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NICE STORY, IF YOU CAN WRITE IT

Lately, I've been making lists. A few weeks ago I bought a package of glittery pens and now I carry them with me, pulling them out to decorate the backs of flyers or take-out menus with scattered rows of words. *Movies I watched last week: Annie Hall, His Girl Friday, A Hard Day's Night.* Sometimes around the lists I draw lines, spindly ones, crossing and tangling like a road map, but unnumbered and nameless. Usually, the lines end up in the same place they started from. *Words that begin with the letter "L": lucky, lesson, left, leaving.* This is my way of making sense, a way of telling stories without really committing myself to anything.

I figure there are a few things that have led Jacob and me here, to this fire escape. Jacob is in love with Ben, a piano player with a steady Friday night residence at a jazz place called the Cobalt Club. Ben has blond hair that curls a little when his haircuts grow out, eyes the gray of river stones, and a girlfriend named Roberta. But this is not really the problem. Jacob understands confusion, welcomes it even. He too had a girlfriend just a few months ago, a pretty art teacher named Hannah with cat-eye glasses and punk-rock red hair. He still has one of her paintings hanging over his couch, brushstrokes of blue and green in little raised mountains. It reminds me of the salt maps I made in third grade, and I can't keep from touching it when I'm at Jacob's apartment.

But now it's this way, he tells me. The preferred happy ending has changed. Jacob wants the stars to tangle and cross themselves. He wants to draw his fingers across the scene like a magician, leaving invisible handprints in the air, transforming things. He thinks it's like adjusting the color of a television set, but it hasn't proved so simple. This may be why: Jacob and Ben have a thousand conversations but only one kiss to straighten out, and this is far more intricate than if it were the reverse.

As for me, I have been avoiding my apartment ever since Ryan left. It's a practiced dance, a languid, rhythmic choreography. I have learned to imitate the movement of fallen leaves the way we used to do in dance class, blowing here and there, catching on grass or twigs or misplaced trash. When I do come home, my cat greets me as if I am a long lost relative, leaving her fuzzy mice and crinkly foil balls to sit next to me on the couch, staring.

The typewriter—the little silver one that Ryan found for me at a garage sale—taunts me. It waits, offering me its asterisks and ellipses and the broken “A” that looks like a star. I haven’t written anything in a long time.

Ryan now lives downtown in a lofted studio apartment that I’ve seen only once, in the early days of our farewell. Before we realized we could never be friends. He’s dating a photographer named Demeter or Dido, something frustratingly goddess-like or nymphic. She rents studio space in the nearly empty warehouse across the street. I haven’t seen her and I don’t want to. To see her would be to acknowledge her as a character in the stories that are always running through my head.

On Friday nights when Jacob and I have nothing else to do, we sit out on his fire escape and rearrange the world. His apartment is on the third floor of an eight-floor building, a lazy, stretched-out square of gray brick and old windows that reflect light unevenly across their panes. His fire escape isn’t even that far off the ground—you could hardly kill yourself jumping off it, as Jacob likes to point out when our discussions take a turn for the worse.

These Friday nights have shimmied their way into our routine, and now I show up at eight-thirty every week, give or take a few minutes. I bring hot chocolate from the coffee shop at the end of my block, piled with whipped cream. Sometimes Jacob has wine, which we drink out of cordial glasses, three sips at a time. When he needs it, I cut his hair, and the only time I have ever been blond started right on this fire escape, and ended there a week later with a bottle of chocolate-colored hair dye and a promise to never touch bleach again. Mostly, we talk about Ryan and Ben, who have turned into the only stories we know.

This week, Jacob has M&Ms.

“Now there are purple, in addition to that obnoxious blue,” Jacob says as he pours some into my hand. “They look a little like dime-store costume jewelry.” I wrinkle my nose but eat them anyway. Chocolate is chocolate.

“And we mourn tonight, for gone are the days when M&Ms matched the color scheme of my Aunt Barb’s living room,” I say, sounding like something between a news anchor and a eulogist.

Jacob shrugs. “If you close your eyes, it tastes the same.”

Tonight we have pulled Jacob’s wheat-colored couch halfway out onto the fire escape, along with half of the blankets from his bed. Jacob is not completely sure the fire escape can handle the weight of the sofa and us, but I’m not worried. I bounce up and down a little on my tiptoes, just to see his eyes widen.

“Miranda!”

I stop jumping and sprawl out on the couch, burying myself in blankets. “I swear, you’re just like my mom.” He’s not, really. My mother is a true paranoid when it comes to safety matters, but I knew it would get to him. He rolls his eyes at me and tosses a handful of candy my way. It clangs against the metal grate and falls to the sidewalk below.

It is the perfect November evening, the air still and chilly except for a soft wind slinking around tree branches and rattling the dry leaves like some sort of ghost. The sky is already dark, clouds glowing like silver chalk dust, and the streetlights are on. From our perch on the third floor, we can see straight across into the first-floor left-front apartment of the building next door. I can see her clearly—a woman in her thirties with long dark hair and nice jeans—in the way that, at night, window-squares look like photographs, saturated with light, Technicolor-style.

The woman sits down at the table in what must be the dining room, talking animatedly to someone just out of sight. Because of the way she smiles and tucks her hair behind her ear, I suppose that it is her lover seated at the other end of the table, listening and eating soup with her. He is a guy who is nothing like Ryan, who doesn’t own more guitars than pairs of shoes or have a habit of cutting her off mid-sentence. *This is what it is like to have a life*, I think. One where your nail polish is not always chipped and your freezer isn’t full of chocolate ice cream and you don’t feel compelled to constantly make lists. *Places to go instead of going home: Laundromat, library, the twenty-four-hour Post Office out by the airport*. Not like Jacob and me, who go on endlessly telling stories in which the character list is just one person, stories that have happened or have not, stories about the way we wish it could be. This woman with the long mahogany table and silver candlesticks doesn’t need to make up stories like this. She owns real ones.

I stand and stretch, tiptoeing over the slotted iron floor of the fire escape. At the edge, I grip the railing, cool and rusted along the bottom. I am poised to deliver a balcony-inspired speech—*O wherefore art thou* and all that. The sidewalk stretches out empty, and the little trees are bent with anticipation. Jacob joins me at the railing, and before I can open my mouth to wonder where my satisfyingly non-existent Romeo has gone, Jacob beats me to it.

“Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears,” he says mere decibels from a shout, his voice falling liquid to the alley below. Jacob has a beautiful voice. I imagine it pooling underneath a streetlamp, a puddle of sound right outside the window of the lady in the next-door first-floor apartment. She stops talking and looks up at us, waiting for the sky to fall or

at least say something interesting. For a second I'm not sure if she can see up this high, or if we are anything more than silhouettes frozen to the railing of a fire escape. My eyes follow the path of Jacob's voice, dripping with Shakespeare, dropping to the ground below. As she looks up at us, I catch a glimpse of her dining partner.

She is talking to a cat seated regally at the opposite end. A bluish-gray tabby, with its eyes squeezed shut. It is giving itself a bath.

The woman goes back to talking, pausing only to take a spoonful of soup. I see that the cat's food dish is not on the table; she sits there purely for recreation. Or conversation, as the case may be. Jacob is first and alone in his laughter, falling back to sit on the couch.

Somehow, Jacob convinces me to go down to Ben's jazz club. It takes a while.

"It's freezing!" I say, knowing that it's four blocks away and we'll walk. *Exhibit A:* I exhale and my breath glows crystal in the air in front of me.

"Miranda, you're already outside." Jacob's tone is like my mother's, any given argument. *Give it up, Mira; it's not going to work.*

I pout, dramatically. *Exhibit B:* I draw my shoulders up and shiver a little.

"Except here I have blankets," I say. *Exhibit C:* It doesn't really matter. I am already untangling myself from the covers.

"Maybe it will give me something to write about," I tell Jacob, imagining gilded "once-upon-a-times," Prince Captivating and Prince Charismatic trailing stories behind them. "That is, if I ever go back to that place with the typewriter."

"You have to." Jacob reaches up as we walk, grabs a tree branch, and lets it go, sending a crumbly rain of dry leaves down on us. "To feed the cat."

"Good point." I catch our reflection in the long, shiny glass of a storefront window across from us. I begin to compose a chaotic want ad in my head. *Girl, 26, A little thin, with blue eyes and nice shoulder blades, and Boy, also 26, tall, dark-eyed, good-looking, seek lovers who will appreciate such things and bring a little happy-ever-after to their lives. Or rather, since they are mildly deluded, seek some sort of fairy godmother to transform two particular people into this.*

The sidewalk sparkles with broken glass. I walk close to the curb, weaving between trees, running my fingertips along the windows of the parked cars. I leave fingerprints. Right then, I want to make sure no one will ever be able to say I wasn't here.

“We’re walking on the wrong sides,” I tell Jacob, going around behind him and taking his arm on his left. He looks at me sideways as if I have gone insane. “The gentleman is supposed to walk closest to the curb,” I explain.

“Since when are we traditional?” he says.

“It’s supposed to be this way so the car can plow you down first, and me second.” I point out to the slowly swooshing cars in the street. “Ladies first in everything but death.”

“Somehow I don’t think I’d protect you very well.” He stops to tap the mirror of a parked Jeep Cherokee.

I nod, resigned. “When they made the rule, I don’t think SUVs had been invented.”

Of our visit to Blue River, the sleepy little jazz club, there is not much to tell. It all unfolds like a shadowy German impressionist movie, the kind you see at artsy film houses that still have heavy curtains hung around the screen and a stage floor unfolded before it. Everything backlit and glowing, painfully beautiful, shot after shot after shot.

A lovely, mixed-up boy on the piano bench playing Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, applause like ice clinking in glasses, Jacob and I flattened like spies against the wall. I buy Jacob a whiskey on the rocks—*for courage*, I say—and he tells me he can’t go over to Ben until the end. Except at the end a girl who is not Ben’s girlfriend comes over and wraps herself around him like some glittering serpent, pulls him in for a kiss. Ben looks right at Jacob and doesn’t say a word. And because I think of everything as a story, this is what I think next. In a movie, there would be some merciful fade-out, the club sliding from dark to darker, and I suppose then Jacob and I could just leave and he could forget about it. In a fairy tale, there would have been some sort of triumphant exit parade, the couple carried off on the shoulders of the minor characters (in our case, the other patrons of the club, holding their martini glasses high). Or maybe it’s a fable, something that we’re supposed to learn from, something like Aesop, but with the talking grasshoppers and ants replaced by Jacob and me.

The moral of the story? I haven’t decided yet.

It is only when we are back out on the street, hands at our sides, that I speak again.

“Why do we always believe that people can change?” I pose this question soaked in caution, glancing sideways at Jacob. He just looks a little pale.

“The happily-ever-after syndrome,” Jacob says. “We imagine it that way, and then it’s just supposed to happen.” *I am Rapunzel, winding my shimmering hair. I am Snow White, sent to sleep by an apple.*

I think for a moment about all these stories and their brittle, sugary construction, told and retold in the childhoods of almost everyone. Even they bring out lists: *things you must be to get Prince Charming: beautiful, graceful, and quite often unconscious.*

“Well, Brothers Grimm, you’ve sure screwed me up,” I say to the sky, as if that’s where they are now living. Jacob smiles his slow half-smile and takes my mittened hand.

It is late now, and the scattered, translucent clouds have left the sky for sleep. The street is quiet, just our footsteps echoing with the hum of the streetlamps. It strikes me as strange that I always think of Ryan when everything is quiet and still. It’s strange because he was all voice and music and shouting and laughter. There is something about love that is a little off-time; it’s like going to the symphony and knowing that someone’s fallen out of 4/4, but you can’t figure out if it’s the violin or the oboe. And I guess, most of the time, it doesn’t really matter.

I exhale slowly, creating a little cloud in front of me. “I think Ryan and I would have been okay if we ever had a good day on the same day. We couldn’t seem to synchronize.”

“Maybe,” says Jacob. “When I was little and riding with my mom, I’d watch the turn signals of the cars stopped with us at traffic lights, waiting for them to match up. They usually managed to get it together eventually, but just for a second, and then they’d be off again.” He looks over at me, and I feel the air catch in my throat a little.

So this is where I am, every night when I finally go home. Here are the radiators with their dry, enveloping warmth, and the records leaned against bookcases, out of order. Here are the gleaming sheets. Only a few things still exist to remind me, a sparse, winding list: a mix-tape written over in faded black ink, a single argyle sock, the way the walls of my living room seem to echo faintly with all the songs he composed there. Our ending, Ryan’s and mine, began when I realized that our story had run off the page.

We don’t speak again until we are on Jacob’s block, its familiar slate-gray sleepiness spreading on either side of the street. My car is parked in front of his apartment. Everything seems a little clearer, as if refocused by the chilled air.

“I am a flicked switch,” I tell Jacob.

“Flipped,” he corrects me.

“Flipped,” I say. “Anyway, I feel on.” Jacob is used to my sudden pronouncements, so he just smiles, though I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know what I mean.

I look up at Jacob’s building, at his wrought-iron fire escape, at his window with its flat panes of glass that glisten as if with water, as if they have collected all the rain of a generation.

“Why do old windows always look like that?” I ask. Jacob always knows the answers to my myriad questions, be they about black holes or dinosaurs or Hemingway.

“Like what?” He looks up at his building, his window. We left a light on, and his orange curtains make the room look aflame.

“Like water. Like the glass is shimmering.” We have almost reached his building, and Jacob sits down on the stoop next door.

“Those windows have been there since the twenties,” Jacob says, leaning back a little. “Glass stays a liquid, it never really changes into a solid.”

Someone has smashed one of the basement window panes and splinters of glass lie on the ground in front of it. The edges are ragged with sharp points.

“Over time, it drips down like that, and the surface isn’t smooth anymore.” Jacob is looking at the windows, the building, the sky. “I guess my tenth-grade chemistry class was good for something.”

I put my hand out without thinking, as if to touch the glass up on the third floor.

Jacob unwraps my scarf and rewraps it, warmer, around my neck. He kisses my cheek and smiles, with a slight, sad tint, like blue watercolor. I realize that I’m probably a little in love with Jacob. This is not something that I necessarily want, or even deserve, as such is the way of presents. We don’t get to pick them out, and sometimes we can’t even use them. Jacob is a beautiful bulky sweater I’ll never wear, a glittering complex contraption I’ll never use. I will see Jacob next week, and nothing much will change, except that maybe we will find something else to talk about.

“Don’t you wish we lived inside a musical?” I do a little pirouette, landing in a dramatic pose, arms wide open. “It would make everything easier if you could just break into song at any moment.” I consider singing, “Nice Work, If You Can Get It,” but think better of it. We’ve had enough Cole Porter tonight.

Jacob smiles his Miranda-you're-insane smile. "Perhaps we should find new topics for conversation. Important things."

I nod. "I could make a list." *Organic farming, Tennessee Williams, the Beatles.*

"Maybe this whole pining away thing is getting a little old." Jacob looks up—at the stars, the windows, the slice of sky we can see between the buildings. I look at him, tipping my head like a cat, waiting.

"It's okay," Jacob says. "It's just—" He squints his eyes in this way of his and his mouth bends up at the corners into a wry smile. "It's a little like having the pavement pulled out from under your feet." I smile back at him.

"From under your black velvet platform shoes," I say, twirling a little on my tiptoes in just such shoes.

"And you can quote us on that," he says, to the sparkling streets, the cat lady and her cat, the empty fire escape.

Jacob goes in, looking back with a wave at the doorway. I step backward a little, watching the water-light on the windows. They remain up there rearranging themselves, swirling for something different, something better, refusing to yield to solidity. There's something you've got to admire about that.

Even though I know I shouldn't, I am missing Ryan. It's like my cat who was once a stray. She's pacified by the pillows and constant appearance of food in a china dish, but sometime around every third Saturday she's at my back window just begging to be outside. She says, *I know I shouldn't, but...* It's like the belief that Snow White will wake and learn to stay away from all things red and shiny. But the truth is, she woke up just craving apples.

I have been thinking tonight about telling stories.

I was hoping for some sort of fairy-tale beginning for Jacob and Ben, something I could weave into a spider web of language, something that could make me believe again in those stories that haunt me. They are promises we make ourselves. I am Cinderella, I will wash just one more floor and then my glass slipper will be waiting. I am Sleeping Beauty, I will sleep just a little while longer and some guy will show up with alarm clocks and coffee.

The characters don't matter. Ryan, Ben, Jacob, Miranda. Fair hearts or unfair endings. The story has been told a thousand times.

At home my typewriter waits in the darkness, its cool metal letters learning how to stay still. The air of the street smells like matches before they are lit; tastes like burnt sugar. Here, I start a story. There are the buildings stretched and sleeping, the streetlamps with their halos of glow. There is the sky with its blue-ink expanse sprawled out above me. *I am glass, I am liquid, I am light.* At the end, there will be only this.

It's all a kind of falling. ☞