

(publication forthcoming)

Blight

a short story

by Kate Reed Petty

We call it the “murder basement.” Part of the black comedy of our home renovation, which has dragged on for two years now—and there is still so much to fix in our house. We’ve pulled up the second-floor carpet but not yet laid down hardwood. The half-bathroom needs tile before we can put in the sink. In the kitchen, the cabinets are new, but instead of counters we have sheets of loose plywood; we’ll pour concrete countertops to replace them, one day. We see a bright future for this house, and so we don’t mention the gray present. We don’t talk about the cracks in the plaster. We sidestep the nails working their way out of the floor. We are honest only about the basement.

“We’re never going to touch the basement,” I say to my Dad on the phone on Sundays, when he starts telling me that Andrew and I are going about the house all wrong.

“If you fix up the basement as a workshop, it’ll speed everything else,” Dad says.

I always change the subject. Because really, truly, we are never going to touch the basement. It’s got thick concrete walls, and the only light comes from two bare bulbs with hanging brass chains. The floor is beige vinyl with burgundy stains, like a serial killer’s polyester shirt. We call it the “murder basement” and we never go down there.

But yesterday a little girl asphyxiated in North Carolina, and everyone is checking their basements for mold, so down we go.

I ask Andrew to go first.

"Obviously," he says, smirking. He kicks aside the dish towels we stuffed into the space under the basement door to keep the heat in last winter.

I want to say, *don't make fun of me*, but he's already descending, ducking his head to dodge the low ceiling over the basement stairs. The lights are already on (Andrew must have forgotten to turn them off last time, but I won't start a fight now). I get to the bottom step but don't go any further. As Andrew walks around the room, I look at the vinyl flooring with its burgundy stains.

"Looks okay," I say. There are ancient rusted paint cans stacked against the far wall, storage shelves with decaying cardboard boxes left by the previous owners, glue traps covered in dead katydids. Nothing out of the ordinary. It's the murder basement, same as always. I hate it down here.

"Weird," Andrew says.

"What is it?" I say.

Andrew just stares at the wall.

Then I realize. The walls of our basement are whiter than they should be. The color is an unremarkable white, like the default paint of a rental apartment, and I wouldn't have noticed except that the walls down here are usually so dark and hard. If these walls were plaster, I would mistake this white for more plaster. But this white is not plaster; this white looks soft, like the belly of a mouse, and the corners of the room are rounded like the spaces between couch cushions.

We have the mold! I think, but I can't say it.

Andrew walks over and grabs a crusted wooden paint stirrer. Before I can shout, *Don't!*, he scrapes the stick against the wall. I imagine a billion toxic spores bursting into the air around us. I clasp my hand over my mouth. I want to run back up the stairs, but Andrew is still there, leaning forward, peering at the dark line he scratched in the white mold. Panic swells in my throat. I want to yell his name but I'm trying not to inhale.

"It's not very thick," Andrew says, his nose only a few inches away from the infestation.

I dash across the basement and grab his hand and pull him back toward the stairs.

"But the light—" Andrew says.

"The spores!" I shout, and then it's like he understands all at once, and he's scrambling up the stairs behind me. The pounding of his footsteps accelerates my panic; I burst out through the basement door panting, I can feel my lungs filling with white powder, my chest is tight and I'm lightheaded, and I want to scream.

Andrew slams the basement door behind him, then leans against it with his eyes closed.

I look down at the gap where the basement light is shining through between the floor and the bottom of the door. "We have to leave," I say.

"Don't freak out," Andrew says.

"Four people have *died*," I say. "This year. That we know of."

"Ours is not that bad," Andrew says.

"And we only know about those four people because of the internet videos! Who knows how many more—"

"It's just the basement. We'll be fine. I'll call a contractor in the morning."

My voice rises to the argument. "We can't sleep here," I say, and then, an octave higher, "We should call someone now."

“It’s seven o’clock,” he says. “It’s too late to call a contractor.”

“Then the police—” I say.

“You’re overreacting,” Andrew says.

He *always* says I’m overreacting.

I turn around and walk into the kitchen.

When I come back with a handful of dishtowels, Andrew is still standing in front of the basement door. He’s got a look on his face like he walked into a room and forgot why. Probably arguing with me in his head. I crouch down in silence and start stuffing the dishtowels into the space between the floor and the bottom of the basement door.

“Not that you care what I think,” I say, “but I think we should go to a hotel.” I lean all my weight against a towel, wedging it in.

Andrew sighs. “What are you talking about,” he says.

There’s a long pause. I look for cracks between the towels that spores could slip through.

“Why are you always freaking out,” Andrew says.

Why won’t you take me seriously! I want to say, but instead I stand up and storm into the kitchen and start angrily cooking dinner.

I’m slicing carrots—loud and hard, like I’m hammering nails—when Andrew comes into the room and leans on the plywood counter and pulls out his phone. I assume he’s going to look up contractors we can call in the morning (as if that’s going to make me feel better). I turn my back on him and go over to the windowsill, where I click on the radio and turn the volume up. Then I walk back to the fridge and pull out a package of chicken sausage. On NPR, they’re finishing a story about changes to the federal flood insurance program. Andrew stares at his phone screen. I cut open the package and take out two sausages.

“I can’t believe some of these pictures,” Andrew mutters.

I turn on the oven. I toss the carrot slices onto a pan with some broccoli and small potatoes and olive oil. I put the pan in to roast.

Andrew starts a video playing on his phone, the sound turned up loud enough I can hear voices saying *oh my god look at that oh my god!* I glance over; Andrew’s jaw works as he watches, like he’s grinding his teeth.

I throw some olive oil in a frying pan and turn on the gas stove. The smell of heating oil makes me realize I’m hungry. Oh! The revelation is a sudden relief. We’re both hungry. Two years into our home renovation and I keep forgetting this one simple trick to a long and happy marriage: Always have enough to eat.

Of course, if I tell Andrew we’re only fighting because we’re hungry, he’ll get annoyed with me and refuse to eat. So instead I pull the hummus and baby carrots out of the refrigerator, nonchalantly, and put them on the counter within his reach. I eat three carrots with hummus and immediately feel better. NPR is saying that a new superhero movie has just broken another box-office record.

“Look at this one,” Andrew says, walking around the counter and holding the phone up for me to see. I take the phone, and he turns to the carrots and hummus.

The video shows a suburban-looking basement; there’s a treadmill and a sectional couch. *But then look*, the person holding the camera says, lifting the wooden handle of a broom into the camera’s view. The camera moves forward and the end of the handle touches the white wall.

And then the handle sinks into the wall, like a straw in milk, about six inches deep. The white surface around the handle quivers like jelly.

"Oh my god," I say. I put Andrew's phone face-down on the counter. "I can't watch, that's disgusting."

Andrew eats another carrot. "Sorry I yelled at you," he says, still chewing.

I sigh, then take his hand and squeeze it. "I can't even remember what we were fighting about."

I take the chicken sausages off of the stove as Andrew goes to set the table. But then the radio starts talking about the mold, that crazy mold that has been appearing all across the country. I stop and turn the volume up. Andrew comes over, and we both lean against the plywood counter, listening with our arms crossed.

"Since January, four people have died after alleged exposure to the mold, including an African-American child in North Carolina on Saturday. Eight-year-old Janice King was found dead in a neighbor's basement. She had apparently snuck into the basement during a game of hide-and-seek, even though the homeowners had said the basement was off-limits."

Andrew looks at me and raises his eyebrows. We don't say anything.

"Toxins found in the mold can cause memory loss and erratic behavior, but federal health officials say the concentration found in households is too small to affect humans."

"Do you think that's true?" I ask Andrew. "You think this is hysteria?"

Andrew puts a hand up, telling me to be quiet, and leans toward the radio.

"...Department of Health spokesperson Gerald Earley: 'We do not think these instances of mold are toxic. Until we have more information, there is no reason to panic.'"

I sigh and turn off the radio. I don't want to think about the news anymore. We need to eat dinner.

"I'm just glad we don't have any mold in our basement," I say.

“I can’t believe it,” Andrew says. “As old as our house is.”

I smile. “I guess we’re just lucky,” I say.

The next day is Saturday, house day. We get up early and stop by our neighborhood coffee shop. We get there just as it opens; our favorite barista, Cynthia, is setting out a big plate of golden croissants behind glass. “Morning guys!” she says. She’s dyed her hair bright orange.

“Cynthia, I *love* your hair!” I say. It looks especially good because the coffee shop is styled in a dramatic, stark white theme—the counters are white melamine, the cinderblock walls are painted white, the large abstract paintings hanging on the walls are done entirely in shades of white. Even the fancy chrome-plated Marzocco espresso machine is white. Standing behind the counter, framed by whiteness, Cynthia’s hair looks like a neon sign.

“Thanks,” Cynthia smiles and tucks a strand behind her ear. “Two cappuccinos, right?”

“What happened to the window?” Andrew asks. He’s standing beside the door, where a piece of cardboard is taped over a broken pane of glass.

“We had a break-in last night,” Cynthia says. She swivels the POS station around for me to sign.

“Terrible!” Andrew says. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, they set off the alarm, the cops came before they got anything.” Cynthia raises her voice over the white noise of steaming milk. “Just a broken window. And we’re just shaken up.”

“Our neighbor Gary had a break-in two weeks ago,” Andrew says. “It’s really scary.”

“This neighborhood,” I say.

All three of us shake our heads.

“I keep wondering about all those videos of the mold,” Cynthia says.

Andrew makes a low whistle. "Right. The erratic behavior thing."

"And you know it's everywhere in the city. Like 70 percent of the houses have it,"

Cynthia says.

"Because of shitty landlords," I say. "It's not people's fault they're being poisoned."

Andrew says, "But still. With the mold, on top of everything else, people make bad decisions."

I want to change the subject. "We checked our basement, thank god we're clean," I say.

"My landlord won't let me into the basement to look," Cynthia says.

"That should be illegal!" I say.

Cynthia shrugs, as if she doesn't disagree but doesn't want to criticize anyone. "He says he's getting a contractor in," she says.

In the car we roll the windows down. It's a beautiful day, clear and sunny, in early June. As I watch the city pass, I marvel at how even the blocks where most of the houses are vacant and boarded up look pleasant in the sunshine. Little white flowers pop out between cracks in the sidewalk. We pass an empty brick rowhouse with an old storefront on the first floor and I daydream about opening a coffee shop, maybe a coffee shop that also sells flowers, maybe we could open a tutoring center on the second floor, maybe we could transform this sunny block. But that's the same optimism that made me want to buy a run-down house in a gentrifying neighborhood, and look where it got us. A tutoring center would be such an uphill battle. And of course all the houses on this gritty block must be *filled* with mold.

And sure enough: At the next intersection we see a cluster of about fifteen people out protesting. They're all local people from the community, they're holding signs that say things like *Justice for Children*, *Jail for Slumlords* and *WE ARE BEING POISONED*, all things I agree with. I

think about telling Andrew to honk the car horn in support of the protestors, but he’s looking out the opposite window. Plus I’m not even sure they want people to honk. Maybe honking will seem ostentatious or trite.

The light changes and we drive on. “I’m going to check the basement for mold when we get home,” I say.

“I went down and checked three days ago,” Andrew says. “It was fine.”

“I just want to double-check,” I say.

Andrew doesn’t say anything. A muscle in his jaw moves. I know he thinks I don’t trust him, but this is life or death. I go back to staring silently out my window.

In the hardware store we’re still not talking. Then we’re standing in Aisle 3 and I realize Andrew is frowning at two different bags of tile spacers—he doesn’t remember which size tile spacers we actually need, which is annoying, because I told him to make a list this morning and he didn’t.

But I don’t mention it. “I’m going to get some rubber gloves,” I say instead.

“What for,” Andrew says, putting both bags of spacers in our cart as if I won’t notice.

I roll my eyes and start walking away. Andrew pushes the cart a few steps behind me.

“What for?” he says again.

“I’m going to check the basement when we get back,” I say.

“Becca. We said we would finish the bathroom tile today,” Andrew says. “We’ll never finish the house if you keep coming up with things to freak out about.”

We’ll never finish the house if you keep refusing to make a goddamned list, I want to say.

Instead I just turn sharply at the end of the aisle and walk away.

I meet up with Andrew again in line at the cashier. I add the rubber gloves to the conveyer belt, along with an industrial-grade dust mask. He looks the opposite direction, that muscle in his jaw working like he's chewing gum, but I don't care that he's mad, it's not my responsibility that he's mad. I focus on smiling at the cashier, an African-American teenager; her hair is an amazing sculpture of braids. "I love your hair," I say to her, warmly.

"Thanks." She says it without looking at me. I worry I've overstepped, or offended her, somehow. I move over to the pin pad and put my credit card in. Andrew loads our supplies into the canvas tote bags we brought. I don't look at Andrew, and he doesn't look at me.

"Thanks so much," I say to the cashier, as she hands me the receipt.

"Yes, thanks *ever so much*," Andrew says, overly saccharine, to the cashier.

He's mocking me. As if my *thank-you* was fake. The cashier raises her eyebrows and looks in the other direction. I want to apologize to her but I'm too embarrassed, I don't know what to say, so I just hope she didn't notice, or doesn't care. I turn and hurry out, as Andrew says to her, still weirdly, over-the-top sweet: "You have a good day."

"Alright," she says.

In the car the silence between Andrew and me is like a tight wire. I can feel that muscle in his jaw working, sending ripples along the wire, we're tied so tightly together by this silence we might as well be screaming at each other, I know exactly what he's feeling, I feel it even as we walk into the house, even as I walk upstairs to put on long sleeves while Andrew goes into the kitchen, the wire stretches out between us, it fills up all the space in the house without getting any less tight.

The wire snaps when I get to the basement door.

"Why did you stuff these towels here?" I shout.

He doesn't say anything.

“Andrew!” I shout louder. “Why did you stuff dishtowels under the basement door?”

“I can't hear you.”

Forget it, I think.

He probably put the towels here to stop a draft over the winter, and has been too lazy to clean them up. *It's late June, for chrissakes, I think.* I imagine him pushing these towels out of his way yesterday—when he went into the basement to check for mold—then coming back upstairs and just pushing the towels back into place instead of cleaning them up.

I carry the towels upstairs to the hamper then come back down and open the basement door. The lights in the basement are already on. *Chrissakes, I think, Of course he forgot to turn the lights off.*

I could leave, I think, as I walk down the stairs. The thought makes me feel giddy. Sell the house. Get what we can and get out. Split the proceeds. Split up. I could drive west, meet someone new, live in a condo. New construction. No history.

I stop on the bottom stair and look around. I can't remember the last time I came down to the basement. I hate it down here; it reminds me of serial killers. I look at the vinyl floor, spotted with burgundy stains, and are those burgundy stains growing? They look bigger to me. I worry about water damage. I'm probably imagining it. But it's good that I'm here, I can check for a leak.

I scan for mold on the walls, but everything looks fine. The walls are white, clean and smooth. I crouch down and rub a gloved finger on a burgundy stain on the floor. It doesn't budge. It must be an old, old stain.

I'm about to go back upstairs when a banging sound starts. A slow hammering. I have no idea what Andrew could be hammering. As I reach for the brass chain on the light bulb, I notice a little white dust in the air. It's just visible in the space around the bulb, just when the light catches the fine powder just so. The powder billows a little bit, in time with the banging.

It's coming off the walls.

Every time Andrew bangs whatever it is he's banging upstairs, a little puff of powder shakes loose. I walk over to the wall and touch a gloved finger to the white and my finger sinks down, through a silky softness.

It's not the wall. It's something all over the wall, about two inches thick.

I stumble backwards, shuddering all over. I *knew* Andrew didn't look closely enough for mold. I'm so mad about it I don't even want to tell him. But this is life or death.

I run up the stairs, ripping off the mask and gloves and leaving them on the top step. I slam the basement door closed behind me. I think of shouting, *Don't go into the basement!* but Andrew is still banging something in the half-bathroom, he won't hear me. I decide it's more important to quarantine the spores first. I run into the kitchen and grab a couple of dish towels and stuff them into the space under the door. Then I run back to the kitchen and wash my hands, under the fingernails and up to the elbow. I dry my hands on paper towels, which I throw away, then tie off the trash bag and set it on the back porch. Then I walk around the corner and come to the doorway of the half-bathroom and stop short.

Andrew is crouched on his knees with a hammer and a chisel, big noise-canceling headphones covering his ears, broken tile surrounding him in shards all across the subfloor.

He's destroying the work we did two days ago.

I watch as he works the chisel under another tile and starts to hammer it. I'm speechless. We laid these tiles on Thursday night, wanting to get a head start with a few hours after work. He keeps hammering until the tile makes a crunching sound, splitting in two. *What the hell.*

I'm about to touch him on the shoulder and gesture for him to take the headphones off and then scream at him, when Andrew bobs his head side to side, in time to the music, and sings off-key: "How can you just leave me standing / Alone in a world that's so cold (so cold!)"

I laugh out loud. Of course he's listening to *Prince*. My anger is gone all at once.

I crouch down next to him and bump my shoulder against his. He pulls the headphones down. "We laid it wrong," he says. "I have to take it all out."

He points, and I look at the line of tile that is supposedly laid wrong.

"See?" he says.

I don't see, actually; Andrew is being a perfectionist. He says that I'm always freaking out about dangerous things, but this—Andrew's perfectionism—*this* is the actual reason why our house renovation is taking two years.

I sigh. Anything I say will start another fight. So instead I take the headphones from around his neck and put them on. I listen to "When Doves Cry" as Andrew puts the chisel under another tile and starts to hammer. *Maybe I'm just like my father*, I think. The tile cracks in two.

"Can I help?" I ask. Andrew laughs. I take the headphones off. "Did I say that super loud?" I say.

"You can't help," he says. "There's only one hammer and chisel."

"Then I'll get us some beers," I say.

I go into the kitchen and get a couple of cans and then come back and squat by the door and hand him one. "How was the basement?" he asks as he cracks it open.

“What?” I say.

“You just went to check the basement. Did you see any mold?”

He looks truly concerned! Just for a second—and for the first time in a few days—I feel a rush of connection with this man. Why can’t I just feel this way all the time? *Maybe I’m just like my mother*, I think. *Never satisfied*. We used to feel this way all the time. We didn’t used to have to speak to understand. It’s the feeling I miss more than anything, and I’m so happy to have it now. Andrew frowns at me, waiting for my answer, and I almost wish I *had* found mold in the basement; not because I want to be right, but because I want to reward his faith in me.

But of course there was nothing in the basement. I went down and there was no mold. After that I came right back up in a rush because I hate being down in the basement.

“You were right,” I say. “No mold.”

“In this old house?” he says.

I nod.

“Wow,” he says. “Lucky.”

I look around the half-bath, the floor covered with shattered tiles, the mortar we put down on Thursday night stuck to the floor. *Yeah, sooo lucky*, I think, but don’t say, because if you can’t say something nice, you shouldn’t say anything at all.

We drink four beers each that day and split a large pizza. Sunday lunchtime I go out and get bagel sandwiches. I’m a little nervous when I leave, because my Dad keeps sending me text messages about the protests rising up in our city, people angry about the mold and the landlords who won’t clean it up, but I don’t see anyone on the walk to or from the coffee shop, our

neighborhood is quiet. We eat our bagels and drink another two beers, and later eat the leftover pizza, and that's how we get the bathroom tile finished, finally, late Sunday night.

We stand at the threshold. The bathroom looks beautiful and clean, a shining expanse of white subway tile covering the floor and three feet of wainscoting up the wall.

"It's still a little crooked," Andrew says.

"Nobody will notice once we paint the walls caviar," I say.

"You mean when we paint them black?" Andrew says.

"It's not black, it's *caviar*," I say, smiling back at him. I turn off the bathroom light and head upstairs, pulling out my phone with the latest text message from my Dad: *You should come sleep here tonight. These things always get worse at night.*

It's fine, I text back, *Our neighborhood has been quiet.*

The city is a powder keg, he texts.

I turn off my phone.

Downstairs, Andrew yells: "Why are these dishtowels here?"

I lean over the railing. "What?"

Andrew pokes his head around the end of the hallway. "There are dish towels stuffed under the basement door," he says.

I walk back downstairs and follow him to the basement door. We stand and look at the towels stuffed into the gap. "Did you put them there to stop a draft over the winter?" I say.

"I didn't put them there," he says.

I lean over and pick them up, and see a band of light in the space under the basement door. "Why are the lights in the basement on?" I say.

Andrew doesn't say anything. He's thinking that *I'm* the one who left the lights on. Which makes me so angry I turn around and go upstairs. It wasn't me. It couldn't have been me. I never go in the basement; it reminds me too much of murder.

I brush my teeth, listening downstairs as Andrew slams the basement door closed. I hear him go into the kitchen, his footsteps loud and fast; he must be really angry. When our day was going so well! We finished the bathroom tile! And still, here we are, not speaking to each other. I wonder again if this house will be the end of our marriage, if we made a mistake moving here.

I'm already in bed with my bedside lamp turned off when Andrew comes into the room. He doesn't look at me.

I wonder if he forgot to turn the basement lights off. He was storming around downstairs, angry at me, and when he's angry he forgets things. But if I ask, he'll get mad. I watch him as he takes his shirt off and tosses it onto the floor next to the hamper (why he can never make it into the hamper I will never understand). There's a weight in my chest.

“How was the basement,” I say.

He pauses for a second, frowning. It's like he's forgotten something—or as if he's holding something inside. The weight in my chest gets heavier; I wonder if we need to have another fight to make it go away.

But then Andrew shakes his head and lies down.

“The basement is fine,” he says, and rolls over, facing away from me, and goes to sleep.

I'm dreaming about a birthday party for my Dad. It's a disaster—I've burned the cake, there are flames shooting out of the oven, the kitchen is filled with people who haven't noticed the fire, and I need to scream but I can't make a sound—when Andrew shakes me awake.

“Does that smell like a problem to you?” he asks, his eyes still half-closed.

I sit up. It’s a chemical burning smell, sharp and wrong.

Andrew stumbles out into the hallway, I hear him banging open doors to the office and the upstairs guest room. I put on a sports bra and slippers and catch up to Andrew as he’s hurrying down the stairs. On the first floor he goes into the kitchen while I check the living room, the downstairs guest room, and our shining new half bathroom (it looks so good!). The burning smell is everywhere, but we can’t find the source. I double-check the kitchen in case Andrew missed something; all the electric tools are cool and unplugged. I wonder if it’s a gas leak, though it doesn’t smell like gas, it smells like a car battery.

“Maybe it’s in the basement,” Andrew says, and I follow him to the hallway. He kicks aside the dish towels we stuffed under the door to save on our utility bill over the winter, and I see that the lights in the basement are still on. *So much for saving on our utility bill*, I think, but don’t say, rolling my eyes behind his back as I follow him down, because he must have been the one who left the lights on; I never go into the basement.

The basement is fine—just scary and dank, as always. “No fires here,” Andrew says, crossing the room to turn off the lights.

I’m confused for a second—why is he talking about fires?—but I figure Andrew is just making some sarcastic joke I don’t understand, probably something about me always freaking out. Whatever. I’m already walking back up the stairs. I hate being down in the basement.

In the kitchen there’s a burning, chemical smell, something is wrong. I open the door to the back porch and the smell hits me like a wall.

“There’s a fire somewhere,” I say, when Andrew comes into the kitchen.

We stand together on our back patio and listen to the neighborhood and the night. We can't see the burn, but we hear sirens wailing in the distance, and a helicopter circles overhead.

There's nothing on the news, at first, but we figure it out on social media. All over our city, houses are on fire. The largest cluster is on the west side; six whole blocks are burning. Half an hour later, when the local news station websites start reporting, it's seven blocks. Our social media feeds are filled with photos of people standing around in the streets, gazing into the flames, and the people in the photos don't look afraid—they look angry. Then there are eight blocks on fire, and the eighth block is only a mile from our house.

I go upstairs and get dressed, then pack a bag for both of us. Two nights of necessities, like toothbrushes and cell phone charging cords; also our passports and social security cards, and the box that has my mother's rings and the flash drive filled with photos from our wedding.

I carry the bags downstairs and find Andrew sitting on the couch in the living room, staring at his phone. I sit next to him and he shows me the arguments, the people debating what these fires mean.

We are not going to let this mold kill our children, says one person from the city where we live.

These people are burning their own houses and letting the mold into the air—so they're getting MORE people SICK? Criminal INSANITY, I will never understand, says another person, who lives in the county, near my Dad.

I get it, though. I understand. Why people would set fire to their own homes. Fed up with toxic mold their landlords won't clean. Burn it down. The idea spread on social media, that's why there are fires all over the city—and the fires are spreading, catching innocent

neighbors ablaze. Now it's two o'clock in the morning and the largest cluster of burning homes stretches ten blocks.

A hero, someone says, below a picture of Gary, our neighbor. Gary is a person like us who bought a broken-down house in our neighborhood and spent years renovating it. In the picture Gary is sitting on his front stoop with a shotgun, looking straight into the camera and frowning like he's ready to shoot whoever took the picture.

We have to protect our own houses, someone else comments on the picture of Gary.

A fucking shotgun?! someone else says.

I can't decide if I'm more horrified by the shotgun or by all the people defending him. I look at Andrew. "Maybe we should leave," I say.

"Safer to stay," he says.

"What if the fire keeps spreading?" I say.

"What if we drive and get caught in a different fire?" he says.

I turn away from him, I don't want to argue right now, I want to stay calm. I look at the picture of Gary. I start to write, *This is atrocious*, but then I stop. I'm afraid I'll sound insincere or hypocritical; I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing. I close my phone and lean my head back and close my eyes. Andrew puts his arm around my shoulder and I lean into him.

"Hey," he says. "Maybe we could burn *our* house down."

We laugh. It's the black comedy of our house renovation, which has dragged on for two years now. And the fires do have an absurdist logic, it is so bleak it's almost funny. The houses are poisonous, and if you can't afford to have the mold cleaned then the house is also a trap. "Or if your landlord refuses to have the mold cleaned," Andrew says, and I'm so glad because he is agreeing with me, it's the shitty landlords, it's not people's fault.

My phone rings. It's after two o'clock in the morning but my father is up, watching the news. “You all need to come out here now,” he says. “Those people are going to burn the whole city down.”

“It's fine,” I say. “It looks worse on the news than it is here on the ground. We're staying here.”

Andrew shoots me a look. I turn and walk into the hallway.

“You have to leave while you can,” Dad is saying. “Come out here to the house where it's safe.”

I think about that house, which he spent my childhood renovating. I can see my Dad sitting in the wood-paneled living room, wearing the headphones that let him hear the television without turning the volume all the way up. Then I think of the basement below him—the original murder basement in my life, that concrete box with a drain in the floor and inherited furniture covered in sheets. Dad never finished that basement, either. When he was renovating our house, he used the garage as a workshop.

“Is your house even safe?” I ask. “Have you checked your basement for mold?”

“What?” my Dad says.

“Have you checked your basement for mold,” I say.

“I heard what you said,” he says. “I just can't believe you would say that to your father. I can't believe you would suggest such a thing.”

“It's everywhere, Dad. It's not just you.”

“You kids,” he says. “You kids think you're pioneers with that house, that city. You're not doing anything new. I worked in the city in the eighties, Rebecca. You don't know how bad it can get.”

“I’ll call you in the morning,” I say, and hang up.

I walk back into the living room. Andrew looks up at me from the couch, his face is stony, he’s angry, and I brace myself for the argument. He’s going to throw it in my face—the fact that I told my Dad I’m not leaving. Even though that’s not what I meant. I do want to leave. I just don’t want to go to my Dad’s house. But now I’ve already conceded the argument, now we’re going to stay here until the fires from the west side of our city rage their way to our back door, and there’s nothing I can say that will change that.

“Becca,” Andrew says, and his eyes widen and I realize he’s not angry, he’s frightened.

He holds up his phone screen, a streak of posts spinning down and away in bright orange.

“I think we should leave,” he says.

We keep the windows rolled up, but the drive out of the city is quiet. We head east. We don’t pass any fires. The highways are empty—no-one else is leaving. The sirens fade behind us.

Andrew puts the hotel on his credit card and we collapse on the bed in the anonymous room. It’s almost four. I forgot to pack pajamas, so I just get in bed naked. The sheets are new, or else so bleached and starched they feel like new; it’s delicious to flex and stretch my toes against the smooth white cotton, to be in a room I don’t even have to clean, let alone renovate. I check my phone one last time, but there’s no way to tell if our house is safe, although someone puts up a post to say that Gary has taken his shotgun back inside.

Andrew slips under the covers next to me. “I can’t remember the last time we slept naked,” he says. With one hand he takes my phone and throws it across the room; he puts the other on my hip and pulls my body against his. I kiss him on the cheek, then roll the other direction. I don’t say anything else. It’s late. I’m tired.

We wake up worried, and look at the news on our phones in bed. It’s six o’clock, and the fires have been contained, although not yet put out. Our house is fine. I feel a little disappointed.

There is more news, tragic stories—families with nowhere to stay, and a sixty-year-old woman died—but we are exhausted, we will process our city’s grief a little later. For now we’re in a hotel, far from the damage.

“Let’s use the swimming pool before we go,” I say, because I know I can’t go back to sleep. And anyway we paid for it. We have the room until noon.

We didn’t pack bathing suits, but we’re in the suburbs, so we drive a mile to a big box store and find the brightest, cheapest bathing suits we can find, and on an impulse Andrew buys us neon orange sunglasses. We go back to the pool and it’s a beautiful morning. Through our new sunglasses, the whole world glows peach. The concrete is already hot in the sun, the water is cool and blue as a gemstone. We slip into the water. Andrew swims laps, and I spread my arms across the edge of the pool and lean my head back and close my eyes. I feel weightless, relaxed.

We push it until almost the last minute, hanging around in the pool like teenagers. A little after eleven, we rush up to the room to pack and leave. Andrew showers first, then goes downstairs to check out while I shower.

This is good for us, I think; as I wait for the shower to get hot. Good for our marriage. We needed a little break. It’s so nice to be in a hotel, a bathroom I don’t have to clean, although this one isn’t as nice as the bathroom I’m dreaming we’re going to put in at home. In this bathroom they cut corners; the tile is white but the grout has gone yellow, and the towels are bleached thin with the edges starting to wear to threads. Also, the shower is *tiny*—there’s a bathtub, but just barely, it feels more like a single stall in a college dorm. I step into the shower and let the water run over my hair. It really is so, so tiny, I think; what a claustrophobic shower.

Then I go to wash my feet. I put one hand on the wall for balance. And my hand sinks into the wall, six inches deep. I stumble and my shoulder falls into the silky white goo, rippling like jelly. I scream.

I scramble out of the shower, grabbing towels to wipe my hands and my shoulder, imagining the mold sinking into my skin. I scrub and scrub at the sink, grabbing all of the towels off the stack and wiping myself then throwing them away from me into the tub. I rush out into the room and pull on clothes, my chest feels tight, I’m panicking, and what if I can’t breathe? What if this isn’t panic, but poison? I’m going to demand our money back. The hotel is going to pay for this. This is insane. We’ll go to the emergency room, I’ll get tested for mold poisoning, I’ll be okay, but we’ll make the hotel pay for this—I can’t *believe* they have the mold—and I grab our bags and head out into the carpeted hallway. Instead of the elevator I take the stairs down to the lobby, where Andrew is standing, his hair still wet.

“The room comes with breakfast!” he says, and gestures to a long counter covered in small foods—apples individually wrapped in plastic, little cups of yogurt. There’s a carousel to dispense eight kinds of cereal, and a tub full of ice and milk cartons. “They have your favorite,” Andrew says. “Lucky Charms.”

I look at him. The man who knows my favorite cereal. The man who takes me to a hotel for a night away, for no reason. Not for no reason—for *every* reason. He took me here to save our marriage. Because we had to get away from our home renovation, which has dragged on for two years now. I swear to myself that I’m going stop fighting with him. I’ll try harder to hold my tongue. We’re going to survive this house married.

I smile and reach out my hand. Andrew takes it and leads me over to the breakfast buffet. We both eat bowls of cereal, crusts of sugar floating like crystals in the milk. “Lucky Charms for

a lucky lady," he says, and I think, *so this is marriage*. Eating breakfast in a dinky hotel lobby.

Pretending we're lucky.

And maybe this is what it means to be lucky, I think. But I don't say it.