



lights



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short stories

JOHN CHRISTOPHER NELSON

Sola Fide

Meaning As Use

Avoidance

essays

BARET MAGARIAN

The Italian Quarantine

MARY LOU SANELLI

Natural Ease

poetry

ESTHER COHEN

a poem for every day

Why There's a Poem Today

Like and Love

Dear Person Who is

Wondering What to do on

Holidays

If I Don't Write a Poem

A Party for Joe

All Holidays Haiku

A Moroccan Man and

Woman I Did Not Know

JOHN DELANEY

Wishing Stone

EILEEN DUNCAN

Chimney Rock

Cats Tongue Fungus

Canteloupe

Cleaning the E.R.

SCOTT EZELL

Carbon Rings

one of six cycles/14 poems

DAVID GROSSKOPF

Ripening

ALICIA HOKANSON

Gathering

Reunion

Blueprint

EDWARD HARKNESS

Beautiful Passing Lives

Holding the New Baby,

I Feel the Feather Weight of My Death

To the Woman at the March

JARED LEISING

Containers

There's No Secrets in the Kitchen

The Rising Cost of Intuition

Wearing a BABYBJÖRN®

CLAUDIA CASTRO LUNA

Morning Star

KEVIN MILLER

Vanish

MELISSA NIÑO

*on the Foreign Custom
of Sending Postcards
An essay on survival*

ALLISON PAUL

*I am a Sequoia
Sometimes I Chop Onions
Lessons from Trees*

SHERRY RIND

Poems based on antique science
*Scitalis
Elephants, Their Capacity
The Reverend Alexander Ross
Explains Griffins
Saint Ambrose Admonishes
Castor*

SARAH PLIMPTON

*The Other Sun
Surface
The Every Day
Edges*

SCOTT RUESCHER

*Above the Fold
Tag
At Hamilton and Pearl
Tenskwatawa*

JUDITH SKILLMAN

*Long Marriage Prayer
October's Mole
The Invalid
A July of July's*

KARI VAMARO

Traveling Soul

THOMAS WALTON

Seventeens

MICHAEL DYLAN WELCH

Foul Ball

Family Business

Naked

Away

SHIN YU PAI

All Beings Our Teachers

Sangha

Imprints

Shamanic

The Century Building

art

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JACQUI GAUGHAN HAD A VALID—though, she felt, inexcusable—reason for being late to the prom. The unforeseen limousine fire didn't make her feel any better about missing everything that had happened prior to her arrival. Nor did the lateness of the others in her party make her own lateness any more bearable. Once she entered the gymnasium and spotted Howard Brandt and heard Madonna—the guy she'd been waiting all day to see and the song she'd been hoping all day to hear—everyone else in her group ceased to matter.

After dancing with Howard, Jacqui would find out:

1. “Footloose” was the second song to play—it was within the first three to play at last year's prom, homecoming, and winter formal. Jacqui wondered how many more formals would endure Kenny Loggins' onslaught;

2. Donny Styles pregamed too hard by himself in his stepmom's basement and was already passed out in the back of a pickup in the parking lot, ruining the tux he borrowed from his uncle Todd;

3. Tailor Rinks left the dance abruptly when her younger, prettier sister, Leslie—most people supposed they were only half-related—told Tailor she looked fat in her dress. Leslie had been drinking. Tailor had not.

But before she learned any of this, Jacqui's only concern was seeing Howard, catching his eye before he and his date left to fool around. Jacqui was sure that if Howard and Suzie Cramer hadn't already had sex, Suzie would put out tonight.

By the time Jacqui arrived, she was already upset about the electric-blue dress she was wearing. The dress did not look bad on her. She looked better than many of the girls in attendance, who had all seemingly embraced the current anti-coke trend and put on a ton of weight in the last year. Jacqui still did coke here and there. She used the word “recreational” and didn't feel it had anything to do with her not putting on weight. But for Jacqui it didn't matter that she looked better, it was that the other girls—not just at Valhalla, but at every other high school in San Diego, California, perhaps the nation—were wearing carnation-pink dresses tonight. That's what was hip this year, this season, this moment in 1985.

So far tonight, Jacqui felt tragically unhip.

Three weeks later, reviewing the photos taken before the dance, Jacqui neglected to comment on her date and simply conceded to herself, “You

look like Donna Lea. Christ.” Earlier that year, Jacqui pierced her right ear a second and third time to mimic her friend Donna Lea and, in response to her efforts, earned no praise from her supposed friend but instead the scolds of her own father for being “less than trailer trash.” Yes, for the piercings. Ear piercings.

But this feeling of tragic unhipness only lasted during the few moments between her arrival and when her song started to play. “Crazy For You” was already popular that year, but was nothing particularly special to anyone but Jacqui, who had already based her night’s imagined success on whether or not the song would play.

Her date, Kenneth Kauffman, was not her first choice. Jacqui had recently left Bob Garber and her brothers had suggested Kenneth for a date. He was not ugly, but handsome was not a word anyone would use. He was too nice for her. Especially after Bob. Bob, who had already graduated. Bob, who sold drugs, who explained away rogue panties discovered in his apartment.

Someone gentlemanly like Kenneth felt foreign, unpleasant.

Her older brothers were among the first two classes to graduate from Valhalla in 1976 and 1977. The school had been erected to endure the overflow from other El Cajon high schools, which were unable to accommodate the region’s exploding population. Kenneth was in Jacqui’s class and his older brother was a friend of her brothers. Jacqui and Kenneth would share the Valhalla class of 1985 stamp on their diplomas, but little else besides that.

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Mary and Maria Pernicano and Donna Lea and their dates went to dinner at Tom Ham’s Lighthouse. Kenneth and his friends Marcus Szinski and Bud Laughtner had chosen something more modest for Jacqui, Tammy Strellic, and Amy Anderson: Fletcher Bowl.

The menu was not quite as extensive as the one Tom Ham offered. Fletcher Bowl had the standard bowling alley fare of hotdogs, hamburgers, fries, and pitchers of beer, the last of which the kids weren’t old enough to order. But this wouldn’t interfere with Jacqui’s thigh-bound flask of Southern Comfort—which she wouldn’t ever be able to stomach again after the summer of 1988. As for the flask, it was not comfortable, nor was it the least bit subtle. But Jacqui felt it was cool, mature. She imagined

Howard would appreciate it, if he were to touch her leg and discover the flask. He would smile at her knowingly, maybe even wink.

Walking into Fletcher Bowl made the imminent disappointment of their dinner more tolerable. Just after the initial six notes of “Everybody Wants to Rule the World,” the teens pushed through the doors and made their way toward the café in the back corner of the bowling alley, the song’s guitar riff leading their way from the stereo speakers hanging off the walls above the casino-style carpet.

As for Jacqui’s date, Kenneth would eventually become handsome enough. Nobody remarkable, but decent, better than Jacqui would give him credit for. He would end up marrying someone more attractive than him—more attractive than Jacqui. For now, that didn’t matter. They were at a bowling alley. And Jacqui was about to eat a plain cheese-burger (“I’m fine without fries,”) while Donna Lea was probably feasting on swordfish or piling in paella. In fact, Donna Lea was enjoying bouillabaisse, which Jacqui had never heard of and would never see on a menu.

Back to Kenneth. Sometimes youth is easier for everyone if braces are imagined as invisible. Weighing braces too heavily in high school dating decisions rules out many otherwise qualified candidates. But they are just so unavoidable. As Jacqui’s tongue and teeth took in the vast array of texture and flavor offered by the complexities of Fletcher Bowl’s head chef Ricky Chavez’s burger, she watched Kenneth eating his. He was not careful to keep his lips closed and, even within her passing glances, Jacqui could see burger debris clotted into the wedges of the metal wires surrounding his teeth. Also, he had small hands. He was not shorter than her but not taller either, with eyes dark enough to be mysterious to high school girls but not dark enough to cause genuine intrigue. His hair had just enough of a curl to suggest a Jewish mother or father—maybe both—but Jacqui didn’t care that much.

Just as Jacqui was imagining sitting across from Howard, some place nicer than this, Kenneth leaned in too close, bringing a series of chin blemishes into view. “Are you excited to dance later?”

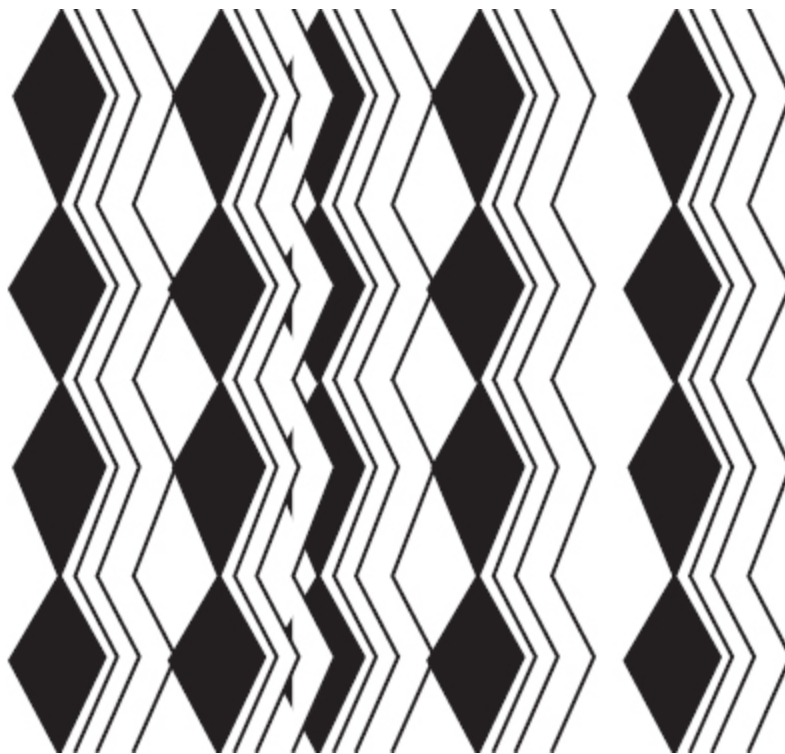
Jacqui nodded a curt, impassive, “Yes,” before slipping off to the bathroom.

She stood in the mirror and judged her dress again. Jacqui frowned at her hips as she pulled the dress down. It was too early in the night for it to be riding up. But the dress was too tight and her hips were too big. And her

too-small breasts looked even smaller, pulled taut against her chest. Jacqui set the flask she'd removed from her garter on the counter and scooped her hand into the corset top to pull her breasts up into the spotlight. Jacqui was certain the sex she'd had with Bob would not be beat by Kenneth, not even met. Still, she was feeling gamesome, even if unsure whether she would allow Kenneth to kiss her.

Semi-satisfied with her reflection, despite her dress color, Jacqui pulled another swallow from her flask. There were still three shot-sized bottles nestled in the bottom of her purse. She emptied one into the flask, before throwing the bottle away. She planned to top off the flask again before entering the dance.

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FOR NOW, THAT DIDN'T MATTER. THEY WERE AT A BOWLING ALLEY.

Years later, in 1992, this was the part of the night that stood out most. There wasn't anything all that remarkable about the moment, but sitting in her hospital bed, Jacqui would catch a flash of herself behind her eyelids. Electric-blue dress, messed beach hairdo, and a chrome flask, all of them reflecting bathroom mirror light. The memory, the image, was colored by a haze not of nostalgia, but as if the memory had been recorded with eighties-quality cameras and film.

At twenty-five Jacqui would be diagnosed with undifferentiated, high-grade sarcoma, an extremely rare form of cancer that manifested as a large grapefruit, or small-sized melon, depending on who told the story, on the outside of the thigh on which she'd worn her flask seven years earlier.

The cancer was as aggressive as it was rare. The treatment was equally aggressive and Jacqui lost all of her hair and dropped from one hundred and nineteen pounds to ninety-seven. Her doctors were certain she would die and told her as politely as they could manage that she might consider saying good-byes, resolving conflicts, maybe checking some things off her list. Jacqui stared at the hospital wall. She had no idea what to do first. She had already performed her life's most brazen act seven years earlier.

Her mother was also in the room and chose to ignore the doctors, deciding her parental intuition outweighed their education and practice. And, by a complete fluke, her mother was right. Jacqui survived.

Back in 1985, this did nothing for Jacqui. No, tonight, prom night, Jacqui would return from the bathroom, having rinsed her mouth in the sink and relipsticked, adjusted her breasts one last time, to see that everyone else was finished eating and the bill was paid—she guessed Kenneth had paid for her, but did not thank him.

Although the group had arrived at the bowling alley in Kenneth's parents' van, the big surprise of the night was waiting outside. The limo was nothing impressive. Tuxedo black-and white, short enough to be mistaken for a hearse, but providing the advantage of looking larger in the context of a bowling alley parking lot. It would fit all of them, and it was a limo. The gesture was kind, so Jacqui, Amy, and Tammy all did their best, without conferring, to feign excitement and surprise in equal volume. This, of course, after standing around awkwardly while Kenneth passed the van keys off to his mother, who had shown up in her nightgown with a flannel over her shoulders, to collect them.



In the limo, Tammy declared, “I hope they play REO Speedwagon.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “No way.”

“Way. It’s romantic.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s romantic.”

“REO Speedwagon?”

“Yeah. What?”

“Jacqui, back me up on this,” Amy pleaded.

Kenneth, Marcus, and Bud were staring out their windows, pretending not to listen to the debate.

“They’re fine,” Jacqui answered, not wanting to take sides.

“Anyway, there’s just one song I want to hear tonight,” and it was much more romantic than anything REO Speedwagon had or would ever release. Their music was the kind jocks got laid to, and it would never be romantic.

“What song?”

Jacqui was deciding whether or not to share the answer when the limo shrugged into an abrupt halt, causing her to spill from the flask she was sipping from between conversational cues. Before she could say anything, the driver was pulling open the back door and yelling at everyone, “Get out! Now!”

Upon exiting the vehicle, initially unsure if they were being robbed or kidnapped, the group froze and observed the flames shooting from the cracks between the hood and the body of the limo. While everyone else continued to stare, Jacqui's eyes wandered to the limo driver with the car phone in his hand, the cord stretched to its full extent. She assumed a manager or dispatcher or something on the other end of the line, maybe the fire department. She turned and walked to the gas station across the street. At the pay phone, she called a cab.

"Actually," she added, turning around to see the limo now fully enveloped in flames and everyone else, including the driver, watching it with their arms akimbo, "can I make it two cabs?"

The boys weren't allowed a vote in Jacqui's decision to split the group, the girls in one cab, the boys in the other.

In their cab, Amy asked the other two, "So?"

"I feel like," Tammy started, looking at Jacqui to verify, "Kenneth isn't getting any tonight."

"He wasn't to begin with," Jacqui answered, adding another bottle of SoCo to the flask, her corsage and the dark obscuring her action from their cabdriver.

The girls had taken the first of the two cabs and made it to the dance before the boys. Tammy wanted to wait for them out front, but Jacqui said, "They'll find us," without meaning it or caring, and headed toward the entrance of the dance. Amy followed.

Upon entering, Jacqui scanned the crowd, observed the ocean of carnation-pink—held her judgment till later when she was alone in her bed—and spotted Howard and his date. Just as her song started to play.

She knew it from the first beats of the drum. She put a hand firmly against Amy's arm to suggest she not follow, and strode across the room toward Howard, who was making small talk with his date. Just before the first lyrics of the song, Jacqui had her hand on Howard's, her eyes on Suzie's glance of reproach.

"Would you mind if I stole a quick dance?"

Suzie's barely hidden scowl, her too-heavily caked makeup, the volume of hairspray in her hair all suggested that yes, she would mind. But Suzie managed a, "No," and a disingenuous follow-up smile. Howard noticed none of this. His eyes were on Jacqui's, half-confused, half-

interested, escorted onto the dance floor as Madonna sang, “I see you through the smoky air, can’t you feel the weight of my stare?”

The two had just started to sway together—one set of hands clasped, the other two on shoulder and hip, respectively, pelvises much closer than polite for two people who had shared barely a “Hello” before this moment—when Madonna explained, “What I’m dying to say . . .”

Jacqui and Howard maintained eye contact for the duration of “Crazy For You.”

Kenneth and the other two showed up halfway through the song. While Kenneth stood and watched, Marcus and Bud stole off with Tammy and Amy.

When the song ended, Howard started to say something, probably adolescent and unimportant, but Jacqui stopped him. She brought her face close to his ear, kissed its lobe, and whispered, “It’s fine.” Then she walked away, with all the satisfaction she had imagined and more.

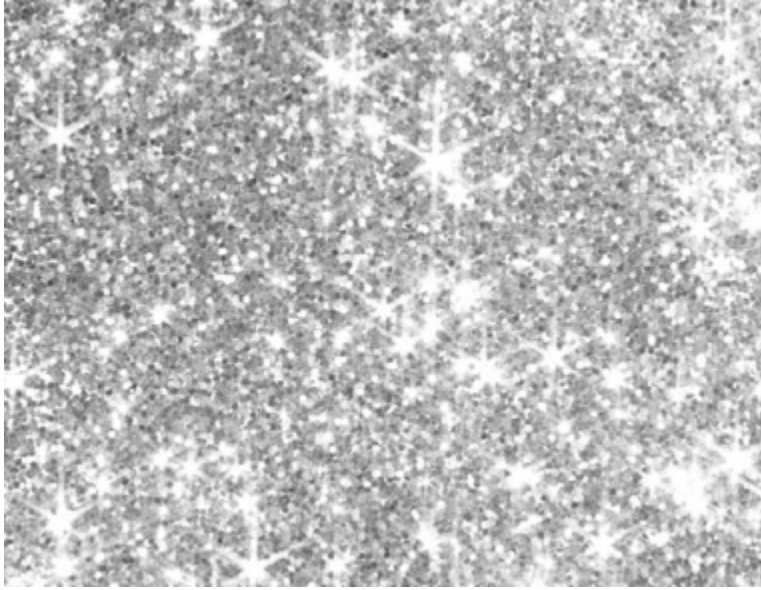
That was her last interaction with Howard, who would marry Suzie, as Marcus would marry Tammy, and Bud would marry Amy. Jacqui was not often a topic in Howard and Suzie’s home, but was a reason to spend an evening in silence each of the four times her name was mentioned during the twelve years of their marriage. Even into their twenties and thirties, Howard and Suzie’s two daughters would occasionally wonder out loud to each other, “Who was this Jacqui person? What could she possibly have done?”



Before Madonna and Jacqui and Howard were finished dancing, Kenneth had excused himself from the dance entirely. That was the last Jacqui ever heard from him as well, excluding details through the gossip train of friends.

In the hospital bed in 1992, when Jacqui remembered her image in the Fletcher Bowl bathroom mirror, the thought inevitably leading to the rest of the night, a too-small part of her wanted to feel bad for Kenneth. But she didn't. She knew he was fine. He lived. Everyone lives, despite their fleeting, superficial pains.

And, most important to her, Jacqui would also live.



AVOIDANCE

Revised

KARA arrived at her slow-maturing appreciation for Maine only after graduating from Bowdoin. Between lectures, coursework, and the modest estimation of a social life, Kara managed to save enough money from her job at Hannaford to rent a summer cottage alongside a century-old mansion in West Bath.

Directly after the commencement ceremony, Kara's mother had asked her to move home, back west. She missed her daughter's presence, and the handful of times Kara was home—whether over summer break, or for Thanksgiving once and Christmas once—were not enough to compensate for her absence.

"Your visits are always so short, it just makes it harder for me," she'd tell Kara. She also believed, savings or no, that Kara couldn't afford the extra summer away. Her mother was right, but nevermind all that. Kara enjoyed a private stretch of beach, her own bathroom, and a kitchenette. And silence. She was able to spend three months

on a schedule she dictated, seen only when she wanted to be seen. Hearing nobody, remaining unheard.

The most socializing she did was through letters she exchanged with friends back home, three sets of pen pal correspondences that she maintained all summer. It was an outdated format but she'd known the girls since middle school and they'd all held onto their passion for handwritten notes. One of them still indulged in surprise confetti. Kara found confetti surprises incredibly irritating, though less irritating than the harrying guilt of spending her last east coast summer apart from the peers with whom she'd shared the last four years. Flesh and blood friends, living in the same time-zone where she still resided. Kara kept telling herself it could wait, that she'd make time for them before the summer was over.

Up until the day she was in her car, driving home.

Sitting on a beach towel, writing her notes, Kara drank too much beer and gave herself heartburn, filled out in her hips and stomach, provided texture to the backside of her thighs. She spent humid afternoons watching the sky's movements above the bay, swatting at mosquitos and other winged nuisances. Some afternoons, she'd attempt to sketch the water in front of her feet or the sky overhead, but she wasn't skilled with drawing and always threw away her efforts.

Kara would remain on the beach until there was just enough light for safe passage along the trail back to the cottage, where she would read and accumulate empties until nearly sunrise.

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Kara had worked part-time in her hometown before leaving for school. She appreciated the relative peacefulness her position offered, the brief interactions with patrons that didn't require genuine investment.

At Bowdoin, Kara had majored in Gender & Women's Studies and minored in Philosophy. That autumn back from school, she reapplied to her old job. On her first day back, a coworker—

someone new, whom she'd never met, a young woman whose very buoyancy made Kara feel suddenly old, even at twenty-two—asked, “What were you planning to do with that degree anyway?”

Kara stared in silence as the coworker waited for an answer, realized one wasn't coming, and left the break room. She considered spitting in the coworker's coffee mug but decided against it and swallowed the mouthful of saliva instead.

When Kara's diploma arrived in the mail, she did not show it to her parents, didn't mention it. She put the stiff piece of cardstock back in its envelope and slipped it between some of her things in one of the boxes she was yet to unpack. There were five total, labeled with her name and what they contained. They were stacked in her bedroom, their sides slouching, corners crumpled in defeat. She hadn't really moved back into her old room as much as she was gradually unearthing her possessions and only as a need for them arose.

Each item she withdrew imbued the reality of moving home with greater permanence, a sense of backward momentum. Maine was in her past—four years that were now just a memory—and the likelihood of returning was less a reality with each day further from graduation.

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Kara's acceptance to Bowdoin was well-deserved and she was successful as an undergrad. Still, she didn't make the experience as valuable as it could have been. There was no extracurricular activity, no joining of clubs.

In the four years she spent on the opposite side of the country, she rarely went outside to enjoy the differences. The snow and the cascade of autumnal leaves that preceded it were viewed from inside her room. If the syllabi allowed absences, she used all of them. Kara was lucky to have a dorm room to herself, where she could alternate between reading and staring at the wall without anyone around to ask what was on her mind. A scene from outside

would sometimes catch her eye and Kara would observe life as it occurred for others.

The boys who found Kara attractive were the wrong ones. Some of them made her feel worse about her appearance despite being drawn to her. Whether because of the way they approached her, the topics they took interest in, their own physical features. Everything about them made her more aware of the scar framing her mouth. Any genuine effort put into a conversation would leave her feeling good about herself intellectually, but those thoughts were fleeting and, ultimately, more depressing still.

Kara attempted, a few times, dating women instead. They didn't try as hard and were a lot less stressful to be around. But after the third individual she realized that it was less about physical sex or gender and more a problem of vulnerability as a general rule, with any human. Kara did not enjoy the company of people, at least not as intimates.

The principle exception to Kara's solitude was the pleasure she took from the quad. There was a quiet to the quad that made it endurable. On her journey to or from class, she would go out of her way to travel through the expanse of walkway-gridded grass and trees, surrounded by old buildings dedicated to people whose names she did not recognize and whose accomplishments she did not care about.

On her adventures through the quad, Kara would deliberately favor the route that allowed her to pass the sign for Studzinski Recital Hall. It forced a smile from her, calling to mind an imagined Mainer equivalent of Jeff Spicoli—similar hair and demeanor, but a different accent entirely, and a Carhartt or L.L.Bean jacket in place of a Baja hoodie.

She was often, nearly always, en route to Benchwarmers, which had become her go-to spot, even if she felt out of place there. Kara preferred out of place over running into anyone she knew, suddenly forced to entertain the possibility of small talk.

She would sit at the end of the bar and pretend her best polite expression without inviting conversation, humoring a vague interest in whatever sports were broadcast on the television sets—always

the Red Sox, always the Patriots—as cover for eavesdropping and people watching. And maybe the people at the bar knew who she was by now. They ought to have. But she wasn't obligated to them, as she wasn't obligated to her friends, the same who'd initially never wanted to join Kara at Benchwarmers, despite her reminders that "it's closest to campus." They always suggested some place further up the road, some place "more exciting." Whatever that meant and whoever cared.

If they spoke on the phone the next morning, if Kara mentioned stopping into Benchwarmers, her mother would always ask, "How was your lobster roll?"

"Mom. Why do you always assume I got a lobster roll?"

"Why wouldn't you? I would have."

"I know you would," which was only another among the things Kara had pretended she knew at the time. And anyway, Kara had burned herself out trying nearly every lobster roll in town by the end of her first semester.

•••••

Tonight, returning home from her shift, Kara longed for a walk through the quad. She would sometimes go out of her way north to Central Park, where she lingered around the monstrous statue of John Greenleaf Whittier—a poet admired by the Quakers, a man who never set foot in the town they named for him.

Or, depending on her mood and level of energy, she might cross Painter to wander aimlessly around Whittier College. But it would never be Bowdoin, nor would the night air feel the same on her cheeks or in her mouth, whether summer or winter. There were always too many cars on Painter, and it reminded her of traveling too far north on Maine Street, the busy part of Brunswick that her friends enjoyed, the stretch she chose to avoid.

Anyway, Nixon had attended Whittier College, which was enough to make her feel gross even being there.

"Better than Reagan," she said to herself, moving through dusk.

•••••

It was closing in on two years since graduation. Two years of texts that had gradually faded, of failing to save money to fly back for a visit. It wasn't going to happen. Not during the life she was currently living.

Kara would wait for her parents to go to sleep, before digging around inside the boxes. This was her routine. Her cat, Sylvia, lingered around the carpet of Kara's bedroom, slinking between the stacks she made in an attempt to finally unpack completely. Kara would look at her diploma, thumb through the books she'd kept, reread letters she'd failed to send, even with their envelopes already stamped & addressed.

She was back to living streets away from these friends now, and still neglected to spend time with them. The same way she'd avoided spending time with the friends who'd lived just down the hall in the dorms.

The dimness would creep and Kara would carefully place each item back in its box, as the absence of light penetrated her room.

Finally in bed, feigning sleep with Sylvia alongside her in the sheets, she'd replay in her thoughts each of her walks through the quad and plan her return to them. "Soon," she would tell herself, straddling the threshold of a dream.

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