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The Museum of the Dearly Departed

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The Museum of the Dearly Departed

There had been a leak.

Deep in the basement and then through the walls and floors of the building, gas had poured, scentless, at two a.m. After the fire trucks and news trucks and gawkers had dispersed, after one body had been sired away and eleven more secreted out under sheets, the building sat empty for a week. The only survivor died in the hospital, never having woken. All twelve of them, that meant, died in their sleep. There had been no calls to 911, no bodies sprawled halfway to the door—just the mailman’s cry for help the next morning after three poisonous minutes at the lobby mailboxes. Despite the earnest reporters’ enunciation of “deadliest” and “perfect storm,” the public was not as horrified as it pretended. “That’s really the way to go,” people murmured to their TVs.

On the eighth day, the hottest of July, the old Hungarian couple returned from Cleveland and stood staring at the yellow tape, suitcases by their sides, taxi waiting to be paid. They hadn’t heard.

In seven law offices across Chicago, seven apartments passed to the survivors of the deceased. One of those beneficiaries, Melanie Honing, was a wiry little woman who had in fact never met the occupant of Apartment D. Hers was a deeply awkward conversation with the lawyer. Early in their meeting she picked his stapler off his desk and held it in her lap, opening and closing the top. He didn’t stop her. Apartment D had been co-owned by Vanessa Dillard, who’d lived there the past twelve years, and Michael Salvatore, the man who’d been found in her bed beside her. He was the beneficiary of her will, as well as the disaster’s sole survivor, for all of an hour. Whether there’d truly been hope of resuscitation or if the paramedics had just fixated on their one chance to avoid total failure, they defibrillated him all the way to the hospital. Because of that later time of death, the apartment and its contents had passed to Michael. Michael Salvatore’s will in turn left everything to Melanie, the woman he was to have married nine weeks after the leak.

“I know this is sensitive,” the lawyer said. He was a sweet, serious man, but in that moment Melanie imagined ripping the white mustache off his face. “You aren’t required to claim anything of Ms. Dillard’s. Her family in Wisconsin has made notes of the personal effects they’d like, although you understand you aren’t legally obligated. Her will was quite

basic.” He picked at the edge of a folder. “As Mr. Salvatore’s executor you can get in there pretty quickly. As soon as six weeks. I imagine you’ll want closure.” Her uncle, the one who’d done up their wills as an early wedding present when he’d passed through Chicago that spring, had volunteered to be here with her, to “speak lawyer” with this other attorney. But Melanie had wanted whatever privacy she could still manage.

“She was his ex-wife,” Melanie said. “You figured that much out.”

“And you were his fiancée. I can’t imagine how—”

“But he’d told me she was dead.”

The lawyer let out a descending whistle, blinked hard.

“I even looked her up online once, the dead wife, and all I found in the city was this living woman, this film producer. I figured it was a different person.” She refused the Kleenex he held out. “He told me she died in a car crash in 2003. And I didn’t know his friends, not the old ones. I mean, they sent Christmas cards. But now I realize I never met anyone who’d known him more than ten years. The thing is, why would I have counted? We only dated eleven months.”

The lawyer scratched his chin, pen in hand, leaving a streak of blue down his cheek. He said, “We take most everything at face value. Otherwise how could we get by?”

Melanie had promised her sisters they could help. But she couldn’t stand the thought of their pity, their mercifully hiding things from her—and so one morning two months after the leak, a week before what had been her wedding date (Melanie had thrown out her calendar, with all its circled reminders for salon appointments, bridal luncheons), she drove down from Highland Park alone. Noble Square was a postage-stamp neighborhood just west of the Kennedy, one she’d never set foot in. One she’d never even heard of. As she entered the building, a young man with shoulder-length hair rushed out past her, nodding. On the ground floor someone was cooking bacon and blasting the TV. She found Apartment D on the second story, and the key—miraculously, it seemed—fit the lock.

She stood on Vanessa Dillard’s welcome mat and stared through the open door. She saw brown plants on the windowsill and felt a dull anxiety that there might also be a dead cat somewhere. She didn’t see one, but she saw a blue couch and sunlight and dishes still on the counter. A print of an O’Keeffe painting, the one of white jimsonweed.

She waited for some dramatic feeling to wash over her. But she hadn’t registered much emotion that summer, unless numb was an emotion.

Grief would be an embarrassing surrender, considering the new facts. Rage was inappropriate, given Michael's death. The two reactions had stalemated each other. She was an abandoned chessboard.

She walked in.

Here is all she'd learned in the time since the leak: It was true that Michael and Vanessa were married from 1998 to 2003, as he'd told her. It was true they'd met in college. She produced educational films. She was survived by a mother, a brother, a niece.

Here is what Melanie learned in her ten-minute search of the apartment: Vanessa had no pictures of Michael on display. She had beautiful shoes. She was asthmatic. She read crime novels. Her bra size (one still hung on the shower rod) was 34B. She liked James Taylor and white wine and Japanese art. She chose photos of herself in which her head was turned, smiling. Her hair was wavy and chestnut and long.

The sheet lay bunched at the foot of the bed, but this might have been the work of the EMTs. Melanie suddenly wanted to sit, and although there couldn't have been gas still in the apartment—not with people living here again and a new furnace and updated ventilation—she imagined she could smell it and that she was passing out or maybe dying. She took her key and sat out in the hall, head between her knees.

She clung to a possibility her friends had offered: what if Michael had come over just that once, to tell Vanessa he was getting married? And then when the leak started he felt so tired that he lay on the bed. (In this scenario, her friends helpfully surmised, he still co-owned the place only to take care of her, the woman he'd once loved.) But why, then, had he been there at two a.m. on a weeknight? Why had he told Melanie this woman was dead? Why hadn't Vanessa changed her will? Michael's personal effects, handed over at the hospital, weren't clues: a T-shirt, boxer briefs, running shorts. What he slept in, but also what he exercised in. She'd been given no shoes.

The man she'd seen before—the one with the long hair—came up the stairs, moving like a sleepy and comfortable animal. He started up the second flight, then saw her and turned back. "Do you need help?" he asked. "You want me to go in there for you?" He seemed recently practiced in his grief counseling.

He sat beside her and told her his name was Jed, that he was a grad student at the School of the Art Institute, that his grandparents had left him their apartment. "I threw away their sheets." As if the fact would make her feel better. Oddly, it did. "I'm using their furniture, but I couldn't keep those."

She said, "Could you just stand here? Stand in the doorway and wait for me."

He did, and Melanie went back to the bedroom and around to the far side of the bed. She knelt on the floor and looked underneath. Michael's shoes. His khaki pants, belt still in the loops. His blue striped shirt. His bag.

Jed, in the hallway, heard what sounded like a scream held underwater for years that had finally, violently, bubbled to the top.

When Melanie returned two days later, she walked up to the third floor to thank Jed for the Kleenex and to return the umbrella he'd loaned her when she started home in the rain. He invited her in, and she was glad for the delay in getting back down to the empty cardboard box she'd left outside Apartment D. Jed was a lovely distraction. At thirty-eight, Melanie figured she had a good fifteen years on him, though, and she shook herself of the notion that his grin was a flattering one. He divided a beer between two glasses painted with oranges.

He said, "How goes the aftermath?"

"I like that word."

Jed gestured around the apartment, by way of a tour. He'd pushed most of his grandparents' furniture against the north wall to make a studio space by the southern windows. "I don't mind it," he said. "It's a little boring, compared to yours." She'd told him, between sobs the other day, the basics of the story. "I did find an old bottle of antidepressants. That's the only surprise up in here."

They sat on a red velveteen couch with wooden armrests too ornate to rest their glasses on. Jed had gathered his hair with an elastic, a look Melanie hadn't seen much lately. Her own college boyfriends all had long hair, and maybe this was why she felt so instantly comfortable with Jed. That and the way you could tell just by looking that his blood pressure was low, that he slept well at night.

Melanie said, "You don't mind living this far from school? From your friends?"

"I'll be honest with you. There was a, uh, ill-timed *tryst*, let's call it, with my roommate's sister. It was a good time to move." He laughed and shrugged.

It was momentarily beyond Melanie's comprehension, how silliness between young single people could necessitate a move across town. Had she once cared about things like that?

He said, "How much hunting are you going to do in there?" He waited, squinting his green eyes and widening the hole in the knee of

his jeans with one finger. He was pure empathy, and she almost couldn't stand it. She might cry again, or run out the door.

Instead she said, "The problem is I don't know what I'm digging for. I mean, I don't know what physical objects I'll find, but beyond that—I don't know if I'll find peace, or just more disturbance."

"Like what if they had a kid."

"They didn't."

"Right. Sorry, right." He looked lost. "Have you tried talking to the Hungarian couple downstairs? The guy doesn't speak English, but his wife does, and they've been in the building forever."

She said, "The ones they interviewed in the *Trib*. The ones who didn't know."

"László and Zsuzsi. It's like Zsa Zsa, but different vowels. She was an opera singer. Holocaust survivor, too."

"Yeah. The article said that, about the Holocaust. Can you imagine? I just—it's hard to explain, but I think I need to compartmentalize. Whatever was wrong with my fiancé, that was one thing he clearly did very well."

"Compartmentalize?"

"I'm just here to sort objects."

"Listen," he said, "speaking of which. I'll take anything you don't want. I'm doing a project." The grin was back, and he led her past the kitchen to what had once been his grandfather's study. Jed lifted the flap of a cardboard box and pulled out a handful of LPs, their jackets sun-worn and softened. "These are from Brooke, on the ground floor. She lost her aunt. She kept the collectible ones, but this crap"—a mangled Burl Ives—"is more valuable to me." He showed her a manual Smith Corona, a bag of old shoes, a stack of *TV Guides*, and a chess set, from the inheritors of Apartments C, F, G, and H. "I'm sure your person's family wants her stuff. But if there's anything extra, or anything you can't deal with. I'm crazy about this project."

She swallowed the urge to point out that Vanessa Dillard was not "her person." She said, "What will it be?"

"It'll be...part of my thesis show. Other than that..." He threw up his hands. She realized, when she smiled, how unaccustomed to it her muscles had grown.

Melanie now had three piles to make: the things on the family's list, intriguing items for Jed, and the artifacts she intended to examine in greater detail when she had the stomach. The Evidence, she felt like calling this last collection. She had no intention of keeping Vanessa's

possessions, and she planned to send a letter (along with the package containing the jewelry, the family photos, the pewter turtle from the bookshelf) saying that although it would take a while to get her affairs in order, she would soon hand over the apartment's entire contents. She hoped they'd understand.

Her sisters kept telling her she was right to sell and profit from the apartment itself. After all, the caterer, the band, the woman from the reception hall—they'd been apologetic but firm that no, the deposits could not be returned. Then there was the dress and Michael's engraved ring. And Melanie had missed, so far, twenty days of work, only a fraction of which her boss forgave. ("But don't you count yourself lucky?" he'd asked. "To be rid of the bastard?") She considered the apartment her settlement in the civil suit she hadn't needed to file.

A cracked seashell went into the box for Jed. A sheer black thong, too: what mother would want her daughter's thong? For the family, a silver bracelet left on the coffee table. An asthma inhaler for Jed. For her own box of evidence: Vanessa's dead cell phone. Three slim photo albums. She dropped them in by the corners as if they'd been dipped in poison.

Deep in the desk was a phone bill from 2012, with certain charges circled in green—the remnant of some battle with Verizon. Melanie rested her water glass (Vanessa's water glass) on the counter and scanned the page. Between those circled charges, many calls to Michael's cell and office. Eleven thirty at night; three in a row on a Saturday afternoon. This was a year before she'd met Michael herself, before he stole her from her date at a rooftop party and took her for Korean barbecue and midnight bowling, before he put his hand on her wrist and told her his wife was dead.

What the hell. She said it aloud, to the walls and dead plants. She put her forehead on the carpet and screamed the same thing. *What. The. Hell.* Spoiled by movies, she wanted a video montage to fill her in. She wanted to find a diary with every sordid detail. She wanted the moral permission to call Vanessa's mother and brother and friends. "Just the past twenty years," she'd say. "Just fill me in on the past two decades, more or less."

On the other hand, there was very little of Michael in the apartment. The bottle of Scotch could have been his, but who was to say? There was more than one toothbrush in the bathroom, but she had no DNA swabs. On the floor of Vanessa's closet, behind a row of purses, was an XL T-shirt from the investment firm where Michael worked. She put it aside for Jed.

Then she sat on Vanessa's couch, Evidence box in her lap. Like a train passenger with luggage on her knees. There were footsteps in the hall, and she flinched. But of course they passed. Who would have been looking for her? Part of her was still waiting for a second bunch of reporters to show up—the tabloids, perhaps—but a wave of tact had apparently washed over the city, as if kindness had leaked out with the gas.

Melanie almost wished there *were* some intrepid reporter snooping around, interviewing Michael's cousins, asking what kind of lunatic could pull off so flagrant a lie. Her mother had offered to hire a PI, but really—what would one even find? That the man was a sociopath. Maybe that he and Vanessa had planned to run off with Melanie's money. None of it would be useful; all of it would be humiliating. So here she was instead: gumshoe, archivist, bereaved.

She should have waited—for more distance, for a shot of whiskey—but sitting right there she opened the top photo album. Baby pictures from the early '70s. A sweet girl, growing, losing teeth, a Laura Ashley phase. The album ended with a shot of Vanessa and her brother at a picnic table, shooting sarcastic glares at the camera. Melanie pulled out the next album to see what havoc adolescence had wreaked and was greeted instead with a wedding portrait: Vanessa and Michael, nose to nose. The same Michael but slimmer, a goatee, smiling so broadly that lines spread from his eyes where one day there would be permanent creases. Vanessa's dress was simple, off the shoulder, still chic sixteen years after the fact. Melanie shoved the box from her lap and scooted down to the carpet to flip through the other pages. Michael's late parents she'd seen before in his own photos. There they were, dancing. His sister, with whom he'd always said he had a falling-out, must have been that concave brunette posing wanly between Michael and his mother. But beyond that, she didn't recognize a soul. Not the raucous men in tuxedos, arms around Michael, hands mussing his hair. Not the old woman kissing his cheek. Twenty faces around the cutting of the cake. She knew no one.

The last picture hurt her physically: Michael down on one knee, Vanessa's hand in his, his mouth goofily open in what must have been song. Bridesmaids clapping and laughing. Vanessa's eyes rolled back in embarrassment or ecstasy or both. Michael had never looked at Melanie with such silly abandon. She'd always found him hollow in a pleasant way, like a Greek urn. It was a silence and melancholy she'd attributed to his losing a wife.

Melanie resisted tearing the plastic sheeting from the photo and tearing the photo itself to shreds. Instead she rose and emptied Jed's box

into a library tote bag. In the box she put a tiny iPod. A pair of blue Cole Haan pumps, size seven and unscuffed. (She was glad they wouldn't fit her, glad there was no temptation to keep them rather than sell. She could get fifty dollars for those, at least. A decent dinner out.) A full bottle of Chanel. A Cross pen. A green cut-glass vase. An armload of DVDs. She remembered some book she'd read as a child in which a girl had to wander the palace of the gnome king picking out the objects her friends had been transformed into. Here: an Hermès scarf.

She walked the box down the stairs and out the front door, and when she was halfway to her car someone called from the window. "Sad lady! Come inside to sit!" A woman's voice with an accent. Melanie tried to see through the screen. "I make for you a sandwich."

She unlocked her car and set the box on the passenger seat.

"I have for you some orange juice!"

Melanie was exhausted. Jed had said they should meet. And the compartmentalizing wasn't going so well anyway. Plus, could you really say no to a Holocaust survivor?

So she turned and went back in.

Zsuzsi looked younger than Melanie expected—the *Trib* had put her at ninety-four—but she was soft and round, which always hid the wrinkles. "Our young artist tells me about you. Come, come, come, come, come." She was asking Melanie to follow her, to sit on the cracked blue vinyl of a kitchen chair. Melanie found herself eating a cheese and lettuce sandwich and being introduced to László, who passed the doorway on his tennis-ball-footed walker and nodded briefly. "He spoke once little bit, but after his stroke he knows just Hungarian. He remembers English only for songs he has known many years. He sings still all the Christmas carols. He sings the old commercials. I talked to *Chicago Tribune* by myself!"

The kitchen, cluttered with Post-its and magnets and pot holders and herbs, smelled like decades of cooking.

Melanie said, "You've been in the building a long time."

"In Chicago it is sixty-six years. When I was young like you I sing for twenty years in the chorus at the Lyric Opera! But here in this building it is only fifteen years."

"That's still a long time."

Zsuzsi laughed. "For you, yes."

She said, "Did you know Vanessa Dillard, the woman who lived right above you?"

Zsuzsi broke into a wide smile, the kind that should have infuriated Melanie but actually, against her will, made her feel warmer toward Vanessa. “She is lovely person. So beautiful! Frankly, I do not see why she should be in scandals.” She pronounced it “frenkly”—a softer version of the word. “She has parties always for her film workers. After the film is finished, up they come to her apartment and she gives wine.”

Assuming the present tense was a language issue rather than a senility one, Melanie pressed on. “There was a man named Michael. He came here.”

Zsuzsi shook her head, and for a moment Melanie thought she might say that no, he didn’t. “He stands outside in the street six, seven times and shouts like Marlon Brando. And the rest of the time is fight, fight, fight.” She pointed to the ceiling. “Or thump, thump, like rabbits.”

Melanie was careful to breathe. This was truly for the best, she told herself. More anger meant less mourning, at least of the traditional variety. “This man,” she said, “he was balding? Dark hair, a bit of a stomach. Michael.”

Zsuzsi swept the crumbs onto Melanie’s empty plate and walked them to the garbage. “No good for her, I tell her lot of times. But what man is not bad news?” She leaned hard on Melanie’s shoulder. Or maybe she was attempting to comfort her. “Frenkly, you are lucky you do not run off with him. People judge.”

“Oh. No! You’re not understanding.”

“In Europe, no one cares about this. The President of France, he has mistresses. But Bill Clinton has his little affair and they try to *kkkhhh!*” She put her hand to her neck like someone getting hanged. “In Hungary once there was a famous affair, a princess and a Gypsy. And do you know what we do? We name after the Gypsy a wonderful sponge cake. Rigó Jancsi. This is all we care! Does it make a good dessert. But you, you are young and pretty. You can find still a man who is free. Some women have babies now, forty, forty-five year old.”

“We weren’t having an affair. It wasn’t—” Melanie’s breath caught and she thought she might start screaming, so she stopped herself from talking at all. She wanted to get away from the kitchen. From the whole building, in fact. She thanked Zsuzsi for her hospitality. When she got back outside, her car was unlocked, as she’d left it. The box was gone from the passenger seat.

She intended to stay away a few weeks, returning equipped to handle things. Maybe with a sister in tow. But Saturday was the day of the wedding—the absence of the wedding, rather—and all morning friends

called to say things like “I’m thinking of you,” then wait for her to say something back. Flowers arrived from her father. At one o’clock, a confused soul from the limo company called, confirming that no limo was needed. The next time her phone rang, she threw it across the room, picked up her purse, and took the Metra to the city, then a cab to Noble Square.

When she arrived, a dazed couple was trailing a real-estate agent down the front steps. Melanie wanted to stop them, to say, “You know they all died in there,” but surely they’d already heard. It would account for the wife’s pallor.

She arranged Vanessa’s liquor bottles on the counter and sloshed some of the unopened cranberry juice from the pantry, with vodka, over ice cubes that Vanessa herself must have poured into the plastic trays. Or Michael, of course. By the time she began circling the apartment with the Evidence box, she was on her second drink. She’d been gentle before, eyeing a shelf and plucking out only the most compelling things. Now, the word of the day was *ransack*. Papers, high-school yearbooks, shopping lists, the contents of the medicine cabinet. No antidepressants here, but birth control pills—the last taken on a Thursday, probably with the glass of water that still sat crusting on the bathroom sink. They’d died on a Friday morning. Here, in the very back of the bedside table drawer, was the elusive charger for Vanessa’s phone. Melanie fished the phone from the box and plugged it into the wall.

It was four thirty—the time when someone should have been finishing her hair, when one of her sisters should have been slipping her an early glass of champagne. Only she wasn’t allowed to envy that girl, that phantom self, the one about to marry an impostor.

She sat on Vanessa’s toilet, staring at the nail polishes clustered on the shelf like a little rainbow army. She slid her feet from her shoes and looked at her toes, dry and calloused. In the alternate universe, she’d have spent all yesterday at the spa. And because her only other choice was to break down and sob over something so ridiculous, she plucked a bottle from the shelf—petal pink—and figuring that Vanessa owed her this, that sweet Vanessa might have *insisted* had she known, she took the bottle to the living room floor, along with one more drink, and made her feet pretty.

As she finished, Vanessa’s phone gave a short buzz. Melanie jumped, tipping over the polish, and a pink puddle oozed across the cream carpet. She stepped around it. Fifteen messages had arrived from the cellular cloud. None were Michael, and the first was Walgreens. The second was from the morning after the leak: “Evelyn K.,” the screen

announced. A woman with a crisp British accent. She said, “Well, yes, let’s talk, Ness, but you know what I’m going to say. I’m going to tell you he’s a narcissist, and he thinks you’re his mother. That carousel just goes round and round again. I will most definitely be using the word *wanker*.”

Melanie had the brief instinct to jot down the message, as if Vanessa would step through the door soon and pay her for house-sitting. Instead she deleted it. She’d be passing the phone to the parents, who doubtless didn’t need confirmation that Michael was a wanker.

The message had verified something she’d felt in her bones: Vanessa couldn’t have known about Melanie, about the wedding. If she had, surely she’d have confided in this friend, or what was the point of asking advice? And if the friend knew, stronger epithets would have been employed.

The phone lay in her hand like a grenade. The other messages were all from the two days following the leak, six of them from “Mom.” They’d be panicked and wrenching, and Melanie understood that listening would be something she could never undo, a far deeper violation than going through the photographs.

And more dangerously: somewhere in that phone, if she touched the right button, would be old texts from Michael. They’d be adoring or angry or sexual or mundane. They’d be cryptic. They wouldn’t be about *her*, but about whatever this tenuous, unkillable thing was they had between them. It would be like watching them kiss.

She mustered enough clarity—it might have been the most mature moment of her life—to see that this would be the worst thing she could do to herself. There were other places she could be. There were other ways to hide from the ghost of her wedding. She needed to leave and not come back alone.

She picked up the tote bag of items for Jed and decided it was full enough: T-shirt, thong, inhaler, seashell, an Animal Control magnet, a very old pack of cigarettes. She carried her shoes—her toenails weren’t dry—and knocked on his door till he opened it, wild-eyed and happy. She put on her silly movie star voice. “This is good-bye, old friend!”

He blinked, and Melanie wondered what she looked like. Not good, presumably. He said, “Then you have to see the project!” Before she could make an excuse, he swept her back to the study, where there stood what looked like a huge dollhouse, or a bookshelf with a roof. Two cubbies wide, four rows tall, of freshly sawed plywood. In each compartment, a display. “I’m calling it *Dearly Departed*. Or possibly *Aftermath*. The outside will look like our building. I’m thinking of this photo-realist

idea where I cover everything with paint that looks just like the thing itself, but—you know, it's paint."

As he pawed through the tote bag, Melanie explored the structure. On the third story, in the space corresponding to this one, a Golden Oldies record jacket perfectly filled the back wall. In front of it sat the infamous bottle of antidepressants and a cheap plastic apple. Next door, in what would have been Apartment F: a Joe Cocker album behind three plastic film canisters. The fourth floor was full, too. A crucifix necklace in front of Louis Armstrong, a phalanx of chessmen in front of Glenn Gould solos. But Vanessa's apartment was empty. "I wanted you to pick the music," Jed said. "Check it out—I have opera arias for the Hungarian lady." He pointed to the ground floor, where the back wall was indeed filled with Maria Callas's face. "I want it to be like the music they're hearing in heaven. Because I'm doing this whole thing with echoes. Right?" Melanie stooped to poke at the small leather satchel in Apartment A, the calligraphy pens and ink bottles in C. "Do you think I should leave the Hungarians' floor empty, though? Is that too literal? I mean, they're not dead, but visually there won't be balance. My advisor would hate that. Should I ask them for something?"

Melanie flipped through the stack of remaining records and found an Etta James one from 1973. *Only a Fool*. She pushed it carefully to the back wall. "I think Vanessa would have liked her, too."

Out of all the things in the bag, Jed had settled on the stale cigarettes. He dumped them on the small floor in front of Etta. "These'll be cool. I can get some height, once I glue it all. Oh, and look. The typewriter won't fit, so I want to set it out for people to type their thoughts. Like this." He pushed the Smith Corona, and the TV table it sat on, in front of the house. He waited for her reaction.

In a previous life, she'd have kissed him right then. She'd have led him to the bed. She wondered though, not for the first time, if she'd ever really want someone again. What was the point, when you could never know him even a little bit?

There was a piece of yellow paper in the roller, so Melanie walked around and started typing. The keys were loud and deep. *It's beautiful*, she wrote. *Let's go get something from Zsuzsi*.

It wasn't that she couldn't bring herself to leave. But she felt somehow invested in Jed's project now, and its completion might feel like closure. She'd never answer her million questions or sort through all Vanessa's things, but she could see the last room of the little museum filled. She slipped her shoes back on.

When they knocked at Apartment B it was László who answered. He waved them toward the kitchen table, turtling behind with his walker. Zsuzsi wore a bathrobe over a nightgown, and she stopped washing dishes to sit with them, rubbing lotion into her palms. Jed explained the project—"a memorial to the ones we lost," he called it—and asked if there was any small object she'd like to contribute. Melanie was taken aback by how vigorously Zsuzsi nodded, by how quickly her eyes filled. She grabbed Jed's forearm. "This I have been waiting," she said. She disappeared into another room while Jed and Melanie looked at each other bewildered and László eased himself into a kitchen chair.

She came back cupping something between her palms, and waited for Jed to extend his own. It was a stuffed gray mouse, worn moleskin stretched over a lumpy plaster body.

László let out a monosyllabic shout, angry rather than startled, then mumbled to Zsuzsi in Hungarian. She shot back, repeating something firmly until he was calm. She brought him a glass of water, and he reclined to stare at the ceiling, his head too heavy for his long, thin neck. Melanie wanted nothing more than to leave—she should have known this was a mistake—and she was surprised that Jed seemed so planted in his chair, waiting out the storm as if it were a real one from which he was responsible for sheltering the little mouse.

"This comes from my sister. She also is murdered by the gas, but many many years."

Zsuzsi pronounced "gas" like "guess," and Melanie fixated on this just as she'd fixated all week on Vanessa's possessions instead of Michael's death. *They were killed by the guess.*

"László, he is okay. I tell you a whole story. Because you know that the gas comes back for a reason. Yes? And here you are this beautiful couple full of life. Do you see what it means to have your life in front of you?"

Jed said, "We do," and he put his free hand solidly on Melanie's knee. It was half a gesture of restraint, and half a display for Zsuzsi: yes, we are a couple if you say we are, and we will stay a couple till you've finished your story.

László was fuming but quiet, drinking his water now like a shamed child, and Zsuzsi leaned close to Jed. "All my life I think, the gas will come back. And here we are almost to the grave until it does."

Jed said, "But you got out safely. That was so long ago." There was that empathy again, beaming from him like a light. Melanie wondered if this was how every day was for him, near-strangers confessing seventy-year-old secrets just because of those green eyes, that forward hunch.

"In 1944, in October, I am standing in the line at the train station. They have in the lines families, and a line for the old men, and a line for the women with no rings, so here is me and here is my sister Kata who is seventeen, and I am twenty-four. Back when I am eighteen I am singing soprano at the state opera in Budapest, and I am called the ingenue. Many flowers, many men. But then 1939 I am no longer a star. I can sing at the Jewish music hall only. Five years pass, and I am in the line, and everywhere is crying and pushing, and László, he recognizes me. I have never seen him. He is only nineteen years old. Do you understand?"

Melanie shook her head and was glad when Jed did too. "No."

"He is a music lover. Every week he goes to the concert hall or the opera, and he remembers me from five years. I have at this time hair to my waist, all black. And he says to the other men, 'We make a mistake. This woman is not a Jew; this woman is with me.' So he takes me from the line, and the last time I see my sister is she is getting on the train."

Zsuzsi put her face into her hands, almost an embarrassed gesture, and once Melanie reassured herself that Zsuzsi wasn't crying, just bracing herself and collecting her breath, she tried to process the story. Jed had taken his hand off her knee and now it hovered over his own lap, as if he might need to catch something in a moment. László just sipped his water.

"Many years later, our old neighbor sends me this." She meant the mouse. "It is my sister's but she gave to the neighbor boy when he was crying. And they send it then back to me."

Melanie was the one to talk. She worried that Jed, in all his patience, wouldn't ask the question. And one more unanswered question would explode her. "Are you saying your husband was there in the...he was in the capacity of a soldier?"

Zsuzsi lifted her head. "He already loved me, from the opera. He knows my name, and he tells all the men this is his girlfriend. He does not save me just to save someone. He saves me because Cupid has hit." She tapped her own ribcage. "He is musician too. At school he was studying the piano. Even now he plays. Frenkly, this is one blessing: the stroke takes from him the language of English, but leaves the language of piano." She hit her palm on the table with conviction, as if this were the salient point of the story. "We spend three weeks together, and then he sends me to his cousin in Holland, and then I am on a boat to Norway, and he meets me in Toronto after the war and we are married." She was talking again to Jed, and Melanie considered that she might need to readjust the look of horror on her own face. She settled for covering her mouth and nose with both hands. "He was Arrow Cross.

Do you know what is Arrow Cross?" They both shook their heads. "I will put this way: they take it upon themselves. Without the Germans there yet, they take it upon themselves. But when the Germans come, the Arrow Cross is still helping. This is when we meet."

"And you *stayed* with him?" Melanie said. She couldn't help it. "This is the same person? *Him?*" She refrained from gesturing, so that László could remain in the dark. He was contemplating his empty glass.

"I fell in love. Maybe it makes no sense."

"Not really," Melanie said, but only under her breath.

Zsuzsi said, "But I had no children with him. Is like the two of you. You are a beautiful couple, and you should not care what are the rules of married and not married and who is a widow. You know: not everyone survives."

Melanie wasn't following anymore. Was she the widow? Was Vanessa?

"And now you see: the gas comes back for us. We are gone in Cleveland and the gas comes back, and instead it finds other people. It finds your beautiful friend." Zsuzsi began sobbing into her hands, and Jed found the right moment to touch her shoulder. Melanie, near panic herself, looked across at the old man, at the absent way he observed his crying wife. She wondered what Zsuzsi had told him, to calm him down—if she'd lied to him about the mouse, or even about Jed and Melanie. Told him they were doctors, psychologists. She studied his face: his caved-in mouth, his long, unruly eyebrows. His blue eyes milky with cataracts.

Zsuzsi looked up at Melanie. "You forgive yourself now for moving on. It is good your affair has ended, yes? Those two go together to their grave, and you are here and finding love. But I know from the first time I see you that you worry you make this happen, that your sins made come the gas. And I tell you this story because you need to know it was not from you. It was from me."

Melanie opened her mouth to say, "No, I never had an affair, I had an engagement and a betrayal and a collapsing of my universe, no, you're very confused," but Jed shot her a look—a gentle glare, a blaze of green—and it was like an emergency transfusion of clarity. *This story is not about you*, the look said. *Shut up*.

"You cannot help that you fall in love with that man," Zsuzsi said.

"No. No, I couldn't. We don't choose, right?"

Zsuzsi nodded vigorously. "Who is ever to choose?"

László started coughing, a thick cough that rattled his whole body, his hands braced against the table, and Jed jumped up to get him more water. He put the glass in front of him, but the coughing continued

with such intensity that he couldn't stop to drink. Zsuzsi rose and stood behind him, lifting the glass to his mouth, and he breathed some water in, then dribbled it out onto his white stubble. Eventually, the coughs spread out and stopped. He said something to Zsuzsi and waved her away.

Jed said, "It's late." And it was. It was dark outside. (The band would have been starting to play right now. Melanie had almost forgotten.) The mouse was still nestled in Jed's palm. He said, "Are you sure you want me to take this? I'll show you the memorial when it's done." But László was coughing again, and Zsuzsi was back at his side. Jed and Melanie slipped out of the kitchen, out of the apartment, up to the second floor hall, where Vanessa Dillard's door was still ajar from what Melanie had thought would be her quick farewell trip to Jed's.

He was saying, "I can't paint over the mouse. I couldn't do it. But that'll be cool, right? It can be the only unpainted thing, like it's the rawest and it stands out."

Melanie nodded and said, "I think I'm stopping here. I need to get off this ride now."

"I mean, *wow*. It's called Stockholm syndrome, right? Do you think she's really loved him all this time?"

"I can't imagine."

"I mean, talk about *compartmentalizing*. Ha! Okay, so does that mean he was a Nazi? Is that the same thing? I mean it sounds, like, as bad or worse than Nazi."

"I don't know."

"Oh, God. Oh. Why are you crying? Hey."

She wiped at her nose and tried to unscramble her brain. "It was true down there, that look you gave me. What Zsuzsi said had nothing to do with me. We think we're part of the story, but we're just the tangents. It's the same thing I've been—you know? In there."

Jed looked horrified. "I don't understand, but I know that's not true!"

Melanie leaned against the wall and wondered how she could possibly still have tears left when she was so very dehydrated. "I'll put it this way. You look into that dollhouse. Okay, that wasn't fair, not a dollhouse. The museum, the memorial. You look into it from outside, and you have a few little relics, and you try to put a narrative around them, decipher them, but really you're never going to know. Are you satisfied with that? Standing on the outside looking in?" He was quiet, and she worried she'd offended him. It was easy to forget how young he was. She said, "I'm sorry. I mean, maybe that's the role of the artist."

Jed's voice was as kind as any nurse's, any teacher's: "I think it's the role of the survivor."

"Oh." It was the point of his whole project, and she'd missed it completely. "Oh."

Why was she always five steps behind?

He smiled, and she knew then that he would have slept with her, if she'd wanted. He would have taken her up to his apartment and made her feel young and unbetrayed again for one night. Of course he would have. It wasn't so complicated. But he was still holding that little mouse, fragile and gray, and she didn't want him to put it down for her or anyone. She wanted it to go straight to the waiting little room, in front of Maria Callas and home, at last, to the land of forgotten and remembered and misconstrued objects—after seventy years, at last. And she wanted to go home and sleep for a week.

Outside, there was a cascade of sirens—someone else's emergency—and then they passed.

She said, "Good night, good night, good night," and Jed started up his last flight of stairs, the mouse cupped in his hands, until she could see only his feet, then nothing.

It was, by design, her final image of the building. She sealed it there, like a movie director watching the dailies and selecting from among hundreds what would be the film's closing shot: here, at the perfect angle, a beautiful man from below, fragile relic in his rough hands. Mouse equaling survival, et cetera. Sirens in the night. Fade to black.

She locked Vanessa's door, leaving the Evidence box inside. Her sisters would be glad to handle the apartment's sale, the transfer of personal effects, the donation of furniture to the women's shelter.

It wasn't quite true, she knew, that there was nothing for her in Zsuzsi's story. The woman had managed—not just eventually, but right there on the spot in 1944—to forgive the most heinous acts of her lifetime, all for the sake of love. Or at least self-preservation. And here was Melanie, who knew that the rest of her life would be defined by the degree to which she could forgive Michael. This was the role of the survivor as well: the passing of judgment, the issuing of pardons. But she didn't even think she *ought* to forgive Michael. She could only note, with slight astonishment, that at some point in the recent past she had managed to forgive Vanessa Dillard completely. Wasn't that a triumph of sorts?

She walked down the stairs, trying to be exactly like someone in a film, an actress with a mark to hit, a single motivation, a paycheck on the other side of the front door.

She almost made it.

From inside Apartment B, piano chords vibrated, delicate but insistent, and above them hovered a cracked soprano. A ravaged voice, a Stradivarius left in the rain.

*It was down by the Sally Gardens my love and I did meet
She crossed the Sally Gardens on little snow-white feet.*

Was this what they did, then, every night? This couple that should not have been a couple, this inexplicable by-product of the twentieth century's worst moment? They gazed at each other and sang Irish love songs? Melanie pictured snifters of brandy. László's clouded eyes, emanating a love that couldn't really have been any different than any other human love in history, could it? There were seven billion love stories on the planet, but when you cracked them open, if you ever cracked them open, didn't they all have the same unoriginal love at their core? She wanted to ask. She wanted to demand an explanation.

But the door was closed, and so she could not see and could not ask. She walked down the steps and onto the street, and the song continued.

*She bade me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree
But I was young and foolish and with her did not agree.*

Both of them were singing now. Dear God, what was that? What was she meant to do with *that*? Both of them were singing.