

M A I L G A M E

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I was playing this mail game with a girl at work.

Hot potato, basically.

Except it was with this two-dollar bill.

Back and forth. Back and forth. Ha, ha.

Neither of us wanted the damn thing. We hid it everywhere. Once, she found it in her underwear drawer at her house. That excited and bothered her.

Pretty sneaky, she said.

At the same time this was happening, I finished learning Spanish. I still had Post-it notes everywhere in my apartment. Vocab words stuck everywhere.

I had wanted to become a flight attendant—bouncing over the ocean, digging my toes back into solid land—and the airline said Spanish would help.

Nope.

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John Jodzio

Look at you, they said to me during an interview, you are one huge mofo. You are way too big to go up, they said.

I still had all the Post-it notes, now, stuck all over my place. The Spanish words for trash can—*cubo de basura*. The word for knife—*cuchillo*.

Those are the ones I could not forget.

During that summer, people came over and ate my food and drank my wine and tried to pronounce things off the Post-it notes and even though I hated Spanish now, I corrected them.

Cuchillo, I would say.

Then slower. Cu-chee-YO, not cuch-ILLO.

See the difference? I would say.

Escucha y repita, I told them.

They left angry, my guests. They called me a pompous ass and kicked the sand candles that lighted my walk.

The girl at work and I finally married.

I told her I might crush her one day.

Really? she said.

Really, I said.

I am so large and you are so tiny, so probably it will happen, I told her.

Really? she asked.

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Do Not Touch Me Not Now Not Ever

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One night, rolling around naked, we found some coins in our bed.

Who knows about these things?

They could have come from anywhere, far away, so close, pockets. They weren't like a two-dollar bill. You write your name on a two-dollar bill and pay for something and someday when it returns to your wallet you can say—see, see, I told you so.

These were coins, though, coins, maybe ours to begin with and maybe not.

O P E N

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See him rounding the corner in the midday heat, wearing the nice lined pants he used to work in, cut off at the knee. Swim over to the side of the pool, rest your arms on the concrete, and ask where he's going.

The library, he says, his man-purse on.

Offer him the car, by which you mean your car, but don't call it your car because he doesn't have one and you don't want to keep pointing out all the things he doesn't have, which is nearly everything.

I can walk, he says. Kick off. Swim breaststroke while a hairy, burning man reads a paperback. It is just the two of you, fenced in. Look to see if he's looking, find he isn't. Be disappointed. Switch to butterfly. Almost drown: still nothing. Hold on to the side of the pool for a bit to catch your breath. Remind yourself that even if this man wanted you, you would not want him. Then tell yourself it's not the point.

Climb out and walk down the hill to your apartment.

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Mary Miller

Make a sandwich, a list, a pan of brownies: distract yourself. Give up. Call him. Ask when he'll be home, knowing that with this call you are forfeiting, and that he has won.

Sometime within the next four hours, he says.

Be sure to leave yourself an open window, you say, and throw the phone across the room. Lie down on the couch, letting your hair soak the pillow. The couch isn't paid for but it is yours enough to ruin. Roll down your swimsuit and look at the bruises on your breasts. Touch one; press down. Touch another; press. Find they only look like they hurt.

Think about men, how you don't like it when they are too old or too new.

Think about the man's tongue, which spends a lot of time outside his mouth, and how he insults you in ways so small you feel badly for pointing them out.

Remember that there are stories in simple things, or ways to make simple things complex. Close your eyes: wait. Open them. Stare at the black spot on the ceiling until it starts to move and call again. Tell him to come home. When he asks for twenty minutes, give them to him.

B R U I S I N G

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Some people burn their lover's letters when their heart gets broken. Or burn them years later when they've finally gotten over everything. I drown mine. Put them in the tub with me once the water has lost its heat, but before it grows too cold. As my fingers wilt and the bath bubbles level out into nothing but honey-scented film that greases the tub walls, I put my book or magazine down and pick up a letter I want to kill.

I unfold the sheets of paper. Double-sided are the best. I love watching the words from one side melt into words from the other, the paper fading to translucent, the water clouding bluey as it licks against the love.

When I was twelve or thirteen a boy named Jim almost drowned in our pool. Mother and Gary had people over and all of the adults were drunk or quickly getting there. Jim was four or five and couldn't swim, though he liked to hold up everybody's fun by standing on the diving board. He liked the bounce, the creaking. He liked boasting that if he really wanted to dive in he could. Said he'd be just fine.

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Dear Mother Monster, Dear Daughter Mistake

After the third or fourth time he did this, my sister pushed him. The splash was almost silent, like he knew just how to get in. Like he'd done it all his short life, and gracefully. I almost believed that he could swim.

He sank to the bottom, fish-eyes wide, looking up, still. He lay there like he was already dead or still sleeping, like he hadn't woken up that day at all. The steady ripple of the water made his legs appear to undulate kelp-like from where we stood.

I dove in and pulled him out, amazed and breathless at how heavy a four-year-old boy could be. As soon as I touched him he came alive down there, scrambling in the sodden leaves on the pool's floor. By the time we surfaced he'd kicked me in the thigh and stomach and had reached up through my t-shirt to grab a fistful of my hair.

Jim never came over again. Whether this was by his choice or his parents' I never found out. But he always stared at our house when he rode by in the backseat of his parents' car and stared me down whenever he saw me, like I might steal his breath back if he looked away.

FUGITIVES

Boy Who Thinks He Isn't the Fugitive

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Most nights, Calvin and I lie in bed and watch TV. Calvin's stomach is a pillow, but I don't mind. Calvin flips the channels. With each channel flipped, sound explodes. "Will you stop?" I say. "You're making me epileptic." Calvin grabs my cock and says, "Do I make you seize?" I kiss him on the mouth.

On the 10:00 news, the announcer says, "police have surrounded the home of the couple they believe to be harboring the fugitive." A phalanx of cop cars circles the house. From the chopper, the house looks like a tiny blue box. It looks like cardboard. I want to crush it with my boot. It looks familiar.

"That's our house," Calvin says.

"Open the door," a voice booms through a megaphone. "Allow us to inspect your property."

We don bathrobes, gray and taupe, and tiptoe to the door. I feel euphoric, like I want to get hard, and I wonder whether the policeman will talk dirty through the megaphone.

“We know you’re in there.”

Lately, I have often felt as though Calvin is hiding something. For instance, the other evening, when I arrived home from work, I found he’d cooked pork tenderloin for dinner. Sliced meat glittered on plates, luminous, white and threatening. Why pork tenderloin, I wondered, and why that night? I look at him, to see if his eyes will answer me, but instead I see the panicked expression of a person reconsidering everything. He thinks it’s me.

“Will you leave us alone?” Calvin says. “It’s almost bedtime and your lights are distracting.”

“Hand over the fugitive and no harm will come to you.”

Calvin looks at me. He looks at the living room. He says, “There’s no one here I’d call a fugitive.”

“If there’s no fugitive, you have nothing to lose by opening the door.”

The policeman butts in, all jackboots, buckles and chrome. He twirls a big stick and points. He orders us to empty our cabinets and we line up cereal boxes on the countertop: Cocoa Puffs, Lucky Charms, Bamm-Bamm Berry Pebbles. We gather items from our nightstand: Lubricant, condoms, a vibrating butt plug. The policeman opens the closet and rifles through rows of Calvin’s suits. He yanks them from the rack, piles them on the floor, a lopsided mound of navy, brown and black. He fondles the television remote and snickers as he inspects the season passes in our DVR. He turns on his heels and marches toward the door.

"Wait," Calvin calls. "Are we cleared?"

The policeman stops. He watches us, reconsiders us, our life, our habits, our stuff.

"It was a mistake," Calvin says. "Tell us it was a mistake."

The policeman jams the door behind him.

"He didn't tell us," Calvin says. "Tell us it was a mistake."

M O L A S S E S

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My girlfriend was home from work, at least two hours late, and three inches shorter, which meant it had been a tough day. She rifled through the refrigerator, lifting a bottle of diet soda, sniffing it, frowning.

"This soda's gone bad," my girlfriend said to my clean T-shirt.

I shrugged. "Its upbringing?"

"You haven't cut the grass," she said to my clean T-shirt. My T-shirt read BOO HOO.

"Grass," I said. "As if it's one big lump of lime Jell-O. I mean it's Bermuda and Fescue and St. Augustine, not to mention all the wildflowers. St. Augustine, come on, that's a story. What do you think about St. Augustine?"

"I don't," she said over a shoulder, on the way to the living room.

Long hours isn't just an expression, understand? Anything can change, under the wrong circumstances. Channels change. The television sat on its stand like a giant cube of sugar. I could hear it squawking, so I went outside.

The lawn was certainly tall, spongy beneath my feet, tendrils of grass tickling my ankles. Fallen leaves sat atop it like rafts on a green sea. Glazed biscuits squatted low, parting the blades with their doughy domes. I reached for one, then noticed it was a mushroom. I was out of molasses anyway.

The lawnmower gave me a don't-even-think-about-it look. A gust of wind leapt the fence, followed by a tree limb bending, yawning, cracking, and falling onto my crow-sketching shed.

Confused, I stared at my feet.

What if you looked closely at a lawn?

You would see wedges and spoons and slivers and beards and pebbles and broccolis and fans and straws and hearts of grass. If I could name the entire flora I would. But I can't.

I can name sunflower and dandelion and bloodroot and trillium and verbena. I can name wild potato vine. Like a river map, wild potato vine crept along the side of my crow-hunting shed.

A voice reached me from the end of the yard, then a swishing of Carolina lilies. Someone was wading Jangly Creek. Wearing oversized waders and the bowl of a pasta strainer atop her head, it was Joey.

Joey was a girl from the country who was always wading Jangly Creek into the city and selling people things from an inner tube she pulled behind her. The inner tube was once the lungs of a tractor, but no more. It now had fence slats and feed bags laid across, and held all types of useful things—shuttlecocks, disposable cameras, Play-Doh

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How Some People Like Their Eggs

molds, and so on—things Joey found discarded, including a functional abacus, which is really quite rare.

“How are things?” I asked.

“Soapy.” Joey nodded to the water. “Someone spilt something, something neon and soapy. The fish are sinking. The beavers won’t gnaw. They’re hiding. I haven’t seen a woodchuck for days.”

“Ah,” I said, putting my hands to my ears. “I don’t suppose you have my barley?”

“And your yeast.” She handed over two recycled microwave popcorn bags, then snapped a few beads on the abacus. She had silly quick hands.

“A dollar and a half,” she said.

I gave Joey two dollars and told her she could keep the change if she could tell me about St. Augustine. She nodded and searched the burlap bags, finally producing a deck of playing cards. Shuffling, then squinting at the cards, she said, “Born 13 November, 354. Lived a worldly life of wickedness and false beliefs, had a mistress or three. Then got religion. Developed ideas of original sin and predestination. Considered the patron saint of brewers.”

“You’re joking.”

“I never joke,” Joey replied, squirreling the cards away. She rubbed her nose with the business end of a flyswatter. I never saw where it came from. Or where it went. Silly quick, I’m telling you.

We visited awhile. I told Joey how my girlfriend won employee of the decade and the way my stomach fluttered last week as I watched her

fingers prying ice cubes from the tray, and Joey told me about how she kept finding oil filters and bottles of water in Jangly Creek and how her father's crows were doing and what the crows were up to. Joey was my crow intelligence. The crows were ignoring the corn. They were feeding off the highways, off the shoulders and the medians. The crows were circling the malls.

"I've never seen that," I said.

She said, "When's the last time you were in town?"

"Few months ago, I guess." For some reason, I nodded to the water, at a half-eaten chicken finger floating past. "I was in Harvy's for a jar of molasses."

Joey lifted her towrope and squinted into the sun off the water. "Harvy's closed last week. One of them giant syrup stores opened right across the street; sells every kinda syrup in the world, and cheap. Harvy's gone."

"No," I said, mostly just to hear the word. Harvy made his molasses in the old way, a low fire and boiling pots of sugar. He was an artisan of molasses, and I would miss him. Shaking her head, Joey pulled her inner tube down the winding creek, her legs parting the current, the inner tube riding dark and high, their shadow some mythical creature kidnapping an island nation. I watched her round the corner and collected my bags of yeast and barley and I swear each one of them weighed ten thousand pounds.