

Whatever Happens

by Victoria Lancelotta

When Matthew calls I'm sautéing garlic for the polenta and Joe is squeezing buttercream rosettes from a Ziploc bag onto a spice cake he made from scratch. Or trying to—we don't have a pastry tip and he's snipped too wide a hole in the corner of the plastic and the cream is oozing and running. "Shit," Joe says when the phone rings, and lays the bag on the counter and licks a finger and goes to answer.

Polenta and a mushroom ragu, asparagus with aioli, tenderloin, and the cake: this is the menu, planned for Christa's birthday, this and a bottle of decent Champagne and a few bottles of more-than-decent wine. But it's an occasion, and it's just the four of us, Christa and Kent and Joe and me, so it's fine; it's an extravagance but it's for Christa and so it's fine—that's what Joe and I told ourselves in the supermarket, the liquor store, the car in between.

The phone is on the dining room table down the hall and that's where Joe picks it up; he doesn't come back into the kitchen immediately and I can't hear what he's saying over the sizzling in the pan and the staticky NPR station on our greasy old radio. It's probably Christa, I think, begging to be allowed to bring something, anything, because that's how she is, she can't help it. Even after cancer, she can't help it.

"Em," Joe says, when he comes back, and that's how I know it's not about mini quiches or dinner rolls or ice cream. He wouldn't call me by my name if it were. I turn off the radio.

"That was Matthew," he says. "He's in jail. He said last night—whoever he was with, somebody new, I didn't recognize the name—I don't know. He doesn't remember much. He said they were drinking and then they were fighting and now he's in jail."

We're facing each other from across our cluttered kitchen, Joe with the phone and me with a wooden spoon, silent, two people who

are rarely silent together. Hot oil spatters the back of my hand and I move the pan off the heat.

“Did he—”

“I don't know,” Joe says. “All I know is what he told me—I assume she called the cops and they took him in.”

“She,” I say, and Joe shakes his head, impatient, displeased, “I don't know, Emily, he mentioned a name but it didn't mean anything to me, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, quiet but he hears, and he puts the phone down, looks around the kitchen. Every surface is covered—the cake on a rack, the cookbook held open with a towel, the meat coming to room temperature, stacks of plates and piles of utensils, the hand blender, our two glasses of wine, the last pour from the bottle I used for the marinade. Whose warm life is this, I catch myself thinking, whose shelter?

It's almost five o'clock; Christa and Kent are coming at seven. We thought we'd have time to fuck before that.

“What are you going to do?” I say.

“What? Nothing. Jesus, Em.” He flips a lock of hair back and reaches for his wine. The glass is spattered with flour. “What, you mean bail him out? Find him a lawyer? Or maybe I should just go down there and keep him company?”

“It's not—”

“What it's *not* is our problem,” he says. “Not mine, and not yours. Unless you have a different take on the matter.”

“I'm not saying it's our problem, I just think—”

“You just *think*—what, you just think they took him in for hurting her feelings, Emily?”

“Of course not,” I say. “I know what he—”

“Except you don't. Except you have no idea what he did to her, and for some reason you're fine with that.”

“And you're fine with letting him sit in a cell someplace.”

We stand, breathing, waiting. The phone refuses to ring again. Outside the sun is gone, hauled down in the February cold.

Inside, the kitchen is bright with heat. Nothing can touch us here, except what does.

“Yes,” he says, and looks at me for a moment before picking up his glass and walking out of the room, the cake forgotten, sweet goo spreading slow across the counter.

We've filled ten years with talk, Joe and I, about most things, and effortlessly—everything, really, except for this, for Matthew. For years he was Joe's best friend, and then his oldest, and then something else, something less.

I move the pan back onto the heat and add the mushrooms. A fight, Joe said, someone new—but there is always someone new with Matthew, someone blonder or darker, funnier or more serious; the specifics hardly matter as long as he can trace a fingertip along an unexplored body, touch his tongue to unfamiliar lips.

I know this because I was one of them, once, a long time ago, before I knew better, before I knew Joe. I was someone new for the blink of an eye, the beat of a heart, more delicious for that moment than the one before me, and then when the moment passed Matthew moved on and I was just myself again.

This is the lava that runs under the earth beneath our feet—mostly, usually, harmless, except when it isn't.

“Hey,” Joe says, and I turn and he's leaning against the far wall as though he's suddenly exhausted, and maybe he is. “What do you need me to do?”

This is what he can offer, and it will have to be enough.

“The cake,” I say, “if the icing's salvageable.”

“It'll be fine,” he says, and sets his empty wine glass down.

“And the meat—it has to be dried and seasoned but get the oven on first—come on, Joe—you know what needs to be done—exactly what you were doing before.”

He doesn't make a move toward the cake, or anything else. “I'm not bailing him out,” he says.

“I heard you the first time. I know that. I know. So can we please just get this done?” I turn back to the stove and stir the mushrooms, which don't need stirring, and after a moment I hear

Joe moving plates and utensils around on the counter. We don't speak. We have cooked in this kitchen for ten years, we move in it with the easy grace of familiarity. The night before our wedding I woke at three AM, thrumming with terror; I lay motionless for an hour before I could bring myself to wake him. Don't worry, he said, you're fine, and we slid from bed and went to the kitchen and in the dim of the counter lights and the moon through the window we chopped and blended and simmered, and he whispered to me as though I were still dreaming. By dawn we had pots of cioppino and ratatouille on the stove, pound cake and strawberry pie cooling on the counter; by dawn I remembered I loved him. I wasn't hungry but I let him ladle out bowls of fish and potatoes, eggplant and peppers; we carried a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine with us out to our front doorstep and sat on a folded blanket. Sunrise was a shimmer of gold at the edge of the field across from us, brighter than the wine. This is my life, I remember thinking, *our* life, what I can see from here, these hours and all the rest of them coming; and I shivered and Joe lifted the blanket up around me.

I spoon the mushrooms out into a glass bowl and cover them with plastic wrap, take the pan to the sink and run hot water over it, balance it on the stack of dirty cookware. Joe pays me no attention; he's focused on the beef, pressing it on all sides with chopped herbs. His fingers are slick with oil and I can smell the sweet bite of rosemary, of cracked pepper. The cake is on a platter out of the way, the misshapen rosettes flattened and smoothed and absorbed into a pristine layer of butter cream. This is Joe, his constant impulse, to seize something flawed and coax it into perfection, or something close enough.

"The cake looks beautiful," I tell him, and he glances up at me, shrugs.

"It's fine," he says, and I know better than to argue. "I'm going to get some of this cleaned up and then shower," he says, "unless you wanted to first—"

I shake my head, touch a finger to the platter and still the phone is silent. The ugly truth is this: I don't care what Matthew

did, any more than I cared what he failed to do when I loved him, when I was young enough to believe that I could do enough for both of us.

Joe said to me then He would treat you better if he knew how. This, outside the back door of a bar where I'd gone to meet Matthew and found him in a corner with a girl I knew, one hand between her legs, the other in her curly damp hair. I watched them, I wanted to convince myself that it was all right, that I understood; I watched them until Joe came up behind me and steered me out the back door and into the sticky heat. He lifted the hair from the back of my neck. *I would treat you better*, he said. He let my hair fall and stepped away from me and even in the dark I could see that this was true, but it was close to midnight and still ninety degrees and I was not tired yet of wanting: the truth of things did not matter. But he does his best, Joe said, and I nodded. We loved Matthew before we loved each other. It would be months before Joe would touch me again.

He puts the meat in the oven and begins clearing space on the counter by the sink. "Hey," I say, "go on and have your shower. I'll get the dishes, okay?"

"Okay," he says. He sighs, puts his arms around me and rests his cheek against the top of my head. "We're lucky," he says, as though he has no doubt, and maybe we are, of course we are, but there are ten years behind us already, ten years we can't get back, and there's so much left undone.

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"This is amazing," Christa says, dragging a finger through the icing on her plate, "truly," and Kent nods. There are crumbs on his cheek—crumbs on the tablecloth as well, and a few wine stains, the happy leavings of dinner.

"Not my doing," I say, and Christa snorts, almost chokes on cake and rolls her eyes.

"Shocking." She takes a long drink of wine. "Believe me, I know better than to trust you with baked goods."

“Do you want another piece?” Joe asks. He's already got the cake server in his hand but Christa shakes her head, reaches for the wine bottle instead.

“In fact I would, but I'm going to exercise restraint. I saw that look,” she says to Kent, who's feigning interest in his napkin but can't hide his smile, “and you can shove it. You're supposed to get drunk on your birthday.”

“Your twenty-first birthday, maybe,” I say, “which is so far in the rear-view mirror at this point I can barely—”

“You're a horrible person,” Christa says agreeably, pouring wine for her husband and herself, and Kent wraps his arms around her narrow shoulders and squeezes.

“My little sot,” he says, and Christa touches her glass to his. “You sure you don't want more cake?” he asks, but she just shakes her head and winks at me.

She's like a blade of grass, now, those five or ten pounds she's been cursing from the day I met her gone, incinerated—irradiated. *The cancer plan*, she called it, on good days. On good days she shopped for bras in purple lace and embroidered satin, talismans; on good days she chanted *non-invasive, non-invasive*, a mantra. On bad days she made me promise to remember Kent's birthday, his favorite ice cream, his shirt size.

Is it disgusting for me to think I look good? she asked me once, after she'd finished treatment and got the best prognosis she could hope for, after she'd begun to believe it. I mean, my God, is it awful of me? It is, I should be ashamed of myself.

It's not disgusting, I told her, and what I meant was *Please don't disappear please don't not that*.

“Everything was fantastic,” Kent says, “You two didn't have to—”

“Stop,” Joe says, “No bullshit, okay? Of course we didn't have to, we wanted to, because we love you, and that's just how it is, right?” He reaches over and cups the back of my neck in his hand. “Am I right?” he says to me, and his fingers are warm and steady.

“Always,” I say, “about the important things, at least.” I reach up for his familiar hand and we catch each other's eyes and smile: we are expert liars when we need to be.

“Isn't your mother always right?” Christa says to Kent, and I lean back and let my eyes close and I know that I'm drunk but it's all right because we all are, all of us drunk in the way we allow ourselves now: a little loud, a little messy, but harmless all the same, docile. We drink and spill the soup, or trip over a untrustworthy rug; we do not get thrown out of clubs or bars, trash houses or wreck cars. We do not wake up in jail.

Matthew is not one of us, not anymore; he watched us build the lives we live now from a growing distance. He is our opposite number: the only one not married and the only one with children, a teenage boy he does not know and a little girl he does, their mothers strangers to each other and to him. The girl is a fragile thing, not yet two and already asthmatic, allergic, myopic. She cannot recognize her father's face until it is close enough to touch. He told me once that he would die for her—Emily, he said, you can't begin to understand that kind of love, and I smiled and allowed myself, for a brief sweet moment, to hate him.

“Every boy's mother is always right,” Kent says, and Joe gets up for the cognac and brandy. “No, every boy's wife is always right,” he says, standing over the table with the bottles in one hand, the tiny cordial glasses in the other, his hair falling soft over his forehead. “Isn't that the way?” he says, looking at me, his smile slow and hungry in the glow of the candles I lit before dinner. He is beautiful in their light, his edges smoothed; he is beneficent, forgiving. He sets the bottles down, so careful, so pleased with his care, in this, in everything.

“If you say so,” I tell him, and Christa laughs, reaches for the cognac. “No, I'm being serious,” I say, “I'm being—supportive.” I slide a glass toward Christa and take one for myself and Joe lifts the bottle of brandy to pour for me. “I'm being supportive and he's being solicitous—it's a very evolved situation,” I say, and drink the brandy I don't need. “We're very—pleased with ourselves.”

“Are we?” Joe says, leans forward as he sits, still careful, still smiling, drunk and munificent here at his table, a logy king—nothing can touch him here, in this room, deep blue and glimmering; the doors are locked, the street quiet, the fields across it silvered and silent.

“Aren't we?” I say, an ugly edge in my voice that I pretend not to mean and he pretends not to hear because even so: whatever happens between now and then we will fuck after our friends have gone, after they have wrapped themselves in wool and suede and stepped out cautious into the starry frost; we will stagger into our dark room and let our clothes fall where we stand on either side of our bed, the sheets a tangled refuge. We will fit ourselves together, sodden, gasping, deliberate, and we will break apart unsurprised, and when we turn away silent to sleep we will imagine we are safe.

“I'm glad I didn't miss this,” Christa says, her voice vague, dreamy. She spreads her thin arms over the table, the heavy cloth littered with crusts of bread and empty bottles, platters and candle wax. The skin of her arms is blue as milk. “I mean—all this—you—” She lets her head fall on Kent's shoulder and closes her eyes and when Joe reaches for my hand I twine my fingers with his: if we are careful we will have no reason to remember this night, to mark it in any way; if we are careful, these hours will float away, weightless and lovely, into nothing.

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Before Joe there was no reason to be careful. Before Joe there was Christa, a receptionist in a basement gallery, a bad drummer and a worse bass player. She baked what she called cowboy cookies and brought them wrapped in plastic to give away at our favorite bar, she kept bags of socks and gloves from the dollar store in the back seat of her car to give away on the street. We met at a party, in a stranger's kitchen, both of us mixing cheap vodka with tonic in plastic cups. We stirred with nicotine fingers, we glanced at each other and smiled, and when she lifted her cup she smelled of gardenias and paint and when I lifted mine my bracelets rang like bells.

We were not careful. The world was too delicious for that, too filled with noise and light and bright shadows in the dark, with beautiful boys and girls and their deep eyes and cool skin. We were twenty-two years old, we could not have said exactly what wanted and so what we had was all the sweeter for that: shabby cheap apartments, jobs we cared nothing for, free meals scavenged from happy hour bar snacks. On weekends we slept half the day through then staggered out in sweaters and sunglasses and sleep-matted hair to meet at diners for coffee, for toast and doughnuts. We paid the check with damp singles and piles of quarters and stumbled back out into the bright afternoon, walked a block or three to a cool dark bar, ready for Bloody Marys and cigarettes, ready to plan for the night ahead.

We ran giddy into midnight like children to a carnival, we spun through the forgiving dark where the girls hid their eager hearts behind arch knowing smiles, the boys hid their insecurity behind swagger and stomp, and we were, for just that long, perfect in one another's eyes, and if we were reckless with our hearts it was only because we could not imagine that time would ever turn on us.

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Christa, after her diagnosis: All those idiots who talk about how getting sick was the best thing that ever happened to them, how they've never felt more alive? That's bullshit—all I can think about is how soon I might *not* be.

When she told me we were sitting in a sticky vinyl booth at the back of a bar, as cool and still on a Tuesday afternoon as the ones we'd gone to when we first met. We each had a double Jack-and-Coke, syrup-sweet and cloying. The bartender kept close, polishing glasses and watching our drinks. He was young, his face a smooth sweet moon, and I hated him. The ice in Christa's glass rattled when she picked it up.

And then they all say how you finally realize what truly matters? Also bullshit—what you realize is just how much *doesn't*.

She tucked her hands beneath her legs to still them and tried to laugh but what came out was a choking bark. The bartender glanced up, then away. I picked up my glass and drained it and Christa pushed hers towards me and I tried to remember the Saturdays we used to spend in places like this one, sunglasses pushed up onto our heads and leftover mascara smeared around our eyes, strawberry Margaritas and crinkle fries and plastic pouches of ketchup on the table between us. We would lick the salt from the rims of our glasses and watch the door to see who might walk in, who might turn the day inside out. We dropped quarters in the jukebox and watched baseball or football on the muted television above the bar; we cared nothing for who won. We'd moved in together and home was the top floor of a red brick row house, tapestries on the windows and grass mats on the floors, unwashed dishes and unmade beds and no one waiting for us in them. We would drain our drinks, one round, another, and hardly notice the hours sliding away from us because there were more, always more, behind them.

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When I wake in the morning the space next to me is empty and I stretch into it, angled, aching. The sheets are cool—Joe's been up for a while. In all the years we've been together I can count on one hand the number of times I've been out of bed before him. I've woken to the smell of coffee, of cinnamon bread, of pasta sauce set to simmer all day; to fresh flowers on the night table, my dry cleaning in the closet, the cars waxed and shining in the driveway. You have to stop, you're making me feel bad, I used to say to him in the beginning, sleepy, teasing, but he didn't stop. And then later, serious: You don't have to do all this, I'd say, and when he still kept on I came to understand that he did have to. He can't help himself, can't keep from touching every hour, every minute, until he leaves it cleaner or better or sweeter than it was before: good enough, for him, never is.

He's left a glass of water and a bottle of Tylenol on the night stand. If I take some now and manage to sleep for another hour the

day will be tolerable, and for an instant I'm twenty-two again, all dry mouth and swollen eyes, wanting nothing more than to pull the blankets back up until the sun has dropped away.

"Hey there," Joe says. He stands in the doorway, neat in black chinos and a cabled sweater, shaved, a mug of coffee in his hand. He looks like he just stepped out of a catalogue. "How do you feel?"

"I'm okay. You're dressed already."

"Here," he says, "did you want sugar? I can—"

"Are you going someplace?" I say.

He sets the mug down by the Tylenol, shrugs. "I was cleaning up the kitchen. We need more detergent, and I could get some bagels while I'm out." He touches a finger to the mug. "No sugar?"

"It's fine." I smile and reach for the coffee and he brushes my cheek with cool fingers. Last night we hugged Christa and Kent at the front door and shut it behind them, locked ourselves back in. We left the dining room as it was and balanced against each other on our way to the bedroom and fell into our bed, the sheets deep and blue as memories. We drew them over us, we gasped beneath them, and when we were finished with each other we broke apart and threw them off. We lay like cooling stones, we closed our eyes to hide behind them, we sank into sleep without speaking.

"So, bagels?" Joe says, fiddling with the blinds. "And some good salmon from the deli?"

The sunlight is white and ruthless. Matthew was never awake before I was, would keep me from getting out of bed: an arm snaking over my chest from behind, a hand around my ankle, a morning that lasted for days. He didn't love me—I understood that even then—he loved my voice that he didn't recognize, my skin that he didn't know. He loved the surprise of me, for as long as that lasted.

"And this afternoon I was thinking we could run over to the window place to look at those curtains—Em?"

Matthew didn't love me, he loved the possibility of me, the *what if*, the *maybe* of me. The flesh and breath of me wasn't enough

for him and though I could not understand this then I can now, in this solid winter house where there are so few maybes left.

“What if I stayed put and you came back to bed?” I say. It's not even eight o'clock and already I can feel the day racing away from us. “What if you closed the blinds and pretended there was no place you'd rather be than right here?”

The first night Joe spent with me was a Sunday, and on Monday morning I woke alone, a note on the pillow next to me: *I didn't want to leave.*

He is quiet, long enough for me to fish my robe from the foot of the bed and wrap it around my shoulders.

“Emily—” he says, and I wait. When he came back that Monday night he was quiet. He took the wine I poured for him but didn't touch me. He sat on the edge of the sofa, he left his jacket on. You have to decide, he said. I haven't said anything to Matthew yet, but you need to decide what you want to do. He set the mug of wine down and his eyes were so dark, his hands on his knees so still. There was no carelessness in him, no haste.

I'll wait for you, he said, but I won't share you. I won't waste our time like that.

Our time—I had never thought, until then, it could be anything other than mine.

“Last night,” he says, and hesitates; my clothes from last night are still on the floor, a crushed pile of velvet and denim; my shoes kicked off near the closet; a wool scarf and gloves tossed on a chair. “You would've gone to get him out,” he says. His voice is soft, marveling. “No questions asked. If you had been the one to pick up the phone, you would've been out the door.” On the night stand, a tube of cherry blossom hand cream, a gift from Christa. During treatment she'd amassed more bath products than she could possibly use; they were all anyone seemed to give her.

“That's not exactly true,” I say.

“Then what—it's *approximately* true? It's true-ish? Help me out here, Emily, because I'm pretty sure something happened last night that makes a difference.”

"He needed you," I say. "He needed us. He wouldn't have called if—"

He's quicker than I would have thought, the back of his hand catching my cheek before I realize what he's doing, and he cups my chin with that same hand, strokes the burning cheek with his thumb.

"No," he says, "he didn't. He didn't, and he doesn't." He smiles, kind, and for a moment I am almost unsure of what has just happened. "Did I hurt you?" he says.

"No," I tell him, and he slaps me again, harder this time, his smile breaking apart, his eyes wet, and the morning before we were married he asked me Are you sure? and I said to him No.

No, I said, because it was the truth; because I did not yet understand how unnecessary the truth could be.

"Did I hurt you?" he says again, and I know that he will keep hitting me until I say yes.

"No," I say, and there is his hand, again, and my cheek burns, my eyes. The robe slips from my shoulders and he draws it back up, soft at my throat. His fingers are unsteady, his eyes glazed over with tears. The sun coming through the blinds is bright as knives, white and cold, and he kneels on the bed before me, both hands wrapped now in the thick robe, his face inches from mine, and this is where love has brought us, this rumpled bed in this small bright room, cluttered with secrets we couldn't keep. He wraps his hands around my wrists and pulls me toward him; he closes his eyes and I press my lips to his wet lashes.

"How can I hurt you?" he says, and I cannot blame him for asking: how else will he know I am his?

"Want it less," I tell him, and we are rocking on the bed, cheeks pressed wet together, fingers twined, February sparkling outside, cold as every other February we've shivered through together.

"Do you know what Matthew said about you, what he told me, before I even knew you?" he says. "He said I could do better. He said I deserved better."

"You could," I say, "you did. You *do*."

"He told me you were desperate," he says, and I know he means for this to cut but how can it?—I was no one then, not yet, I was barely whole. Of course I was desperate: I was open hands and hungry skin; wide eyes and soft heart and sharp teeth. I was ready to fly apart into a million stars.

"I still am," I tell him: what he wants least to hear. He tries to pull away from me but I hold on, I hold fast; we are each other's home, after all, no matter how much we might wish this were not so.

* * *

I don't get out of bed until I hear the front door close and the car door open. I pull on thermal leggings and a sweater, thick socks, loop a fine soft scarf around my neck.

Joe is on his way to the police station. He can't help himself.

I take my cold coffee into the kitchen and pour it down the drain, get a new cup from what's left in the carafe, add a good shot of Sambuca, another. The kitchen is as clean as it's ever been and I am as tired.

Sometimes I'm too tired to move, Christa said during treatment, and then I feel like shit for feeling like shit—because I'm just *tired*, you know? I mean Jesus, tired is nothing, it could be worse.

But she was lucky. It wasn't worse. It was bad enough and then it was over and I know, of course I know that *over* is a dangerous word and *lucky* is a foolish one; I know this no matter what my husband might have me believe.

Today could be any Sunday, any silence. This house is choked with pieces of us that have come undone over the years, too sharp to touch at first and then not, then worn smooth everywhere except in the hidden places, the places we stay far from, the pieces in them still jagged, still breathing, still hot.

Even so: We are here because *here* is the easiest place to be.

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Joe doesn't get back until late in the afternoon. He opens the door and the sky behind him hangs gray and still as ash.

"He's out," he says. He comes into the living room, tosses his keys and wallet onto the coffee table and sits next to me on the sofa. I can feel the cold coming off of him. "She's not pressing charges." He reaches for my glass of wine, drinks it down and refills it from the bottle by his keys. "Marie," he says, "if you're interested."

I know better than to be interested. I wait. He stares out the window, into what's left of the day.

"Why don't you take your coat off?" I say, and he looks down, as if surprised to find he's still wearing it, and draws it tighter around him.

"I took him home," he says. "She was waiting for him—Marie. I went upstairs with him and she was waiting at the door. She—"

"Stop," I say, because I know what he intends to tell me and because there is no reason for me to know what Matthew did to this woman I will never meet. Her bruises, her cuts, her broken skin and broken heart mean nothing to me.

My husband turns to look at me. He waits for me to tell him that he has always been enough and I wait for him to tell me that I have nothing to be afraid of. Outside the branches whisper and scrape and inside we are warm, we are broken; inside he is made of silence and I am made of fear.

"Whatever happened—" I say, but that is all I say. I don't know what comes next, I don't know where to go from here, I don't know how to make him see that we cannot keep each other safe, not locked inside this house or any other, not today or tomorrow or any day after that.

He does not speak. Minutes pass, too small to hold, and still he is silent, watching me, his hands in his lap empty, red with cold. He has done all he can, now, he is waiting for me to fix this day and us in it, waiting for me to say whatever will save us from disappearing. But we are disappearing already, all of us—Christa in her closet, fingers pressed into her own wayward flesh, feeling for death, finding it; Matthew and his sodden rage, his endless futile

greed; his children and their mothers, faces light and mild as clouds, with no idea how hungry time is for them.

“Whatever *happens*,” I say, “we’re lucky,” and I will never tell a prettier lie. I take his cold hands, ease them under my scarf and press them to my throat, my chest. He lets his eyes close and I will keep his hands on my warm skin until he decides to open them again. Beneath his fingers my heart beats, a hammer, a drum; small and warm and indifferent. It will last until it doesn’t. Until then, it is a perfect instrument, playing itself out.

