

the bends

There's no way to tell the lifeguard that she is fine, that he need not have bothered to save her. Instead she thanks him profusely and says she must have eaten too much breakfast this morning, and that was what caused the cramps. He nods a lot, a smug saviour, and she aches to tell him that he is not what he thinks he is, but she just thanks him again and heads for the showers. Maybe he gets gold stars or medals for this kind of thing; she has no way of knowing. Maybe it makes him feel good, to save someone who appears so helpless. There are worse things than being convenient in someone else's life. Many worse things.

When Sarah steps out onto the street, it is already late afternoon and she finds the streets wet. The rain had been sudden, surprised the city, left it looking a little bruised. She wanders up the hill away from the bay, confused, looking for some answer, some explanation in the eyes of strangers in cafés. She is beside herself. She feels the birds begin to breathe again, and it seems to her that everyone is chattering, clacking words into the air, looking for one word, just one word to describe dust and moist at the same time. Is he still back there, underwater? She shouldn't be thinking about it. Ludicrous.

She stands in the square outside the pool, staring at the Saturday traffic crossing the Burrard Street bridge,

the clouds rushing east off the water. It's late September, so the rain is seasonal yet still unexpected. There's so little you can control. Reading a magazine in the doctor's office, waiting for an appointment she'd forgotten and arrived half an hour late for, she had read a random fact: Earth is spinning on its axis at 1674.4 km per hour, and hurtling around the sun at 108,000 km per hour. She'd dropped the magazine onto the waiting room coffee table and rested her cold cheek against an upturned hand. Invisible speed depressed her deeply.

She remembers it now on the street, the hurtling and spinning, and she just wants to put her finger to her lips and say, "Shhhh," find some way to make the world suddenly quiet, suddenly still.

What if they could set aside five minutes when everyone in the world would just stand still, even grab hold of those damn butterflies and keep them still for a moment. What then? It wouldn't be that difficult. Half the world would probably be asleep anyway. But what then?

It's been three months and still Alice, Karen, and Tania take her to lunch once a week, setting aside a considerable portion of the meal to exercise their pity-pained faces, to hear the horror of what it must be like to be single at their age. They use words like "wounded" and "damaged," and remind her that she is "the victim." Some time is also devoted to tearing into Peter with suburban blood lust. They say Peter's heartless. He's arrogant. He's always flirted with them, even Tania, who admits she is less attractive than the other two because she wasn't born with blonde hair. They say he's always been emotionally stunted. He's nothing like their husbands.

Sarah imagines them arriving home after these lunches,

showering off her divorce bacteria and then applying ample moisturizer. Maybe they imagine Peter left her because she didn't have adequate ablutions. It's possible. Alice, Karen, and Tania never used to go for lunch with her. But they're her friends now. And this is what friends are for.

They say goodbye at the entrance to the restaurant, and they each slip her "care" packages. A "get slim" diet book from Tania (who hasn't cracked it open), some hand-me-down dresses from Alice, and from Karen just a business card, the number of her "wellness" coach. From this Sarah gathers that they and their reluctant husbands have chosen her over Peter. But she also deduces that they find her overweight, lacking style, and mentally unbalanced, and these are, in their minds, all potential reasons she couldn't keep the bastard in the first place.

Sarah remembers a ninth grade teacher telling her, "You're in for a rude awakening," though she doesn't remember why. Maybe this is it. This numbness. She's left her head somewhere. On the bus. At the corner store. In the pool.

She generally believes other people's stories before she believes her own, so these last few months have been overwhelming as she waits to feel "damaged," "wounded," or eventually "abandoned." What really scares her is that she doesn't feel anything. Their ex-relationship counsellor had said, "Feeling nothing is a mask for an abundance of feeling," and Sarah had wanted to point out that this must have been very reassuring for him and their hundred-dollar-an-hour sessions. Maybe it's not numbness, but just the fact that no one's fighting, no one's confused, and no one feels the overwhelming need to have the last word.

"Fine. See what happens," she says, grimacing hopefully when her friends ask her how she's holding up.

Her mother hasn't called in weeks. She might be giving Sarah some space, but it's more likely that this is dredging up "issues" from her own separation. She's probably taking "personal time" with her support group. Sarah's becoming certain that children spend their years until they're thirty trying to be different from their parents only to eventually sink, to creep back to what's sadly comfortable. It's in the lines forming in the corners of her eyes, in the dark, bruised shadows under them, in the fading colour of her hair, now more bland than blonde. It begins ever so subtly with a familiar gesture witnessed so often as a child. You start to throw salt over your shoulder when you spill a little, because that's what your father used to do. Then you begin to twist your hair around your finger the way your mother did when she was nervous.

"Are you all right?" asks a young man in a grey track suit. Sarah is startled, realizes she must have looked odd staring at the sky, standing in the middle of the square all this time. She looks at the young man and recognizes him as the life-guard from the pool; he must be finished his shift.

"I'm fine. The sky's just so beautiful," she replies, grabbing for a reason.

"Have a good night," he says as he walks away, looking over his shoulder twice to make sure she's not falling to the ground or drowning. A lifeguard's work is never done. For a moment Sarah wonders if he's flirting. Maybe it's not enough for him to save people at work. Maybe he wants to take her home and save her. She doesn't feel terribly averse to the idea. But she decides she's being foolish. People don't flirt with her. She doesn't know why. Maybe that's why her friends feel she won't make it without the asshole. He was the only one who ever saw fit to flirt with her.

She turns in the direction of home and starts to walk. Sometimes when it rains she takes the bus, but tonight she feels like walking. The lifeguard must think she's having a nervous breakdown, but she's quite happy. She has two cats, Eenie and Meany, but the first one lives up to the second's name. She goes to the gym each weekday evening and climbs and climbs on the machine made for climbing, stairs leading nowhere. She swims three times a week. Sometimes she looks in the mirror and imagines there must be someone, somewhere, who is pleased with her reflection, attracted to what she sees there, instead of this ... this remarkably arbitrary face. No, it's more than that. She's disquieted by the imitation of her face in the bathroom mirror, like bumping into someone familiar on a bus in a part of town where one would only encounter strangers. Familiar, yet wrong.

She's passing the markets along Davie Street when she hears a woman singing across the street.

"Why, oh why did you leave me?" She's a beautiful woman, maybe Korean, with a forlorn expression she's throwing out to traffic as it passes. Sarah is about to cross the street to hear the rest of the song, perhaps give the woman some money, when the woman turns and screams at the empty bus stop seat beside her. "Shut up! Just shut up!"

Sarah stops mid-stride and decides to stay on her side of the street. She turns to the nearest shop window and pretends to look at the display. It's a bakery, so she tries to justify buying cookies. She doesn't often eat cookies, but maybe just a small package of oatmeal ones to dip in tea. Then she sees, on the lowest shelf in the bakery's glass window, those small chocolate cookies she used to eat as a child; they were her favourite. Was it her father or her

mother who baked them? She can't remember. Nothing worse than vague nostalgia. It's not like her, not at all, but she almost cries right there, just outside the window.

She enters, asks for the cookies with contained excitement, and finds herself wanting to explain her nostalgia to the baker. She's afraid of how often she now feels the urge to reach out to strangers, and each time it happens she remembers being a child, then a teenager, shopping with her mother. She remembers watching her mother talk to complete strangers, tell them how Uncle Howard's lost all the hair on his body, how her older sister's acne was probably related to diet, and various other details of her life, of their family's life. She's certain this led to her own shyness, her fear of divulging too much. The therapist had said this was her issue. Reticence. Was it loneliness that made her mother talk to strangers? Maybe this is what turns old women crazy and leads them to rant on buses about their lack of teeth and the voices inside their heads—maybe they just need to share with strangers, to reach out past the loneliness.

Suddenly Sarah's crying—a sob escapes her mouth and her hand jumps to catch it, but too late.

"Are you okay?" the man behind the counter asks, concern crinkling his forehead.

She digs into her purse, grabs a bill, and places it on the counter. The audacity of strangers. Is she okay? What kind of question is that? It's probably a bloody come on, or even worse, some pitiful way to make himself happy, benevolent in the face of the boredom of his own dreary existence. She doesn't really believe that. Working with cookies, with *these* cookies, couldn't be dreary. Couldn't.

"I'm fine. Thank you," she says as curtly as possible.

She waves away the plastic bag, nestling the paper bag of cookies in her open purse. She turns and exits, the bells above the door echoing, the cold air on her face, the sidewalk thick with strangers. She forgot her change but she's not going back. She notices her purse is still open as a wide, square-jawed man walks into her, knocking her to the ground, her purse exploding across the concrete into a galaxy of lost details. He doesn't stop. No one stops. Though they do watch her move slowly to collect her lipstick, her daybook, the cookies. Her palms burn and her knee is throbbing where it hit the sidewalk.

Sarah stands, her purse lighter. She didn't collect everything. She thinks of the cookies and decides she got what she needed.

"Why oh why ... oh why?" wails the crazy woman on the other side of the street, her sing-song lament outside the supermarket. Then, with perfect timing, she turns to her imaginary companion and yells, "Shut up! No one asked you!" She grimaces. She looks up to the sky, her face softens, her hands release with what looks like reverence for the sky. Then suddenly her hands and her face clench again, and she weeps, "How could you, oh why?"

Sarah rubs her burning palms against her skirt, then brushes a wet strand of hair back off her forehead. Sure it's hard, with no one to confide in. No one to ask about things. No one to call out from other rooms. She needs to relax. Maybe go for a massage or take a yoga class. Karen mentioned yoga. No, that was Tania. Karen mentioned her happy coach. Yoga, that's what she'll do. Something to get her back into her body, so maybe then she won't be so absentminded. She starts up the street to her apartment, looking into the faces of strangers, wondering if she'd

recognize him. Then she feels foolish and focuses on her footsteps, the rain on her forehead, not looking anymore.

Absentmindedness led her into trouble back at the pool. She'd slipped into the area where people usually swim careful, corded-off laps. She was so preoccupied with thoughts of the conversation she'd just had with Peter over coffee that she didn't hear the lifeguard's calls. She began her lengths and didn't realize something was wrong until she was already above them in the deep end of the pool. At first she only thought it was peculiar that there were streams of bubbles erupting from below, tickling around her. Then she noticed where the bubbles came from. She didn't know what to do at first, just stopped mid-stroke and did what her third grade swimming instructor called the dead man's float. She didn't want to leave the streams of bubbles.

It's late, well past midnight, and she is now standing at the living room window looking out at the city lights, the strange Christmas tree effect of other people's lives flickering just out there. She turns to the dining table where she discarded her purse, digs and finds the cookies. There are a few left. He wants her back. She hasn't told any of their friends, her friends. He came to her two weeks after she'd moved out, told her he was regretful, three kinds of sorry, and wanted them to start anew. He used that word: anew. Rhymes with "poo," she thought to herself, and then tried not to laugh. Peter would think she was going crazy. He said he didn't want a response, but that's the sort of thing people say when they want you to say yes right now or later but not no. He said he wanted her to think about it. She had wanted to laugh, not just about the poo rhyme. It was a laughable moment. But she couldn't even let herself smile. She excused herself and went to the washroom. It would

have probably crushed the man to see her smile right then, and she didn't want to crush him. She didn't want to hurt him in any way. In the washroom she looked in the bathroom mirror, hoping someone, even just her own reflection, might tell her what to say or do.

Back at the table, she sat across from him, looked out the café window, tried to focus on the lights of traffic glistening off the wet street, the hiss of passing cars so she wouldn't ask, "What about her?" And then she asked. She hated herself before the pronoun was even out of her mouth. She knew Peter could give her no honest answer.

He told her then how he had only had the affair with that woman because he was scared. That woman, she thought to herself. That woman. It sounded so powerful. He used words like "co-dependent" and phrases like "cognitive error," and she began to regret ever suggesting they seek couples counselling. It's much easier to give a monkey a hammer than it is to take it away.

That was four months ago, and since then they've tried to be friends: coffee "dates," movies he seemed to have carefully chosen for their messages about relationships, and walks where they carefully avoided the lagoon or the rhododendron park where they had discussed the end of their relationship. All the while, Peter waits for his yes.

Her mother seems to wait for it, too. She calls after each date and tries to sound casual as she asks how it went. Maybe Sarah wants the yes, too. Maybe. There's only one thing she knows for sure. Only after the numbness goes away will she know what to do.

At the pool today, her casual mistake. She floated motionless, just under the surface of the water, the streams of bubbles tickling past her to the surface. On the bottom

she could count eight scuba divers, and she could see one of them sitting on the bottom looking up at her. He didn't gesture to any of his scuba friends, seemed separate and away from the others and their scuba language, carrying on with their scuba lives. He just sat on the bottom looking right at her as his breath ascended and fizzed around her to the surface. Effervescence, bubbles of his breath, warm and salty, turning her to breath, joining his. So she laughed. She read somewhere that castaway sailors surrounded by dolphins trying to save them could drown laughing, the sonar tickling their diaphragms, leaving them tragically breathless. Plenty worse ways to die.

She has always been very good at holding her breath. In the pool, she had remembered watching a television special on yogis who could hold their breaths and slow their heart rates until they were almost dead. She wondered, once they started, how did they stop themselves? She thinks this might happen to her. When she's reading or editing at work she forgets to breathe. Her assistant asks her why she sighs the way she does, but she needs to take a big breath like that when she's forgotten to breathe for a while.

She finds herself holding her breath when she's around Peter, too. When they see a movie or go for coffee, he will always talk about how much he's changed, and she has to consciously remind herself to breathe and unclench her hands. Yesterday when they chatted, he was going on about "family models" and his childhood, what he now saw as the source of all his relationship "rackets." Like most of the converted, it only took a few sentences before he suggested she try on his religion.

"Have you looked at your family background? Don't take this the wrong way, Sarah, but it might be telling, how no

one in your family gets along.” That had been the end of that coffee date. She didn’t let him know he’d pissed her off, just found a quick and economical way to get out of there—something about the cats and an incident with a raccoon.

She’d always thought Peter had the most wonderful upbringing. It was one of the first things he told her about himself. How he had been the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, robust chosen one, and his parents seemed to have supported him through everything. Now that he had revised that whole story and found the roots of his issues (controlling mother, spineless father), she became suspicious of his stories. Arriving home after that bad date, she had turned on the light in the hallway in the middle of realizing she had spent the whole evening and the trip home thinking about Peter’s revised history.

Maybe it isn’t only his fault his stories take up so much space. After he left her for that woman, she felt relief, that maybe now she could stop thinking about him so much, might have time to look into her own story, wonder about her upbringing, maybe even discover some repressed memories. Anything. She went in search for this when she left Peter, but his stories, with their coffee dates, re-emerged, rewritten, bigger than ever. She realized then, standing in the hallway with her jacket still on, that Peter would never cease to find himself interesting. That once he had excavated this new version of his childhood, he would find another. How does he not drown in so many stories?

She goes to bed at 1:00 AM, knowing full well that she’ll be awake for two or more hours, but she is determined to find sleep. When she closes her eyes, she’s descending through the bubbles, floating down to the man sitting on the bottom of the pool, enclosed in that thick underwater

silence she loves so much. Why is it that, on the surface, pools are so chaotic, so noisy, full of the sounds of children's voices echoing off tile walls? It's why she could not hear the lifeguard's whistle, did not notice the life preserver he threw in her vicinity. It's why she was startled by the crashing splash, flurry of limbs, rush of voices calling through water as he jumped in to save her, hooking his arm around her arm and across her chest, pulling her up and back so she surfaced. She got only one last glimpse of the scuba diver before the cloud of bubbles obscured her view. Then she was breaking the surface and a young man was telling her she was "going to be all right. Just breathe!" His strong left arm crushed her against his warm chest, and pulled her back and towards the edge of the pool. She rapidly blinked her eyes—the chlorine, the glare of the fluorescent lights, the shrieks of playing children. She realized she was crying.

Being saved wasn't wholly unpleasant. It was like being held. Like being safe, just for a moment. But then she was jostled free of the water, lifted and dropped on the cold, slick tiles, the lifeguard's warm arms gone. The whole incident might have been embarrassing to some, and even to Sarah, but any chance of embarrassment was buried under the pain of being tugged away from the deeper water, the cloud of bubbles, and the scuba diver's upturned face. She could live with the fact that she is probably a story the lifeguard will later tell someone, maybe a girl he wants to impress who wouldn't notice him otherwise, the kind of girl who counts brushstrokes as she combs her hair at night. Sarah could live with that. If only she could know that she is a story the scuba diver will tell someone—anyone.

The next morning she goes through her rituals, follows the script. The same breakfast, the same chewing, the same

shower and soap and then clothes from the same closet. There is no story here, she thinks. She's not sure where she will find it.

At the bus stop she stands in the rain waiting for the bus to take her to work. Her hair tendrils down her forehead. It's early before the rush, and she's the only one there. She idly wonders where the crazy lady goes at night. Maybe home to her husband and kids, making macaroni like nobody's business, asking them about their days and never letting on that she sings and screams her afternoons away downtown among the strangers. Sarah looks down at the empty bench and then, before she can think, she's looking at the empty seat beside her. She's a little disappointed. She doesn't feel like singing. She doesn't feel like yelling at the empty seat. She considers trying anyway, wonders if she'll feel differently once she gets the ball rolling. Instead, she reaches out her hand and places it gently on the blank bench beside her. There's a beginning. She can sense it now. But it's still a long way under.



sweet tooth

i

4 ripe avocados, pitted and peeled
6 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
3 cups low-fat, plain yogurt
4 large fresh basil leaves, slivered
¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
4 large fresh basil leaves, for garnish
4 radishes, finely chopped, for garnish
Pinch of salt

They served a cold soup first, and it seemed like a perfect choice for such a warm evening in early June. The soup had almost been an afterthought, for the rice required so much attention that the soup, and most of the meal, became insignificant. Everyone had tasted the rice, a wild breed, and the general consensus was that it was not yet cooked, so more water was added and it was cooked some more, and then more water and more cooking. Wild rice is the most difficult to cook; the grain never reaches the texture one would expect. Eventually, hunger caused the guests to call the rice cooked and sit at the table, at first without the cold soup.

August's grandmother used to tell her that on particularly hot days one should drink hot tea to cool down. That

if one drinks cold liquids, the body thinks it is cold and acclimatizes itself accordingly. So it follows that although the cold soup was refreshing in the heat of an early summer evening, it may have only increased the fervour of those who consumed it. And who would have thought, passion and cold soup.

ii

2 small Italian eggplants, cut into one-inch cubes

1 pound very new potatoes

(the kind you can easily hold in the palm of your hand)

4 tablespoons olive oil

1 green and

1 red bell pepper, both cored, seeded, and cut into one-inch squares

1 red onion, coarsely chopped

6 ripe plum tomatoes, cubed

2 cloves garlic, minced

Salt and pepper to taste

A handful each of the following: parsley, basil, and oregano

They each tell stories of their childhood. Jamie confesses to making a neighbour boy drink a mix of juice crystals and his own urine. August admits she used to eat things she found on sidewalks, though, as Jamie points out, a hostess should never make such confessions. But it is Robert who tells a story from Tim's childhood. He talks of a young boy without a father. At night, after a long day on the canning lines, his mother must bathe each of his brothers and sisters before putting them to sleep. Only after bathing all four children would she draw herself a bath. The boy remembers lying in a tucked-in bed and hearing the sound of rushing water, and this sound becomes for him another

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word for sleep. Even now, as an adult, the sound of rushing water subdues him and fills him with fatigue. A school trip to Niagara Falls was almost fatal.

Tim blushes, tries to pretend the story hasn't been told, intends to wipe his mouth, but can't find his napkin. A polite smile, he looks out the window.

Thinking about water falling, Robert takes Tim's hand under the table. Then he stands and goes to the kitchen to refill the water jug. There, with the jug in his hand and the water beginning to flow cold from the kitchen tap, Robert thinks of the story he has just told. Once when Tim had a terrible flu, Robert left the water running in their tiny bathroom, wishing he could amplify the sound, longing to ease Tim to sleep. They have been together four times and broken up three, met so many times that they've been able to let go of all the faces that could have kept them apart. But now Tim is moving, to the other coast. And Robert is staying. Irreducible facts.

iii

The last bite of food bitten, the cutlery akimbo on empty plates, August gives Jamie a small smile as the heat swells in and replaces the conversation. Outside the windows, the cicadas dirge in the swelter, and in the kitchen, water rushes through the taps as Robert fills the water jug. Tim stifles a yawn brought on by the sound of rushing water, then blushes.

Jamie wonders if Robert has always been this way, how he fills a room. Robert is the type of man who tells stories, while Tim, Jamie notices, is the kind of man stories are told about. Jamie wonders if it's a trick of physiology suggested by Tim's plump mouth and thick neck. Or maybe because

he talks less. Even now, as Tim shyly looks down at his own solid tradesman hands, he leaves much to the imagination. When he brings his glass to his mouth, there is something unconscious and deliberate. A closer look would show how his tongue reaches out to touch the glass, as though he trusts it more than his bottom lip to ensure the rim is there. Robert turns and sees August looking at Tim, too. His mouth, Jamie thinks.

“What were you like as a child?” Tim asks Jamie. August smiles and looks at her husband.

“Smaller, but the same size head,” says Jamie.

August and Tim try to think about Robert as a child, how he seems to have come into the world as an adult with no history, no memories, no photos of himself naked at two, sitting in a creek bed. Each of them marvels at how they could love the man without noticing the missing past.

The casserole, too, is a secret recipe, and Jamie hasn’t ever given out the ingredients without forgetting to mention something. Maybe a tablespoon of lemon zest, grated.

iv

And when the meal is mostly finished, August begins to clear the table, walking from the kitchen to the dining room and back again, making as many trips as possible to avoid either room. In the kitchen, her husband Jamie feeds the dog, while in the dining room her past love Robert laughs and tells a story to the one he loves now, Tim. She can still remember the V of his chest hanging over her, the smooth length of his back under her hands. Jamie’s back is hairy.

Hands balancing dishes, she glances at Robert, his head tilted down to look at Tim’s hands in his.

She passes Jamie who returns to the table. In the kitchen she wonders if Robert fantasized about a man like Tim when they were together; she remembers the small apartment they shared in Winnipeg, the one with too many doors for its two rooms and the late night scrapes and shouts of ice skaters on the frozen, flooded tennis courts out back. She doubts he remembers.

Stacking dishes next to the sink, she idly tastes a piece of chicken off Jamie's plate. She remembers making the meal, the list of ingredients, she remembers even tasting it to be sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She'd put a little too much garlic in the eggplant, but not enough salt. But she doesn't remember the taste of the meal as they sat at the table. Someone, maybe Tim, had complimented her and she'd nodded. But she couldn't remember any flavours between the making of the meal and this moment, closing parenthesis over dirty dishes. An argument for eating alone, without the distraction of other people, she thinks, eating another bite from Jamie's plate.

With a deep breath she returns to the table, poises on the edge of her chair, hoping she might find glasses or side plates that still need to be cleared. Jamie's hand rests on her hip and so she looks at him, a reflex. A tender smile. He has a spot of cold soup in the corner of his mouth. She reaches to her feet to find her napkin, expecting it's dropped, but can't find it.

"The corner of your mouth," she says, sticking her tongue out to show him how to reach the spot of soup.

He sticks his tongue out the opposite direction.

"Got it?" he asks.

"Yes," she says, and looks away from the spot of soup.

v

It was a dinner punctuated by the hot summer wind rustling the window blinds and the dog running off with the table napkins. Jamie finds her in the kitchen, looking out at the small yard behind the house. The first thing they did when they moved into this house was tear up the bricks and plant grass so the dog could play in the five-by-twelve space. A snapshot of a life, but who knew if the dog cared?

Jamie wonders what August is thinking, and where she has been with those blue eyes. She cut her index finger while slicing red peppers for dinner, and just the sight of the Band-Aid hurts him. Her family are prone to fainting, and she had to sit on the floor with the half pepper in her hand, crushing its waxy texture. In pain she is unreachable, but this distraction of hers, at least, is familiar to him.

He returns to the table, to their guests, and August returns, perching on her chair and surveying the table. She is away and gone. He touches her on the hip with his open palm, cupping her warmth and softly bringing her attention around. He has learned to economize his touch, to express the most affection in the smallest gesture.

How he came so far in this life to this house, this home, this wife with the red pepper—it seems a mystery to him now. In the other room is his friend, his wife's past lover, and the lover's current lover. This dinner's guests.

And this is how it is meant to go. Three years of marriage culminate in a dinner party where the food doesn't satiate the appetite, and the light flush of the wine masks sensual stirring. He knows three languages, yet would he confess in any of them the way he finds himself looking at this young man, Tim, at this dinner party tonight? Perhaps not a kind of thirst, but only an undercurrent on this strange beach.

Something he will never let carry him away, but still ... there is this strange sensation of colder water pulling on his feet. Another world, a few feet down.

This young man is the geography of a place he will never visit, only lines on a map he traces lightly with his finger. These subtle loves, these subtle passions are harmless when one is married. The next morning he can blame it on the wine ... a brash and crass Argentinean grape, incidentally, though the guests liked it.

The kettle calls from the kitchen and his wife walks from the room with a consoling smile. Even a stranger could see she is a dancer. A ballet dancer, since it must be known that dancers of different styles walk differently. Modern dancers pound the earth with their feet, expecting an answer in return. But this woman, a ballet dancer, seems always, always about to rise up through the ceiling on an unexpected current, limbs like jellyfish tendrils, to suddenly disappear one Sunday afternoon so quietly even the dog would not start barking.

And then what? What would this man, her husband, do then? He can't float away. Not in this body at least, corduroy and belly flesh. It's a body that has worn him well, but some days, lately, it feels like laundry day underwear, the saddest, most shameful pair. He's still in very good shape, but after each run the small of his back clenches and whines. More often than not, he wants to stay home on weekends with the dog and the comfort of knowing August will soon be there with something chocolate from the local pâtisserie. She loves him in a Hansel and Gretel way.

Growing older with half-imagined passions and a sweet tooth. The crème brûlée. The forgotten dessert. He moves to the fridge, removes the small ceramic dishes full of cream

(he jokingly calls them pudding for adults) and follows his wife into the dining room. For the briefest moment as the kitchen door swings open, he catches sight of Tim and Robert holding hands across the table, before they turn to greet him or the dessert.

vi

Robert watches first August, then Jamie enter the room from the kitchen. He remembers reading somewhere that if both of your hosts are in the kitchen for more than three minutes, all is not well. But despite the small dimple that has formed between August's eyebrows, there is no evidence of a disagreement on Jamie's face.


In the middle of a joke, and to punctuate his description of the jarring his sister's car caused the house when she drove into it, Robert bumps the hanging lamp above the dining room table with his palm. For the rest of the evening the light will continue to sway, as though on a ship on open waters.

Laughter ricochets between wine glasses, followed by a silence in which they each think of sleep and wonder if the evening has not gone on too long. Tim takes Robert's hand underneath the table and August wipes adult pudding from the corner of Jamie's mouth with her thumb.

vii

2 cups fresh cream
4 separated egg yolks
½ cup sugar
1 tablespoon real vanilla
1 cup brown sugar

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The taste of the crème brûlée is indescribable. One man would call it “better than sex,” another would say “a pleasure unlike any other,” and yet another would only smile and say that “time is measured more carefully, more painfully with a good dessert.” And you see, the woman said nothing. For it was painful enough for her to hear the men diminish such pleasure. With each spoonful she languished, tasted each mouthful as though alone in the room.

The final scraping of the small, white ceramic bowls signals an end to this dinner. Two men will leave and one will stay. The woman and the man will leave the dishes soaking in the sink and will fall asleep, each to their own side of the bed.

The dog sleeps in the kitchen tonight, dreaming, the taunting smell of dinner’s dishes piled high in the sink.

