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Thoughts I've Had at Parties

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

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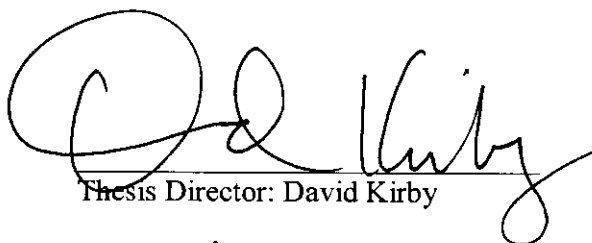
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KATRINA PAPOUSKAYA

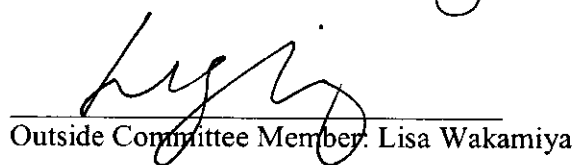
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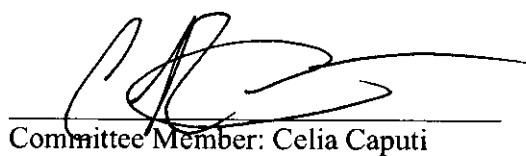
The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Katrina Papouskaya defended on November 16, 2018.



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Contents

The Types of Boys You Didn't Expect to Meet in College.....	4
Psychiatry Appointment Gone Wrong.....	6
Michael	7
And Even Two-Second Eye Contact and a Simple "Hello" Are Dangerous.....	8
Would I Ever Succeed in Trying to Teach a Son the F Word First?	9
Oriental Therapy	10
The Scratch-Offs.....	11
I'm Sitting in a Vegetarian Café Where the Screamo Music is Too Loud.....	13
I Learned the Word "Sleepover" at the Villanueva House.....	14
Mozart's Babies & the NannyBot 3000.....	15
Welcome to the Office	16
The Newly Born Woman	18
Thoughts after Seeing a Coworker with a Waist Trainer	19
Things That Make Me Reconsider.....	20
Alternate Universe (AU I)	21
AU II.....	23
Mixed Signals and Mixers (AU III).....	25
I Went to London on My Own and More Brave Choices Followed.....	27
Isaura Helped Me Learn English When All I Knew Was Russian.....	28
November 2, 2018.....	29

The Types of Boys You Didn't Expect to Meet in College

I. Ben

Babbles a mile a minute. Blue eyes quick, tongue quicker. Points out obscenities. More frequently makes them up. "Bitch" is a frequent part of his vocabulary in jokes. He puts you on the spot if he suspects you've got a crush, wiggle his eyebrows, says, "Think he's a cutie? Hit him up." (He's talking about Jake.) Always wears a baseball cap backwards, blond hair, curly but unangelically. Will spill your secrets if you tell him. Redeeming quality: bought his girlfriend a Taser and mace when he found out she lived in a shady neighborhood.

II. Stephen

Shaggy blond hair and a burly tone. Looks older than he is. Asks you who you like, whether you've got a secret admirer because you've got a small bunch of flowers you picked in your hands one day, wants to know because he's got eyes for you—you know because he laughs at things you say that weren't even a joke. When summer ends you cry over him the most, you think about not seeing him so often anymore once friend groups divide. It might be because he reminds you of your brother: insensitive; difficult; someone who loves you.

III. Jake

Ben's best friend. Also the boy you once had a crush on in high school. He suddenly notices you at the college parties you both serendipitously attend in your last year. You have the same friend group now, both like comedy, crave New York, write poetry (why you used to think you were meant to be). This is after you've finally climbed out of your shell, learned your own worth, started wearing pencil skirts and talking to people with firm handshakes and a smile. You spill personal stuff back and forth like a mess of alphabet soup—difficult family drunkards, parents not letting you take jobs to focus on school, the way his ex made him stop smoking for two years but he's free to do it now. He says you're a good friend and that you two should hang out more when you tell him he shouldn't apologize for opening up, and you wonder how it took him seven years to realize you were someone worth talking to. You always did know you were destined for each other somehow, but you didn't imagine it would be like this, him offering you a smoke of his vape pen on a balcony overlooking a party where everyone's going through something similar or worse. He says it's mango flavored and you refuse, say you don't smoke. He shrugs, says he's only being polite.

IV. Casper

Writes poetry but has been too humble to mention it. Is all nerves

on stage and you wish he would see his own brilliance. You could debate about movies back and forth for a millennium. He makes ironically sexist jokes and you wish you didn't laugh but you do every time, attempts at a glare feeble. He says his sister is running the New York marathon and that she's the best person he's ever known.

V. Isaiah

The boy that scares you the most because he makes you laugh. All summer you've talked and teased, and it was easy then, when he was with someone else. When they break up, you start staring across the room at each other at every party, but he avoids talking to you. One time you find him sitting on the kitchen floor, eyes bloodshot, beer bottle in hand, and he can't get a word out when you ask him if he needs anything, just shakes his head. You're the one always walking up to him now, until you can't stand the staring anymore, the way his hugs linger but he says nothing. You tell him how you feel. He tells you *sorry, I see you as a good friend, nothing more* and you feel crazy for weeks, cry to your friend over the phone, say you realized you like male validation more than you thought. Your guy friends all tell you later you weren't crazy, he "just can't give you what you want" and somehow having been right all along makes it worse.

VI. Jack

Freshman. Calls you his mother as a way of greeting, and you like it, but he's the only one that's allowed to do that. You call him son in return, bring him water and pat his back when he's on the floor puking his guts out at a party, pink watery substance on cement. Your random bursts of motherly instinct make you scared the primal cavewoman living in you will flare up more as time passes, make a home inside you, beating her club against the walls of your uterus, begging to be filled. You just started taking birth control because you've been thinking about boys a lot. It's the first big decision you make without consulting your mother. You still haven't told her, just like you haven't told her you like girls too.

VII. Mike

Wears beanies or sometimes baseball caps. Gets red cheeks every time he drinks, works at the local grocery store, is as mature as you would expect a nineteen-year-old boy who still says "gay" as a joke to be. He's arrogant and somewhere along the line you know it will change because he's lived in this college town all his life and something will kick him to humility, but you like him, still, because he's like you—always working to be better, trying not to show how much he cares about success.

Psychiatry Appointment Gone Wrong

I have a friend who calls me after she said she'd tried to call everyone else, voice teary, asking if we could go out for food or anywhere so that she doesn't do anything beyond walk into the liquor store and look around and walk back out like she's already done a few times that day. I lie listless on the bed but quickly abandon

my computer. I am scared, she's been dry for a while, but think that this must be what it is all about, in the end, the small bit of control we do have. I say "yes," tidy up my house, run my finger along the bridge of my cat's nose as goodbye, drive over to where we agreed to meet—a colorful-walled vegan joint with overpriced spicy, greasy sandwiches.

She told me she would wait outside for me so that she wouldn't order a margarita, but they're closed on Mondays anyway, which she says is a sign. She wrings her hands, squeezes them repetitively, mutters, "I don't need it," over and over. We drive over to another joint, another vegan place (one purity to balance out the one she does not have),

and she orders a cupcake, poutine (Canadian like her), a sandwich, some soda – the works to numb the other temptation. A red, plastic coin lies on the table beside her that I mistake for a wrapped chocolate. It says the mantra that starts "give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change," on the flip side says "sober," and the number 11 for the 11 tenets

they follow in AA. She's not there yet, says she's just dry, that sober means practicing all 11 steps. Like pious members of the church they gather, share their troubles. She won't go today, says it's a bad day to go, so we head out to a school show instead, where she sits

straight-faced and quiet, seeming more like me than her usual extroverted self, unstimulated by the vibrant players on stage who are gesturing wildly, screaming, making the audience roar with laughter. She leaves while I stay to mingle with friends and it is so not like it was three years ago when we met and college was new and she knew everyone and I, no one.

She had asked me about every topic under the sun, asked how often do I masturbate? Said how evolved I was for being into women too, made me believe there was no reason I couldn't get the guy I've been pining over for years. She made me climb out of my nervous shell and now she's in one, kneading her hands in the seat next to me, zoning out as the crowd

chortles around her, telling me "thank you" so many times in the car as we drive around the town. I tell her about my easy day, about the picture a boy I love posted today, laugh for the both of us with a hard grip on the steering wheel, turning up the R&B bops, Nicki and Cardi, bass vibrations to make the mood light. I don't ask what the doctor told her

but in the restaurant I step off to the bathroom, pause before the mirror, say, "God, please."

Michael

They give the storms names and people named Katrina like me
get teased for a decade to come. This is the third one in a row
to hit this college town, and the panhandle is overflowing
with fragile trees that splinter and crackle and down the power lines
so that every home and apartment is musty and hot for days,
yogurts and milks and hummus' tossed in the trash for the smell.
I stick out the storm in the modern, well-kept suburban home of my boss.
It feels like staying at grandma's – my room has a quilted bed

and old family pictures up on the wall, VHS movies lining the bookshelves.
We watch *Magnum PI* and *NCIS*, predictable but comfortable shows. The power
dies and Michael is raging a personal vendetta against the bushes
and oak tree in the backyard, branches beating against the window
in the sun room where we go to watch the storm, play Spades.
I try to teach my boss, her husband, and his elderly mother, Mama Lina,
a Russian card game. They dislike it, think it has too many steps.
Her husband keeps looking off to the side, and I feel too Russian

every time I have to remind him it's his turn. They're eager
when we move on to Scrabble next. The next day the storm
is over. I drink my morning coffee fast and pack up with excitement.
I drive home around fallen trees on the road. Hills of branches decorate
either side like makeshift topiaries. Home is only damaged by tree litter
and my cat's fine. The first place I go after is a friend's apartment, the apartment
of weekly Roman-ly ragers with friends. Another friend from across the street
comes over and I'm relieved, don't care about the way I sit in my own sweat,

sticky on the leather couches. We talk for nine hours, listen to Modest Mouse,
drive around in my friend's car with the windows down. We check for damage
at friends' houses, see what's open down Tennessee Street, settle on Asian fast food
that gives me an intimate half hour with the toilet a day later. We talk
over curry and boba tea about having kids or not having them,
the too-short heights our parents gave us. At the apartment we watch *Taken*,
talk over Liam Neeson's ass-kicking about politics; moral relativism; kinks;
talents we can't profit off (two of us can bend our fingers back far, one of us

can say every state in the US under 20 seconds). The town's all right, college
students riding on their scooters in the sun, neighbors chatting now that
there's no AC or TV keeping them inside. The air the next day is perfect, crisp
at a low of 61 degrees, which explains why I slept so well with the windows down.

And Even Two-Second Eye Contact and a Simple “Hello” Are Dangerous

There is an apartment that never sleeps by the foot of the stairs
I must descend every day to get to the parking lot. I walk

with stiff shoulders, gaze fixed forward. I always mutter a prayer
that today, no group of boys will be sitting outside it,

the sweet-smelling vapor of weed wafting from their mouths
as they laugh, watch for passers-by to shout at. “How’s it goin’?” and

“Hey, I have a friend that looks just like you,” and “You look good
wet,” when I’m running for shelter from the rain.

I never know what to say, I’m not hardwired to shout “Fuck off!”
and stick up a middle finger. I’m meek and I mumble, sometimes

I freeze. “Look, she’s smiling,” they say when they offer to show me
a dirty-mirror bathroom selfie of the girl I really looking nothing like,

and all I can think about is the way chimpanzees will smile to say,
“Don’t hurt me” to their predators. I read an article about a dominatrix

who teaches women about power dynamics. Never answer a question,
she says. Respond with your own or redirect attention to them.

I try it, tell one guy, “Nice shoes,” in response to “Nice shirt.”
He’s befuddled, chuckles and repeats “no” like a broken record, as if

to say, “That’s not how this works.”

Would I Ever Succeed in Trying to Teach a Son the F Word First?

I bid seven *Always* pads for a day's worth of peace, or at least stainless pants.
Another girl bids her entire uterus (universe?) for a lifetime. Another bids

the most absorbent super tampons from the drug store, a rattling bottle
of Advil, two tubs of ice cream, a hot water bag to hold to the stomach. Another

bids a plastic cup you fold like a tulip, insert vertically, *ouch*, it hurts,
feels tight, two different sizes, one for those who haven't borne children,

one for those who have, and isn't that the way they see us anyway?
It's dubbed *Diva Cup* to assure you you are a strutting, hip-moving,

heels-enduring woman. It's environmentally-friendly, at least,
"reducing feminine waste," they advertise. Feminine waste? Period stuff,

placentas, cum, babies that will grow up throwing trash on the beach,
babies that will grow up to be men who will be bad at dates if you're lucky,

wolf-whistle at women on the street and slip roofies into solo cups
if you're not, men that will grow up to be men who never grow up.

Women look down to the pavement, their phones, will develop early
creases from practicing the perfect frown to say, *don't talk to me*,

I'm tired, angry, a meme-worthy resting bitch face, or whatever
I need to be to be ignored by you today.

Oriental Therapy

A Chinese medicine doctor tells me I should have a child before thirty.
On the wall of her office are photos of corpulent babies next to smiling mothers,
the patients of her miracle-giving acupunctural practice. In a private room,
Dr. Liang pokes needles through my skin, asks question about my period, diet,
whether I have a boyfriend? I shake my head, murmur, "No." Her polite way of asking
if there is someone I would accept spilling inside me, making something grow and push
against the walls of me. Polycystic ovary syndrome is a mouthful but so are all the reasons
I am bothered by the way my mother and the doctor joke I need to marry soon, so I stay
silent and wonder if my mother imagines me as another smiling woman on a wall plaque
who has fulfilled her duty. My brother, at thirty-one, has elected to live without marriage
or children. Grandkids are my responsibility now. I am the last life raft on the Titanic.
Hard ice penetrates, cracks the steel hull. I am meant to drop into violent water,
a mess of blood and excrement on an operating table, dutiful deliverer of the family blood.
I didn't want to think about this before I could drink legally. Princess Kate is on her third
at thirty-six but she's got no student debt and lives in a castle. I have dreams too. New York
sounds too busy for a pregnant woman, and I can barely take care of my cat. Dr. Liang
puts a hand over her head, sighs heavily. "For women in twenties still possible. For women over
thirty so. Hard. Find good man to marry soon." I scrunch up my nose because
it's Pride Month and I swing both ways, and I don't know if there will be bras or boxers filling
up extra space in my closet one day, or where I'll be in a year or even tomorrow.
At a Fourth of July party three kids run amok in the yard. The two youngest, girls,
are rowdy, pull up their noses to look like pigs. Their older brother, all of twelve, polite
like an angel, follows them, picks up the red and blue streamers they drop in the grass,
festive, impermanent blue dye frosting his hair. He picks up his sisters, spins them around,
and they love it, and the grownups love it, laughter drowning out the disruptive screams.

The Scratch-Offs

We have been coming here for years – different places but the same eraser-less pencils: green, small and stubby. Usually we go to the local Publix,

pink slips with numbered squares sitting pretty in a pocket of the green stand near the entrance, like a multiple choice exam we pay to do.

The scratch-offs of this gas station are luckier than bridge jump survivors. Certificates hang above the cash register: wins for thousands. The highest two

are 250k and 3 million. My mom's eyes are my own and they light up when she comes back to the tank-empty car to tell me this.

We have been wiping scratch card shavings off the sides of our hands since we got to America. Booze lines the right-hand wall

of the station's double doors, a revolving stand of cheap sunglasses to the left. The cashier is a Southern white woman with eyes yellow like amber.

She hands us our scratch off cards at the counter— Money Roll, Ca\$h Payout, the Gold Rush Doubler 50k and 500k. The pink slips are around the corner.

On our way to them we pass an Icee machine called Alligator Ice. The raspberry blue and strawberry red slush around in their tanks

like color-sorted laundry. We scribble in random numbers with the small pencils. Powerball Megamillions, Florida Lotto, Fantasy 5. I try to attach logic to it, pick

the unexpected ones, the odd ones, the ones too close together. Or I pick the ones that catch my eye – I want to believe the universe might

magnetize me and the winning numbers together. There are packs of Red Bulls stacked on the floor and they press cold against my thighs. Later at home, the lotto

empties out bare pockets but the gimmicky scratch offs give us \$15, admittedly luckier than the frequent nothing, the occasional \$5. My mom and I like it, both want to believe

the universe concentrates its power in a gas station. In some magazine I read that gas station attendants are the least happy in their jobs. When we go back, I smile

at Yellow Eyes, tell her an ardent thank you for trading us new tickets for the \$15 we won – the cycle on repeat. She tells us they are ranked #2

on the Florida Lottery website for winners, ungrudgingly gives us the address of the station ranked #1. My mother asks her why she has not played herself,

and she shrugs, says she doesn't know how to win. I like the idea of this tall gas station woman, with wisps of grey peeking out

in her dark auburn hair, winning the lottery, hanging up the towel on this job, fleeing to Rio, Istanbul, or wherever gas station attendants go to find joy.

I'm Sitting in a Vegetarian Café Where the Screamo Music is Too Loud

The writers use what they can. Hilton Hotel pens (currently), eraser shavings, their own blood (cliché), the stubby green pencils at a lottery stand. Sauce off their sandwiches.

When something winks at them as they go through the motions— a kind stranger on a plane, the way windshield wipers dance frantically on the final notch, a Fourth of July party where a boy

shoots a firework out of his butt— they must run to grab the cheap pens at the desk of their hotel room and scribble words others can't decipher, and if they happen to be writing in the groggy hours of 1AM-7AM,

they might not decipher them either when reviewing later for inspiration. The lady on the bus had cheeks red like what? There are few good non-clichés for red, and mid-phone conversation with a friend

you write down “Am I turned on or do I just have to pee?” because you're discussing the confusing signals of your bodies when it comes to boys, and then you have to think of how to make that sound poetic,

or how to keep it crude for a stand-up comedy bit you might never do, because, really, comedy is just another form of poetry, and ah! Cheeks red as that particular shade of embarrassment you turned when

a boy proposed to you when you were both six, and you said “no” flat out, which would determine your philosophy on boys and big commitments forever henceforth, hereafter, forthwith, and till death do you part.

I Learned the Word “Sleepover” at the Villanueva House

My first American friend is fighting again with her grandmother, who she calls Lela, and I sit meek in the corner of the kitchen, fresh off learning English, watching them spike their shouts at each other like volleyballs.

I'm nibbling on the sunny-side up eggs Lela cooked for me, scooping up the yolk with toast. Lela always makes us breakfast in the morning after a sleepover. In her kitchen is where I first learned that eggs can be molded: sunny-side up, scrambled, over easy, poached. Before, I only knew breakfast as the white gruel of kasha, or flavorless grechka, or syrki, frozen and sweet like cheesecake.

Ashley stomps away to her room and slams the door to let the whole house know she is angry. Ashley being my age and spoiled is good for me: she has a Nintendo DS we play Mario Bros. on. It's better than my old Tetris. I love this pink, plastic American toy, and I ask her every two minutes if it is my turn to play. Ashley has three Tamagotchis, and one time she lets me take one home. Her family takes us to Santa's Enchanted Forest in the winter and the Fair in the spring. At Santa's, my hands are overflowing with ticket stubs and feel sticky from the salted, buttered corn-on-the-cob we're chewing before hopping onto the next ride.

I first meet her when my mom and I move into the house behind her. There is a fence between us that gets blown away by Katrina a few weeks after we arrive. I remember seeing their pit bull wandering around the yard amongst the litter of palm tree leaves and browning grass. Not two years later we move again, somewhere in the chaos and confusion of the police on a domestic abuse call visiting our house, the one I did not feel comfortable enough inviting Ashley to, even to go on the swing set out front. The police asked specific questions about the man of the house. My mom might have answered quieter if she knew I was listening through the door.

Months later, I see Ashley again. My mom and I arrive in the cover of night. Mom wore a wig on the drive here to be safe and her and Lela talk at the door in hushed tones. Lela reassures her I'll be safe here tonight, that the house next door is vacant now. I fidget outside and meet Ashley's eyes. She hovers by the door behind her grandmother. We are both impatient to play with her Nintendo and sit hunched over the one desktop computer to play each other songs on YouTube. I choose Soulja Boy's "Kiss Me Thru the Phone" because it reminds me of the boy I have befriended at the women's shelter. He is my age, and the song always plays on the radio in the giant van his mother uses to lug around her five growing boys.

Mozart's Babies & the NannyBot 3000

The vibrations of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 pass through Beats to the swelling stomach of a future mother sitting in the doctor's waiting room. Next to her, Tula considers the laminated menu she picked up from the nearby coffee table.

They are offering discount deals on enhanced IQ, aquamarine eyes, language proficiency and mermaid hair (color options: green, blue, and purple), which is all the rage. She sends Hank a photo of the language proficiency price options. Their budget

has been tight since Hank lost his job, but they both agree they want the girl to be worldly. Mozart Mom is flipping through a homemaker magazine, lingering on a page displaying an eggshell blue nursery with one of those adjustable-landscape windows

and a NannyBot in the corner. The NannyBot is made to resemble Grace Kelly, the most popular model. She wears the 50s housewife dress and her blonde locks are perfectly curled. There's something wrong with her eyes, though, Tula thinks.

They bulge slightly and reflect like glass. Above Grace's head is a speech bubble with the lyrics to an old nursery rhyme: *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...* Mozart Mom flips to the next page, pursing her red lips, nose upturned

like she'd seen better. The office is chilly. In a few weeks Tula will have to strip down to nothing for the artificial insemination and she will be goosepimply then. They won't be able to give the girl mermaid hair or violet eyes, every penny

going to basic health modifications. Hank's family has a history of Alzheimer's they want to avoid. And maybe they can get that language proficiency. "Does it help?" Tula asks. Mozart Mom looks up from a clothing advertisement

for plus-height children. The new stores have been popping up all over the country out of demand from parents with six-feet-and-above tweens who just hit puberty and don't have anything age-appropriate to wear. The mom looks at Tula, dazed

for a moment. Then she self-consciously cradles her headphoned belly and her face breaks into a relieved smile. "Oh, I know it's old-fashioned. What the *old* moms used to do. We got the IQ enhancement, of course. This

is just for good measure." The door to the Dr. Ford's office opens and a nurse calls for Mozart Mom, whose name is actually Mary. Tula watches her waddle away. Her palms begin to sweat. Even with the discount, the IQ enhancement

had a six-figure price. The magazine Mary was reading lies crooked on the cherry wood coffee table. It's an issue of *Genmom Weekly*. Three white-teethed Grace Kellys pose on the front cover with third-trimester bellies, staring at Tula with listless eyes.

Welcome to the Office

Osmond, who sits over there, has a lot of crumbs in his keyboard because he eats his lunch at his desk, and he always eats a ham and Swiss on rye while watching the latest NFL game. He claims he is watching a training video if you ask, and his headphones are plugged in, so no one can technically say otherwise, but we know he is not.

The girl who's got pigs decorating every crevice of her cubicle is Loreta. Loreta loves pigs, and the girl with cubicle opposite hers, Marietta, loves cows. Marietta drinks her morning coffee from a cow mug with four udders at the bottom that serve as legs keeping the heat from touching our very impressionable office desks (pen scratches rarely come off).

Marietta goes to church and is nice to everyone. Marietta also had an ex-boyfriend who ended up murdering the girl he dated after Marietta. We don't talk to Marietta about it, but sometimes you can find her crying over the phone in the stairwell to her mom. We aren't sure what she's crying about, and we never ask. Best to keep busy.

Sandy sits over there in the cubicle across from hers. Wear the proper office attire around Sandy. No bra straps must show. Make sure your blouses are completely opaque. If you don't follow the proper office attire, Sandy will tell the boss. You don't want Sandy to tell the boss. The boss will call you privately into their office and tell you

that there are men in this office, and would you please wear a blouse that isn't quite so tight around your bosom. You can't help that a button popped one time. Never mind that it was your favorite blouse. You will never be able to wear it to this office again. In that corner sits Clarkson. Clarkson will roll his eyes at whatever the supervisor tells him to do

but the supervisor will smile and pretend not to have noticed it. He will tell you if you don't seem confident in the job even when you are. Don't suggest changes to his process. Sometimes changes will make sense, but he won't make them. He will use informal text speak in emails. You will wonder why he can get away with it and why you have to refrain from

using contractions and only allow one smiley in an informal email per month. He will complain about the pay and tell other employees "no" with an attitude. No one will say anything to him. You will not be able to do the same for fear of appearing bitchy. You will be right. You will look bitchy. Don't be bitchy if you want to keep this job. Be proper and polite at all times.

Tuck in your blouse. Make sure your pencil skirt is not too tight. If your boss sees that your pencil skirt is too tight, she will call you into her office. You do not want to be called into her office. The boss wears pencil skirts and blazers that are appropriate. The boss has an essential oils diffuser in her office that helps her sinuses. When you go into her office

to ask for something and she is busy, she will smile and nod but you will know from her tone that she is busy. Do not linger in the office if she is busy. The boss used to be a party girl in college. She always jokes about her "former days" and you aren't sure what that means except that sometimes she will crack an inappropriate joke. The boss sneaks

into your section's small birthday gatherings to eat the cheesecake. Always invite the boss to these parties and let her eat the cheesecake. Carmen is here, far away from your cubicle. Carmen wears feathers in her hair and sometimes bandannas. Carmen will become your closest friend, so it is a shame that you sit on opposite ends of the office. Carmen will

sometimes come to your desk and your supervisor will tell her to not sit on your counter because the counters in this office are rickety. What she is trying to say is that Carmen has to leave. Your supervisor does not like the mingling in this office. You and Carmen will gossip about your supervisor and the boss during your half hour of lunch. Always go out

to lunch outside the office. You do not want to be overheard. If you are overheard, the boss will call you into her office. You do not want to be called into her office.

The Newly Born Woman

A woman has overstepped a boundary by using a shrill voice. “Hysterical” originates from the Greek *hyster*, which means “womb,” and out of hers comes Eve’s sin. Woman is like the moon with her cycles, she is

intrinsic to nature, her hair is wilderness underneath the bonnet. When she is uncaged on the stage, she bleeds. The crowd gasps. When she smiles, they hold their breath—a smile means

witchcraft, the Sabbat, possession by Mephistopheles and when the magician throws a sheet over her and she emerges an aproned housewife the crowd sighs, relieved. She’s holding sparkling dishes and has beaming,

well-fed children and a waist cinched with a belt marking the spot where she is cut in half by a saw. The trick goes wrong, she bleeds unnaturally when he parts her in two, but the crowd goes wild—she is a good actress.

When she files a detailed police report and lists all the witnesses, they say, is Woman running magic? They pity the plight of the fired magician and all the magicians after him. They call it a witch hunt.

Thoughts after Seeing a Co-Worker with a Waist Trainer

The lower stomach bulge on my body is something I often twist and turn in front of the mirror to observe. I know it's where my uterus sits, but it juts out in a way that suggests sometimes that I am slovenly, and it bulges more after I down a burger. There are appetite-suppressant lollipops advertised by bright-lipped, skinny, flat-stomached girls. My uterus and food bulges aren't signs of wealth, and the absence of them aren't either, they aren't signs of anything except that this is my body, and some days I ate more, some less. My co-worker doesn't shy away from the donuts or cake left over in the waiting area of our office every week from a birthday celebration or an all-staff meeting. She tells me she used to have a "nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" sticker on her fridge but that she took it off, that her husband told her he didn't comment on the pounds she lost after she confronted him for not complimenting her on it because he wants her to be happy.

Things That Make Me Reconsider

I. My professor tells the class, “We are not cell phone people and don’t listen to the Top 40 on the charts but my son just watched a live performance of ‘Billy Jean’ on YouTube and fell in love. Michael Jackson’s first moonwalk, grander than Armstrong. Me and the wife caved, ordered him an MP3 player and Beats which he wears religiously around the house. He claims not to have heard me when I told him to go to bed, belts Billy Joel. He’s been slaving away at a list of the greatest musicians of all time, has a hard time deciding who’s higher up; Billy or Cobain, Jackson or Cohen. When I join an online video chat for a conference at the house, his singing echoes through the walls, *it doesn’t matter if you’re black or white.*”

II. A boy who graduated from this college town to make it big in New York is working odd jobs like every aspiring actor, learns how to make balloon animals on YouTube, announces on social media that he’s working as a clown for kids. He wears eyeliner and a shirt striped black and white, gives a full account of the adventure. He says the kids flocked him, started off polite, but then all niceties went out the window once they figured out he was, as he said, “a balloon-making WWII machine.” They wanted swords so they could be pirates. And when he made one kid something that wasn’t a sword, the kid got angry, said, “Don’t you *ever* trick me again, clown.”

III. The same boy and he’s back in town. We’re both early to a party, have a moment to chat. I show him a video I recorded of a kid on the bus riding alone with a spilling bag of popcorn on his side, a movie blaring on his phone. He’s swallowing all the popped kernels he can fit into his small fist. I loved his independence at first, wondered where he was going, until I realized the bus driver was his mother, that she probably couldn’t afford daycare or a babysitter. She called him forward at a stop, struggled to point him to a water bottle when he said he was thirsty because she couldn’t get out of her seat.

IV. New York boy responds to this with a story about how he would take an Uber every day to work, and one day, a thirteen-year-old tried to take his ride, negotiated with the driver to take him to school, until New York Boy offered the kid to tag along. They together every day. The kid talked family problems, about how his dad was abusive. Someone from the party butts in, asks what we’re talking about, and I say, “About how great kids are,” wonder why I responded so automatically, wonder if it’s more than just me sitting across someone I am attracted to.

Alternate Universe (AU I)

The places we've met
have always been shadowy at the edges;

windowless classrooms, low-lit auditoriums,
late-night parties. Always crowded, too.

There are three conversations between
where I sit on the couch, where you stand

on the coffee table, head-banging
to indie rock, you and another guy

pressing your heads together, panting, shouting,
eyes pure adrenaline, some strange male energy

I don't understand but watch.
Wolves behind glass at the zoo.

I take small sips from a shot glass, something
neon green and green apple flavored.

I know I would have still talked
to everyone here in spite of it.

The boy I am actually at your apartment for
flirts, dodges away to other groups,

repeats. I notice his fingers are short
and there's a smell off him when he talks

close to my ear that I have never
smelled before and don't like. Somewhere

in the time between being ignored comes you.
We talk your graduation. Your dad

busts drug cartels. I joke about everyone
out on the balcony smoking weed.

We both lived in Europe as kids. I like the idea
that we may have crossed paths once

on a mountain in Austria.
In their senior goodbye speeches, the girls all admit

in their vodka-laced-weed voices

that they wanted to fuck you when they first met you.

One girl sobs through every speech,
hiccups, shushes everyone too savagely.

I smile when she apologizes for leaning
against my legs, pat her hair, bring her tissues

when her nose gets clogged.
I think about when we met,

the way you made “Hurricane”
your mnemonic for my name,

the way you emitted like a radiator
in hand-numbing cold, the light of you

making me write “personable, pretty”
in a journal later. I told all my friends about you,

said I adore you platonically, and it was true
because I think lots of people are pretty. Now

I watch you with eyes that must seem hungry.
I look at your hands, notice

the long fingers. Eyes that crinkle
when you laugh, nearly shutting if

it’s really funny, hands covering
your mouth if it’s hilarious.

Two boys always visited the gable-roofed house
where I lived in Austria

one of them blond, playing the piano
the other darker-haired, shorter. This likeness to you

and your brother makes me wonder
if it could have been you there, Russian and German

words confusing but exciting between us,
us catching fireflies in jars in the backyard.

AU II

You made a home inside me, lit a stove and flipped
something on a sizzling skillet, the light

winking off your dangling earring, your sunny
nail polish chipping as you scrubbed

the dishes I made a mountain of in the sink.
You kick your feet up on everything and strum

your guitar, film noir ditties for an improv game.
I ordered a chai latte to the protest of

my already-jittery fingers for our not-date
coffee date. I discover you're a Leo, which I guessed

after Aries. It's all to do with your mane of curls,
the easy way you saunter the stage like it's home,

the audience your pride. One of your front teeth
is yellower than the other and your hands

are creased with lines like crumpled
aluminum wrapping of chocolate candy,

which is strange for your twenty-two years, stranger
for the age of your soul. You have a child's easy faith,

tell me I have so much time to figure myself out
as I talk about being insecure, worry

my heart-shaped necklace, twist my cooling coffee.
We both love deep space, the possibilities of it.

You ramble about stargazing, how you once wanted
to be an astrophysicist. I bring up the multiverse theory

and you joke that we're married in an alternate universe.
My eyes go supernova watching you.

From New York on the phone you tell me you're leaving
a shuffleboard bar and going to a coffee shop. Never in stasis,

always in-between things. Joints, auditions, beers, people.
I call you Delilah. The screen says we've small-talked

for six minutes when you say you're hopping on the subway,

“no signal, call you back la...”—and suddenly you’re sucked away
into a crowd, a new gold-hoop earring catching
the eyes of other girls, a flash like a meteor burning.

Mixed Signals and Mixers (AU III)

It's a Halloween party – skull telephone, cotton spider webs on the TV, twirling rainbow lights, the face monster from *Alien* hanging on the cabinets, red solo cups in the middle of the kitchen island and rum in bottles of all colors and heights, and cherry vodka that I top off in my cup, it's not as strong as the white rum I sip later, have to put down and wash down with water because buzzed is the most I will allow myself given my father's bottle-swinging history, my best friend's weekly struggle to make it to AA.

The Shining plays mutely on the TV, Shelley screams with those big eyes, the twins stand at the end of the hall. People file in through every door of this pastel-blue townhouse, a boy the host has never met shakes his hand at the door, says his name, waves in a keg no one planned for. I got to the party first, you got there second, and I liked the way we sat down, you in your Kim Possible camo pants, black shirt, fresh haircut, chain around your neck, me in the color red (an easy costume but also the color they say

psychologically attracts). You take my seat when I leave it, kick me playfully, or maybe I'm just reading into things, reading into the way you hold my gaze across every room, point out parts of my costume that require an up-down. The host of this party comes out, asks us to help zip up his costume in the back, I go for it, try to help, you step in, say you got it—I want to imagine you don't like me touching another guy but more likely it's because I was struggling, fumbling with finding the sticky part of the patch and you got impatient,

couldn't resist the impulse. I always said that when I leave a crowded place, a boy who liked me would follow me out. You followed me out of a crowded auditorium earlier that night after a show, all your friends still mingling inside. It's a cool night with a gibbous moon, you're wearing a billowy Hawaiian shirt, top buttons undone, chest hair exposed – the pre-Kim Possible look, me feeling like Elio from *Call Me By Your Name* because who knew an airy shirt could mean so much. “Need a ride?” you said, swinging under the rails of a platform and jumping down next to me.

I said my car is parked in the nearby garage and we walk there together, you talking about a film agent that doesn't get you any jobs, the way your old comedian friends in New York are cynical. We start and end our walk with silence. I broke the first with a clunky, "What's up?" You said, "chillin'", like you always do, your breath the vapor from your Juul. In the second silence, we walk to our respective cars, words left unsaid, at least on my part. My silence is me saying *I'm sacred that I love you* and I don't know what yours means, but I am more confident than I was the last time

we saw each other—before, I shook with nerves, now I message you about getting coffee again, stare back, wear red. You say yes to coffee but lose track of the day, forget while frolicking around town with your brother, say *see you at the party*, your last stop before you leave town early in the morning the next day. I leave the party first, sidestep pink puke and cigarette smoke, stop to say bye. Your parting words are "I'll be back in five weeks," and it's just the kind of promise I cling on to, will think about for the next month, picturing us cold in December, leaning in close across a table and cradling coffee mugs, white breaths mingling in the air between us.

I Went to London on My Own and More Brave Choices Followed

My pants are getting looser and I cut my hair,
am contemplating going shorter, up to the shoulders,
dying it again, balayage style. I want a bear tattoo
on my right foot, for its motif of male energy,
strength and confidence. I never thought I would want
to start my own comedy show in a college town
but I like the idea of a woman running a comedy scene
in a local dive bar whose specialty is greasy oysters
and watered-down vodka shots. The lady who already
runs one has tattoos lining her body, black witchy hair,
sharp eyes and many jokes about a daughter she loves.
I like the idea of signing up nervous college kids
looking for a voice, and local veterans, a ragtag group,
on a list torn from a notebook, one similar to the one
I signed up on to do stand-up for the first time, nine
male names, the tenth my own. It's cold in this café,
my extremities freezing and my stomach
empty and hungry, but unlike eight years ago, I'm not
starving on purpose, just on the run and filling up
on people's company. I'm on the brink of a panic attack
behind the bar when the show is about to star, breathing hard,
my fingers, nose, and knees tingling, me muttering
to the show's organizer, Scott, about how I might
just have a panic attack and not go up on stage tonight.
He says the show won't die without me, but that he'd like me
to go up, that Olympic competitors turn nerves into
positive energy, and that he used to have a comedian
that would be just the same as me a few years back, then
kill the crowd every time. I go up and it all melts away.
In the playbacks of the all videos my friends post of me
I'm beaming, waving my hands and bobbing my head
like I love the stage. A random girl sends a picture of me
to a boy all the way in New York who used to be the most
popular kid in this town, knows comedy like the back of his hand,
comes to mind when I think about someone I could marry.
He tells me she said I was cracking up the crowd,
congratulates me on a job well done, tells me, *kill 'em dead.*

Isaura Helped Me Learn English When All I Knew Was Russian

It's the start of a Georgia summer in May and I'm at a party for my best friend's brother, who graduated. He's forgotten somewhere inside the house, lounging on the couch, arms wrapped

around his girlfriend. Outside, his parents and their friends swing back beers and sing off-key at the top of their lungs, songs in Spanish I don't understand. Under the porch light, her cheeks red

from drinking my wine, Isaura, my best friend since third grade, turns to me and says, "We're all immigrants here." I look around, wonder what stories all the guests here left behind in their mother countries.

I imagine they are something like my mother's, two kids at her hips, no husband to support her. America is gleaming, the land of opportunity, but really the place where my mother broke her back lifting boxes at Target,

cried over her broken English. The American husband who brought us here yells at her when teaching her to drive, says she will never learn, will never amount to anything, one day insists I sit in his lap while he's only in his underwear

and I am only in mine, age eight. I wonder how it is that lines on a map thin as spider webs can determine so much. And if the woman who once got out of her car in a fit of road rage to yell at my mom at a stop light, and, upon hearing

my mom's Russian accent, yelled, *Learn English, you're in America*, grew up between the wrong silk threads, grew up huddling kids into safe corners from bombs, or knew the fright of living months in a women's shelter

after leaving an American husband, would she finally understand? In public, I try to avoid talking *o политике*, but I will say ICE sounds exactly like the name of an evil organization from a movie. Sometimes a monster

looks exactly like a monster, no matter how cliché. Isaura's dad, who always has a Bluetooth in his ear for work calls, had a close call years back, no papers. He is comfortably drunk now, and so is Isa's mom,

and they'll wake up tomorrow, sick with hangover. He's Columbian and she's Mexican, and everyone else here is one or the other, save for me and Isa's American boyfriend, who's looking up the lyrics to these songs so

we could try to sing along anyway.

November 2, 2018

I only learned her name when I saw her picture on the news. My friend read the article out loud—
“lone gunman,” “six shot, two killed.”

When she showed me her picture, I recognized the eyes instantly, warm and brown. I shook my head, said it must be someone else, the angles didn’t show her like I knew her, it could have been anyone.

I got home and checked the roster for the class, just to be sure, and it was her, her icon the same picture as the one on the news. I talked to her two times.

The first time she stopped me on the sidewalk and I didn’t recognize her right away, she was so quiet in class. Literature, she reminded me, and I smiled, apologized. She asked me what I thought of the test we took earlier that week, listened patiently as I vented my frustrations about the course. The second time I regretted not saying “Hi” when she passed me in the hallway, so I waited till we locked eyes, then shouted something like, “How are you liking *Sense and Sensibility*?” She came over, nodded in agreement when I vented again about the professor scolding me before a test for having my notes out, said I’m not learning anything in this class. I wish I remembered more of what she said, but maybe it says more that I remember her listening, nodding, asking me how I felt. A local newspaper headline reads, “She just wanted to help people.”