sour saliva down to the floor; you fought those nurses as hard as if they were trying to murder you.

Sick seems more appropriate, but it too tastes bad. It feels too close to *disordered*, which is a word your oldest and dearest friend, who had become very religious after childhood, used when you came out to her. It was over email but you flinched anyway, and before the end of the next paragraph—which explained that she was sort of relieved you hadn’t said you had a crush on her—you were already crying.

Dream House as Barn in Upstate New York

Many years later, I wrote part of this book in a barn on the property of the late Edna St. Vincent Millay. I didn't know I was writing the book yet; it would take two more summers to realize it was a book about a house that was not a house and a dream that was no dream at all. But I sketched out scenes and jotted down notes and did a lot of mental excavation staring at the wall of the barn.

A few weeks in, while hiking out in the woods, I came upon what looked like a mound of garbage. When I got closer, I realized what it was: a huge pile of broken and discarded bottles of gin and morphine, where Edna's erstwhile housekeeper had taken the empties and left them.

There was something horrifying about the mountain of glass. I had just finished Edna's biography, wherein I'd learned that weeks after her husband died, she fell to her own death in her house, on the stairs, likely in a haze of intoxication. Was it a terrible accident? Suicide? Everybody has a theory. The biography made me angry. Edna treated her lovers, male and female alike, with no small amount of cruelty. She was talented but arrogant; brilliant but profoundly selfish.

And yet, there among the trees, seeing the measure of her pain, the proportions of her problems, I felt a stab of sympathy. It couldn't have been easy to be married to her, but it couldn't have been easy to be her, either.

One day, a bird slammed into my studio window. I was sitting on a yoga ball and tumbled backward in terror. Almost every residency I've had since, I've found at least one stunned bird sprawled on the ground outside my workspace. I learned: they never see the glass coming. They only see the reflection of the sky.

Dream House as Shipwreck

In New York that winter, when you walk too slowly for her taste, she abandons you at a storage container craft fair in Brooklyn. You stand there with your suitcase and your puffy down coat, and she tells you as she walks away that maybe you should go back to your parents' house in Allentown if you can't take the city.

(This is, you will recognize later, a pattern: she loves to walk away from you in places where you know no one, where you have no power, where you can't simply get up and go somewhere. Over the course of your relationship she will walk away from you in New York a total of seven times.)

You sit down on a bench and numbly try to buy a bus ticket on your phone, but your phone's storage is full and your screen does not respond properly to your finger. When you look up she is actually gone, and you panic, because you don't know New York, and not only do you not know New York, you hate New York, and you have too many bags and no money for a taxi and you don't even know the difference between uptown and downtown. In every direction walk New Yorkers: so confident, so cosmopolitan. You think, they are not the kind of people who get abandoned by their girlfriends at twee craft fairs.

You cry so hard that a tall woman with dreadlocks gets up from her storage container and comes over to you. She sits on the bench and puts her arm around your shoulder, and asks if she can do anything to help. You hiccup and wipe your nose with your hand, and tell her no, no, you're just having a bad day, and she crosses back to her container to fetch something.

When she returns, she hands you a tiny box of cone incense and a carved wooden incense holder. "For your new year," she says, and you want to believe she's right—that even though your suffering feels eternal, unrelenting, the new year is full of promise, and it is coming fast.

Dream House as Mystical Pregnancy

Every television show you watched in your twenties included some kind of mystical pregnancy. Every interesting female character needs one, or so the showrunners seem to think. Vampires get pregnant with magical mortals; comatose women give birth to gods and empathic starfleet officers to mystic energy; time-traveling companions discover they've been flesh avatars for months, and their actual body is somewhere far away and about to give birth. One woman wakes up on her wedding day to discover herself massively pregnant, courtesy of an alien.

You are thinking of these episodes when you begin to experience pregnancy symptoms in the Dream House. You vomit into the toilet, you feel swollen and out of sorts. The two of you have talked about a child for so long—a little girl, Clementine, hair poufy like a Q-Tip, like hers—that you abandon all reason and wonder if you could be pregnant. You have had so much sex, and the intensity between you feels as real as anything. You consider saying to her, “Ha! I’m sick like I’m pregnant, isn’t that weird?” But you are terrified—of the radical body modification that is pregnancy, the dangers of childbirth, the unforgiving nature of motherhood, and—most importantly—of what she’ll accuse you of. What she’ll do afterward.

You drink ginger ale, you lie down for a long time, you forgo food for an evening under the pretense of having snacked, which you definitely did not do. You cannot be pregnant, you cannot be pregnant, you literally absolutely could not be pregnant under any circumstances.³⁹ You take a pregnancy test

39. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Types T511.1.3, Conception from eating mango; T511.1.5, Conception from eating lemon; T511.2.1, Conception from eating mandrake; T511.2.2, Conception from eating watercress; T511.3.1, Conception from eating peppercorn; T511.3.2, Conception from eating spinach; T511.4.1, Conception from eating rose; T511.5.2, Conception from swallowing worm (in drink of water); T511.5.3, Conception from eating louse; T511.6.1, Conception from eating woman's heart; T511.6.2, Conception from eating finger-bones; T511.7.1, Conception after eating honey given by lover; T511.8.6, Conception from swallowing a pearl; T512.4, Conception

anyway, like an idiot, and of course it's negative because you haven't had a penis anywhere near your body in years. You are afraid she'll find the test, so you put it in a Ziploc bag and throw it out in someone's trash can on the street after she's gone to class.

from drinking saint's tears; T512.7, Conception from drinking dew; T513.1, Conception through another's wish; T514, Conception after reciprocal desire for each other; T515.1, Impregnation through lustful glance; T516, Conception through dream; T517, Conception from extraordinary intercourse; T521, Conception from sunlight; T521.1, Conception from moonlight; T521.2, Conception from rainbow; T522, Conception from falling rain; T523, Conception from bathing; T524, Conception from wind; T525, Conception from falling star; T525.2, Impregnation by a comet; T528, Impregnation by thunder (lightning); T532.1.3, Impregnation by leaf of lettuce; T532.1.4, Conception by smell of cooked dragon heart; T532.1.4.1, Conception after smelling ground bone-dust; T532.2, Conception from stepping on an animal; T532.3, Conception from fruit thrown against breast; T532.5, Conception from putting on another's girdle; T532.10, Conception from hiss of cobra; T533, Conception from spittle; T534, Conception from blood; T535, Conception from fire; T536, Conception from feathers falling on woman; T539.2, Conception by a cry.

Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure®

You wake up and the air is milky and bright. The room glows with a kind of effervescent contentment, despite the boxes and clothes and dishes. You think to yourself: *this is the kind of morning you could get used to.*

When you turn over, she is staring at you. The luminous innocence of the light curdles in your stomach. You don't remember ever going from awake to afraid so quickly.

"You were moving all night," she says. "Your arms and elbows touched me. You kept me awake."

If you apologize profusely, go to page 163.

If you tell her to wake you up next time your elbows touch her in your sleep, go to page 164.

If you tell her to calm down, go to page 166.

"I'm so sorry," you tell her. "I really didn't mean to. I just move my arms around a lot in my sleep." You try to be light about it. "Did you know my dad does the same thing, the sleeping damsel swoon? So weird. I must have—"

"Are you really sorry?" she says. "I don't think you are."

"I am," you say. You want the first impression of the morning to return to you; its freshness, its light. "I really am."

"Prove it."

"How?"

"Stop doing it."

"I told you, I can't."

"Fuck you," she says, and gets out of bed. You follow her all the way to the kitchen.

Go to page 168.

"Baby, if this ever happens in the future, you can always wake me up and I'll go to the couch, I promise. I really don't mean to do it. I don't have any memory of it. I can't control how I move in my sleep."

"You're such a fucking cunt," she says. "You never take responsibility for anything."

"All you have to do is wake me up," you say, a kind of incoherent desperation zipping through your skull. "That's it. Wake me up and tell me to move or sleep on the couch and I will do it, I swear to you."

"Fuck you," she says, and gets out of bed. You follow her to the kitchen.

Go to page 168.

Here you are; a page where you shouldn't be. It is impossible to find your way here naturally; you can only do so by cheating. Does that make you feel good, that you cheated to get here? What kind of a person are you? Are you a monster? You might be a monster.

END. Go to page 177.

Are you kidding? You'd never do this. Don't try to convince any of these people that you'd stand up for yourself for one second. Get out of here.

END. Go to page 177.

You shouldn't be on this page. There's no way to get here from the choices given to you. You flipped here because you got sick of the cycle. You wanted to get out. You're smarter than me.

Go to page 171.

Breakfast. You scramble some eggs, make some toast. She eats mechanically and leaves the plate on the table. "Clean that up," she says as she goes to the bedroom to get dressed.

If you do as you are told, go to page 169.

If you tell her to do it herself, go to page 166.

If you stare mutely at the dirty plate, and all you can think about is Clara Barton, the feminist icon of your youth who had to teach herself how to be a nurse and endured abuse from men telling her what to do at every turn, and you remember being so *angry* and running to your parents and asking them if women still got told what was right or proper, and your mom said "Yes" and your dad said "No," and you, for the first time, had an inkling of how complicated and terrible the world was, go to page 171.

As you're washing the dishes, you think to yourself: Maybe I could tie my arm down somehow? Maybe put a tack on my forehead? Maybe I should be a better person?

Go to page 171.

You shouldn't be on this page. There's no way to get here from the choices given to you. Did you think that by flipping through this chapter linearly you'd find some kind of relief? Don't you get it? All of this shit already happened, and you can't make it not happen, no matter what you do.

Do you want a picture of a fawn? Will that help? Okay. Here's a fawn. She is small and dappled and loose-legged. She hears a sound, freezes, and then bolts. She knows what to do. She knows there's somewhere safer she can be.

Go to page 171.

That night, she fucks you as you lie there mutely, praying for it to be over, praying she won't notice you're gone. You have voided your body so many times by now that it is force of habit, reflexive as a sigh; it reminds you of your first boyfriend who fucked you while watching porn—how he rutted and rutted and then every so often lifted the remote to rewind something you couldn't see. (Once you turned your head over the lip of the bed and saw a tangle of upside-down limbs and your brain couldn't make sense of them; you never looked again.) You would just lie there silently, watching his face move over you. It was like being unfolded beneath the yawn of the planetarium as a kid: the sped-up rotation of the earth, the movement of the stars over you, the constellations melting into and out of being as a distant, disembodied voice told some ancient story to help make sense of it all.

You shudder and moan with precision. She turns off the lights. You watch the darkness until the darkness leaves you, or you leave it.

To sleep, go to page 175.

To dream about the past, go to page 172.

To dream about the present, go to page 174.

To dream about the future, go to page 173.

The first time it happened—the first time she yelled at you so much you were crying within thirty seconds from waking, a record—she said, “The first ten minutes of the day, I’m not responsible for anything I say.” This struck you as poetic. You even wrote it down, sure you would find a place for it: in a book, maybe.

Go to page 175.

It’s going to be all right. One day, your wife will gently adjust your arm if it touches her face at night, soothingly straightening it while kissing you. Sometimes you will wake up just enough to notice; other times, she’ll only tell you in the morning. It’s the kind of morning you could get used to.

Go to page 175.

You shouldn't be here, but it's okay. It's a dream. She can't find you here. In a minute you're going to wake up, and everything is going to seem like it's the same, but it's not. There's a way out. Are you listening to me? You can't forget when you wake up. You can't—

Go to page 175.

You wake up and the air is milky and bright. The room glows with a kind of effervescent contentment, despite the boxes and clothes and dishes. You think to yourself: *this is the kind of morning you could get used to.*

When you turn over, she is staring at you. The luminous innocence of the light curdles in your stomach. You don't remember ever going from awake to afraid so quickly.

"You were moving all night," she says. "Your arms and elbows touched me. You kept me awake."

If you apologize profusely, go to page 163.

If you tell her to wake you up next time your elbows touch her in your sleep, go to page 164.

If you toss back the blankets from your body and hit the floor with both your feet and tear through the house like it's Pamplona, and when you get to the driveway your car keys are already in your hand and you drive away with a theatrical squeal of the tires, never to return again, go to page 176.

That's not how it happened, but okay. We can pretend. I'll give it to you, just this once.

Turn to page 177.

Dream House as L'appel du Vide

In the pit of it, you fantasize about dying. Tripping on a sidewalk and stumbling into the path of an oncoming car. A gas leak silently offing you in your sleep. A machete-wielding madman on public transit. Falling down the stairs, but drunk, so you flop limb over limb like a marionette and feel no pain. Anything to make it stop. You have forgotten that leaving is an option.

Dream House as Libretto

My middle school music teacher showed a film version of *Carmen* to the class, the really famous one with Julia Migenes where she keeps hiking up her skirt during the Habanera. He was probably just trying to give you all a bit of culture, but all my classmates took away from the screening and the ensuing discussion was that Carmen was a prostitute who didn't shave under her arms, and by extension, by thirteen-year-old logic, I must also be a prostitute who doesn't shave under her arms. They asked me about both of these things over and over again. Already smarting after a decade of Carmen Sandiego jokes, I was ready to abandon my name altogether.

When Carmen sings, she tells the men who surround her that love is a fickle thing, and they need to beware. Don José gives himself over to her, loses himself in her. When she leaves at the end, he begs her not to go. She tells him that she was born free and she will die free.

Then he stabs her, and she dies.

Confessing his crime to the gathering crowd, he throws his body on Carmen's corpse and howls, "Ah, Carmen! Carmen, my adored one!" As though he hadn't just killed her with his own hands.

Dream House as Sci-Fi Thriller

One night, John and Laura ask if you want to watch a movie with them: *Flatliners*. Julia Roberts, Kiefer Sutherland, Oliver Platt, Kevin Bacon: all med students playing with the edge of death. You are so excited; you remember seeing this movie on TV as a teenager, and you are ready for the shot of nostalgia. You all make drinks, sit down together.

As soon as the movie starts, you fall asleep, your legs slung over the arm of the couch.

You are tired. You are tired and the room is warm and dark and John and Laura are there, breathing gently next to you. You remember the opening—silhouetted statues in the half-light of sunset and a sweeping, dramatic choral arrangement, and Kiefer Sutherland announcing that it is a good day to die. And then you are out. You do not dream. When you wake up, the movie is over; you've missed the entire thing. And yet you feel so content there, in that space, in the moment after waking, and before you remember your cell phone.

When you crash into your bedroom, it is lying there at the end of its charger. Still and traitorous. When you pick it up, there are missed calls, text messages. You call her back, shaking, your pectoral muscles twisting into fists of anxiety.

"Hello." You can hear the smolder of rage in her voice.

"I'm so sorry," you begin to explain, breathlessly. "We just—"

"Who were you fucking?"

You feel your chest pulling inward.

"No one," you say. Then, "Wait, wait, I can—"

You run into the living room, where John and Laura are sprawled content as cats. John sees your face, stands up.

"I can prove it to you," you say to her. "John and Laura are here, I can give them the phone, they can tell you, they can prove I wasn't with anyone else, we were just watching a movie—"

If you live into eternity, if you live until the sun crashes into the earth, you will never forget the expression on John's face, the way he slumps forward and looks flattened with grief. He shakes his head very slightly, though it's not clear if he's refusing the task or refusing the reality where the task is being offered to him.

"No," she says. The smoke in her voice clears immediately. "No, no need."

You talk to her after that, almost certainly, but you have no memory of the conversation. The moment when you woke up on that couch—before you remembered the phone, remembered your entire life—was one of the sweetest from that year. That tiny pocket of safety and oblivion. Whiskey, breath, bodies. Credits crawling up the dark.

Dream House as Déjà Vu

She says she loves you, sometimes. She sees your qualities, and you should be ashamed of them. If only you were the only one for her. She'd keep you safe, she'd grow old with you, if she could trust you. You're not sexy, but she will have sex with you. Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something stunningly cruel, and there is a kick of fear between your shoulder blades. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like she's determining the best way to take you apart.

Dream House as Murder Mystery

Lightning flashes, the power dies, and when the electricity comes back on again a dinner guest is folded over the dessert course with a dagger in her back. The handle of the blade is inlaid with precious gems, but her tiara is missing. When the undercover detective reveals herself—the plucky reporter, of course!—the mystery deepens: the cost of the gems in the handle of the knife far outweighs the value of the stolen tiara, whose diamonds were merely glass. Who among them would give up a tool of such immeasurable value to take something so worthless? And so boldly, in front of so many people?

The plucky reporter paces on the Persian carpet in front of the suspects. Was it Heathcliff, the brawny dockworker turned mob boss? Ethan, the foppish social climber with eyes like the distant radiance of Mars? Samson, the experimental artist with a murky and enigmatic past? The reporter crosses dozens of times in front of a slight, blonde woman sitting in the corner, but never includes her on the list. The blonde woman is leaning back with flinty cool, following the action. She nods and listens, and every so often tilts her chin in the direction of the plucky reporter and lets loose a dazzling smile.

The plucky reporter turns to Samson with a trembling, gloved finger. Samson stands to defend himself. Ethan begins shouting, Heathcliff glowers. And no one pays attention to the blonde woman, who stands and walks toward the corpse of the dinner guest. She grips the blade with both hands and pulls it out like King Arthur deflowering the stone.

The body of the dinner guest, whose eyes are wide and wet with betrayal, lifts with the movement and then slams back down on the place setting, lemon cake squashed against her bosom. The blonde woman wipes the blood off the blade onto the dinner guest's dress and replaces it in her purse. Everyone continues to argue as she walks out the front door and into the night.

IV

The trouble with letting people see you at your worst isn't that they'll remember; it's that you'll remember.

—Sarah Manguso