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# Seabed

By Rachel Leeds

“What’s that?”

“Oh... just the tap. This apartment has shit plumbing.” Cara taps the empty space next to her on the bed and makes clicking sounds- flicking her pale tongue against the roof of her mouth.

“I’m not a cat,” Luce says as she leaps onto the bed exactly as a cat would.

“Hey, it worked,” Cara coos, and rolls onto one shoulder to face Luce.

Luce pretends not to notice the tortilla chip crumbs embedded within the fitted sheet. They leave small, sour imprints on her leg. Cara tucks a strand of Luce’s hair behind her ear.

“I’m so happy we’re finally doing this, Luce.” And she is. Cara always stays at Luce’s place. She’s been begging Luce for weeks to spend the night here, but Luce always make excuses. She can’t tell Cara that she hates her apartment. She hates mildew. The concave ceiling. The buckling pale banana wallpaper that gets a tinge darker every time Luce sees it. She asked Cara about it once. Cara just smiled with her chapped lips and said, “It’s mood wallpaper.” Luce was pretty sure that mood wallpaper was not a thing. She later confirmed this by 30 minutes of google-searching that night. But in the moment, Luce just smiled back. Her mind fuzzed out in the moment of Cara. Cara with her luminous eyes, long arms, and floaty smile that seemed to skim over the surface of the words “mood wallpaper” like a Gerridae. And then there was no way Luce could call Cara at two am, a good eight hours after the incident, to call her out like, “hah! I caught you in a lie. Mood wallpaper doesn’t exist!” Then Cara would know Luce was crazy. Cara would break up with Luce. So Luce tossed her phone on the rug beside her bed and flipped over her pillow. She didn’t broach the topic with Cara again. Even as she sees the wallpaper now. Clumpy. Browning. Peeling in places.

“I’m happy we’re finally doing this too.” Luce responds. She kisses the dome of Cara’s forehead. “You should really get a plumber.”

“Why would I do that?” Cara asks. “The tap is dripping in perfect three-four time.”

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Cara is a cellist with the Florida Orchestra. The way her long arms curve around the varnished base, one hand flickering across the strings, hummingbird vibrato, so quick you only see it once it’s already flown away. The other expertly curled around the bow. Back. Forth.

Back. Forth. Bracing. Fluid. Deep, fractal notes. Like the gloss of a jewel beetle. Luce could listen to Cara play forever.

She tries to recall the melody from the Elgar concerto Cara played for her on their second date- the Patel Conservatory after hours. Cara had the keys to the auditorium and permission to stay late, but Luce still felt dangerous. Illicit. Sneaking into a world where she didn't really belong. Cara unclasped the large black case. unsheathed her bow and scraped it across an orange crystalline prism. She handed Luce the prism. It smelled like pine.

Cara's apartment does not smell like pine. It smells dead. Like the rigid cats Luce had to dissect in anatomy. Luce imagines the musty air winnowing through her nasal cavities, prying its way into her mouth, entering her lungs, rotting her from the inside out. She tries not to breathe. She makes it forty-seven seconds before her body revolts, sputtering and coughing.

"Are you okay?" Cara asks. She looks so concerned. Luce feels guilty.

"Yeah," Luce says. "I just forgot to breathe."

Cara laughs. She kisses Luce's neck, lies back down, and looks into Luce's eyes. Luce lies down to face Cara and smooths out her left eyebrow. Cara accidentally shaved it off when she was eleven, and now all the hairs grow the wrong direction. Cara can stay this way for hours, just staring at Luce's face. She says she likes to take everything in. Luce feels beautiful and paralyzed. Proud that her face is interesting enough to captivate Cara for so long. Terrified that if she moves an inch, the moment will collapse and they'll both be left with nothing. She lies in complete stillness. She realizes she isn't breathing again and forces herself to take in the terrible air.

How can Cara not notice, Luce wonders. The dampness of the sheets. The mold blooming behind the banana wallpaper. The suspicious crystalline ring around the toilet bowl. How can she not notice any of it? This apartment is *wrong*. And if Luce isn't careful...

buzzzz

Luce's phone vibrates behind her head. She twists her left shoulder and grasps blindly, so as not to move her head and disturb Cara. 'I might be able to lick my elbow,' Luce thinks in a sudden moment of glee. 'I'll have to try that someday.' Feeling a hard surface, she grabs her phone and swings her arm behind Cara's head, so she can read the text.

Martin: You ok?

Luce doesn't respond. She'd talked to him about this. She said she could handle it. Why can't he just trust her? Luce looks at the time... It's 9:19. Wow. She's already been here three hours. She made it through the doorway. She ate dinner that they cooked on the rusty appliances that spark when you turn them on. She sat on the sopping brocade couch. She entered the bedroom for the first time since...

And now she's here, in Cara's bed, and they're lying here together, and everything's fine. They might keep lying here. They might make out. They might fuck. One of them might fall asleep. They might go out for gelato. 'It's just like when Cara stays at my place,' Luce thinks, 'there's really no difference.'

But there was a difference. Why couldn't Luce just talk to Cara? Just say that she has a thing about mildew and gets anxious here, and that's why she likes it better when Cara stays at her place. That wouldn't be hard. God, it would be so much simpler than the current situation. And Cara would definitely understand, or at least, Luce thinks she'd understand. And even if

Cara didn't understand why Luce was upset, she'd at least try to be empathetic. Right? It's not a big deal. It's not too hard to understand- to make Cara understand the difference. They weren't at Luce's apartment. They were at Cara's apartment. In Cara's room which Luce hadn't dared enter since... Their fourth date.

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It was late- after one of Cara's string quartet performances. They were both drunk. They stumbled down the blistering summer sidewalks of downtown. "Red light!" Cara called out and pointed enthusiastically to the traffic light. Instantly, it changed to green. Static. Fluorescence. Cara's eyes. It was the most beautiful thing Luce had ever seen. She pulled in closer. Cara pulled in closer. They made out, aware of nothing but each other, chapped lips, smooth flex of tongue, until a flock of greasy high schoolers started clapping and yelling "HOT!" Then, Cara took Luce's hand, and they ran twelve blocks, the city smearing behind them.

After that, it was all a blur. Stepping through a doorway. The gentle 'ding' of the elevator button. Cara's crisp white shirt and pants, Luce's patterned dress, all thrown into a pile on the floor.

Luce woke up two hours later gasping and sticky. Everything tasted like salt. She rose, careful not to wake Cara, who snored contented into her pillow. She went to pick up her dress from the floor, but then froze as her eye darted backwards to a corner of the room. In the corner of the room sat an inexplicable puddle. And in the middle of the puddle lay a rat.

Most apartments have rats. Luce's certainly does. She routinely lures rats into catch-and-release traps using her own patented concoction of peanut-butter, fly larvae, and sharp cheddar and then releases them in Lettuce Lake Park. Luce doesn't have problems with rats.

Just this rat. Lying distended belly-up. Tiny pink limbs splayed out. A crusty, matted pelt slicking every which direction. Luce was not a forensic pathologist- she was a vet tech. But even so, she was confident that this rat had drowned. Luce looked out the window, the sky was clear. The streets were dry. It hadn't even been raining.

Then it flooded Luce all at once. All around her was water damage, mildew, and mold. Water damage, mildew, and mold. Water damage, mildew, and...

it was all a blur again. The next thing Luce knew, she was panting, on a shuttle with a bunch of tourists wearing yesterday's dress and her heels on the wrong feet.

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And now Luce is here again. The air grows thicker with damp and rot. Something else starts to drip, out of time with the tap. Spindly fingers climb up Luce's bare legs, fairy-tale spiders, holding their breath as they bite so as not to be noticed. In Cara's eyes, Luce sees reflections of her own. They are laced with fractals. With mold.

Luce starts up from the bed. She is breathing so fast. She needs to calm down because the faster she breathes the more of the air she breathes in and the air is wrong, and soon the air will become her and she will be wrong too.

"What's wrong?" Cara asks sitting up. She looks so concerned.

"Nothing... ummm... I just really need to pee?" 'God,' Luce thinks to herself, 'just talk to her you fucking idiot!' But she can't talk now because she just said she needs to pee. She has to act natural, so she runs into the bathroom and locks the door behind her.

The tap is louder here. Drip. Drip. Drip. The shower curtain is closed. Luce leaves it that way, terrified that there'll be a wall of mold behind it, but she won't realize it's a wall of mold,

so she'll touch it, and a huge chunk will come off and sprout in her hand, vein its way throughout her body until none of her is left. Until she infects everyone she touches. Her hand buzzes. What? She looks down and realizes she's still holding her phone. It's Martin again

Martin: im here if you need me

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"Like, it's probably nothing, right? I'm just freaking out because I'm weird with mildew."

Luce took a sip of her Americano. It was a day after the drowned-rat incident.

"No. From what you described, that sounds pretty fucking bad," Martin responded across the wire café table. "You should really talk to Cara about this."

"I just don't want to make things weird."

"She's the one making things weird." Martin took a bite of his sandwich.

"Like... yeah... but in a good way! She's so fucking weird. that's what I like about her. I don't want anything to change"

"Except the apartment?"

"Exactly! I swear, every time I walk in there, I immediately want to throw myself out the fucking window. I haven't felt that way since high school!"

"Yeah, that's fair."

A spray-tanned waitress asked how they were enjoying their meal. Both of their mouths were full. She smiled and walked away. A common occurrence, but Luce felt like this particular waitress was getting sadistic pleasure out of it. 'Good for her', Luce thinks staring at the ring of

crystals in Cara's toilet bowl. She thinks she recognizes the structure as salt. 'I hope she's still having a good time.'

"Here's an idea..." Martin slapped the table in excitement. A soup spoon clattered to the floor. "Any time you're at Cara's place, and you feel like you're going to panic, just text me, and I'll come up with an emergency!"

"You'd do that?" Luce picked up the spoon.

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Martin did do that. He did that for three fucking months. They came up with the most absurd lies!

"Oh, I'm so sorry Cara! I totally forgot I agreed to pick Martin up from his colonoscopy." Luce did not need to pick Martin up from his colonoscopy. Martin did not have a colonoscopy. He is under fifty and has low risk of colorectal cancer.

"I feel terrible. My cousin Giana was on a school trip to Disney World, and the plane left without her, and now she's stranded. I'm the only one close enough to pick her up." Luce's cousin Giana is a middle-aged Italian dentist who has never travelled outside of Europe.

"GRACE HOW THE FUCK DID THAT EVEN HAPPEN?!?!"

"Cara! I have to go. My idiot friend Grace microwaved her beta fish by mistake." Luce's friend Grace was not thrilled with that one. Martin found it hilarious.

And every time, no matter how outlandish the story, Cara would smile and said she understood and tell Luce, "You're a really good friend" with the most earnest expression. Did she really believe Luce? Did she just not care that Luce was lying? Luce hated that thought. She hated herself. She hated what she was doing, but she didn't stop. And she and Cara got more



serious, and she still didn't stop. She just kept on lying and feeling terrible. "Just one night," she told herself. "I just need to stay over at Cara's one night, and I won't be a terrible girlfriend, and everything will be okay." But every time she opened the door, the dead smell hit her instantly. The sockets hissed. The tap dripped. The damp air clawed at her throat. In the end, Luce always caved.

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Luce's finger hovers over the type-bar in her text exchange with Martin. 'No,' she thinks. 'Not tonight.' She throws her phone hard against the tile floor. It does not break. The air thickens. It's fog now. Luce can hardly breathe. She can't see her reflection. The sockets spark. Lifted in the air. She opens the bathroom door. Cara's sitting on the bed. Luce sits next to her.

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"I hate this apartment. And I didn't want to say anything because it shouldn't be a big deal, and I thought that maybe I was just being dramatic about nothing, but I'm not. There is something *wrong* with this apartment Cara. Something is really really *wrong*. And I don't know how you can be here and be fine with it. I want to rip my skin off. I seriously considered buying one of those war-grade gas masks for tonight so I didn't have to breathe in the mildew. When I go home, I'm going to throw out these clothes and shower five times just to get dry which doesn't even make sense. This is way beyond a plumber. Mood wallpaper isn't real. And I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want to tell you, Cara, because I didn't want to ruin things. Because I love you. I fucking love you, Cara."

Luce looks up at Cara. "This is it," she thinks. The tap changes time. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip, and Luce can hear the melody from Elgar's cello concerto. Its keening vibrato ripples through

the apartment. Why won't she say something? The fog grips them- molecules pressing tighter together. Pooling around the sandy bed, around Luce, around Cara's chapped lips. Banana wallpaper glides away revealing the pink beneath it, spongy like lung tissue. Cara opens her mouth to speak. "This is it," Luce thinks. She cannot read Cara's eyes.

"Luce," Cara begins. The music stops.

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"I fucking love you too. It's going to be okay. Whatever happens, it's going to be okay."

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The music starts again. Luce is shaking and crying and Cara is shaking and crying, but you wouldn't even be able to tell because the tears blend into the salty water that surrounds them. They float off the bed. Together. Underwater. All anemone buzz. Goldentail morays skirt past, brush up against their sides. Coral branches out in dizzying fractals. Algae speckles the ocean sky. Cara wraps around Luce, pale-tongue and long arms like tentacles hold tight then release. Luce swims to face her. She smooths Cara's left eyebrow then kisses her ear then turns toward her luminous eyes, those soft echoing pools. Luce can breathe. She can finally breathe.

Cara will not let her drown.