

Unattached

I was out for a run, neck-to-ankle in pink and black spandex, and for a single, happy moment, I felt sleek as a scuba diver. Running was a new hobby I liked to blame on Dylan. When things end poorly, I write lists of lessons I learned, changes to make, etc. Incidentally, I have a lot of lists, mini spiral steno pads full of them, stacked under the bed. After Dylan left, I'd resolved to run daily. I'd gotten the idea from googling something stupid, something like "relationship failure not connecting." The goal was to feel every part of myself as the human/animal it's supposed to be, as muscles and lungs, as feet on pavement, grounded, because I was having that problem again, connecting.

And it was working, maybe, sometimes. In small spurts of letting go, the hot burn in my lungs would feel like fuel instead of fire, and I'd be off, springing down the stone-gray sidewalk, pretending the scenery was blurring by, a Monet of lime-green and yellow grass and brown brick townhouses. And then it would be over, and I'd be tired again, my chest heaving, and I'd begin to worry about the things that can befall a person while running, while being outdoors, while being a woman: rape, murder, relentless ridicule that cuts to the bone.

What did befall me, in the end, were none of these things.

That day, the sky was awesome, like some high-saturation desktop background, bright and empty save for a single, cartoonish cloud. An exhilarating tingle hung in the air, like the shift in energy before a storm (negative ions, Dylan always said).

I was making a list in my head that had nothing to do with self-improvement (milk, eggs, tuna, peanut butter) when the hairs on my arm stood straight up. My stomach dropped, that belly-flip feeling like when your car takes the crest of a hill at just the right speed, and as I tried to run, I realized my feet weren't on the ground. I was floating (falling?) towards a tree whose branches had been, just moments before, directly and safely above my head. By some instinct I'm glad to know I have, I grabbed onto a branch while the rest of my body headed onwards toward the sky in a sort of slow-mo somersault.

"Well, shit," I thought. There are lots of things you imagine you'll do in a crisis, but there isn't much you *can* do while hanging from a tree, legs shooting sneaker first into a pit of blue sky, looped shoelaces dangling in the direction of the sun. I felt like a piece of post-modern art, photoshopped somehow into this predicament.

In theory, I was upside down, but no blood rushed to my head. I felt light and buoyant. It was as if gravity had not only reversed, but also weakened. I inched my hands along the branch, recalibrating my movements to contend with the extra float, and wrapped myself tight around the tree trunk like a cartoon bear. My head was pointing toward the grass of someone's lawn.

Around me, everything that had been unattached was either going or gone, ascending (falling?) toward the heavens like escaped helium balloons drifting casually away from the earth—ants and acorns, leaves and dirt, flowers and terra-cotta pots and lawn gnomes and lawn mowers and children’s toys, like a dirty blue and yellow plastic slide, the kind I remember playing on as a kid. A Wiffle ball clinked out of a gutter. A black hose rose like a charmed snake up the length of a house and hovered there. Cars that had been parked along the sidewalk or in driveways moments ago were already hitting the stratosphere. One disappeared into that fat cloud near the sun. I heard a whimper—was it me?—but, no, in the distance I caught sight of a family dog spinning through the sky.

I felt nauseous because my brain kept flipping the picture, reinterpreting which way was up. When I saw the world as upside-down, then the houses and trees were like stalactites hanging from the ceiling of earth above my head, and our little civilization was very small, just the tiniest inhabited layer in a world made up almost entirely of air.

Soon the sky cleared, save the occasional flower that suddenly popped out of the dirt and drifted away, or a leaf, like the orange-brown one that detached from a branch just a foot from my head. I fought the urge to reach out and grab it. Instead I watched it fall away, kept watching it, straining my eyes until I lost it to the grain of vision. I listened for the dog, but it, too, had disappeared.

By now, I’d shimmied down a little to sit on a branch, though I didn’t dare let go of the trunk. The air smelled of overturned earth. A golden mid-afternoon light, the kind only possible in late fall, shone through the brown and red leaves in my tree, making them look like the final standing shards of a shattered stained glass window. A serene dreaminess overwhelmed me, the sort of peace I imagined people felt when they had conceded to death.

I thought about calling for help, but it didn’t seem appropriate. After all, I wasn’t the only one in a predicament. Besides, I’m not an inspired yeller. It’s one of my flaws, really, and the reason I quit karate in the fourth grade after only getting a yellow belt. It was the reason I only whispered “Whoopsy” one summer day when I fell sideways on a wedge sandal and sprained my ankle, walking on the foot for a week before seeing a doctor, and why I felt embarrassed when my mom screamed in the middle of a Walgreens after learning her sister had gotten hit by a delivery truck while trying to cross the street in midtown, and why I didn’t cry at the funeral or any of the days before or after, and why my own sister whispered in my ear in the middle of an echoing church, “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

It’s strange how calm I am in a crisis, because I’m afraid of everything. I’m afraid of people: waiters, tech-support, pizza delivery guys, coworkers, even the people I’m supposed to know. I’m also afraid of transportation: planes, subways, trains, buses, cars, elevators. Also, invisible things: carbon monoxide, those brain-eating amoebas found in lakes. I am farseeing, a

chess player calculating all of fate's possible moves. "Expect the unexpected!" is my motto, but even in the many, detailed, and wild scenarios my brain has conjured, I never expected this.

The breakup with Dylan? That, I expected. I braced myself for it from the moment we met, and even so I let him nestle in, like a worm inching its way into the heart of a rotting apple. Symbiosis began to occur. He brought me half-price lunch from Bubba's on Wednesday afternoons—a giant burger, well-done, plus two surprise sides of his choosing. He cleaned off my perpetually finger-printed glasses with a magic combination of his warm breath and whichever cotton T-shirt he was wearing. He was a member of a community woodshop, and he kept asking me what I wanted him to make me. "I don't know?" I kept answering. "Whatever you want?"

Dylan claimed that my rising intonation was a defense against commitment. "I don't think so?" I said. "Maybe I just talk like this? Maybe our whole generation just talks like this?" What was I supposed to tell him? that he was right? that I actually liked my Ikea furniture? that I took comfort in its smooth, laminate look, in the pleasant feeling it gave me, a longing for some made-up version of Scandinavia? that one day we would break up and I wouldn't want furniture that would remind me of him?

In the end, he made me a corner shelf for my most impossible corner and a media cabinet that perfectly held my TV and peripherals. Just as I feared, they were so flawlessly tailored to my life that I could never get rid of them.

In the night, Dylan looked like the outline of a person I might not know.

"You asleep?" he would ask when he was almost out.

"Definitely," I'd answer.

He'd kiss me, and I'd forget to kiss back.

"Where are you?" he would ask.

I was in one of a million places—I was the ghostly figure in the gray-dust aftermath of a subway bombing; I was the eviscerated human hanging from a shattered passenger-side window; I was a bodega shopper shot and losing blood next to a display of Cheetos.

Where am I supposed to be? I would think, but I'd say, "Nowhere?"

I wrote this on the list of things I'd learned: *The answer is "here." That's always where you're supposed to be.*

*

The temperature was dropping. Or maybe I was just cold because I wasn't running anymore. I tried to stop thinking about Dylan. I tried to just be *mindful*, a skill I was learning from a meditation podcast. Or, was trying to learn between advertisements for box subscriptions, where you get overpriced samples of snacks and clothes delivered directly to your door. I was supposed to think about what my body parts were feeling, but this usually led me into a panic, because I'd

focus a lot on my teeth, which were always on the brink of decay. This time, though, I skipped the teeth entirely and went right to my hands, which were holding onto the tree so tightly that they were starting to ache. I gave each a rest in turn, shaking out one hand and then the other. The bark had left an imprint on my skin that I watched fade as I bent my fingers back and forth.

A voice, suddenly, calling out to me: “Excuse me! Hello!” I flung my head towards the townhouse—whoever was yelling, I was in their lawn.

It was a woman with a white fluff of hair. She stood in the open doorway, two stories of house and a pointed roof and a blue sky pitched below her.

Behind her, papers were scattered on her ceiling, which was now ostensibly the floor, and a wooden table was legs-up, like a dead bug. A bald man bounced into view, like an astronaut on the moon. He seemed to be enjoying himself. “Mass and distance!” I could hear him shouting. “Mass and distance!”

“Are you okay?” the woman called. I envied that she was able to sound concerned while yelling. Sometimes I had difficulty establishing appropriate volume and tone during conversations, especially with people I didn’t know. “Just be yourself,” Dylan had recommended. But what if I already was just being myself?

Just be yourself? I wrote on the list. Then I scribbled out the question mark. Later, when reviewing the list, I put it back in.

“Fine, thanks,” I croaked back to the woman, too quietly, then louder and too aggressively: “Yes! Thanks!”

“Would you like to come in?” the woman called.

I made an awkward little laughing noise, because this seemed impossible, because I was sitting in a tree about twenty feet from this woman’s front door. I opened my mouth and closed it again, trying and failing to think of an appropriate response.

“Hold on!” she shouted, then she closed the door and disappeared. I waited in the tree trying to be mindful about my body, except not my hands or my teeth.

Just as I began to wonder if the woman had been a figment of my imagination, the door swung open and she reappeared, a thick hemp rope clutched in her fist. I had to wonder what sort of person just happened to have a length of rope on hand. Then I thought of what might befall me if I stayed outside: nightfall, hypothermia, starvation, floating into oblivion.

Standing in that doorway she seemed, somehow, poised over a precipice at the edge of the world, like a superhero or a character in a children’s book, like maybe if she tipped out of the doorway she would fly instead of fall.

“I’m going to throw this to you!” she shouted. She announced everything as she did it, like a friendly nurse. She tried to lasso the rope out to me, but it just flailed around the entryway and doorframe. The man appeared again, grabbed it from her without a word, and flung the rope

out like a fishing line, which worked surprisingly well. It snaked towards me and I caught it—one handed!—and all three of us cheered as the rope bristled in my palm.

“As an extra precaution, my husband is also tying our end to the banister,” she said. I hoped he was a scout or a sailor or a veteran or whatever job people had where they learned to tie knots.

I triple-wrapped the rope around my waist before tying it, because I am not a scout or a sailor or a veteran, and recently I’d learned—from a YouTube video, no less—that I’d been tying my shoelaces wrong for years.

Was I starting to feel a little heavier? As if to confirm this, the husband jumped with what appeared to be reduced bounce. “Best to do it now, perhaps,” said the woman. The man hustled up behind her to hold onto the rope. “We’re ready!” she shouted.

I looked down into the blue abyss below, my heart racing. I felt like I was standing on top of a Loony Tunes high-dive. How strong were these people? How heavy was I? How sturdy was this rope? How firm was my grip?

“Go!” she shouted.

I stopped thinking. I went. I slipped off the branch as if I were simply slipping into a hot tub, but instead I fell into the sky. I was like a tethered astronaut or a baby on an umbilical cord. The cool air rushed past my cheeks, the tree grew small below me, its leaves fluttering gently like hundreds of fingers waving goodbye.

At my peak, dangling above the townhouses, I had an unbelievable view. Streets ran towards the horizon in parallel lines, empty-looking neighborhoods set out between them in squares and rectangles. Pointed roofs in red, gray, and brown jutted from the ground like giant arrows pointing towards the sky.

As the couple reeled me in, I bumped up against the tiny attic window, the brick facade, a second-story window where I saw a bed upside-down on the ceiling, mattress on the floor, splayed quilt pinned below it. Then there I was, at the top of the doorframe, the woman looking at me from above, her face flushed red from exertion. I climbed inside the house and the woman stretched her hands out towards me like a mother about to embrace her wobbling toddler. I reached back the exact same way, and we shared a hug that felt weirdly natural.

When she placed her hands on my shoulders, I realized I was shaking. She straightened her arms and looked at my face in a grandmotherly way, or maybe I was just getting that vibe from the mothy-menthol smell of the house. “There,” she said gently. Like saying, “You’re safe.” Her skin was mottled and wrinkly and her cheeks had a jowly droop, but her eyes looked friendly. Of course, you never knew.

The woman introduced herself as Rosa. Her husband was Harry.

“I’m Kesha,” I said even though that’s not my name.

In the center of the room, a ceiling fan whirred in a circle-blur of brown, and the metal chain pull kept getting swept up over and over again in the blades, clicking in and out and getting stuck again. The pale bulbs in the fan's tulip-shaped frosted glass lights tilted up from the ground like stage lights, and I made the mistake of looking directly at a bulb, so that even when I looked away, a dark cut-out in the shape of a bulb punctured my vision.

Hanging on the wall—some upside down, some perfectly rotated on their nails—were framed diplomas, a half dozen white porcelain crosses, family photos from the 70s featuring younger versions of Rosa and Harry as well as three smiling kids who, photo by photo, kept growing up. Green shaggy wall-to-wall carpeting, spiked and matted in different spots, was affixed above us. It made me feel as if we were huddled in a mossy cave. Outside, the grass looked like a low, carpeted sky.

“Would you like some something to drink, Kesha?” Rosa asked.

“I'm okay,” I said.

“Maybe it's good idea to stay hydrated,” Rosa suggested.

“What the girl needs is a whiskey,” said Harry.

“Anything is fine,” I offered.

“Why don't we get comfortable?” Rosa said after she'd gathered the drinks. “No use waiting around to see what rusts.”

I helped flip over some furniture. Rosa sat on the dark red velvety couch and I on a mustard-colored loveseat that was surprisingly cozy despite the sunken seat. The drinks—OJ for the gals, whiskey for Harry—were served in fancy highball glasses with gold trim, remarkably un-chipped after the flip.

Harry was still up and trying to bounce. He didn't go very far. Gravity had seemed to settle into its new orientation with its standard Earthly strength. “Perhaps you arrived in the nick of time,” said Rosa. Harry looked like a kid whose balloon had floated away. He slumped down next to Rosa.

“So what do we think happened here?” asked Rosa, looking out the window.

I shrugged at the same time as Harry shouted, “This is impossible!” He balled up his hand as he ranted: “If gravity has reversed, then the weight of the air alone...! The oxygen! As the distance between objects *decreases*, or rather *increases*... what I mean is, you have to consider the *mass*...” He was stumbling over his own words, angry at himself for not being able to articulate what he couldn't remember.

“It *does* seem impossible,” Rosa agreed. “He used to be a physics professor, you know,” she said to me.

“Cool beans,” I said. Cool beans?

I glanced back at the photos on the wall, featuring Harry when he was a physics professor with hair. I could already tell who'd gotten the raw end of this deal.

"Neat highball glasses," I added, too loudly, to fill the silence.

"These were wedding gifts nearly fifty years ago, if you can believe it," Rosa said. I didn't hear a trace of regret in her voice.

For some reason, I made the sign of the cross. "Impressive," I said.

I *was* impressed. Even fifty months of dating was unfathomable to me. How long did it take to settle into the idea that a person was going to stay, and move onto worrying about something else, like when they were going to die—or worse, go crazy?

Were long relationships really like an old pair of shoes, as people said? I thought of them more like old anti-slip shower mats. Bright and clean at the beginning, but with mildew growing beneath ever since suctioning down day one. By the time you saw the mildew creeping up on top, the bottom was already infested beyond repair. You either had to tear it out and concede to slipping or keep it and concede to a lifetime of ignoring what was obviously disgusting.

"Why don't we play a game?" suggested Rosa. "What do you like?"

"The one with the words," said Harry. This was not, I guessed, Harry's most strategic choice.

"Scrabble," said Rosa.

"That's right," said Harry.

"I love Scrabble," said Rosa.

When we opened the Scrabble box, the letters were already all flipped over to the blank side. "Well, that's something," Rosa said.

Dylan and I had played Scrabble once. I'd won by a lot, but otherwise it hadn't ended well. Dylan hadn't wanted to play in the first place because he thought the game would be uneven, that I had a much better vocabulary than he did and thus was sure to win. I told him my vocabulary wasn't all that good. "In fact," I'd said, "it's so bad that I can't even think of a word better than bad to describe it."

"Don't just let me win," said Dylan. I didn't, but when the game was over, Dylan was angry. "I guess you were wrong about your vocabulary," he said.

"Well, the game is about math, really," I replied.

"You told me you were terrible at that, too!"

"It's all just luck," I said finally, and I felt like I was trying to get out of several lies I hadn't even meant to tell.

"You're impossible," he said. I was turning him into someone who clenched his teeth.

"But I'm so flexible?" I answered.

“You trying not to create problems,” he said angrily, “is creating problems.” He stood up. “You’re like a puppet,” he said, “you puppet yourself around, like you’re your own marionette, like you’re a ventriloquist.” He’d run out of puppets to call me. “What are you trying to avoid?” he asked. “Everything, actually,” he answered, “you’re trying to avoid everything.”

He walked out of the room, and I saw that Dylan was right, that in the very process of trying to stop the spread of mildew, I was always spreading it faster.

Scrabble with Rosa and Harry was more successful than it had been with Dylan. Not only was I winning, but neither Rosa nor Harry seemed to mind.

When it was Harry’s turn, Rosa would mull over his letters with him. “Oh, how lucky,” she might say, “you have an ED.” Or, “Two E’s always pair well.” Or, pointing at the board, “Well, perhaps I shouldn’t have left that triple open for you to nab.”

“Okay, okay,” he would say eventually, waving her away, “I’ve got it!” He’d put the word down, beaming, as if it had been his idea all along. But he knew. “Bravo!” Rosa would say, and Harry would put his hand on her knee, thanking her.

As we played, the late afternoon light shone through the two naked windows as if from a glowing sea. I felt a certain kind of coziness seep into me. I was reminded of snow days when I was young, when a storm had taken out the power and we were giddy with the crisis, gathering flashlights and candles and fleece blankets. After that, all we could do was wait. My mother, sister, and I would lie on the carpet by the light of the sliding glass doors playing Monopoly, watching the snow fall. If I looked out the window just right, I could get the sensation that the snow was static, that it was me who was moving, like I was in a spaceship shooting through stars.

In those moments, nothing else mattered, not the petty details of existence, like homework and the dishes, and not the bigger ones either, like my parents’ impending divorce and whether or not I would manage to do anything worthwhile with my time on the overheating planet. How safe I’d always felt, nestled in the soft aftermath of catastrophe, protected, finally, from the terror and exhaustion of anticipating disaster.

Was this why Rosa was happy? Misfortune had already arrived; the person she’d chosen to spend her life with was losing his mind. Or maybe she was just someone who moved forward no matter the conditions, as if life were a train constantly being re-routed, as if she never expected to arrive anywhere in particular, as if she just appeared places and thought, “Ah, what do we do here?”

I was about to place my next word when the Scrabble letters began to float off the board. I felt a strange tingle, a certain lightness, and once again I was not on the ground.

We descended from the ceiling to the floor without incident, the furniture and tables bumping back into the ground, the photographs rotating on their nails. The Scrabble letters fell

too, all around us, and I hoped they would land in some configuration that would offer a clue about how to proceed, some secret key I needed to add to my list so that I could do everything better next time. But they just scattered around the room. There was no way to put the board back together as it had been.

I should've been relieved that things were returning to normal, but instead my heart felt tight, like a small animal had balled up in my chest. Harry, on the other hand, was enthusiastic. He pulled himself up off the ground and shot his fist into the air. "Yes!" he shouted.

We watched from the window as a gentle rain of objects returned to earth: cars and cats, flowers and toys. Across the street, a car landed in the driveway as if it had been parked there all along. Then the sky was clear, save a dramatic fluorescent cloud, a deep, pinky-orange, trimmed in a murky shadow.

I felt heavy, heavier than when I'd started out, but Rosa was moving at the usual rate, picking up tiles from the shaggy green carpet and tossing them into the cardboard box. "Stay as long as you need, Kesha," Rosa said.

But I didn't stay—it was getting dark, anyway. I left the house without looking back, sprinting by the time I passed the mailbox. I was starting to worry that this would happen again, that I'd float away, that I wouldn't be able to come back down.