

GLORIA MENDOSA

*THE START OF SOMETHING*

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He stretched the stiffness from his muscles. Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, he rolled his head from side to side. He pressed his fingers to the back of his neck, trying to ease the frustration from his body. The ticking of the steel-rimmed clock came back into his mind, recycling the dead minutes which had passed unnoticed.

He shut his eyes, opened them, shut them again. He knew nothing was working. It hadn't been working for years. He felt rigid and remote, like a patient laid out on a table waiting for some vague ending.

He pressed his thumbs into his temples. The room seemed to shrink and the sounds from the street outside swelled like a vacuum and rolled back with the flicker of a forty-watt bulb. He saw the page. Lamplight fell across his face, shining electric pale. He wore no expression.

He fumbled for matches in the near-darkness. For a moment his hands weren't his own. He had the vague sense that they were numbed, etherized, out of his control. He lit a cigarette and inhaled. He saw the fire cut a red hole in the dark and the smoke hover teasingly on the air. His fingers twitched, receptors of some forgotten feeling: he thought of muscle memory, slow stagnation. The day he moved into the apartment he had nearly fallen carrying the wooden trunk up the stairs. It was too big and he had to unscrew the hinges and take the door off. The first thing he had done was open the window and let the wind blow in through the empty room. Three years of a twenty-eight year blur and now looking out the same window he heard the clock and felt the metronome march of slow death. It was the vomit of cheap poetry.

His gaze lingered on the streetlights. The city was no longer the same and the more he thought about it, the more he felt that he was living out his youth in the wrong place. To him, each hour that passed was another life unlived and every night he hoped that he would wake up the next morning years away from this place. He wished that he could explain these feelings away but sometimes he felt nothing at all. There was no cold lump in the back of his throat. That belonged to somebody else. His mouth was dry and wordless.

she held his hand and it was cold and warm all at once and he remembered smiling this is it she said and he said it was everything that he had been waiting for and she said

He rubbed the stiffness from his eyes but it was in his fingers still and he thought that this might go on forever.

His fingers twitched again. A bit of ash fell from the tip of the cigarette, scattering across the page. He saw footprints in the ashes, crow's feet. The incendiary stain of words unsaid. Bile creeping up the back of his throat. He almost laughed.

Leaning back in the chair, tilting as far back as he could, he exhaled. He watched the smoke rise to the ceiling. He sat back up. He enjoyed the creaking sound the chair made as its joints bent back into place.

Scratching his head, he pushed the lamp away and hoped that he might see something. He saw only a darker shade of nothing. He wondered what had happened in so many short years, sifting through possibilities and always circling the thing he knew for certain. He thought of something else. He thought of the story. He'd had the idea for some time but he just couldn't fit it into words. It was a good story: the grey-haired photographer, unfaithful, hiding it from his wife, always using the company car so that it would never seem like anything more than business, which in a way it was.

He pressed the butt of the cigarette into the steel ashtray. The curling smoke made him think of sewer grates in winter. He thought of the cold, empty feeling at the pit of his stomach. It had taken him an hour to drag the trunk into the bedroom. By the time he had moved all the boxes into the apartment it had begun to snow, and he remembered walking through the streets, leaving footprints in the fresh powder. He stopped for espresso at the corner café. It snowed so heavily that he couldn't follow his own footprints back to the apartment. They were buried by the drifting snow.

Lighting another cigarette, he walked over to the wall opposite the window. He realized that he still hadn't filled the other half of the bookshelf. He ran his fingers over the worn spines of the books. He touched each one, consciously lingering over the books he had never read. He remembered somebody saying once that a book unread was not a book.

He pulled a bound hardcover from the shelf. It felt heavy in his hands. When he opened it, he heard the spine crack and the book opened to the same page. The tickets were creased and yellowed. He didn't like having the book on the shelf, and if the trunk was still around he might bury it there and forget about it. He held the cigarette to his mouth and inhaled again. He tucked the tickets back into the book and reinserted it between the others. There is a photographer. He takes photos of babies but he didn't always. In the beginning he works for a newspaper, taking pictures of politicians, boat races, traffic accidents. He grows older and older until he thinks finally that success has passed him by. And then one day he takes a photograph of newborn twins sleeping opposite one another like a yin and yang and somebody notices. The photographer meets his wife in the same maternity ward four years later. He is already famous. She is a young nurse and when she sees him placing babies into hollowed out fruit she falls in love. They marry in May and by the following April she wants to have a baby.

He looked out the window. He felt the cold through the glass. A dog limped out under the flickering streetlight, white against the black asphalt. He saw it in the light and then the darkness and he thought about the old poem—the corpse and the hungry dog. He inhaled deeply and the smoke stung the back of his throat.

the train pulled away and as he watched it disappear into the long grey of the station she was still there and they walked together to the taxicab cotes-des-neiges passed them like a painting and he was only watching one thing and he was looking at nothing all at once the hotel was bigger than he remembered and when she whispered in his ear he couldn't quite

The cigarette was a half-line of ash. He moved over to the ashtray and tapped it out. The hollow feeling was still there, the hard thing inside his stomach. He wished that he could turn it into something. He wondered if maybe he could have changed it, challenged it, moulded it into something fertile. More poetry. He drew a long breath. The cigarette smoke filled his mouth. He exhaled through his nostrils.

He remembered his first weekend in the apartment. His neighbours came over and threw a housewarming party. They brought cold salads and Beaujolais. He remembered the half-sweet taste of the wine and the way a small sip filled his entire mouth. He remembered the way it lingered on the lips. He got drunk and tried not to talk but she took it from the shelf and when he realized that he had to say something, the silence separated and he read for fifteen minutes. That night it didn't snow and when he walked back from the café he followed his footprints home.

He heard the clock ticking. He was back in the room, thinking about a present that felt just outside of time. The cigarette smoldered and died. He thought about lingering things and the smoke hanging on the air like perfume. He thought about the photographer. He works almost exclusively with babies and he can't see himself raising one. Despite the fourteen years between them he tells his wife that they are both still young and that he will think about it. His photographs are displayed in galleries in Toronto, New York, Amsterdam. The photographer travels every month and his wife still insists that she wants a child. He flies to Chicago where three babies have all survived the same illness. He ties a blue ribbon around them and takes photographs. He invites the publicist for dinner at the hotel bar and then for drinks in his room. The photographer travels to Vancouver, San Francisco, Lyon. He takes a pediatrician to lunch, a makeup girl to the pub. Every time he does this, he reminds himself how much he loves his wife. He and a lighting technician have sex in a nursery while two one-year-olds in matching zebra stripes look on in wonder. This continues for five years. The photographer's wife has suspicions. When he checks his messages, he hears her voice, but he starts to forget her face. This makes things easier when he is away. Whenever he returns home, little is spoken between the photographer and his wife. He asks how things are at the hospital and she asks how things are in Paris. He doesn't tell her that he is having regular sex with a red-headed stewardess. He doesn't have to.

He sat back in the chair and readjusted the lamp. Outside, a truck drove past but he did not pay attention to the sound.

He clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to stimulate the memory of some prior function. He felt extensions of his own body fading vaguely away and he tried to think back to a time when he wasn't bothered by muscle cramps and light bulbs. He thought about riding the bus and the weight of borrowed books, the wind blowing his scarf against his face and the sound of a key turning in a lock.

Another truck drove by and he thought about sharpening pencils. He remembered making coffee in the morning and leaving notes and when he thought about the way dust collects on an unmoved thing he couldn't remember the last time he had heard a joke. He thought about chopsticks and microwave popcorn and backgammon and maxi pads. Once he had loved the vanity, the gluttony of taking it all for granted, and now all he could do was try to get the bad taste out of his mouth.

the room looking out over the river and the boats going by working until the sun died and washed everything away plucking a flower from the gardens and when he gave it to her looking back out over the water she placed it in her hair and the way she said things looked at night and holding the door he almost

The match lit and the fire swelled and subsided. He thought about touching it to the tip of the page, watching the bone white nothing curl back in on itself, shrinking

with the black heat. He lit his last cigarette and dropped the match into the ashtray. He thought about meter and rhythm. His foot was tapping and when he noticed it he tucked it under the chair. His shoulders were sore and his stomach was tight and he pictured in his mind a knot impossible to untie. He spun halfway around in the chair, thinking about the exaggeration of time and another night wasted.

He rose and walked around the desk. He leaned forward and let his head drop. He felt the wood with his hands and remembered that it was harder getting the trunk down the stairs but it was easier to unscrew the hinges the second time. He couldn't decide if he wanted to move the desk further from the window now that it was colder. He wondered why he had never thought of this before. He slowly pushed the desk across the floor. He wondered if the desk had grown bigger or if he had shrunk somehow and he thought that if he ever decided to leave, everything would be more difficult to move.

He liked where the desk was and he considered moving the bookshelf but decided against it. He thought about the photographer driving home late from the airport. The lights of an oncoming truck blind him momentarily and he fails to see the roadwork ahead. The car hits a pile of debris and flies two feet off the ground into the next lane. The truck collides with the car, tearing off the hood and most of the front end, sending a door spiraling fifty feet in the opposite direction. The windshield shatters and the airbags explode. It takes the emergency crews two hours to free the photographer and insurance investigators find a license plate three days later in a ditch.

He looked out the window again. The dog was no longer there but a car sat idling on the street corner. The woman inside was reading a newspaper. Her breath clouded the windows and his breath clouded the window and he saw the exhaust fumes curling and he remembered when the art store at the end of the street caught fire. In his mind he could see the red flames rising, fueled by easels and brushes and oils and all the canvasses eaten away, the red brick blackened and the old woman who owned the store weeping as she watched it consumed by the fire, spouting white clouds into the air, serpents of smoke climbing into the sky for ever and ever.

He saw her open the door from the inside and a young man holding a bottle of wine got in. The door closed and they drove away. He heard the sound follow them until it was gone.

He turned back to the desk but he didn't want to sit. He wanted to taste something sweet. He looked at the clock and he couldn't decide how late it was. He thought about wine and the heavy way his words moved through it. He thought about being drunk and the cheap ease it gave conversation. He thought of all the vile tasting questions.

trying to walk through the crowd and shaking hands with everybody and the way she pinned up her hair and he showed her the edition displayed at the table and she put her arms around him the large man with the flower on his lapel asked when the next one was coming but he couldn't

His hands were cold and he rubbed them together. He decided that he didn't want to drink wine. He looked at the bookshelf. He put on a sweater and walked back and forth over the floorboards, thinking about the best ones. He put his hand on the shelf, feeling the dust under his fingers.

He remembered how the wind had stopped blowing long enough for him to move the trunk and the boxes down to the street. He felt that he should have said something but the wind started up again and he didn't. When he went back up to the apartment it felt as big as it did in the beginning. The photographer wakes up in the hospital. His wife is standing at the foot of the bed. He is bandaged all over and he can't feel anything below the waist. She tells him that she checked the chart and even if it were still there it would be useless. He tries feebly to lift his arms. She says that with luck he may regain use of his upper body. She tells him that she's leaving him and that the nights alone, the smell of perfume that wasn't hers, listening to all the distortions and half-truths were one thing but how could she stay if she was never going to have a baby. After all, like he said, she was still young.

He closed his eyes. He could hear himself breathing and he thought about being asleep and being awake and that slow space in between. He thought about wool blankets. He reached for a cigarette. He opened the empty box and then he remembered and he could hear the clock ticking again. He grabbed his jacket and when he turned off the lamp he didn't notice the white go dark. He was thinking about the taste of espresso.

coming in out of the rain her hair was wet you didn't have to give me this he said and she told him to sign the first page and she said it meant the start of something he kissed her she was looking back to him and he realized at that moment that if beauty lay in things unsaid

He closed the door behind him. He put the key into the lock, turning it until he heard the deadbolt slide, and then he put the keys in his pocket. He turned and, bracing himself against the wind, started to walk down the street. The street light flickered and he saw the light go dim and then bright and dim, dimmer, bright again. He thought about potato salad and watercolours and hairpins and boxes. He thrust his hands into his pockets and he could see his breath hang heavy on the cold air.

It was going to snow any day.