

YOUR PEOPLE'S WAYS

by Jane E. Martin

Tomas insists the new exercises will help. "Come on!" he yells, "like a clam! Clam!" And even though his arm movements suggest the opening and closing of a shell, it takes me a moment to understand what he's saying. With his accent, I keep hearing "klum." I lie on my side and, with feet together, very slowly begin to lift my top leg, forming a greater-than sign.

"Come on," he says, "this is not geriatrics. Higher."

"Tomas. It's worse this time."

"Okay," he says, and gently presses on my shaking knee, closing the shell. He instructs me to lie on my back, sits, and bows his head over my hip like the Peanuts' character over his piano. He places a palm flat over my scar, where the surgeons once went in to repair torn cartilage, and closes his eyes.

"Feldenkrais?" I ask.

"Of course," he says. Two and a half years ago, still recovering from hip surgery, I moved from Boston to Ann Arbor, to take a job with GM. My mother had just died, the last of the New England family I wanted anything to do with. A few days after I moved, I limped into Washtenaw Orthopaedic and Sports and looked at the photos that hung beside the reception desk. I intuited that Tomas, of all the physical therapists, would incorporate untraditional techniques into his work. I also decided that he was gay.

A few weeks ago, I had to start coming here again. Tomas showed me the various certifications he'd earned since I'd seen him last. One in cranial sacral therapy, another in the Alexander technique, and the rest in the Feldenkrais Method. He held up a laminated certificate with one hand, as if he were wearing white gloves and was about to serve me choice gouda or kernhem from a silver tray. "The man was a fucking genius," he told me, his green eyes radiating an intensity that made me blush. Tomas is not gay.

"How's Gaby," Tomas asks me now. He loves that I date women.

"You know," I say. "Busy. Preoccupied."

"Adulterous."

“If she goes to California, then I’ll worry,” I say, and just to see what will happen, “She worries when I come here.” The truth is, Gabriella knows almost nothing about Tomas, only that he is my physical therapist, and that he used to be a professional diver for a tourist attraction on one of Michigan’s islands – a detail that she finds fascinating because of a paper she once wrote on variety entertainment in America. But because this flirtation with Tomas is new, I feel bold.

With his eyes still closed, Tomas snorts a short laugh, and, it seems, reddens a little. He takes his hand off my groin and places it on my face. “Feel how much heat I’ve captured.”

In the lobby, Tomas and I kiss on the cheek, as we’ve begun to do.

“I’ll see you in a few days,” he says.

“Unless I find out it’s cancer,” I tell him. “Then you can visit me in the oncology ward.” This is a useful habit of mine: embrace the worst-case scenario in order to feel relief when a less tragic alternative turns out to be true. (“No Rose,” my doctor has told me, “lung cancer would not cause groin pain.”)

Tomas says something in what I guess is Dutch, and points to the door. “You are a difficult cripple,” he tells me.

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“I have to go to California,” Gabriella says. I stop removing garlic, bread, pasta from a canvas bag that has a loose interpretation of Earth and her remaining green patches logotyped onto it. Gabriella sits on a stool and rubs at a spot on the kitchen counter, hopelessly beautiful. I realize that I look like I’m about to throw a green pepper at her, and lower my hand. A strand of her curly hair frees itself from behind her ear and swings toward her nose. Too often, in Gabriella’s presence, I feel like the buck-toothed preteen desperately trying to prolong the moment when the popular girl – Jesus knows why – has turned her smile, her warmth, her dazzle toward me.

“What about our trip to Canada?” I say. Gabriella and I had talked about visiting my grandmother’s hometown on Columbus day weekend, less than two weeks away.

“Rose, it’s *cancer*.”

“*I* might have cancer.”

“You said it was bursitis.” Gabriella looks at me in the same way GM’s software engineers look at code that has just failed, indignant about the inconvenient result. It’s always at the same moment in a project: when all the parts the engineers have been working on in isolation are combined into one big program. I sit in my cubicle a few feet away from the commotion, amazed once more that they have not accounted for each other’s existence.

“They have no idea what it is. Even Tomas agrees it’s worse this time. They don’t put people on medical disability for nothing.” I am often more stoic when estrangement is happening to me. But Gabriella’s recent insistence on prioritizing her ex’s problems over my own is particularly hurtful. I’m in pain, I’m scared, and I don’t feel like being tough. I feel like being covered with a hundred little kisses that tell me I will soon be able to go for a run again, or open a door, a window, all on my own, that I can go back to work, that I will not slip into disability every few years for the rest of my life.

Gabriella’s eyes betray a small shift within her. It is in my favor. “I’ll try to do both trips,” she says. “Maybe I can fly to California from Canada. It depends on whether my funding comes through.” For now, I accept this small offering. “Let me know when dinner’s ready?” she says.

Gabriella crosses the kitchen to her study, which sometimes doubles as my yoga room. The ease with which she walks makes me sad. I’ve begun having dreams about being able-bodied, again. This happened the last time, too, many weeks after surgery, when climbing stairs was still an event to plan for, when getting out of a car had to be broken into a half-dozen ergonomic movements, when everyone, even the surgeon, was puzzled by how slowly the recovery was going. When my mother died, I used her cane. It comforted me, fitting my fingers into grooves her own fingers had worn into the wood. It was like holding my mother’s hand through the wake, funeral, and slow dismantling of her home. Christopher Reeve said that he was never paralyzed in his dreams. He was always sailing or playing polo, the things he loved to do before his accident. Lately, in my dreams, I’m doing things I’ve never yearned to do: downhill skiing, rugby, and perhaps because I’ve begun going to Tomas again, contorting my body into several impossible moves as I fall from a diving board to water. Gabriella would have once analyzed these dreams with me, with more curiosity and pleasure than if they had been her own.

As I cut the green pepper into squares, and triangles, and shapes that have no names, I hear Gabriella talking. The study door is closed, but I hear the crests and dips in her tone, an intensity that lately is reserved only for Oriana.

Eight years ago, as an undergraduate intern in Special Collections at UCLA, Gabriella seduced Oriana, who, as University Archivist, was Gabriella's boss's boss's boss. Oriana had started out as the young professor from Bogotá, Colombia and had quickly turned heads in the UCLA Library and Information Sciences community. Gabriella was hired for a semester, to help catalogue collections related to the sauna practices of Peru's Aymara people, pre-Inca.

Over many horrible weeks, Oriana chastised Gabriella for sloppy handwriting, for mishandling bound records, and once, for mispronunciation of "Qharaqhara." And then, one late afternoon, when everyone else was gone, Gabriella overheard a conversation: "That girl's inventorying is goddamned pristine," someone said. Gabriella looked on from the shadows just outside Oriana's half-closed office door. Her boss's boss's boss was talking about her! Within a moment more, Oriana had sealed the deal with Work-Study: Gabriella would intern for Special Collections until the time she graduated. Oriana watered a few plants with the contents of a coffee cup and smoothed her slacks before flicking off the light.

Gabriella was bold. "What makes you think I want to stay?" she said in the dark.

Startled, Oriana stepped backward into her office. "Jesus, Gabriella. Why are you still here? Please leave."

Gabriella's eyes filled with tears. "I don't understand you," she said.

Oriana walked briskly past Gabriella, and past a clay hut, toward the exit. "See you, Thursday, then. Please don't be late."

The young intern ran after the University Archivist, and surrendered to an insanity that bubbled up from some strange brew of indignation and awe. Oriana was shocked, Oriana was confused, Oriana kissed and groped back. The two brought heat to the Ica stones in the Peruvian sauna.

It was each woman's first lesbian experience. Gabriella was twenty, Oriana, thirty-four.

Gabriella picks the green peppers from her spaghetti sauce, and adds them to the garlic sheaths and ginger ale cap that form a small garbage pile on the rim of her dinner plate. "They make my throat scratchy," she says when she sees my exaggerated look of horror.

"Whatever," I say, and then, "Doesn't she get regular paps?"

"Of course. That's what's so scary. From one year to the next, her lab results go from normal to cervical cancer."

"It's a highly curable form of cancer." I spread my bread with several cloves of the garlic I've roasted for us. "When I was a kid, there was this Latvian woman in our neighborhood. It was really weird, a Latvian in Maine, but anyway, cervical cancer, stage two, and they do this cone biopsy, which these days, my god, is like bleeding people for colds—"

"Can we please change the subject?" Gabriella looks straight at me. Her eyes are soft. If I saw us from a distance, I would think this woman were saying something tender to me.

"What?" I say. "She lived to be ninety-five. I was being hopeful."

"How was physical therapy?" Gabriella asks, a question I wanted to hear two hours ago.

I stare at my plate as if the chunk of black-olive I see is unwelcome in my meal. I shrug. Gabriella reaches across our little table, which we once spent weeks looking for at garage sales, on restaurant websites, in foreign furniture stores, which we smiled and hooted at when we found – mosaic, art deco, unpretentious – in a suburban antique shop. She covers my hand with hers, a mother throwing her body over a shivering, feverish child.

"Since when are you allergic to green peppers?" I say, thinking of how difficult it was for me at the grocery store. Each time I reached toward a shelf, pain shot from my arm to my groin, like fire on a trail of gasoline. By the time I had all that we needed for dinner, my entire pelvis was ablaze.

"Oh, Sweetie." Gabriella gets up, and comes to me. "I'm the worst girlfriend ever." Gabriella's sweater is soft, her smell, warm. I close my eyes. And there she is, Gabriella, setting me down, carefully, in silky grass smelling greener than an August field in full humidity. She removes her hands from under my lower back, from under my head, and

straightens. Her head is like a sun beside the sun. And when I'm squinting up at her, I catch it, something she's understanding about me, us. *That's it, right here*, she's thinking. She's looking down at me, and that's what she's thinking: *That's it. Everything. There*. She's seeing me in a way I understand myself and in a way I don't. Something in her eyes wraps around me like a sun-shiny blanket. *Baby, you are mine*. And my blood is enriched by this understanding, the same blood that my little heart pumps to my toes and my nose, forever and ever.

Gabriella does the dishes from last night as I lie on the couch with my laptop on my stomach. This is something I used to do after work and on weekends, when I first moved to Ann Arbor and my hip still wasn't right. I would read article after article on French Canadians – flight from France, immigration to Maine, secession debate in Québec – and look through various genealogy databases for a trace of my mother. Our heritage was not something we spoke much about. It simply was, on her side of the family and my father's, in the schools and churches of our hometown, on the faces of everyone who lived next to us. We spoke French, we ate *tourtière*, we were taught by nuns. The significance of these details came to me as my mother was dying. She seemed perplexed, maybe a bit pleased, by my sudden assault of interest, as if I were a foreign journalist visiting her country for a few days. She answered each question patiently. She let me jot down notes before continuing with an anecdote. She placed her varicose hand on my cheek.

When I first met Gabriella, she was finishing up her coursework, and was beginning to think about a dissertation. She wanted to get intimate with a group, to hypothesize on its behaviors, to analyze variations in its diaspora. Somebody cultural anthropologists had traditionally ignored. She had, I realized, a long record of judging her own European ancestry to be no ancestry at all. Of latching onto other people's dark-eyed, olive-skinned histories and valorizing their plebian struggles. For a while, I was her fateful find. Fat from the fruits of my personal research, I talked on and on about the shift from family farming to a production-based economy, waves of migration southward in search of a better life, menial work in upholstery factories that flanked the Saco River. I blushed when Gabriella claimed to detect an accent in my words. I showed her pictures of my mother's mother,

dark circles under her dark eyes, the first in her family of sixteen to move to the United States and send money to her parents in Québec.

Then Gabriella went to a conference in Boston. We were already living together at the time. She lunched with a friend in Watertown, the heart of Boston's Armenian community. They ate *khovavats*, pickled cauliflower and peppers, village yogurt; they drank mineral water bottled at a spring in Jermuk. She heard the man behind the counter speak to the man at the grill. What a unique language! Gabriella was transported to a *truly* different land, a *truly* distinct way of life, one with which, instinctively, she could identify. She apologized to me, my people (a bit too familiar, a bit too white) and began writing her dissertation.

"Babe, come here," I say, once the sink is clear, and Gabriella is drying her hands on a towel. She sits on the edge of the couch and plays with my hair. We look at online photos of the bed and breakfast, the *auberge*, where I want us to stay in Canada. I zoom in once, and then twice more on the owners. "Come on," I say, "tell me they're not lesbian."

"*Pas question*," Gabriella says.

"We'll be goodwill ambassadors." I raise my palms. "American lesbians offer peace, understanding, and herbal tea to our Canadian sisters."

"I bet they're former nuns."

"Wouldn't it be fun?"

"I'll try, Rose. I will." Gabriella kisses me and gets up. "I'll be in the study. I *have* to finish this chapter if I want to get funding." Gabriella has been working on the same chapter, her third, for four months. Every week, she discovers one more article that will add necessary nuance to her thesis, learns of one more conference that any respectable scholar in her field would not miss. She is in her seventh year of graduate school, a year beyond guaranteed funding.

Last night, after dinner, Gabriella and I went to our room. She lit candles. On our bed, I lay down. I bent my leg on my bad side, and rested it against two pillows that I'd stacked against the wall. Gabriella sat before me. "You're sure you can?" she asked. "I'm injured," I said, "but I'm alive." Her hand under my thigh, she lifted my good leg – she can tell if I want to feel handled – her bicep flexing from the effort. And then I watched her hand and arm move against me as if I were an instrument she were playing. She closed her eyes,

and narrated: “Kaleidoscopically textured...leaves spilling, polychromatic, earthy.” A while later, as she lay beside me, I pulled my body toward hers, punching the bed with my elbows, like a caver dragging himself through the darkness to catch up to his mate. I did my best, I loved what I could, given the pain. Gabriella said my name – Rosaire – the way I’d taught her to way back, the proper way, the way my mother, everyone back home said it: Rose + eye, no, no, no, darling, not Rose + air. “Wow,” Gabriella said last night, in some wildly magnanimous moment that made me never want to hurt her, ever, ever, “you *are* alive.”

In the study, filing cabinet drawers are opening and closing, earnestly. I google “inflammation,” and then “adhesion.” I pull up a program usually reserved for my work, for sketching dashboard components – steering wheels, speedometer and tachometer dimensions, knobs that don’t feel affected in the user’s hand. I create a 3-D design of Gabriella’s head, in GM standard-indigo, and then animate it.

When the study door opens, Gabriella’s head is flapping across my screen, like some wild duck with vertigo trying to make its way north. With a tap of my index finger, it disappears, as if shot down from the sky.

“I have to go do a few errands,” Gabriella tells me.

“Okay, I’ll just be here,” I say. “Unless I’m break dancing on the library lawn.”

“Your *fesse* would look cute in baggy sweatpants,” Gabriella says, using a word I’ve taught her. Lately, making love earns us several tension-free days. These respites remind me of when we first began sleeping together: sure, World Misery was still out there, swinging Her stick around; yet gloriously, She was no longer clubbing *me*. It’s the sort of relief psychopharmacologists drool about when they invent their little pills.

When Gabriella has left, I get up from the couch, and limp to the study, for old times’ sake. A month ago, I was still doing yoga in that study. A month ago, I lowered myself into half-pigeon, the exact position that tore my hip cartilage last time around.

Gabriella questioned me a few days after half-pigeon redux, when I began to realize just how bad things were going to get again. “So why’d you do it? If you thought that’s what caused it the first time?” There was an edge to her words. She wasn’t looking for the psychology, but that’s what I gave her:

“I bet I wanted to recreate the trauma. You know, to gain mastery over it.”

Before the injury, I biked the sort of miles you'd find in any respectable competition, just to get to a dirt path, which led to bush so thick I'd have to hoist my bike to my shoulder. In a few hundred yards, there'd be a clearing, the passageway to a well-kept secret, a pond known only to Bostonians whose direct relatives dumped tea into the harbor and heard the warnings of a midnight rider. I'd run through the woods, I wouldn't stop, even if the thicket branches drew blood – I have the scars. Into the water, crash, and across the pond, breathing in trees, sun, sky, off with the sports bra.

"It practically killed me the first time," I told Gabriella. She looked at me, doubtful. Gabriella didn't know me before the injury. Gabriella used to like to help me understand myself.

The study is like a museum of wreck. Cereal bowls encrusted with flakes of something hang out on the floor, a few feet from the desk chair, which apparently, enjoys dressing up these days – a pair of jeans over its back, sneakers on the seat, socks tossed over an arm. A folder that rests against a file cabinet drawer yawns open and exhales paper, like some active exhibit. Oral histories, picture books, *Armenian Women Poets* cover the space where, not so long ago, I saluted the sun and posed like a warrior. My yoga mat, in a practice of resistance, leans upright against the wall, neatly rolled.

I fidget with the computer and find that Gabriella has been looking at flights to California. Her desk is covered with papers. Beside a mug of molded-over tea is a letter, which I read. *Lambda League Fellowship... award for lesbian-identified graduate students...research that broadens cross-cultural understanding...multi-layered approach to women's experiences ... \$15,000...one letter of recommendation...postmarked September 28.* September 28 is tomorrow. I notice a notepad. The name *Jillian Nge* is written about a dozen times on the top sheet. Jillian is Gabriella's advisor. She is doing research in Malaysia and Indonesia until November, a source of anxiety for Gabriella, who is most productive when she is afraid of disappointing Jillian. Without their regular meetings, without nearly any contact at all (Jillian had forewarned Gabriella), Gabriella has no sense of what Jillian thinks of her; productivity is at an all-time low. "I feel abandoned," Gabriella has told me. "What if I need her for something?"

I lift a few pieces of paper from the trash can. They are copies of a letter of recommendation, dated a few days ago. They are signed with various interpretations of Jillian's signature. So, Gabriella is desperate.

Here's what I have a hard time figuring out: Oriana was mean. Mean, mean. She used to host occasional cocktail parties for Archives staff. A sort of team-building event. Gabriella had graduated from UCLA and was teaching social sciences in an all-girls' private high school in Brentwood. The two women had been living together for months when one of these soirées took place, on a Saturday. All day, Oriana was on edge. Gabriella shopped with her, helping to select fruit, cheeses, patés, liquors.

"What about this one?" Gabriella asked, holding up a \$60 single-malt Scotch.

"*Por Dios*, Gabriella." Oriana grabbed the bottle and reshelved it. "Highlanders are trashy."

At home, Gabriella dressed in a tasteful, burgundy cocktail dress. While she arranged a silk scarf in her hair, Oriana came into the room, and spoke to her partner: "You can't stay."

Oriana was not out at work, and she intended to keep it that way. That night, and for the next three years, whenever Associate and Preservation Archivists, Records Management Specialists, Reference Assistants, and Processing Managers drank \$150 Islay Scotch, Gabriella quietly made her way through Oriana's collection of canonical Western literature in the cool, yet fully-furnished basement.

"Sounds like Stockholm syndrome," I told Gabriella the first time she told me these things.

"Oriana is a charismatic woman. It was intoxicating to be around such drive."

"Point," I said.

Tomas is bold as he massages my ass, a cure, he tells me, for the sciatica I've begun to develop. "Future wife," he says, "you must get well enough to prance down that aisle like it were a runway."

"Deal," I say. "If you do a reverse three-and-a-half somersault thingy on our honeymoon."

“You will like the bathing suit I wear,” he says.

I try to determine if these interactions make me uncomfortable. Part of me admires Tomas for whatever emotional risk he takes in flirting, whether he is sincere or not. It’s a quality I’ve observed and envied in men. Approach a woman, and if she throws her drink at you, change your shirt and talk to her friend. I’ve always shielded myself with a good dose of ambiguity: “I was just calling because, remember the Iranian movie I mentioned at the party? It’s playing. Saturday. There’s a 9:00 showing. You really want to be sure to see it.” These were the words that tripped out of my mouth the first time I phoned Gabriella. Graciously, she fortified my anemic little invitation enough for it to swagger some. “Oh, you’re right – we have to do it,” she said. “And why don’t we eat first?”

Another thought that I can’t shake: what would it be like with Tomas? The man has a beautiful body. He’s shown me pictures of his diving days, a glimpse at perfection. He would take care of me, and I would not be afraid to ask this of him, as I am with Gabriella.

“Could it be adhesions this time?” I ask Tomas. “You know, from the operation.”

“Whatever the case,” he says, “the cure is the same. You must come to me.”

“Tomas. Will I get better?”

“Baby doll, I will do everything possible to help you.”

And for all his misaligned attention, I trust Tomas.

Ever since my mother died, I’m overwhelmed by the foreignness of people. They have no affinity to help, or even pay attention to me. The slight upturn at the point of my nose, my slender fingers and legs, the tight patch of freckles on the back of my arm – these are no longer characteristics that make someone in the world say, “Yes, she is mine. I want to be in her presence.” I must work to be seen. I’ve watched people lunch at quaint sidewalk cafes. They smile, lean into one another, gesture, and touch. Even in silence and stillness, their bodies belong to each another. In moments like these, it’s clear what I no longer have.

Suddenly, anywhere identifies me as much as the next place. Beaches, pines, fields and woods, starkly contrasting seasons, seafood, blueberries, black-capped chickadees: once, had Picasso drawn me, my likeness might have been fashioned from these parts. Now, the idea of existing among these things feels lonely.

When my mother was gone, I walked through the rooms of her house, through all that had brought her comfort, grace. Dried wildflowers in colorful vases, lighthouses stenciled into lampshades, Hummel figurines of fishermen in raincoats or pig-tailed little girls; candles, antique rag dolls, atlases, hand-made quilts, *Down East* magazines, French books – nursing manuals, histories of Québec, a Bible. In the past, these possessions told me secrets about my mother, what she noticed, desired, loved, what made her feel most like herself. I was endlessly fulfilled by the presence of her personality, even more so, by some moment – a gesture, a story, a word – that allowed me to know her more deeply, insight into the stirrings of some smooth animal under the sun. In the house, without my mother, her belongings were silent.

Now, for me, there is no place to go to for rest.

GM is laying people off. I hear this on NPR as I wait for Gabriella to come home. In my industry, there is a saying: when company stock is down, get cancer or get pregnant. Word has it that the vulnerable – those on medical disability, the grieving, those nursing twelve times a day – are safe, but I know better than this. I once worked with a programmer who lost her little boy. Fell out of a tree and onto a hornet’s nest. While he was trying to stand up on the leg that was twisted up real funny, he received about seventy-five reasons to go into the anaphylactic shock that killed him. This was right around the time when our new product was sinking in the market; the board was pissed. The woman was out for five weeks, and within a month of her return, was let go for “careless code.”

Gabriella is in from the rain, with things I can eat and read.

“You breadwin well,” I tell her. She bends down to kiss me, wet hair on her lips. Her skin smells like ocean and warmth, and I yearn for Gabriella. I want her to love me, to find nuances in me that I’m oblivious to, and to be deeply moved by them. I want to feel her being fulfilled by who I am.

We sit side by side on the couch and eat the take-out. Gabriella places a piece of ginger on each piece of maki. She’s always better able to enjoy herself once things are in order.

“I applied for a grant the other day,” she tells me. “For the winter.”

“Great!” I eat my miso soup with a spoon, something that often annoys Gabriella. She adds more wasabi than she should to her soy sauce. “Careful,” I say. Last year, she had a peptic ulcer.

“But I won’t be getting anything more for the fall.” Gabriella taps at undissolved bits of wasabi with her chopsticks as if she has a tic to do so. “I met with Anthropology today. They’re out of departmental money for the semester. But I’m almost certain that by January –”

“It’s not a problem,” I say, charging to the spot that Gabriella has begun to encircle. “Let me take care of things for a while.” For months at a time while Gabriella and I have lived together, I’ve covered our expenses – rent, utilities, payments for the car we bought together, cell phone fees, groceries.

Gabriella lays her chopsticks on her knee, and lets her head fall back. “God, I feel so impotent,” she says.

“Stop,” I say. “You’re my future benefactress.” To assuage Gabriella’s guilt about our financial arrangement, we’ve come up with a plan: once Gabriella has a tenure-track position, I’ll take a year off from work, and she will support me. Each for our own reasons, we keep the idea alive. “I’ll have abs like her when you’re my Mama,” I’ll say. “Babe, paint me something like that when you’re on sabbatical,” she’ll say.

Truth is, I have no intention of redeeming the offer, the year of the all-day pajama bottom. I never knew such things, even at an age when many others do. My mother worked nights, slept a few hours, got up to care for me and some others, added trees and gardens around our humble home, cut old folks’ tough toenails and fed their cats in her spare time. My people are workers. And unlike those who came before me, I am fulfilled professionally.

Yesterday, Tomas put his hands on my shoulders and looked at me. “Come early for our next appointment,” he said. “I would like extra time with you.” This flirtation was no different from the others except for this: in the few silent moments that passed between us before I answered, I watched Tomas’s command turn into a plea. His eyes widened a touch, and began to search my face to understand my hesitation. Tomas was scared. However it had happened, he had come to need something from me. “I’m afraid I can’t,” I said finally, realizing that a request, coming from Tomas, could never feel like anything other than an obligation. I had always felt grateful for Gabriella’s needs, and before hers, my mother’s.

They were affirmation that through some unthinkable good fortune, these beautiful women and I were connected. The needs of both strengthened me, situated me more firmly in their lives – places I loved, and couldn't imagine leaving.

"Rose, I can't go to Canada." Gabriella says to me now. She looks at my thighs to avoid my face. I hope they will somehow change her mind. "Oriana is a mess. She has no one else to help her right now. She's having a procedure and needs to stay in bed for a few days." Gabriella reaches for my leg, which I move abruptly away from her. My hip does not like this.

"You should bring her my pain meds," I say. "Or, hey, have her come here. She can take over my appointments with Tomas." Gabriella lets me continue. "In fact, tell her to quit working. I'll put her on the family payroll."

This last one is mean, and Gabriella finally reacts.

"Jesus." She removes the plate of sushi from her lap and places it between us. She brings her head to her knees, and then turns her face in my direction. "I would do the same for you, if the situation were reverse."

"The situation *is* reverse."

"You're going to be *fine*. You're just scared."

"You suck," I say.

Gabriella does not flinch. "Warning," she says. "Bad hips may cause your partner to emotionally regress."

I say nothing, in part because it feels like someone – let's say Oriana – is stabbing my groin with a serrated fighting knife. But also, I find what Gabriella has just said to be kind of funny, and don't want that to show. She must see something, because she moves the plate of sushi, and comes closer. It occurs to me that if you are a baby, or a senior, for instance, the wishes of others are more freely imposed upon you, because, simply, you cannot move. If someone, your girlfriend with the lovely hair, say, wanted to put her arms around you, she could. No chance of fleeing, as you might have done for effect in the days of happier hips.

I sniff Gabriella's bicep. "Am I going to lose you?" I ask.

"No."

"And I should trust that why?"

“Oriana is in my past, Rose. I’ve moved on.”

A few days ago, I did an interesting thing. While Gabriella was away, I sat down at our little kitchen table with my briefcase. I pulled out one of the letters of recommendation that I’d found in the study trash can and had held on to, that Gabriella had forged. Official recommendations were usually written on University letterhead. This one was not; nor, I imagined, was the one Gabriella had decided was genuine enough to send to Lambda League. So, at our little table, I wrote on the top of the letter, in big fat writing unlike my own, “Please resend on letterhead.” I folded it up real neat and placed it in an envelope, Lambda League information in the return address. And then I took a drive to the post office, where I mailed the letter to the supposed recommender herself, Jillian Nge, at the University’s department of Cultural Anthropology.

The way I see it, Oriana’s not ahead by much. Your people’s unfamiliar ways only get you so far. Then, the fist-sized bruises you once left on your ex-girlfriend’s arms and back take precedence over the pretty visuals you’ve left in her mind: moisturizing a sister’s hair with homemade coconut oil, running barefoot two miles a day to deliver sweet-corn *arepas* to men in the fields. I’ve eaten my mother’s *creton* with my fingers, scooping it up from the ceramic bowl she painted herself; I’ve stood still in nor’easters, beside massive elms bent like candy-canes, my face to the sky, laughing at the rain’s sting, wearing nothing but hand-me-down clothing, and loving it. And I’ve passed my lips over places on Gabriella’s body that were once hurt.

And from what I’ve gathered – and from what a publicly-accessible online salary matrix confirms – University Archivists earn roughly the same as Senior Creative Designers at GM. Possibly a little less. If GM lets me go, I have a healthy 401k begging to be called on thirty years early. Gabriella *is* the sweet time in the sun I’ve been told to save for. Let me hold arthritic fingers to the keyboard, let me dress in knitted sweaters to tolerate cool office air; I’ve never presumed I wouldn’t work my way to the grave, just like my mother, just like the mother who came before her.

Gabriella can be comfortable with me.

But every once in a while you need insurance to get you through the tough times. And Jillian is a good woman. She will chastise Gabriella, she will tell her to withdraw the

fellowship application; but she will do nothing more. And Gabriella will come to me, in need.

“Tell me how you left Oriana,” I say.

Gabriella rubs her hand across my breastbone. She claims I have remarkable natural definition here. “Are you serious?” she says. “Again?”

“I’m *injured*,” I say.

Gabriella sighs. “She was away. On a research trip.”

“To study what? Domestic abuse in the socially-outcast household?”

“Variations in textiles along the Amazon.”

Gabriella was terrified, though Oriana would be gone for days. Classes had already started at UCLA; Gabriella was back in school, the first semester of a PhD program. Her first choice had been the University of Michigan, which she’d been accepted to, and which Oriana had talked her out of. “We could still be together,” Gabriella told her. “Don’t be ridiculous,” Oriana told her back. “Our life is here. In L.A.”

While Oriana was away, Gabriella called Michigan, as if from the trunk of a stolen car. Was it too late? She’d changed her mind and wanted to come. Yes she could start classes the following Monday. (It was a Thursday.) Yes she had a place to live. (She didn’t.) Yes, yes, and yes – whatever you need me to do. Gabriella went online and within the hour was roommate to three young male professionals living in the Kerrytown district of Ann Arbor. (Several months after this, my co-worker would throw a party, and I would enter this apartment.)

“I left that night,” Gabriella says. “I had to. Otherwise I wouldn’t have done it.” Everything that was hers in the house fit into one suitcase. She dressed in black.

I love what comes next. “Were you thirsty?” I ask.

She was. Gabriella filled one of Oriana’s engraved flasks, emptying a Speyside scotch. She left behind an unopened Highlander, which, ever since that first time, Gabriella had insisted they keep in the house.

“I can’t believe she let you,” I say.

“I was my own person, Rose.” I let this go, so we can get to my other favorite part.

Gabriella stood at the front door, holding her suitcase, sipping from the flask, as she waited for the cab to take her to the airport. She thought of the many hours she would

spend waiting in the terminal, of the long flight. She ran downstairs and grabbed the leather-bound copy of *Gulliver's Travels*, which she'd begun during Oriana's last cocktail party.

"Reappropriation of the oppressor's tools," I say. "At its best."

"I needed something to read," Gabriella tells me. "You're glorifying a random detail."

"See how alike we are?" I say.

I imagine Gabriella dashing through the chill night to her cab, Oriana's house behind her, and – in my expanded version – overtaken by violent flames. An elastic inexplicably snaps as she runs, and her hair dances in the wind. Our young heroine is neither relieved nor fearful as she moves toward her future. She knows, simply, that what lies ahead is proper, right.

Gabriella passes a hand over my stomach and lets it rest below my breasts. "You're a brat," she says.

I imagine walking up to the *auberge*. There is a wrap-around porch and shutters, the resonance of something I've known before. My Canadian sisters stand by the staircase and wait for me. I use my mother's cane to go to them. They encourage me with their calm smiles. They've never known me as anyone other than who I am now. The leg on my bad side is dead weight, and I wonder if I'll make it. Yet I am pulled forward by the certainty that inside, I will rest.