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The first sign of trouble comes via email. It's from myself, apparently, and begins with the words *help me*. I wonder if it's not a prank. I've worked in offices for nearly a decade, on a temporary basis, among people prone to this sort of thing. A message arrived once from a former first lady, regarding the cunnilingual pleasure she took in a Jack Russell terrier; on another occasion, my own mother posted me a lyric meditation on flatulence. The green carpet partitions hive us in, requiring these sorts of small rebellions. My status here, I'm sure, represents some greater state of flux, of life in transition, but I leave my counselor to muse on that. I was farmed out by the agency several weeks ago to inhabit this particular deskpace. A champagne flute stenciled 2002! takes a corner by the computer monitor, and is garnished with a tasseled noisemaker. A greeting card depicts a stork with an infant in its beak. Inside, it's ascrawl with dozens of exclamatory well wishes.

There is no end in sight.

I spend my days here like an actress on the set of an office, trying to find the right motivations for looking busy from moment to moment, though of course I'm not a regular cast member, but rather a day player—occasionally given a line, such as, "Do you need me to file these?" or, "I can't find the ladies room key," nothing which might affect the main drama as it unfolds around me, rarely the focus of a shot, among the universal backgrounded blur. I'll open a blank document and type for the sake of typing, like this, it doesn't matter what.

Our department, a neglected quarter in this glittering thirty-seven-story city, appears to be a neighborhood that residents are anxious to leave. I noticed a man yesterday wander off the elevator and after the doors had closed seem to realize he'd gotten off on the wrong floor. He hovered at the elevator bank, hitting the "up" button with an urgency that unsettled me. He turned his gaze inward—to his own shoes or his

reflection—challenging no one with eye contact. The doors opened again and he gave me a quick glance of immense relief, as if a manner of asylum had been granted him. I stood at the cooler, refilling my mug with hot water. Voices here rarely rise above a mumble, and the insect clicking of keys rides a more general, panoramic roar.

I'm not known here, or rather, no one knows I'm here, which makes the notion of a prank seem unlikely. The office where I'd been hoaxed, years prior, had been much smaller and more lively, lit by enormous floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the upscale bustle of Spring Street. By the end of that assignment, I was on a given-name basis with all eleven employees. Here, the florescent glare makes what natural light comes in irrelevant, precluded. Further, the message was detailed with a private miscellany that only I—and perhaps my counselor—could possibly know.

When I tell my counselor about the message, she asks me what I think it means, to have written to myself without knowing it.

It wasn't me, I say. It was someone else.

Someone else as you, my counselor asks, or you as someone else? The only person it could have been, you said, was you.

And you, I say.

My counselor considers this. She says, How does that operate for you, that I might do such a thing?

You tell me, I say.

What I couldn't tell her, for the bias it might cause, was: this wasn't the first time I had tried contacting me. One has to be careful managing a detail like this, especially with someone in her profession, in whose hands it might become just the easy answer she'd been looking for. It's our nature to seek the plausible at all costs—Ockham wasn't alone—and once found, to quickly discontinue hearing what you have to say. We are far too seduced by the simple,

and have been trained to regard it as elegance, as truth.

Is it not possible to be both haunted and insane?

I watch a coworker rise from his cubicle and wind his way across the room. I follow his head with its poodle curls bobbing past my desk and into the copy room. Stuttering reports tick from within and silhouette the doorframe, like a coroner's photo-flashing at a crime scene.

I'm interrupted from these thoughts by a boy in a yellow jumper. He stands before me with a brown-wrapped package. You're not Angela, he says.

The box has the heft of a floatation device and bears the name of Our Lady On Maternal, whose seat I warm, the return address indicating the most-maligned of the tri-states, the Garden. Do I sign somewhere? I ask.

Are you authorized?

I'm not but go ahead anyway. I hand back his clipboard and pen and ask him if there's anything else.

You just look like someone, he says.

So I've been told, I say. Someone you know?

Not particularly, he says.

I wonder if my transience has affected the way I appear, as if somehow after all these years of moving from one job to the next, I've become—*corpus corporatus*—some different species altogether. I close the box into a desk drawer and embark on lunch, eleven flights up.

Despite its swank, the Cafetecca (as reads the stenciling on the glass door) is unable to conceal the underlying spice of food prepared in vats. Its most basic elements betray hairnet roots: overhead flatware bins; railings along which to slide one's tray; the tray itself, made of a substance more solid than plastic, damp and warm from an industrial washing; and the help-yourself tour of foodstuffs ladled and carved and plucked off a steam table or bed of ice chips.

I recognize none of these people from our

department, not that I would if they were, but their clothing—more formal and of fundamentally better fabrics—displays an inherent grasp of arcane fashion axioms, tie color as an aspect indivisible from character. The choice of dress on our floor, on the other hand, seems calculated to get away with, to fulfill the minimum possible requirements.

I take a seat by a window and imagine I am my reflection, dining midair: into nothing but tarred rooftops, cooling towers, and the paper flutter of roosting pigeons below.

There was a woman once, a companion. She had a way with a grapefruit, and a spoon ridged specifically for the task. Her thin fingers held the utensil with surgical grace as she extracted each segment. For whatever reason, occasionally, there came those moments wherein I'd regard my companion as an amnesiac might her own reflection, baffled, wonderfully, at the miracle of something so familiar yet so strange. Every other jewel-pink bite was mine.

For me? I managed to say to the spoon, mouthside.

But meant, really, I am blessed.

After several years, we had negotiated ourselves into the position of co-leasees on a one-bedroom downtown. On the front door in gold stencils, "2B" was lettered above the peephole like a suggestion or an invitation. Within, every intimacy of one was available to the other and, by force of time and limited space, we learned to become, effectively, one woman. All trace of eachness—the small habits of solitude, the indulgences, the openendedness (of time, of hygiene), and friendships—was shed like so much dead skin.

Routine united us—sitcoms viewed every Thursday from a certain same position on the couch, tandem toothbrushings, a last lock-check before turning out the light. I remember little but this. And that we woke one Sunday with a man in our bed.



We'd become acquainted with him the previous evening at a gallery opening where photos of genitalia loomed, abstract and vast as the charred aftermath of some natural forest devastation. A case of pinot grigio lay at our feet, the double-sized bottles unwieldy after sharing two between us three. It was coppery, tepid, and recalled nursery school's grand old days of apple juice and graham crackers. By reception's end, I was unclear whether this man was the artist or his subject, but whatever the case, he spoke of the work with either's mixed feelings of pride and embarrassment.

He was pale and knobby, yet we felt ourselves drawn into his celebrity—a territory which made glow his eyes and achieved its own moral atmosphere that we tested at length back at our apartment. I have trouble remembering specifics (whether out of propriety or too much wine, I can't be sure), but the tender, muskbearing regions received most of our attention with fingertips and tongues.

Morning brought us around.

It was ugly, the foreign stink of this man in our bed. I pulled myself from pillow to toilet and vomited. When I emerged, he was lacing on his shoes, a bald circle of scalp pointed up at me. I could hardly bring myself to see what had become of my companion. She clasped a fistful of sheet to her chest and with the other hand made a show of feeling around for her glasses. The interloper was carrying on, however, with the jolly candor of a well-accommodated houseguest. He suggested that the evening had been (as he put it) fun, and insinuated a telephone number into the margin of a book I'd been reading, with the notion of a follow-up sometime soon. I trailed him to the door and once it closed behind him threw the deadbolt into place.

I turned back to my companion and could see how this incident, in the manner of a mishandled food preparation, had already caused a separation, a curdling, to occur. Eye contact was a problem suddenly; we regarded one

another furtively, peripherally. We were two people again, each in shock over what the other was capable of.

It had made us strangers to each other, strangers to ourselves. I would encounter her as she was stepping out of a shower to find the old mechanisms of modesty reactivated—her retreat behind the curtain, my exclamatory Oh! Alone in the apartment, laying clean laundry in the dresser, I would hear my companion's key rattling open the door and my first thought (and hers, judging by the startled flinch) was: intruder.

What was there to do after this but enact the rift on a larger, more public scale?

Her departure coincided with the appearance of a rental truck double-parked on our block, into which she stacked, hastily, possessions she'd assembled into boxes scavenged from neighborhood groceries, cartons branded with the logos of the day.

These memories feel embellished, as if I were passing off someone else's anecdotes. Who was this person, this me, who allowed these things to happen, I wondered, lingering at my lunch and looking out the window.

Was she the one writing to me?

This wasn't the only me to choose from, though. I find evidence of others in a spurt of cleaning, my first since my companion's departure: a nest of hair pulled from the tub drain, a jersey from a rock concert attended many years prior and never worn (meanwhile, in my body an entire generation of cells has died and been succeeded—the woman to whom that shirt belonged no longer exists, certainly). I find an appointment book in a disused knapsack under the bed. It described my naïve attempts at understanding Time. I see an optimism in the sheer number of tasks I would assign myself in any given hour, which made certain unaccounted-for daily necessities—eating, bathing, traveling—impossible. Here was someone

else's life, someone who made allowances for Woodwind Practice, Main Lawn Rallies, and German Club. The only activities I still have in common with that girl are precisely those which went unrecorded. In January, I had been well represented in the schedule, each hour reported in a code of blues and greens. There were gaps in March, and in April entire weeks. By the end of July, I had disappeared entirely. Worse were the addresses at the back, of which I recognized not a one. Where was my mother here? I checked her initials, then under M—Martin, Gina Miller, Mustafa. I might as well have been reading names out of a phone directory. The me of this book, the me of the concert jersey, of the drain hair, of the unfortunate three-some and domestic bliss, these me's troubled the unexplored corridors of past and were each equally capable of calling out for help and, as such, suspect.

In the elevator back down from lunch, I see a familiar head of poodle curls.

Where do I know you from, he says, fathoming. Did you undergrad in Boston?

I assure him that I'm merely the woman whose cubicle lay opposite his.

Market Data? What were you doing in executive dining, then? That place is exclusive. He seems disappointed I am not someone more significant in his life. We dine on three with the general pop, he says. Who said you could eat at the 'tecca?

This is a temporary situation for me here, I say. I'm not sure the normal rules apply.

I follow him back to his desk and ask him what he's heard about self-sent emails. It's clear he knows things. Has he ever seen anything like this happen in his tenure?

Sure, he says. I send myself emails all the time. He appears unfazed, though his limbs, of their own accord, gesture for me to keep my distance, legs swiveling his chairback at me, arms taking up a binder shieldwise against his chest. I stand above him, affecting a workchum stance I'd seen others pose when interpersonalizing.

He continues. Say I want to work on a file at home. I'll shoot myself an email with the file as an attachment. I clean out my inbox, half of it's from me. His face is flecked with golden splinters. Hair of a similar shade but the shape of stray rug fibers runs the length of his forearms and the backs of his hands.

After this, I'm on the phone with the agency. I learn that terminating this assignment voluntarily would put me at the bottom of a long call list. I argue that my companion has left me delinquent in rent and, further, that this department seems to be (I whisper) cursed. Someone who claims to be me is sending me messages.

This isn't covered, they explain, under rubrics for untenable work situations. It means at least a week of unpaid days. If the company, however, were to terminate my assignment for me, the agency would be obliged to find a new one the following day.

Get myself fired? But how?

Just keep it up, they say. The reports we've been getting about you are rather shocking.

The message I had received from myself mentioned a father who had fled, an older brother who had mantled fatherhood in his absence, and a mother, of sorts. It alluded to a new political diet I and my companion had adopted, and how this mother, when we found ourselves over for dinner, would assemble elaborately sauced meats and display them before us at the table.

This runs counter to everything I've come to believe, my companion said.

Since when, my mother replied, has gumbo been an article of anyone's faith?

We made the most of the peripheral greens and starches on the plate and saved our own argument for the subway ride back.

Your mother's trying to undermine us with her cooking.

She'll have to do better than that, I remember saying, though it seems, in retrospect, she



didn't.

The message mentioned my library days, as I—in this age following my companion's departure—have come to call my time here. The building's south lobby and several sub-levels are given over, oddly, to a branch of the public library; its white and sky blue flags snap and shudder above a revolving brass door. With the aid of a few generous corporate donations, the embossery out front reads, the city was able to acquire its extensive collection of obsolete computer manuals and stock futures theory, which are kept here, along with holdings in Asian languages, multimedia, and the humanities. It's a thrill, if only for a few hours at a time, to have access to so vast a clearinghouse. Besides, the place appears to welcome a certain amount of transience. I'll sit with any number of books dreamt up overseas and thick enough to stop a bullet, drowsing over a sentence, all around me the homeless on their finest behavior, looking passably yet desperately groomed.

In these situations, I'll often get it in my head to masturbate and, going to the catalogue terminal, execute a search on “erotica” or “human sexuality,” thrilling at the notion of a chaste clerk noticing my browse, or (after I'd done it enough times to know these categories by call number) go directly into the stacks.

The books themselves are uniformly bound in green or black, the spines stamped with title, author and number—indistinguishable from any other of the library's selections. I'll slide one off the shelf at random. Or I should clarify: what distinguishes these selections are the loitering few, such as myself, whose urges, which bring them here, might take them one step

further, perhaps, if they are so inclined. There are several outposts like this around the library, each catering to its own kind of patron—entirely male, save me.

I was reminded in my message of a particular afternoon in stack row PS368.7—PS1190. I took my pick, something entitled, I believe,

Pulp Friction, waiting for a

moment before heading

to the bathroom,

to see if anyone

interesting

might show

up. It was

one of those

in-between

times-of-year,

that brief inter-

val when indoors

it is neither industri-

ally cooled nor industri-

ally heated, and there's an odd balm to the air

and any undue body movement brings out a sweat. The air was thick with the noble mold of old books and binding glue.

I don't mean to let on that I'm attractive, by men's standards—my body has the lopsidedness of a tropical fruit, my face the marks of a rough-going adolescence—but in these stacks, to those looking for this sort of thing, I govern a charm that even the most famous air-brushed beauty can't hope to achieve because in that moment, I'm a point of contact with the book they're holding in their hands. They look up from it and here I am, the dream made manifest. Usually, all it takes is a smile, and sometimes not even that.

For me, though, they do nothing more than heat the warm regions of my body, and answer some darker need to offer my receptacle ends for filling. It's a perfunctory business. My companion had spoken of this need in me as a kind of genetic sexism, and urged us to turn away from it, to walk with her deeper into the forest of our own kind and become savages again, to seek a state prior to biology, as Sappho

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and her island sisters once had. That sounded nice, I told her, but what if we didn't like the people we became? She responded that from that point on, any loathing we developed for each other would be a form of self-loathing, and subject to rehabilitation.

A man comes up from behind, and pulls down a book.

I keep my eyes on the open one in my hand and, after a moment, his humid breath is warming my ear. Another moment passes and I can feel the rest of him closing in. I let him shadow me into the bathroom.

Hey, says a homeless woman, sponge-bathing at the sink. He can't be in here!

I haven't gotten a look at the man, though I've become, these past few weeks, familiar with his bobbing gait, his golden curls. I latch us in the stall and press my face against the door as he hikes up my skirt and, after several heartbeats, slides himself in. From beyond the crack in the door, I see a glimmer of watching eyes that I take for the homeless woman's but, opening the door after we're done, I see they're my own, reflected in the mirror above the sink.

Do this enough times and you'll begin feeling what I do, trust me.

The email's opening *help me* precedes the infinitive clause, *to finish this self-evaluation*. The participle *troubled* appears several times, and the nouns *weakness* and *loss* twice each. I rearrange the words chronologically by the number of times they occur and at the top of the list is *you*. *You* appears a total of twenty-three times. But what can this mean?

I'm not suggesting that I've adjusted to this place—in fact, I find myself the following Monday on the business end of a new security protocol, installed, apparently, over the weekend. I'm made to loiter by a guard's lectern as he makes several phone inquiries, repeating

the name of my department doubtfully into the receiver. I stand there for over an hour. At a certain point, another guard in white shirt-sleeves and black tie comes to relieve the first as he is called away with a crackle of his walkie. The second guard regards me carefully against my picture identification. A swarm of the well-dressed push past.

What about them, I ask the guard.

I'm just doing my job, he says.

I study the faces as they collect in the elevator bays. I know these people. They are neighbor-like, cousin-like. They are the faces of minor celebrities, of postmen, of local network anchors. They are subway regulars, former classmates and coworkers and teachers and bosses and neighborhood freaks and familiars, all impeccably dressed and gathered together and waiting, as if for a final performance, featuring me.

I recognize among them my new acquaintance. I call out, but he looks through me as though I were a stranger.

I continue adding to this document by the day. I use it as a means to justify this seat I'm in. When I arrive, I'll display it on my screen. I'll let the phosphorescence of it touch my face and all the objects in my partition with its official glow. I'll reduce it in size, so the page borders are visible and the words are just the suggestions of words. Or I'll close in entirely, so a single letter takes on the contours of an architectural blueprint. I'll print out what I've written so far and embroider it with whatever pens I find in my desktop tray. It has taken on the quality of a narrative, and seems to be addressing someone, a you, though I don't know who you are. When I become bored with this activity, I'll leave pen and chair poised to suggest my imminent return, and secret myself to the library for a browse.

Eventually I will send it along—to you, whoever you are: my companion, myself, or whoever



it is that keeps writing me.

The first guard returns and snips my card into a handful of chips, which he then releases from his palm into the trashbin. I am issued a peel-off “visitor” badge with today’s date in red marker. I will be required at all times now to wear this sticker, renewed daily by authorized security personnel.

Does this have something to do with the ‘tecca, I ask.

That dining hall requires executive clearance, he says.

Back at my cubicle, I spend what’s left of the morning finding out what I can of the new mother whose desk I occupy. A drawer rummage turns up few clues of any substance. In the bottom left, among a system of hanging folders, is one filled with magazine clippings, thin rectangles of a single column or two. They are cropped so tightly as to obscure their sources; neither can it be determined where the block of text begins or ends, or whether what’s selected is the entirety or just an excerpt—all of which makes it impossible to know what, if anything, is significant about a particular article and what it has in common with any of the others. One begins, *Wellwoman’s vitality, everyday capsules for an everyday*. Another one ends, *bid to buy slots on the state-run network in front*. A separate folder contains the half-eaten remains of several candy bars, each wrapper cinched by rubberband. I take the package from the other day out of the drawer and set it in front of me.

A woman stops by who possesses the confidence and custom-tailoring of a superior and, as it happens, hands me a task with which the day’s afternoon half is occupied. She returns as she’s shrugging on her coat and tells me that come week’s end, I’ll no longer be needed.

Finally, I think. Fired.

What do you think you were trying to tell yourself, my counselor asks. What was the meaning of the message? Was it a reaching out? An attempt at reconciling?

It was a warning, I say.

Against what?

Becoming too much like her.

You, my counselor says.

Me, I say. Right.

But that’s already who you are, she says. Isn’t it?

Sometimes, I say. Other times it’s a different story—one that involves a manor house and a disembodied spirit.

A ghost story? Sounds romantic.

We are ourselves only once at any given moment. The selves of all prior moments are as much mere specters as all subsequent ones are pure speculation—free to roam, to haunt. To be alive is to be a ghost, I say.

To this, my counselor says that we, unfortunately, are out of time.

Sliding a pen point along the taped edges of the package, I part the flaps. I dig past a froth of styrofoam nuggets, rooting through the box and pulling out its delicate contents, one by one, and arranging them neatly on the desk. I pour the styrofoam into the trash and lay into the empty box the magazine clippings from inside the desk and the stash of half-eaten candy bars. It is time, I decide, to take hold of all things temporary in my life. I take the greeting card off the wall and add it to the box, and the champagne glass and the noisemaker. Everything goes in the box save its original contents, which stand perched at the center of the bare cubicle. I reseal the box and address it to myself in Apartment 2B and leave it in the wheeled basket with all the rest of the day’s outgoing mail.

I wonder if, when I get home, I’ll remember having sent it.