

They Could Have Been Yours

By Joy Baglio

It’s 8 am on a Monday, and I’m curled in bed, eating cereal from a plastic bowl and browsing the Site, indulging a secret, bitter part of myself that likes to keep tabs on the past. I’m used to seeing every type of announcement, but there’s something about J’s engagement post, something I hadn’t expected, that pricks me like a tack. Perhaps it’s that no one wants to see a former lover happily engaged, especially not first thing in the morning, or maybe it’s the constant commenting of mutual friends, continually pushing the post to the top of the feed. He has a beard now and longish hair; still attractive, but in a cusp-of-middle-age kind of way. He’s wearing angular sunglasses and grinning, arms around a petite, rabbit-faced brunette, the ring on her finger thrust into the foreground like a small glittery moon. Of course, I don’t care that much, but it irks me just a little, just enough to text my sister. She’d once written him a scathing email, defending me during the final fallout, though now she responds quickly, as she does with all drama, unimpressed: *Let it go*. I dump the remains of my cereal in the sink, troubled that this small sliver of Past has managed to faze me, and head out to work.

I’m a lawyer at a top firm in the city. On my lunch break, I check the Site just to see how many “likes” J’s post has tallied, and I don’t believe what I find: T, a dancer with whom I’d had something complicated and illicit, is (strangely) also getting married. I feel the tack prick harder than it did this morning, because with T there was something abyss-like that might have swallowed me, had he not left me first.

You're not gonna believe this, I text my sister. T too.

T what?

Engaged.

Stop, she texts.

I know it's a dangerous spiral—obsession, memory, regret, logging on more and more—but I'm eager to check on both posts, to torture myself again, to see the announcements, mute and beaming with their growing trains of “Congrats!” and “So happy for you!” and “Gorgeous couple!” On the morning of the next day, while still in bed, unready to face the world, I'm thrown yet again: N, a coworker from my former law firm, whom I dated in the tempest of my first legal battle, who once told me that if it were going to be anyone it would be me, has popped the question to a smiling round-faced woman in large glasses on the Great Wall of China. And I'm staggered to see that under N's post in the feed, L, whom I met at a bartending class in Chelsea the same fall I quit art and applied to law school, has announced his engagement to a folk musician he met on an Ayahuasca trip in the Peruvian jungle.

At work, I tell several coworkers, “Like a third of my exes are suddenly engaged.”

One looks up from the copy machine, laughs. “That's what happens.”

“It's life,” says another, a girl of unbesmirched modesty who, despite this, has a voice like a stone in your shoe and is engaged herself. Then, without looking up from her computer: “Just block them.” Her desk borders mine, and I've spent the last week noticing all the details of her ring, which, since I'm to her left, I see quite frequently.

When I'm home, I arm myself with a pint of Jack Daniels that I swig right out of the bottle, sit on the sofa, and log on. I will block each of them as permanently as I can, wipe each swiftly

from my news feeds, though I’m not prepared for what I find: The engagements of the first three must have been an opening act. Everywhere across my various Site feeds, men from my past are posting the news. The same news. I see two in sequence, scroll down, and there are three more: C, who’d been in a polyamorous relationship when I’d met him and who’d shown me a logic proof confirming the Flaw of Monogamy, has announced his engagement, via sonnet, to a woman he claims is “the poetic genius” he’s been waiting for. R, the photographer with whom I once chugged sangria and cavorted through a field at night and later semi-dated long-distance over several dissolute years until he one day no longer answered my calls, is grinning in front of a Santa Monica pier alongside a beaming, sunburned redhead of goddess beauty. A, my first, my schoolmate, has posted a panoramic image of the Swiss Alps, both of them outfitted in bright alpine gear, the ring glistening on one ungloved hand like a shard of ice. I can barely read through it. And here: M, who was most recently mine, a playwright and stand-up comedian who took the LSAT for fun yet ended up (unlike me) a test-prep tutor, proposed through a monologue he snuck into a play (yes, the video is here on the Site) to a petite, weasel-like woman with bad posture and a nasally voice, though pretty in an all-elbows-and-collarbone-and-jaw kind of way. But there’s one that stops me, causes me to catch my breath, drives the pin so deep I let out a sound. It’s the last one I see, the one I loved most, the longest, for almost five years before law school, when I had wanted to be an artist like him: K, the one I’d always hoped would take me back, who at the end could not forgive me, has gotten down on one knee in front of a voluptuous brunette along the Tiber River with a ring he made himself from jade and copper.

Their posts appear hours—in some cases minutes—apart, as if they have somehow conspired to release them all this evening. My fingers swipe and scroll back and forth in silence among all of them. I can almost hear the laughter through the news feeds, can almost see the

mirror-rehearsed smiles. After a few hours, the bottle of Jack empty, I stand, stumble through my apartment, drunkenly call my sister. She’s two years older and has smartly gone and done what I should have—that is, held on to someone she loved for the requisite amount of time. She has little sympathy.

“It’s not that strange,” she tells me, when I slur through the litany of engagements.

“People hit a certain age, and everyone’s doing it: marriage, children, big life decisions. It’s like clockwork. It’s biological. It’s what you’re supposed to do.”

I say nothing, just breathe heavy and drunken into the phone. I have been alone for some number of years now, and I like it OK, worse sometimes and better others, but I’ve never felt so distinctly like damaged goods, like a product so outdated it is no longer recognized, no longer seen.

“So I’m a failure?” I say. “I’m a failure because I’m alone, is that what you’re saying?”

She sighs. “You don’t have to be so dramatic.” Then, with something just shy of callousness: “You know, if you’d have played your cards right, any one of them could have been yours.”

“How?” I say. “I did everything I could. I loved them.”

“Did you really?” I can tell from her voice that she’s smiling, not coldly, but with a touch of that unflinching disdain she lets peek out every now and then. I don’t always agree with my sister, but I know what she really means: If I’d been a little less selfish, a little less dramatic, less drunk, less jealous, less obsessive, needed less reassurance, if I’d have just been less of all those things, they’d have rolled this carpet out for me.

The engagements happen over five days. Two more trickle in on the morning of the fourth, one on the fifth, and then they stop. Still, I’m restless, frantic all week. I notice with irritation the

couples on the train, slouching into each other’s seats. The smiling, texting teens, so easily flowing in and out of singleness. But worse than the men and my memories is the persistence of the women. They’ve merged into a single monolithic presence in my mind, a fusion of all the qualities I lack, occupying the same role as I did, just at a different point in time. Of course, I look each one up, stalk her, learn everything I can, but that’s hardly the point. I want to know who they really are, these women whom, I learn through my research, are wannabe actresses, nonprofit directors, architects, managers of small startups, film producers, English teachers, yoga instructors, postdocs. What do they possess that I don’t? I ponder this, turn it over in my mind like an alibi I’m inspecting for weakness, cast the hook of my curiosity out into the void.

A week later, I find it: A ring, tucked neatly under my pillow where no ring was before. It’s odd, because I have never been more single and I don’t have a roommate, a neighbor, or a visiting parent who pities me enough to stage this. I pick it up cautiously, as though it’s hot off the forge or possibly magic. I let it sit on my palm like it’s alive, breathing, about to wake from seasonal hibernation. The band is silver, and in the center there’s a lucid green stone, princess cut, refracting light with the oily sheen of a diamond, yet hypnotic in a way that diamonds never are. There’s a word I can’t quite make out inscribed on the inside of the band. It might be “Love,” but it’s so faint and hard to read that it just as easily could be any other four-letter word.

For some reason, I hesitate to put it on. I’ll wait until evening before wearing something so mysterious and expensive, I think. But I keep it near me for the rest of the day: on the kitchen windowsill as I cook so it refracts geometric light across the walls; on my desk as I call potential witnesses; on my bedside nightstand as I fall asleep. Somehow, it feels important, the universe’s answer to the strangeness of recent events.

But the following evening, I’m so nauseated at the ever-growing stream of “likes” and

“congrats” that confront me with each Site login, that to distract myself, to pretend for just a moment that I am one of them—that glittering crowd of ring-wearers—I slip the band onto my finger.

I’m usually the first to admit to something unnatural in the works, forces like black magic, curses, entities, even karma. And it’s not just this moment that has me on high alert: I’ve witnessed my fair share of supernatural. There was the time in the funeral home with my grandmother’s corpse, waxy and dead in an overpriced casket, the articulated clarity of her voice in my head. There was the haunted step on the staircase in the house I grew up in, the pale, wide eyes of a ghost girl that flashed in my mind each time I descended upon it; and of course the unexplained Presence I feel in almost all bathrooms. But this is different. There’s something about the moment when the ring slides onto my finger, the coldness and tightness of it—snug and perfectly fitted like a glove but without any warmth—the darkness that rushes down around me like a fallen curtain so that I’m now distinctly nowhere, that lets me know I have crossed a line, stumbled upon a new kind of uncanny. And then, in an instant, the darkness is gone, like the next beat in a song, and I am no longer in my room.

I rub my eyes. Pinch my earlobe. Twist the ring so that the stone clings to the underside of my finger like a bat in the cave of my palm. I laugh dryly, disbelievingly. I knew it: The ring is cursed. It’s transported me to some other apartment, apparently. Gone are the low ceilings of my East Village studio, the floor clutter of dirty clothes, the smell of unwashed dishes. This room has a wraparound window bench lined with small animal pillows. I step over neatly stacked books that I’ve never owned or read, looking for signs, explanations as to where I might be. The closet is large, yawning, a doorless cave with just a curtain pushed aside. I step toward it. A sound comes from it, a human sound. Someone is rummaging, singing softly, and when she steps

out of the closet—a woman my age, thin and pretty in an angular way—I stop, stare. She’s familiar.

“Hi,” I say. “I can explain—or try to—why I’m here. It has to do with this ring, this *thing*,” I hold out my hand. At the very least, I’ll fall back on politeness, civility, even if she is rudely ignoring me, glancing everywhere but at me. “Hello?” I say again. “My name is—” and then she steps into my exact space—*through* me. It’s the strangest sensation—jarring, tingling, as if I am suddenly made of Jell-O and a spoon has been dragged through me.

“Hello?” I say again, and this time I’m certain it is just me, only me, who hears my own voice. My chest feels full of cotton, and there’s a balled-up knot in my throat. I kick at her tower of books, yet not so much as a page shifts. Her phone rings, and I reach for it, but my hand moves through hers. I know her now: I recognize that toothy smile, that nasally voice, her sharpness, her collarbones. She grips the phone between jaw and shoulder, the flash of her own ring gleaming.

“Hey, there,” she says, not to me. Then laughter, musical, shrill. “You have no idea. I was so surprised.”

I step closer, into her personal space, so close that I can see the pores on her cheeks. So this is the life partner M has chosen. I study her: The few fine hairs above her lip, the uneven twist of her mouth when she speaks. She is glowing, radiant with joy, and I’m suddenly sick, so overcome with something inexplicable that I slip the ring from my finger, hard and fast, without thinking, and here I am, back on the couch, the Site open before me.

I don’t touch the ring for several days. The strange thing is, while it didn’t feel like I was gone more than ten minutes, two hours had passed when I returned. I was ravenous too; so hungry I devoured the entire contents of my fridge: Thai leftovers, ice cream, a carton of cold chicken

wings. I conclude that the ring must be dangerous, definitely cursed, but I don’t get rid of it.

Work consumes me (the office is in the middle of an intellectual property rights case), but as I browse the Site that weekend, my curiosity returns—my desire to play with fire—and here I am, removing the ring from the drawer, sliding it back on my finger. Like last time, there’s a quick pulse of darkness, but instead of the apartment with animal pillows, I open my eyes to a tiny windowless room, a pop song playing small and tinny from the ceiling, women’s voices in a cacophony of eager praise.

“Definitely that one.”

“Really flatters you.”

“Shows off your shoulders.”

I’m in a dressing room, and the voices are coming from outside, from the adjacent stall. I reach for the door but grasp only air. Annoyed, I paw the space again and again before I step into—*through*—the wall, and I realize I am not stepping at all but gliding, hovering, propelled by something else entirely. Outside the stall, I’m struck by the abundance of dresses, a surplus so extensive I feel disgusted by the brightness, the frilliness, the obvious joy, the lavish waste. I don’t recognize the women clustered around the dressing rooms, but I pause, listen, wait with them. When a stall door opens, I recognize her immediately: the red-haired goddess beauty from my hours of Site stalking. It’s not a face you forget easily. She’s posing in a white lace gown, tilting her head, eyeing herself in a mirror. The door closes and opens again and again, new dress every time, the friends’ voices like a swarm of stinging insects. Can it be that the ring gives access to *all* of them? To all of those smiling, hated brides-to-be? I’m suddenly gluttonous to find out, eager to play, to dally, to test the rules of this newfound gift.

Again and again that evening I don and remove the ring. The locations—sometimes a sidewalk in a foreign city, a back seat of a moving car, a suburban yard, an apartment in a neighborhood I’ve never been to—shift around me. Of course I recognize the pattern, recognize the women always present, rings flashy and visible on all their fingers, sometimes with friends, often alone, sometimes with that heartbreaker himself, but—and I smile at this—for whatever reason, it’s not the men that the ring connects me to; it’s these strangers, these usurpers, and in the coming days, weeks, and months, the ring becomes my new way of keeping tabs, a voyeuristic Site upgrade. I slide it onto my finger, adorn myself in spectral anonymity, and fall away from myself, into those other lives.

It’s hard to remember them all, who’s paired with whom, but soon I learn their names, memorize them like characters in a reality show. Riley, M’s wannabe actress, has named her ring the Twinkle Star. I discover this via the Site, yet when I slip on my own ring and find myself in her bedroom as she talks on the phone that evening, I learn more: How she’s named every ring she’s ever owned. She’s lying on her bed, ten feet from where I’m perched on her window bench with the animal pillows. I can almost hear the excited voice on the other end, some girlfriend from college no doubt, gleeful at the thought of her friend’s approaching wedding.

I float toward her, on the bed beside her, up to the ceiling over her, in awe of my own movement, my ability to hover, drift, rise, take in every angle. She’s rolling sideways on the mattress, walking her legs up the wall, gushing about how he also showed her Vega on that night when he proposed, and right above Polaris, Cassiopeia, the jealous queen, who looks like a “W”—the constellation I once pointed out to him.

It’s not long before I piece together some of the logistics: The ring is not purely random in its transportive ability but seems to function on some kind of casual shuffle, cycling among all eleven women in order of when the corresponding man exited my life. I’m shocked, too, to find that while I’m wearing the ring, I cannot leave the fiancée. If she’s in the bedroom, I am too. If she doesn’t leave the apartment, neither do I. If she’s in a crowded metro car sandwiched between tired nine-to-fivers, there I am. If she’s moaning under my ex, I’m there watching. At first, I feel trapped, like some sort of trailing puppy tethered to an inattentive master, but the more I witness the small, quiet moments of their lives, the little things that no one usually observes, the more my leashed existence feels like a kind of VIP pass, a one-sided secret intimacy that I alone am permitted.

Afterward, when I remove the ring, open my physical eyes, awake to my own room, my body is always stiff, the same brief paralysis I’ve experienced sometimes when waking too quickly from deep sleep, and, just like the first time, my hunger is magnified, insatiable, my throat as dry as if I’ve run for hours or crawled through a desert. But the strangest thing is what I observe in the passage of time itself: No matter how short my visit, sometimes a mere five minutes, when I return to myself, an hour or more has passed; sometimes half the day or night is gone. I’m often late to the office, sleep-deprived, scattered. I’m not that surprised when my boss gives me the talk, doesn’t ask questions, just tells me to “get back on track” and says this kind of “leniency” can’t last. I smile, nod, laugh inwardly at his ignorance of my power.

Still, my visits become routine: after work and weekend mornings, like exercising or online shopping. I’m surprised at my sustained interest in the women, which has grown in me like a persistent and thriving weed, surpassing for the most part my wilting desire for the men, who, with few exceptions, now seem like old news. Occasionally, it seems that the women

almost know I’m there—want me there—a kind of witness that gives meaning to the monotony of their daily lives, even if they can only just sense me on the periphery. Sometimes I talk casually to them about my own past. Of course, they can’t hear me, but I like imagining that they can, that they find the stories intriguing.

With Sarah, on the subway home from her office in Toronto, I hover and talk about A as a child, the forts we’d build together in the woods, all the girls in seventh grade who wanted him, “but he chose me,” I say, proudly. “He thought I was different from all of them.”

In J and Alexa’s apartment, the radio is always playing Bollywood music (she’s taking a class). I perch on the spice rack above the sink to better face her as she washes dishes, and I tell her about me and J in the college library, the things we did in the deserted stacks of the reference section. When the beat picks up, I jump from the spice rack with the spring of a ghost cat and shake myself to the music. She stops, hands submerged in the sink, like she’s been grabbed by something, and for a second, I see her staring at the spice rack, listening.

I tell Olga, T’s dancer, about my own time with him, how it all began with tango lessons while I was still with K. How my connection with T was like a storm that blew me off course, totaled me, destroyed everything I’d thought I wanted. She’s often dancing in front of a wide mirror when I visit her, but she pauses just fractionally when I speak, as if my words are directing her differently than the music.

But when I visit Katrina, K’s fiancée with the jade and copper ring, all my levity is gone, and I’m overcome with a deep envy, a sense that she has stolen what could have most easily been mine. She’s a high school teacher, usually more tired than the others, and often my after-work visits to her are occupied by hours of her grading.

The night I first whisper in Katrina’s ear, she’s sitting on the couch with her laptop, grading papers. I don’t have anything great to say, but I decide on a recipe K’s mother once gave me, a sweet potato coconut curry that he particularly loved. Unlike with the others, I’d rather not talk about K, even though I know she can’t hear me, even though I have so much I could say. Still, I float close, my mouth right at her ear, and I recite the recipe over and over, fast like a tongue twister. She looks up from her computer, looks around the room, not alarmed or anything, but as if a breeze has blown in from somewhere and she might get up to close a window. I chant it faster and faster, louder and louder, until in my own bubble of invisibility I’m screaming the words, and then something miraculous happens: She tilts her head, then types the first ingredient into the open Word doc, then the second, then the whole list, and I stop, suddenly scared that the rules are changing on me, and what does it mean that she’s now aware of my presence? I take off the ring.

The next time I’m there, they are eating that very dish, and K is gushing to her, saying how this is his favorite, asking how she knew. I hover around them, watching. There’s a secret smile on her lips, and later, as she washes the dishes, she turns her head up to the window, mouths the words “Thank you,” and I realize this gratitude, must be—can only be—for me.

There must be some secret in speed, in saying the words very fast, like the blueprint of sound itself, an energy that can slip between the beats of awareness more easily. I ponder this all day at work, where I have fallen behind but have managed to keep up an appearance of progress. That evening, I practice speed-talking with the others, though their ability to perceive me is blunted and weak. To Leila, I whisper a sex position I often used on N, a sensuous punishment, but she only rubs her ear like there’s a buried itch. While Zoe rehearses with her band, I repeat a joke

that once destroyed L with laughter during an important meeting, but she simply closes her eyes, smiles. In Riley and M’s room at night, I sit on the bed as it moves and shout-scream M’s final words to me, words said over the phone, then again on that night at the seaport. I intone them over and over in a blur of speed until I’m reliving the moment, but they just pull the blankets more tightly around them. Defeated, I remove the ring, return to my body. It’s this time, when I regain movement in my limbs, notice the sun streaming through my blinds, that I know I’ve stayed too long. It was not even midnight when I donned the ring, and although I was away no more than an hour, it’s now afternoon, the next day, the day of the hearing at the courthouse, where I am expected to be. I listen to my messages, to the worried voices of several coworkers trying to reach me, then to my boss telling me in the kind of casual tone in which you order breakfast that I don’t need to bother coming in, today or any day onward. A numbness descends upon me. I tell myself that this is for the best, that the office was only smothering me, that I’m exploring a deep magic, and why would I shackle myself to such ordinary work? Then I smile, walk to the fridge, and devour the remains of a pot of macaroni and cheese.

There is something else I am beginning to notice: it’s harder and harder to remove the ring. This last time, I struggled with it fiercely for half a minute. When I finally wrested it from my finger, opened my eyes to my own bedroom and heard the familiar siren-wail of my hospital-adjacent building, I put the ring in a drawer, out of view for the rest of the day. I cannot suppress the thought arising in me that now is the time to throw it away, that something is shifting, ensnaring me, becoming more than I bargained for. But I am not one to listen to my fears, and I push the worry away, bury it under my zeal, and so I continue.

Katrina, despite my envy, is my favorite. She’s the least concerned about the planning of her wedding, unlike the others, and more concerned with her students, with her mother’s cancer, with her relationship with K. I notice how she smiles at him, how she tucks her head into the space between his shoulder and jaw, her endless encouragements of his art projects, the way they dance, silly and dramatic, in the living room. But most of all, I’m intrigued by the idea of my own influence. I know that for some reason, she alone hears me but doesn’t understand who or what I am. I imagine revealing myself to her, telling her my history with K, but instead, I whisper to her of other things: Details about his childhood, insights I gleaned over the years about his parents, his family, my own philosophies, and when one night, after he has gone to sleep, I find her crying because her mother has taken a turn for the worse, I feel particularly kind and, imagining myself a comforting spirit, say “You’ll survive, become stronger, transcend.” It is not my imagination that her breathing softens, her crying stops, and she whispers, “Thank you.” Another night, as they’re lying in bed, her eyes still open, she asks into the darkness, “Who are you?” and I can’t resist. From the ceiling where I hover over them, I whisper my own name over and over, like a mantra, and I see her eyes widen in the darkness at this answer, though of course it is not an answer she understands.

When the weddings approach, I’m ready, although really, what must I prepare? These are the first weddings I’ll attend where my attire matters not, where I won’t wrangle some indifferent male friend into being my begrudging second, where I’ll say and do exactly as I please.

The weddings fall in a staggered chronology, consistent with the order in which I learned of them. With the exception of two, they all take place over the same weekend in May. M and E

are married in beachside luxury, with suckling pig and a twelve-layer cake. Others in rustic, hidden-charm places: a tall ship in Mystic, Connecticut; a New England castle; a rose garden in Saratoga Springs. J and B have destination weddings on island beaches; others alongside pools with swim-up bars; in resorts in Key West and Hawaii, to which I arrive in a single glorious instant, sans airfare and jet lag. Others marry in traditional venues: country clubs, churches, hotel event spaces. I visit them all, flitting back and forth, often arriving just in time for vows and speeches.

It’s a thrill to see each man, each ghost of my past, paunchy with newly acquired middle-agedness. Of course, I have seen them over the months as I’ve haunted their women, but never in such a glaring limelight, never squeezed and stretched into the unforgiving confines of a tuxedo or suit, sweaty and nervous and gleeful all at once. During the speeches, I relish my nonphysicality, my crude laughter, my insults, my ability to spit and shout and curse. I dance, too. On the dance floor, grotesquely, before the bride and groom take the spotlight. Over the chairs and under the altars. On the tables while the guests are spooning garlic soup and coconut custard and all the richness of the feasts into their mouths.

But it’s not just a raucous affair for me either, not all one big party. One of the weddings eclipses the others, pulls me deeper into the center of whatever it is I’m already in. K’s wedding is more understated than the rest, not particularly flashy, at his mother’s place in New Jersey, where the lawn stretches back to a shallow strip of forest. There are chairs and benches throughout the yard, and a carriage house arranged with rows of folding tables and a small space for dancing.

It’s the end of a long night for me, a night of parties I sampled in bits and pieces, until this one, this party, gradually becomes the only one I care about, the only one I want to see

through to the end. I stare around the room, lit with Christmas lights. The fig and nutmeg cake—earlier a tower of iced and sculpted perfection—sags in crumbled ruin. Paper plates sit empty and sodden in front of guests. The bugs are out in murderous, unseen numbers. The last in a train of speeches has just ended, and it’s time for K to speak. Katrina is clinking her glass, laughing. He stands, smiling, a few glasses of wine in him, I can tell. He has never been the public performer that I am, never commanded an audience like I have, like I’m leading them into battle, yet I recognize that something in him has been stripped away, some veil of boyish self-consciousness, and what’s left is so striking and alien and newly emerged that I let myself sink to the floor in the center of the room to observe him.

“Out of all the women to come into my life,” he says, and already I am undone, “Katrina has risen above them.” He continues, describes the moment he first knew it was her, how she was by his side through layoffs and unemployment and surgery, how she built their furniture with him, the deep gentle strength of her soul. “My warrior princess,” he says, same as he called me. Even his laugh is the same as when he was mine. There are so many things that are the same and so many things enticingly new that, for the briefest of moments, I think maybe I am Katrina: Maybe this is all for me. It’s my wedding; I’m marrying K, the way we both wanted, the way it was supposed to be.

“Thank you all,” he says, coming to the end, and I realize he has been speaking this whole time. “You have all, in your own ways, helped us to find each other. We are eternally grateful.” He’s staring out into the room of faces, looking right at me, it seems. When he sits down, I float over, hover near them, between them. He leans to kiss her, *through* me, and I hold my breath, strain to steady myself, but I feel him in every pore of my nonphysical being—his thoughts, his smell, his dreams, his fears, the way he laughed at my jokes, all of it condensed into

that one space, a concentrated broth of him bathing and submerging and drowning me, trapping me in the old, filling me with such deep longing for the first month I knew him, when he was at the epicenter of everything I found magical and hopeful and beautiful and the world could have gone to apocalyptic ruin around us and I’d have hardly noticed.

Katrina pulls back from the kiss; she’s breathing heavily, restlessly, brushes her neck like a fly has landed. I can tell she’s sensing me. Her focus shifts; her eyes flit nervously, searching, and she whispers something. At first I think it’s to him, but then she says it again, almost apologetically, her eyes roving around, perhaps looking for me: “Please,” she says. “Go away, go home.”

“What?” K says, pulling back. “Are you talking to me?”

Then she says it: My name. She’s staring at K. “Do you know her?”

He makes a weird face. “Yeah, that’s my ex, the lawyer. The crazy one.”

“Crazy?” Katrina asks.

“She took the breakup hard,” he says. “Though that was years ago, grad school. Why?”

It was not just grad school, I want to say. I am from before and after. I was with him through the applications and interviews, through the apartment hunting and city-choosing and jobless limbo of afterward. I would know his voice in a crowded room, after twenty years, across time and space.

“Is she dead?” Katrina asks, her voice low, serious.

His face pinches together like the thought is sour. “I don’t think so, why?”

“Because,” she says, “I think she’s haunting me.” And just like that, my secret is out.

K laughs. “I’m assuming she’s alive, but who knows. I haven’t heard from her in years.”

I don't know what upsets me more: Katrina revealing my secret or K's indifference to my hypothetical death, though part of me leaps with glee that here they are, talking about *me* on their wedding day.

Katrina looks up at him. “I can't explain exactly how, but I hear her,” she says. “At first, I thought it was something more, bigger, the universe or something. But it's her. She's here. It's like she's trying to steal my life, *be* me, somehow.”

K takes a deep breath. “She would sabotage us if she could. I wouldn't put it past her. She's jealous. Cold. Cruel, even.” He takes a large swig of wine. “If she's messing with you, I'll never forgive her.”

Katrina stares at him, her eyes narrowed. “You know,” she says. “I don't think that's it. I hear her voice. *Feel* her. She's not cruel, really. She's sad. Desperate. That's what she is. She's empty.” Then she smiles with such genuine warmth that I hate her even more.

K softens. “That's why you're so wonderful,” he says. “You're not like her,” and they stare at each other with such tenderness, forgetting me so completely in that moment that something in me shatters, breaks for good. When he leans through me again to embrace her, I don't feel him this time, just my own hollowness, my lack of substance, as if I have suddenly fallen out of myself into some vast black hole at the bottom of everything. I start to curse her out, whisper obscenities, call her every name I know she's once been called, but I feel a sudden tension on my finger, a cinching: The ring is so tight it's strangling me, as though it's around my throat. I can barely breathe, can no longer hear my own voice. Even as I whisper the words, they feel soundless, without meaning. I float away, down the long table of guests, across the dance floor that's starting to pulse with bodies, past the festive sparkle of the disco ball twirling the floor with orbiting colors, and outside the carriage house doors into the yard that's now flickering

with tea lights on every small table, like fallen, trapped stars. Somewhere in this very same world is my physical body, suspended, paused until my return, yet here in this garden, I am no more than a ghost.

I float into the woods at the end of the yard, over wet, clotted leaves and brambles. Somehow, I’m allowed to leave Katrina’s side; perhaps it’s the marriage that has dissolved my tether or the fact that both of them know of me, my secret exposed, though it hardly matters now. I sit on a rock, gasping for air, and pry at the ring. Despite my lack of physicality, the ring has always been the one thing I can feel concretely in this lucid dream of haunting. I pull, strain, hammer it against a stone. I call in my thin ghost-voice through the trees, my ring-clad hand burning with a pain so primal it’s all I’m aware of. Perhaps it’s already too late, the ring seared onto my finger with a permanence I’ve known has been looming but have chosen to ignore. “Please,” I wail into the dripping woods. “Please.” It is the only word I can say. I wrestle with my own hand, yanking, jerking, pulling, wrenching, kicking over the leaves below me, which remain unruffled and still.

I don’t know how she finds me, how long it’s been, or what has led her here, away from the lights and music and guests, away from her husband, but I open my eyes to the soft curves of her face, the almost-black torrent of hair, her dark eyes. Katrina is kneeling beside me in the woods, where I lie curled. Her wedding gown pools around her, a frozen waterfall of white, and I have no doubt that she sees me now. I’m too dizzy to speak, too faint with the strangling ring, with my own struggle, to throw myself at her mercy, to beg forgiveness, but I hold my aching hand out, limply—it’s all I can do—and with a gentleness I don’t expect, she takes it, suddenly solid in hers. I feel for the first time the warmth and softness of her fingers, feel the jade and copper ring against my own skin, and with a strange knowing—and an ease that shocks me—she

slides the ring from my finger. In that last instant, before I’m transported away for the final time, back to my own life, our eyes meet, and it’s a look that will never leave me: a smile—gentle, reassuring—as if to say, *You will have this too.*