

J.

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Lemma wakes up from a dream in which her friend J. is running—full tilt—out of a car stopped on a desert road. The ground slopes down on one side of the road and Lemma is at the bottom. She sees the car coming. It brakes just when it's about to pass her, and before the car has fully halted, the door bursts open and there is J. like a bullet, running down the slope. Lemma doesn't realize J. is crying until after she's awake.

In the beginning, our friend Jake is dying and we continue to live.

We wake up in the morning. We sit on armchairs with books lying open in our laps, and the window open, too. We listen to the highway roaring outside. We listen to the birds.

We have removed the wet towels from the windowsills, and the breezes wander into the dark corridors of our house. Our house is dark because we've sat too long by the window and the sun has gone down. In the dark we can't make out the words in the books on our laps, so we shut them and curl up in the armchairs. The window still open, we fall asleep.

The boy is pale, losing color like a photograph left out in the sun. He looks again in the small oval mirror and tries to imagine himself ten, twenty years older. He has a headache. If he has children, they will be weak. But he won't have children, the boy thinks, because in ten years he will be dead. The boy saw glass being blown in an open furnace once. He remembers the little shack in the forest from when he was younger, and the bearded man with red cheeks, and a green apron, his sleeves rolled up to the elbows. The boy remembers the glowing hot globs, and how the bearded man blew through the long pipe until they ballooned into clear baubles.

Everyday now, the boy feels hot winds blowing from the desert. Even though his windows are shut, and he has stuffed wet towels between the cracks, the boy feels the winds blowing into his ears, filling up his aching head. He feels he is being blown up like glass, the skin around his temples thinning, stretching to transparency. Glass is easy to break.

Lemma.

Lemma believes too much. Lemma believes that people are good. She believes that people are complicated. Lemma believes that if she were about to die, her last words would be something about loving people. Lemma believes in loving. She likes the word cataract, and the word cold, and all words describing light. Lemma wishes her name had been Wilone, meaning longed-for. It reminds her of willow trees.

J. knew a lot about trees. J. knew the flowering trees, and the cone-bearing trees; J. knew the names, scientific and common, for the moss, the lichen, the hornworts and the liverworts that grew on trees. J. knew the flowers, grasses, ferns, and shrubs. The names of the shrubs were most beautiful to Lemma. Moonseed, Oleander, Sage. And J. could name the stars, too. When they came out at night, J. would greet them like old friends, Rigel, Betelgeuse and Pollux, Polaris, Dubhe and Castor. J. knew their magnitudes, their ages, their distances from the earth. Lemma believes there was nothing J. didn't know.

Jane thinks she should study science. That would explain the order of things. Jane wants to speak of crystal lattices, seventeen dimensions rolled up together, and the perfect symmetry of a flower. She wants to speak of beginnings. Not the kind when she wakes up in the morning, or opens

the first pages of a novel, but beginnings that are so old they touch the ends of things. Jane wants to know what happened at the very beginning, down to the nanosecond. And now, at the beginning of things, Jake is dying. Jane lies down on the bed where he lies.

Jake, Jane says, you got it wrong.

The girls decide to go for a walk in the desert, because it is dark inside their house. Around them the night is falling, and the girls try to catch as much of it in their hands as they can. They throw the night back up into the sky, or else they pin it in their hair, tucked behind soft ears. If we don't know where we are going, the lighter girl says to the darker one, we may end up somewhere we don't want to be.

The darker girl says, I know where I am going.

The garland of night weighs heavily on the lighter girl's head. Lately, she hasn't slept.

I am going down the hill, the darker one says.

So the girls go down the hill and the descent is steep. They are alone on the road, and now the night has fallen to its knees. As the girls are walking, the lighter one starts to notice the small things lying on the roadside: a little oval-shaped mirror catching the moonlight, a lighter, a ring, a harmonica. The darker girl doesn't seem to notice.

The things grow in size the further the girls walk into the desert, and there are more of them in the road. There are books, a guitar, some paintings. Sometimes, the things block the road and the girls have to go around them. Near the bottom of the road are the heaviest things: chairs and tables, couches, a refrigerator. The girls climb over them and make their way to a bed at the very bottom of the road. The lighter girl sits down on the bed where a body is lying.

My friend, she says, wake up.

Jane is reading a book written in numbers. It is a truthful book, and Jane is reading it because she wants to know the truth. In the book Jane is reading there are numbers, and there are symbols explaining the relationships between the numbers. Sometimes there are also letters, but the letters do not form words or sentences or paragraphs. The letters stand alone and apart. They have some dignity.

Things must follow an order, Jane thinks. There must be patterns, formulas, proofs. If there is uncertainty, Jane thinks, there should be a principle to prove it. If there is chaos, there should be a theory to describe it. If Jake is dying, Jane says to us, there should be something.

Why was J. crying? Lemma can't remember. She closes her eyes again, tries to fall back asleep. It's no good. The dream is gone. *Spilled*, she thinks, *leaked*, *slipped*. But it's not like that. There isn't even a scintilla of dream-stuff left, nothing stuck to the underside of her consciousness. J. was crying. Lemma opens her eyes. She has never seen J. cry before.

Everything happens in three parts.

In the first part we are taken in by the hand and made to sit down in the armchairs by the window. We are offered tea, blueberry scones, and the conversation of two pleasant girls, one fair and one dark. The scones compliment the tea, or the tea compliments the scones, and we can taste the honey in both. The dark girl explains to us why bees build hexagonal prisms and the other one asks if we would like the window opened or closed. Either is fine, we say.

But something goes wrong. In the second part we discover poison in our tea, or the window is shut too tightly for us to breathe, and the girls, too, have shut their lips tightly, because they are keeping a secret. And we should've seen this coming from the first part, from the way the girls

firmly held our hands when they led us to the chairs. We should've tasted the poison. And now we sit still by the open window, and the honey is congealing at the bottom of our teacups.

In the last part we escape. From the poisoned tea, the honeyed scones, the cold hands of the girls who led us to the window. In the third and final part we are freed from all of it. If not physically, at least existentially. If we cannot lift the heavy windowpane, or the heavy hearts of the girls, our ontological grief, at least, can be lifted. And as self-and-other interpreting beings, we peer into our teacups and try to remember why honeycombs are hexagonal.

Why honeycombs are hexagonal: there are many possible explanations for anything, but Jake has a headache. He finds that if he lies still enough on the bed, it goes away.

Jane.

Jane likes to know the names of things. Naming things, Jane thinks, is the first step to understanding them, and understanding things, Jane thinks, is the only way to love them. Jane loves the things she can name. Jane can name deserts, oceans, and rivers, clouds, colors, and languages. Jane can name stones and animals, instruments and herbs. But then there are so many other things, things Jane cannot name, like the way the sky looks just before nightfall, or the feeling of not knowing what you want but wanting it anyway. Jane has no name for the way Jake smells, or the sound of his voice, or the way his skin feels around the temples, like paper-thin velvet, she thinks, moth wings, but even that's not right.

If only she had the right names, Jane thinks, or the right system of naming, the world would be set right. It would be whole and hers to love.

We wake up from our deep sleep. Our sleep is deep because we have settled deeply into the armchairs. Beside us, on the windowsill, there are books we once tried to read but later shut and put away. They now gaze at us with some contempt, as if to say: why have you kept us waiting? There's so much we have left to say to you.

There is always much left unsaid, we say to the books.

Lemma gets out of bed. She feels like crying. It must be the dream, she thinks. She can still see J. running out of the car, running full tilt, running desperately. Running from what? Lemma thinks. Or running to what? Lemma believes in premonitions. She opens the door and hears a voice in the next room. You got it wrong, the voice is saying, and Lemma feels gauzy, as if a veil has been lowered inside her head. She stumbles into the next room, and there is J. lying on the bed.

Jake.

Jake thinks there are too many things to know. It used to bother him. When Jake was young he made a vow to read every book in the public library. It felt like the safe thing to do. Later, when Jake was older, he went to the city and saw the library there, with its vaulted ceiling and high ladders. Jake despaired. He began to have suspicions, a feeling that the world was not only unknowable, but, more specifically, not for him to know. Jake felt as if he were always at the beginning of something, but that whatever it was couldn't begin, that he couldn't be a part of it. This something, Jake felt, was probably his life.

One night Jake said to Jane: sometimes I want to just stop.

What do you mean? Jane said.

Just stop, Jake said, and see what happens.

Nothing would happen, Jane said, turning her back to him on the bed, because you wouldn't be doing anything. Jake reached his arm around her body. He thought her hair smelled nice, but he couldn't name how.

Moonseed. Oleander. Sage. Periwinkle. Sweetspire. Hazel. Leatherleaf. Rockrose. Lavender. Pea-tree. Silverbell. Juniper. Magnolia. Mistletoe. Indigo. Smoketree. Twinflower. Aloe. Ivy. Abelia. Hibiscus. Willow.

