

Late Slips

“Don’t touch me,” she says when I lie down that night.

“Why not?”

She doesn’t answer, and I reach my hand through the pitch black until I feel her shoulder through the comforter. She shrugs my touch away and as my eyes adjust to the darkness I can make out the curl of her body at the very edge of the mattress. Pulling my hand away, I sit up, resting uncomfortably against the sharp curves of the headboard.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, nothing.”

She is sincere, which is even more confusing than if she’d been sarcastic. Leaning over her shape, I reach out again, tensely, in the same way I would reach out to a stray animal, unsure of what reaction I’ll receive. It occurs to me that I should know how to touch her, that by now touching her should be familiar, instinctual. But my hand hovers unsurely above her shoulder, as if she is repelling it by sheer will.

“Please, don’t touch me,” she says again before I can work up the nerve.

Adjusting my pillow, I lie down on my back with my hands behind my head and stare up at the ceiling, the white sheetrock protruding through the dark. Normally, she rolls over now and tells me what’s on her mind. These initial rejections are common, considering we both have the same difficulty concretely explaining things at the exact moment we think of them. Our thoughts never line up in an orderly fashion, never A, B, C, D. Instead they run all over each other like ants on a hill, leaving us the difficult task

of sorting out what to say. These initial rejections are only acceptable because of our unspoken agreement to give each other as much time as necessary to think things through, with the promise that *something* will eventually be said.

After twenty minutes though, my arms begin to ache from being in the same position behind my head and I sit up again and lean over her.

“Are you still up?” I whisper.

Her short, staccato breathing tells me – she is asleep. I stay leaned over her for a few moments, watching her shoulder rise and fall with her breath, before I lay back down, closing my eyes to create a more complete darkness, and attempt to sleep. Instead of sleep, however, I project the entire evening onto the backs of my eyelids again and again, searching for what I may have done to upset her.

Eventually, I give up trying to figure it out, which consequently means I give up on sleep. Swinging my legs over, I sit on the edge of the bed, hoping that the sudden shift of the mattress will wake her up. It doesn't. I stand up and head toward the kitchen, shutting the bedroom door softly behind me. Looking through the cupboards, I remove a pot and, after filling it with water, set it on the stove. Hovering over the pot as tiny bubbles of heat form at the bottom, I stare at my own reflection shimmering back and forth across the surface and wonder what I look like to the face in the water, if my face is just as distorted, just as incoherent. I look at my arms and hands – completely still, completely in focus.

Of course I look focused to myself if my whole body is moving. It's relative.

I close my eyes and concentrate. At first, the only feeling is the cold slickness of the linoleum beneath my feet. Soon though, I feel the waving of my body, which strikes

me so quickly in the first few moments that I nearly lose my balance and fall backward. I press my toes against the ground to hold myself upright and adjust my balance. I stand and absorb the pulses and vibrations of not just my body, but of everything – the steam-filled air, the slick linoleum, the pot, the stove. It occurs to me suddenly that the reflection in the pot may be real, and that myself and the room are the ones being brought to a boil. The now-billowing steam sends sweat beads crawling down my forehead like water streaking down glass.

I'll just evaporate. Just evaporate and become a cloud in the kitchen. And then rain.

Water boils over the pot and the resulting hiss of the liquid and heat forces my eyes open. The movement subsides. Everything comes back into focus. Staring again into the pot while I blow across the water's surface, I am unable to see my reflection, which has now disappeared behind a white, foamy mixture of steam and bubbles.

After adding some salt, I drop in a fistful of spaghetti, watching the top sag as the submerged portion takes on water. Stirring the noodles slowly with a wooden spoon, I'm just beginning to close my eyes again when someone begins knocking on the front door – a solid, steady knock that takes me a few moments to believe is real. I check the oven clock, even as I can feel the knocking reverberate through the otherwise-silent air.

3:34 a.m.

I check the VCR display on my way to the door to be absolutely certain.

3:35 a.m.

The knocking is still steady, slow, not the desperate way I would expect a knock at 3:00 a.m. to sound. It's as if the person on the other side knows I'm on my way to answer.

As if they knew I'd be awake.

I get to the door and as I turn the deadbolt, it occurs to me that I may be opening up to something unpleasant. However, my hand, running on autopilot, has already turned the knob and I hold what little breath I have in anticipation, letting it out only when I see a woman standing in the doorway. She is soaking wet from a heavy rain I didn't notice falling when I went to bed. The wetness makes her appear small, with her black hair stretched tightly against her head, curling at the very ends in defiance of the rain. Her skin is a dim, grey color in the dark, but her eyes shine out at me, bright and green in stark contrast to her hair and her skin and the night. We stare at each other in silence, long enough that I begin to feel awkward and shift my weight from foot to foot, as if my own skin doesn't fit correctly and I need to adjust it.

"I have something for you," she says suddenly, reaching into her hip pocket and producing a pink envelope, folded in half and wrinkled from becoming damp in her pocket.

I take the envelope from her and unfold it, turning it over in my hands.

"I live across the street," she says. "I got that letter a few days ago, but just haven't had the time to bring it over. You know how it is. You get busy with this thing, then that thing, and completely forget about what you really meant to do at the start.

"But when I went to bed tonight, I had the strangest dream. I was swimming underwater, so deep that I couldn't see the top, but not deep enough to see the bottom. I

guess I should have worried about running out of breath, but I guess you don't really have to worry about that in a dream, huh?"

I nod and shift again.

"Anyway, all of a sudden a bright light turned on above me, like a spotlight, and I could see to the top. It was shimmering and white from the light. And that's when I saw your face, just above the surface."

"My face?" I ask.

"I know," she says, "We've never even really met, and I can't say for sure that your face in the dream looked the way you do now. I mean, it was distorted because of the water and the light. But somehow I knew it was you. I opened my mouth to tell you I had a letter of yours, but got a mouthful of water instead. I woke up and hurried right over. I knew I couldn't put off bringing you that letter any longer."

"I suppose not," I say.

"And now you have it," she says. "Now I can sleep without drowning."

"Good," I say.

"Maybe you can too," she says, smiling. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"Maybe so," I say.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight," I say, watching her walk down the porch steps, only to disappear into the downpour. She materializes in the streetlights moments later, but is quickly reclaimed by a combination of rain and darkness once she crosses the street.

I close the door and walk back to the kitchen, tossing the envelope onto the counter and turning off the stove. The water slowly comes down from its boil, steam still

rising in a thin, blurry film. Leaning over the pot, I can see the black bottom in between strands of spaghetti. It is like looking into the ocean.

“What’s in the envelope?”

I turn and she is there in the doorway to our bedroom, her face twisted against the bright light from the kitchen.

“I heard voices,” she says, crossing into the kitchen and looking briefly into the pot. “Was someone here?”

“A girl from across the street had a piece of our mail delivered to her by mistake.”

“Strange time of night to bring someone their mail,” she says.

“I was up. But my pasta got overcooked because of it.”

“I’m sorry about that,” she says.

“It’s not your fault. I wasn’t thinking about how long it had been boiling.”

“I mean about you being up. I know you can’t sleep when something is wrong. It’s just that this time, nothing was particularly wrong, so I didn’t know what to tell you.”

By now I’ve picked up the envelope and pushed my finger beneath the flap, ripping the envelope open across the top. I pull out a similarly pink piece of paper and read it over.

“It’s the water bill,” I say. “It says we’re late.”

“I sent the money yesterday,” she says. “Just throw it away.”

I crumple the paper and envelope together into a ball, working it between my hands, unable to throw it away just yet.

“Anyway,” she says, “like I was saying – I didn’t know how to tell you why I was upset. I feel like you’re just supposed to know, somehow. I feel like it should be as clear to you as it is to me.”

“But it isn’t clear to you,” I say, leaning against the counter.

“You’re right,” she says after a moment’s consideration. “Maybe it’s unfair of me to expect you to understand things about me that I can’t myself. I feel like there are all these layers to me. Of course, everyone can see what’s on top, the part of me that has become the surface. When you and I first started out, it was tough sometimes not to just make those layers impenetrable to you, to keep you out. But now you’re down here where I am, to this place where I know you can *see me*. But where we are is not the bottom. I don’t know what’s underneath this, but there is more. I’m afraid, though, to just peel myself back and look. But now that you’re here, I hoped that you would just dig some more and find out everything so that at least *someone would know what’s down there*, even if I don’t.”

I’m still passing the balled-up water bill back and forth between my hands. Unable to crush it any further, I am simply squeezing it tightly, pressing it against each palm in turn until it becomes a flat oval.

“I already know what’s at the bottom,” I say.

She looks at me hard, and I try to return her scrutinizing gaze with a sincere one.

“You don’t believe me?” I ask.

“I do,” she says finally, her eyes losing their intensity. “Let’s go to bed.”

For the next few hours, until the sun sweeps all traces of the night from our room, I lie in bed and hold her while she tosses and turns in her sleep. I can feel her drowning

in that layer beneath herself that she can only find in her nightmares, at a time she will never remember. Lying there awake, I swim down into myself, into a seemingly endless sea of crisp, unopened pink envelopes – all unread, all unanswered, all addressed to me. I try opening each and every one of them, so that I can crumple up and throw away what's inside. But I am quickly overwhelmed by the sheer number of envelopes and, suffocated, I shake myself back into reality, gasping for breath, my whole body damp and trembling and pressed against her. Burying my face in her tangled mess of hair, I remember the overcooked noodles, lying soft and cold against the bottom of the pot.

I'll dump them out later, I think to myself, suddenly. We have plenty more.