Little Starts

Rose Skelton

When my wife and I marry in autumn, the seasons are all wrong. On our Philadelphia rooftop, spinach sprouts in the heat of late September and in early October, basil flourishes in pots. Summer flowers—petunias, fuchsias, geraniums—gush from other people's window ledges. Tomatoes, fat and misshapen, line the counter of the vegetable shop across the street.

On the island in Scotland, where I am from, at this time of year I sleep under one, two, thick quilts, and rain slants sideways across the windows.

The shops are void of all summer fruit. There, it is the season I gather mushrooms from the woods, when the cool wet weather pulses black trumpets from the loam. Horn of plenty, birch bolete, chicken of the woods, cep.

But in Philadelphia, the days are a humid stench that won't let up. The woods, though I scour them, give up nothing to me.

The night before our City Hall wedding, we sleep with the windows thrown open. At 5 a.m., the bin lorry wakes us as it thunders past our bedroom. My wife, to-be, throws a leg into my sprawled crook, insists her body into the shape of mine so that her beating heart, tiny, hot, thrums against my scapula. I know I should use the American terms for things—trash, truck, fall—but it isn't a reflex yet. Only my wife understands me in this new strange country where I didn't mean to end up.

I hadn't dreamed of getting married either—I had watched my parents suffer their own twenty-four years before divorcing—and by the morning of our wedding I am forty. N., a poet, and I met in a writing program at grad school two years before, and were within days talking of a life together. She captivated me, the way she seemed to be one thing, but also another. She was brought to tears by blossoming trees, and by Marx. She complained of feeling cold, but her body burned with a heat that felt electric to touch. She had spent two years researching in a military special-forces training site, but she only wore cowboy boots, didn't own a rain jacket. She had published two books of poetry, but her poem tattoo had a punctuation error, something she showed me the first time we met, both of us laughing as she pulled up her T-shirt to show me her slender naked back. She didn't give a damn for convention, actively sought out the other. I had spent my life being bored by people, but of N., I never tired.

In time, I noticed that a change had come over me, a softness that grew as she burrowed into my life. People said I was *nicer* when I was with N. I started to like dogs, and children. I began to believe in myself, I wrote more. I learned to fight away the harsh words I had always tormented myself with.

At City Hall, my details are in the *groom* column, though we are to each other *wives*. A judge has us repeat the vows, *to have*, *to hold*, *till death*, *the end*.

In Scotland, my succulents sit on the windowsill of the flat I bought five years before. They overlook the bay, the boats, the seals slathered across the rocks. These plants that I grew from cuttings taken from friends around the island, brought to maturity from the smallest of snips: a leaf, a tiny bloom pinched from its host. The plants that now tumble in giant fat thumbs down the side of terracotta pots and beyond, below the windowsills: bear's paw, pork and beans, princess pine.

I left them without so much as a goodbye, only meaning to stay in the United States for a couple of months. Who knows in which season I will return.

I'd had it all planned out, the proposal, down to the finest detail, to be enacted at some future point. I was going

to buy an antique emerald ring—green, her favorite color—at an auction in Edinburgh, and then hide it in a smoked trout and wild garlic pesto sandwich and present it during a picnic on a clifftop overlooking the isles off the west coast of Mull. All of these things—the cliff, the sandwich, the isles—had become sacred to us because we had once made love on top of the same cliff during the same picnic. It seemed like the kind of place to offer such a declaration of love.

But I worried that the ring would fall down the cliff, or be swallowed, or that we would fall down the cliff. I imagined N. choking on a trout bone, or one jabbing her in the gum. I worried that the ring wouldn't fit, or that I'd choose the wrong shade of green. I worried that marriage wasn't for me, that I was made from my parents' own failures, that I was too bisexual, didn't only like women. I worried about leaving the island, this place that had been my sanctuary for five years, and I worried about living in the United States, about health insurance, about guns. I worried she'd suck me in, that I'd lose my marrow. I worried that I'd lose myself.

I had the sandwiches planned out, but the date of the proposal was always in some unreachable distance. N. wanted it, I knew, but I could never quite free myself from the thought that marriage might not be for me. Was I up to it? Did I dare hope for something so far from my skill set? I was clamped in a fear of my own making, unable to move forward, too in love to move back.

In the early days of my relationship with N—long distance, as I'd returned to Scotland after the writing program—I would set myself tests, meticulously tallying up the score in my mind. Sitting alone on the weir above the glassy skim of the Mishnish Lochs, I asked myself what I'd do if she fell into the water and wasn't able to swim. I'd jump in, of course, lift her up, drown myself if I had to. I imagined her standing on my back, my head a meter below the surface, taking in gulps of water instead of air. Ditto the lorry that came hurtling for her: I'd dash in front to save her. That's how much I love her, I'd tell myself, adding to the score card of feeling.

But on my solo hikes on the hill, sidestepping gorse and heather, I'd turn my phone off, not willing to be disturbed. Puffins fluttered overhead. N. wanted to speak every day, but I thought that twice a week was enough, preferring instead to write letters. On her family holiday, I asked if any other girlfriends hadn't made it all the way through the week. The tally sheet was in turmoil—I would have died for her, yes, but the closeness, it set off an alarm that rang in my stomach all night long.

For three months in the dead of winter of that first year together, we separated. I told myself I'd get over her, and I didn't. I took on far too many contracts—training investigative journalists around Africa in reporting skills—and woke from nightmares in strange hotel rooms caked in my own sweat. I slid into a darkness that deepened with every month. I went over the notches on my score sheet, wondering if I'd done the right thing, knowing I had not. When she wrote to say she hated

life without me, I was skeptical, because nothing had changed. Except maybe it had: I also hated life without her. I vowed to be better, to work harder. So did she, and she gave me space. I gave her closeness, things eased. We learned, eventually, the unique way that we each needed to be held: me a little gentler, her a little harder.

A couple of months before we went to City Hall, when marriage was still just a vague idea, I went to Rwanda to train a group of journalists. I made plans to visit N. in Philadelphia after the job. Then I planned to return to the island.

The day before I was to depart for the United States, on a high mountain pass, I came across a road accident, bodies sprawled across the tarmac. Climbing out of the bus in which I was traveling, I saw fresh blood pooling on the road, blood flooding eye sockets. I'd been trained in lifesaving—I am part of the Lifeboats, an ocean rescue crew on the island back home—and I know how to stop people from bleeding to death. My fellow bus passengers pushed back from the scene, and I too was terrified, but I know how to be useful to strangers. I ran toward the thing that frightened me, not away from it. I took my grandmother's handkerchief and I pressed it to a man's head, told him that it was going to be okay. I moved to the next, trying to stem that flow, and blood splattered across my arms. The casualties were loaded into a pick-up and taken to the hospital, my handkerchief still clasped in some man's bloody hand.

Back in the bus, my phone sounded, a text from N.

"It's 3 a.m.," she wrote. "I can't sleep. Are you ok?"

Her small hot body in bed in Philadelphia, no earthly way of knowing I needed her, but knowing all the same.

Afterward, in the hospital, post-exposure HIV medication as large as horse pills, drugs that made my body shake and my arsehole tighten like a screw. A friend, someone I had met during the accident, sat with me in the hospital and told me that during the Rwandan genocide, when he was a child, he had lived on the street for five years, eating scraps from the gutter, a toddler who somehow survived. Death was all around me. No, survival was all around me. I longed for N., I wished I were more brave. Why couldn't I stop resisting this remarkable thing we had found?

When I arrived the next day in the United States on a tourist visa, I only expected to stay for two months. N. came from Philadelphia to New York to meet me. It was September and stiflingly hot. A border agent asked me if I was carrying plants, if I was going to work, if I intended to marry a U.S. citizen. Even then I did not, not really, but the next day, while N. was meeting a friend, I went to a jeweler on Forty-seventh Street to look for an emerald ring. Just window-shopping, I told myself, and I told the man, and even though I didn't buy the ring, something had shifted in me. The accident had moved me to some kind of an edge.

That night we went out to a lesbian

bar in the West Village and grinded with the other butches and femmes under a glitterball. N. wore a low-cut waistcoat and no bra. We drank too much and kissed in full view, enjoying that rare feeling of safety among others. Things felt changed between us—looser, freer—as if I had been rattled loose from the fears that had kept me bound together.

Lying in bed the next morning, N's leg nudged into my corners, I found myself thinking again about marriage. I tried to fight it, this voice, I told myself there was no going back once it had escaped my mouth. I had not yet proved to myself that I was up to such a thing. But then I was crying, stammering about a wedding, and she knew what it was that I could not quite say, so she just said, *Yes*. There was no cliff, no trout sandwich, no ring, even. Just us.

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Back in Philadelphia, things move briskly forward. We find out that to return home to Scotland and apply for a fiancé visa for me there would mean a two-year wait, a two-year separation. A lawyer asks us if we have told anyone we intend to marry, if there is a ring, a text message announcing the news, Facebook. By now there is all of this—I went back and bought the emerald ring after all. He says we should get it done quickly and so we do. Six weeks later we are married at City Hall, and the next day, giddy with excitement, we take an unplanned trip to Atlantic City and walk on the deserted November beach where fisherman cast their hopeful lines. We call it our shotgun honeymoon, all dreams of an island wedding fizzled out, but we are joyful, relieved to no longer be divided by distance. I surprise myself by feeling calm, hopeful, happy—any doubts I worry I might have appearing nowhere on the horizon. We practice calling each other *wife* and it feels sweet in my mouth.

The Monday after we're married, we file our green card application. Our lawyer tells us we just have to wait. *Five months, seven months, a year, who knows. This buffoon in the President's office has put glue on the wheels.*

I can't go home to the island until I get my green card—without one, if I leave the country I won't be able to come back in again—and I can't work. I have in my suitcase only what I packed for Rwanda: some jeans, a summer dress, my Virginia Is for Lovers trucker's cap. Winter is coming but I didn't bring a coat. I have one book, my laptop, patches for a quilt I am stitching. I have brought nothing else from my life with me.

I tell the organization I work for that I can't make my next training job in

Thailand, that I won't be able to work for some time. *How long?* they want to know. *Three months*, I lie. I haven't been out of work since I was eighteen. As the months roll on, I will turn down contracts in Senegal, the Netherlands, Thailand again, Senegal twice more. I can't apply for any jobs, and I can't work in the States. It is not, as some people suggest, a great time to focus on my writing. I can't write a single valuable thing.

I text a neighbor on the island and ask her to go to my flat and take my succulents to her home. But she doesn't have enough space and so she leaves some of them behind—the bear's paw, the money plant, the ripple jade. They sit on the windowsill overlooking the street below, the people coming and going from the shops, my neighbors, my Lifeboat crew, my community. I wonder what will become of the left-over plants, if they will survive the harsh Scottish winter. I wonder if, by the time I get back, the town will have forgotten all about me.

That first week of marriage, my wife drives to her job in New Jersey and back, comes home exhausted from teaching. I try to find something valuable to do with the day—writing, cooking, reading—but I flail around, unable to concentrate, wishing she would come home sooner and hating the idea that I need her so much. When she arrives, she falls asleep watching *The Office*, her legs on my lap, and then she crawls the five feet to our bed and shuts the door. I continue to sew, I watch more television, and then she comes bleary-eyed to ask me if I can listen through my headphones. Our apartment is so tiny that there is nowhere to do anything alone. It's dark outside, and every other person I know is asleep in a time zone five hours away. I have nowhere to go and nothing to keep me occupied. The terror I feel is as big as the whole black ocean.

I have learned that to fold inward is to sink downward, so an hour later I force myself to go to her bedside, and I sit on the edge and gently shake her. *Wake up*, I beg, *just for an hour*. I have never known a need quite like it.

At first she says she is tired, and I know she has had the longest day, that none of this is easy for her either. *No*, I make myself say, my voice hovering over the precipice of rejection, *you don't understand. I can feel myself slipping.*

She sits with me while we watch television. We crack the pistachios we have been saving from a summer holiday in Greece when we first got together, the tender green nuts a reminder of easier times. It is the first time in our relationship that I have asked for her help, and it is the first time I have told anyone but a professional that I suffer from severe episodes of depression. It's only now, in marriage, that I'm able to let on how deep it can be.

When I was eleven, my parents sent me to boarding school. We were twenty girls, all younger than thirteen, most of us sleeping in one shared bedroom. I slept in the end bed, between the wall and my best friend, and after lights out we whispered stories and checked to see if our breasts were finally growing.

One day I was moved to another room with just two beds, and from then on I slept under a sloping roof, the ceiling running close to my nose. I shared the room with another girl I didn't know. We didn't become friends but we did understand that we were being punished. We had no idea what for.

I remained in boarding schools for the rest of my education, moving from one to another, and my memories of those years aren't always clear, though some things remain vivid. Once, during homework, I cried so much from homesickness that I wasn't allowed outside to play with the other girls. Instead I was forced inside the laundry cupboard and made to watch the sheets tumble around as they dried. A staff member developed an obsession with me; I discovered she was hoarding the letters I wrote home and stealing my underwear, keeping everything in a box under her bed. I couldn't tell my parents. *Home* became something distant, unreachable, a place that had not protected me.

I told myself I had to be better at being alone, because then life would be easier. Other girls grew into bullies, developed eating disorders, took drugs. I made myself tough. After school I moved to Australia, I lived in a tent, I drove across deserts. Then I moved to Senegal, became a journalist, lived there for fifteen years. Across West Africa I covered coups and cholera. I once got cholera. Depression dogged me everywhere I went.

I had a string of romantic relationships, nothing that ever stuck. I was on and off for seven years with one person, wasn't sad when it came to an end. I flirted with the idea of marrying a lover, was relieved when it didn't work out. I chose people who stayed at a distance, didn't really want me, weren't free to be mine anyway.

When I was thirty-five, after a severe bout of depression, I moved back to the Scottish island where my grandparents were from, where I had spent my childhood holidays roaming the mossy cragged hills. I reconnected with the nooks and crannies of those hills, tracing the paths through the forest where I had long ago looked for mushrooms, picking wild garlic from the banks to turn into pesto. I learned the names of the wildflowers that grew along the banks beside my deceased grandparents' cottage. One afternoon in late summer, I stripped naked and floated out from the pebbled shore of the loch, the same waters I had learned to swim in as a child. Overhead, the vast blades of sea eagles wheeled on the eddies of warm air. Below me, the pulsing globes of sea gooseberries bumped at my frigid skin. Nature engulfed me. I felt, for the first time in my life, not debilitatingly alone.

Amid a tiny, remote population, I committed to being single, dedicated myself to my writing, my work. I moved from my grandparents' cottage into the town. Slowly, I came to know my neighbors, learned to rely on them for help. It is difficult to survive in a small rural town without being part of the pulsing organism that is community.

I trained in ocean rescue, just as my grandfather had done, learning how to helm, how to make fast, how to splice rope. I trained in casualty care, I held my first dead body. I learned what it felt

like to be in a crew, a community that would both hold and ask you to hold. I found myself in a place where I was both needed and could need. In my flat on the harborfront, I grew succulents on my windowsill, I invited my neighbors around, I made a home. I learned how to be held by a place.

When I become trapped in Philadelphia, awaiting my green card, it's like all those years in the bedroom with the sloping ceiling. Except my wife is here, and we've chosen this. Well, not quite this. Without my home, my work, my Lifeboat crew and my friends, I find myself suddenly and completely lost. The things that kept me afloat, they've all bobbed away on some strange ocean current.

All I have is my wife, whom I desperately need, but wish upon anything that I didn't. The thought that she might drop me, though I know in my bones that she will not, is too heavy for me to bear.

Summer turns violently to winter, and still, no sign of my green card. My new in-laws give me old jumpers, a ski jacket, some mittens. I trawl thrift shops for winter clothes. Everywhere we go we tell people we just got married, and strangers give us gifts: car rental upgrade to a bright red convertible, employee discount at the vegetable shop, drinks, a house plant. Climbing into bed every night beside my wife is the most delicious thing on earth.

In November I go for biometric processing—fingerprints, retinas, green card application necessities—at a giant warehouse unit in north Philadelphia. On the way home we go to the roller-skating rink. We are constantly looking for ways to cheer me up.

That winter's government shutdown slows everything to a halt. Workers go on furlough, offices close. Our lawyer tells us not to send the Citizen and Immigration Service anything important because they will lose it, that we have to wait to hand over my syphilis and TB test in person. I am waiting for an FBI background check, but the USCIS website gives a waiting time for my documentation of twenty-six months. The immigration forums, to which I am now a seasoned visitor, say this is incorrect, but no one knows for sure. I promise myself I won't look at that page again, though my mouse hovers impatiently over the refresh button.

I am constantly aware of how much harder this would be if we didn't have English as a first language, if we were trying to navigate this without a lawyer. I can only imagine how much harder it would be to be a person of color and in this situation. But when people tell me that because I am British I will get the green card easy-peasy, I grow irate, because it is true and it is not true. None of this is easy. We have the resources for an immigration lawyer, without whom a mistake in the labyrinthine application process could throw up months of delays, and with our educations we are more able to navigate the system. The advantages of our whiteness and our class are clear to us at every stage. But our lawyer tells us that being gay could go either way: we get an immigration

officer who takes it as a tick in the diversity box, or we get one who thinks we are sinful. *It's all the luck of the draw*, he shrugs. Like everyone else in the queue, we must wait, cross our fingers, see who pulls our file from the top of the stack.

At the supermarket, the cashier tells me that although she has a green card, she doesn't go home to Cambodia in case they put her country on the list while she is gone. She hasn't seen her children in two years. For the hundredth time I feel lucky, but when I tell her I am waiting for my travel and work documents, she nods, says she feels sorry for me, hopes they will arrive soon. She gives me a coupon for money off my shopping.

The spinach I planted in IKEA storage crates on our roof terrace in September now lies under three inches of ice. During the polar vortex, I take some of the winter clothes I've been given downtown and hand them out to homeless people. Coming from a country with socialist sensibilities, I expect to find the police checking on the people huddled under blankets in doorways—what I would likely see back home—but instead I see them harassing a young Black man, asking him where he got the TV he is carrying.

The people addicted to meth who come downtown from north Philly are nowhere to be seen, and I worry about them, imagining their frozen corpses lying under the bridges where they live, conscious that I—living in a souped-up neighborhood that once housed blue-collar workers—am part of the housing problem. The inequality of this city blazes through me. Everything feels overwhelming, out of control, enraging, and I walk around the city in below-zero temperatures, my eyeballs burning in the cold, snot freezing in streaks across my face.

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At home, we huddle up under a blanket while I painstakingly stitch the patches of my quilt, bright sunshine blaring through our windows, which I have covered in plastic film. My wife makes soup from the wild mushrooms my neighbor has sent from Mull. I have never been so cold in my life. A friend in Chicago tells me that at night she can hear what sounds like someone banging on her window pane with a hammer, but it's an ice quake, where the ground has frozen so deeply that it has cracked.

I think of how, on the island, I always know the direction of the wind, the coming of rain, the spring's first unfurling of fern. During winter, I keep the fire burning all night long because it's the only heating I have, and the fetching, chopping, and drying of wood has

the intensity of a full-time job, one that gives rhythm to the day. When spring comes—the first primrose of the year—it'll be another month before the sun will truly warm your face. The last porcini mushroom—like a bread roll growing on the forest floor—spells the coming once more of winter.

In Philadelphia, we know none of these things, and my days are marked only by the regularity with which I check the mailbox for my immigration documents. In early winter, I check daily, because the disappointment doesn't yet slay me, but as winter begins to wane, and the early months of spring come around, I check only once every three days. By March, I stop checking altogether. Instead, I wait for our mailman to knock when there's something to receive. I listen for his voice as he zigzags down our street, knocking on doors, calling out greetings, and then I listen as he passes our door, nothing for us today.

The apartment in Philadelphia is sparse, my wife until recently a PhD student, forever in temporary spaces. She owns six plates, some mugs, an ornate emerald-green bowl that once belonged to her grandfather. Her furniture is fit for one. She wasn't expecting so suddenly to be living with me. She owns an aloe plant that a neighbor gave her, but it has received too much water, or not enough light. From Circle Thrift on Frankford Avenue, we acquire wine glasses, a cake tin, an antique walnut desk from someone else's life. I cannot bring myself to buy the things I already own—slippers, woolly hat, hot water bottle. I am cold the entirety of winter.

The first succulent cutting I steal is from an art shop on Front Street, a hen-and-chicks that grows in concentric rings like a fist holding secrets. I could have asked the shop attendant—it would have been polite—but in the moment I feel unable to reach out, especially to strangers. I fear them saying no. And so while my wife scopes the art, I reach in and take a tiny shoot, nipping it with my fingernails so that soil cakes my cuticles. I cradle the cutting in my fist until we are outside in the street, where I unfurl it under the El train overpass. A train thunders overhead.

Succulents aren't like other plants, whose woody stems you'd need to cut with a knife. They are mostly made of water, and can grow in the unlikeliest of situations. A bloom, a section of stem, even a single leaf: if you lay it on the windowsill in the sun, it will eventually send out roots looking for water, having used up its inner reserves. When planted, the succulent will grow again, a new life flourishing where once there was nothing. It is a project that requires care, patience, and time. You must take it at its weakest, send it to an edge, and then bring it to life in a new form.

Once home from the art shop, I lay the cutting on the windowsill in the sun and I wait—a method that has always worked for me. First it droops, becomes a little wilted, and then its two tiny leaves begin to shrivel. Over the next few weeks, it loses its shine, its color, and its sense of shape. It is painful to watch, and there are times when I

think it is dead. Then its stalk begins to buckle, its leaves closing in, shrinking inward, nothing left to sustain it, and the temptation to give it water is overpowering, so hard to watch something shrivel at your own hand. But you must hold your nerve, not give in to impulse. You must give it the time it needs.

One morning, I see that my tiny stolen being has sent out a root, two roots, beetroot-red and frail like the thinnest of threads. They emerge from the base of the severed stalk, ripe and curious, unmistakably alive. They are, as my wife writes in a poem later that spring, like tiny wandering mouths, and at breakfast the feeling that I am not dead overwhelms me. I fill a jam jar with soil, and place it on the windowsill. I feed the tiny frail plant a little water every day, its leaves plumping so that its stalk can barely carry its own self.

When my period comes, I give the plant a dilution of my own iron-rich blood, remembering the times I watched my mother mix bone-meal into water to keep her garden alive when I was young. As the months move on, I gather more cuttings, taken from coffee shops, from tattoo parlors, from other people's homes, and I give them my blood too. The succulents become the thing I must care for, that I must curate, grow, and give succor to. My wife and I call them *little starts*. They are the only thing I have managed to achieve the whole damn winter and I spend hours at the windowsill, watching for signs of growth, for a new leaf on one of the more established plants, for new roots on one of the recently severed. They need me, no, I need them. We keep each other fed.

Once a week, I talk online with my therapist, my computer screen a glimpse into his life on the island. Behind him, a window which brings me the weather: the darkness of Mull afternoons, the raging sideways of the wind, the sudden glimmer of the sun when the clouds have blown away. When I have not worked for three months he reduces my fee. He says I remind him of a caged lion: well fed, well watered, showered with love, but its mane falling out all the same.

The anger that seethes in me has to go somewhere, and in the darkest times it goes to my wife. After all, this is because of her, I hear myself say. Not her fault, exactly, but I am tormented by the thought that she might not have done the same for me. I am the one to have given everything up. I had forged a life for myself where I was independent, self-employed, able to go anywhere, but this ability is the very thing that has caught me in this trap.

N. and I go around and around about this—the things that tie her so tightly to the country, versus the things that seem looser for me. Her large, close family versus my smaller, disconnected one, her need for them versus my need for solitude. My need for nature seems so thin when placed on the table. She never can come up with a plan for how we might go back to my home, and I know that the island cannot accommodate us both. She is a university professor; our island only has one high school.

I know I cannot take her to this place, and yet, I want to hear it as part of an offering, proof that she would do it if she could.

So I am stuck, no chips on the table, nothing with which to bargain. Everything feels gone from my hands. And this person is the one who has carried me here. These thoughts choke me as we rattle around in our tiny, freezing apartment, she working hard at her job, me tending frantically to my succulents. And still, I know I am better for her: so held, so loved, so many ways I am cherished. I am so confused by the anger I have for this person whom I love absolutely the most.

Without a Social Security number, I am unable to get a bank account, car insurance, a car. I crave time on my own. I buy a book of hikes but the mountains of Pennsylvania look more like small brown hills to me, and one must drive for hours to see them. I join the gym, but the girls with swinging ponytails screech at a volume I can't stand. The local parks are small muddy parcels that do not wear me out. Nothing seems to be the thing I want to do. My depression has the whole of my body to run free.

I used to keep a list in the back of my diary that included these things: *take a walk*, *go for a swim*, *eat green vegetables*, *play music with someone*. When the darkest times took hold, I would run through the list and do everything on it, even when I didn't want to. Especially when I didn't want to. When I met N., I stopped transferring the list to the new year's diary, naively believing the worst of these times were behind me.

I tend to my plants—burro's tail, flaming Katy, pig's ear, plush—and I feed them my blood every month. But N. and I notice that my spirit, at a flat zero throughout the month, plummets into the negative on the days when I am menstruating. A minor thing will shake me, no sustenance to keep myself held up, and we'll fall into a fight that lasts all the way through the night.

We rage, and it passes. When she sleeps, I lie there looking at her, wondering how she can close her eyes when things are so frightening. My self-hatred rises like vomit, a bile that lingers in my throat until dawn. I cannot let myself reach her. And then she wakes—that softness and worry in her face—and her hand has been outstretched this whole time. All I have to do is take it.

She stays in bed with me, my wife, blows off work, tells them she is sick. I know she is worried I'll kill myself, or go missing. She reads me an Alice Munro story, and I fall asleep to the soft hum of her voice. She offers me tea, a walk, a biscuit. Eventually we go outside, and I hold on to her arm as if I am sick. The world feels bright and frightening, a shockingly new place to be. We sit in the park and share a bagel with capers and cream cheese, watch the tattooed parents with their kids. We don't say it, but we both wonder to ourselves: When will my green card come, when can I go home? When will this whole ordeal leave us be?

In my desperation I steal cuttings from everywhere: the tip of a dangling fishhook from the Milk Crate Cafe on Girard, a stem of purple-heart from the home of someone who invites

us for dinner, though we barely know her. I make these thefts in anger at this city that has held me captive. At the party of an acquaintance, I take a stem of string of pearls from the woman's bedroom where we have been directed to leave our coats, and on the way out to the street, I take the maroon-edged leaf of a fang plant while my wife keeps watch at the door. At a giant Lowes on the New Jersey Turnpike, I take a section of burro's tail that has fallen to the floor, because I am filled with the desperate desire to make something good out of this place. At the revolving doors, I can feel the crosshairs of security cameras at my back, but they're not on the lookout for people who look like me. Still, I think about my FBI background check, the results still pending. Would it be so awful to be sent away from this place?

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One night at IKEA, the empty parking lot is cast in a bleak skim of ice. The wrecked carcasses of ships creak across the Delaware River. I only came to buy candles, but instead of going straight to that section, I take a cart and a giant yellow bag and, as if I am here to select a whole new bedroom, I walk the entire length and breadth of the store. I take in the clean, compact living spaces, the kitchens with their dangling pots, these homes where there are no emotions yet. I am filled with the feeling of the alternate life I could be living, one where I am free to travel and free to work and free to be the person I feel deep down I must somewhere still be.

The feeling of not wanting to go back to our apartment, to this life that is suddenly mine, is so overwhelming that I sit outside in my wife's car as the temperature drops around me. I watch the shipwrecks silhouetted against the dusky pink sky, the swirls of ice blowing around the tarmac in a delicate wind-whipped dance. My thighs tingle and numb. I don't know how to talk about what is happening to me anymore. There are only so many times I can tell N. that I miss my home and I miss my life. There is nothing new to say.

In my cupped hand, the single withered leaf of a California sunset that I had taken on my way through the plant section. I desperately don't want to take it back to the apartment I share with my wife. I want nothing but to go home, to the place where I am from.

We do not fall apart and in our apartment on the corner of Norris and Tulip, we make the best of these sparse times. I finally finish the quilt that I have been sewing—hexagonal patches of browns and beige that my mother started in 1975 and never completed—and while N. is at work I stitch in the final touches, a

bright red border to give it some cheer. I learn to make new kinds of food—huevos rancheros, bagels, beer cheese—and, living on one salary, we stay home and drink boxed wine, huddle together under the finished quilt. We nestle into this time together, despite it all, maybe because of it all, and we grow closer. I learn, incrementally, to let my wife hold me.

For my birthday, N. surprises me with a scrapbook of letters from the people I love the most—my best friends from London, my oldest friend from South Africa, well-wishes from the Lifeboat crew, a poem from my next-door neighbor. *See*, she says, *see how much people love you?* I can't tell her how painful it is to read, how uncomfortable it makes me that so many people were tasked to do this thing. I read it in two sittings, and cry throughout. I see the love, and I understand that it's for me. Somehow, though, I cannot breathe it in.

I tend to my cuttings, transposing them to larger pots when they become too cramped, cutting them back when they become leggy, moving them into the sun as it turns around the corner of the building. I watch for new shoots, hoping for those recently acquired to show signs of life, and become frantically excited when one of my little starts sends out roots.

The windowsills are full now, and so I put up shelves and place the more established plants in old coffee cans, their leaves tumbling from the edge of the shelf, searching for light, strengthened by my monthly offerings. We have twenty, thirty different varieties of succulent and trailing plant by now, and I know where each one came from: this one from the cafe on East Passyunk, this one from the gay bookshop where we didn't have to think before kissing each other hello. I remember every mood I harbored when I took the cutting: the plants become a holder of our time in this city.

We go on overnight trips on the spur of the moment, staying in the worst kind of budget motels. In the Poconos, N. drops me at the foot of a mountain on a bright Sunday morning and I bound up to the fire tower, weeks of kinetic energy unwinding like a spring. On the way back to Philly, we eat cinnamon donuts from a farm store, and stop at a giant Staples to buy a binder to hold our married-couple paperwork. In Atlantic City, some tipsy gamblers ask us who we are to each other: just best friends, or what? We pet a homeless woman's dog, and walk arm in arm along the cold beach. These moments of just the two of us, they are the lifelines that keep me going.

One weekend, N buys us tickets to the aquarium to see the giant Pacific octopus, its legs swarming across the glass of its dark, benthic tank. Afterward, we sit on a bench in the wind that whips down the Delaware River and eat the sandwiches we packed at home. We watch this dark brown slug of a river running through Philadelphia's industrial wasteland. I chew my way through the sandwich, thinking how dry the bread, how synthetic the cheese. I long for my own sourdough bread, and think of the yeast starter I kept alive for so

many years, now dead in my fridge on the island. This is my new life, I keep on telling myself, and I try to find beauty in it—aquariums! square-dancing! poetry readings!—but I cannot quite get myself there.

Spring comes in a surprising flurry. Where there have been naked gray branches and the sideways slip of sleet, suddenly there is bloom: cherry, crabapple, hawthorn. Petals litter the road, gum up windscreen-wiper blades. Blossoms fly in our hair. In April, we walk around in T-shirts and grass grows in tufts along the muddy banks of the park. I have adjusted to this new state, I have stopped resisting it. I live in limbo now.

N. has been on the academic job market for three months, and I watch as she prepares for interviews at universities in Georgia, California, Texas. I take her boots to the cobblers for reheeling and I nip the protruding baby of a spider plant on my way out, fold it triumphantly into my pocket. Since I'm still unable to work myself and N.'s job is coming to an end, our entire future is in the hands of academic selection committees. As the interviews come and go I imagine our lives in Los Angeles, Milledgeville, Dallas, googling rental prices in each of them to see which is most likely to yield a garden.

Eventually N. is offered a job in Dallas, and it feels a triumph—we have some kind of a future. When we go to visit the city, the wind blows burning hot through our hair. The university offers me a provisional job too, lecturing in the creative writing department. We don't tell them I don't have papers to work legally in the country. But we're not worried; things feel ready to change. We know it, somehow. Spring has brought it in the air.

When we arrive back in Philadelphia, the trees have given up their petals to the wind and the whole neighborhood is encircled with flying white blossom, no longer the sad brown of winter. Blossom bashes at our faces. On our doorstep, N. asks me if I want to check the mailbox, and I don't know how we know, but we know. When I find my Social Security card inside, my permit to work and to travel, we stand there and cry for the longest time. *It's over* is the only thing I can say.

We have so many plants by the time N. and I leave Philadelphia that we give them away to anyone who will take them. There goes the spider plant from the cobbler, there goes the hanging plant N. bought me from that fancy place on Frankford, which never yielded its promised pink flowers. We advertise on a local Facebook forum and I leave them on the doorstep for people to collect because I can't bear to tell them why we're giving them away. Leaving is a triumph, yes, but the year has been a devastation.

We are left with just the small treasures: the fishhook I took from the Milk Crate Cafe, the purple-heart from the woman who had us over for dinner. The bear's paw from the tattoo parlor on Memphis, and the dangler from that house party around the corner from the El Bar. We pack our tender little starts

into N.'s car and drive them to her parents' house in the suburbs, to be looked after for the summer while we move. There's a whole life on the backseat, everything that I own in this country, the two of us ready to give them a new home.

But by the time we leave for Dallas, most of our succulents have died: overwatered, underfed, insufficient surveillance for the tiniest sign that they are unhappy. One by one I shed them into the bushes behind my in-laws' suburban garden, at each discarding feeling that I am throwing a bit of Philadelphia and the year that we have had away. I don't want to carry any of it with us.

In Dallas, cacti are the thing: pencil cactus, queen of the night, old lady. Prickly pear grow alongside the rubbish-strewn tram lines, great fat paddles that sprout like mouse ears from the thinnest and driest of terrains. On a visit to a new friend's house she takes me onto the porch and hands me a leaf of prickly pear that she has taken from its host. *Stick this in the ground and it will grow*, she says, and I am awash with wonder that we have a garden and that we have friends and, most of all, that I have N.

More than once I have asked myself if the violent wrenching with which I left the island was the only means by which I was ever going to leave—if, left to my own devices, I might have stayed and never known the pure pleasure that deep commitment to another person brings. The island will take me back, as it has done throughout my life again and again, but in N., there is a chance to see what kind of life I can lead, one where I'm not always at my own storm-bound helm.

I leave my paddle of prickly pear lying in the yard outside our house and when I go to pick it up, I am unable to move it, so securely it has fastened itself to the ground. While I wasn't looking, it has sprouted roots from its curved back and begun to grow in the dry, rocky soil. I leave it there, and don't give it another thought. It will grow larger, sprout more paddles, flower, and then fruit. We can even eat the leaves. It will become, with time and with patience, a whole new life of its own.