

# Bear You Company

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To anyone who has dreamed of fucking the unfuckable



## Snow

A snowy night is bright, shockingly so—each season, somehow, the moon’s reflection takes Melissa by surprise. The tiny shards of ice bouncing light upwards, the ping-ponging of cold white moon glow skyward and back. She can always remember the smell, clean and nosebleed-coarse. The feel, too, comes back to her easily, the crunching underfoot, the softness giving way at the press of fingers. The taste of it, so untouched by earthly things it’s nearly sweet. But the brightness—that’s new every time.

It shouldn’t be, is the thing. It shouldn’t be novel that the first snowy night is as bright as copy paper. She’s had years of first snows, thirty of them, and each time (each in recent memory at least) has her unexpectedly reaching for her sunglasses. But this year, old things are new again. Why not snow? And why *should* the taste be familiar, or the feel, or the smell. Melissa is new, after all. She could be baptized by snow. What water could be holier than this? It’s straight from heaven, spilled over the sides of God’s bedtime glass, pulled from God’s fridge tap.

It’s so quiet out here, windless, the forest noises muffled by the soft, heavy blanket. *I could die out here and no one would know*, she thinks, then laughs, then very narrowly avoids bursting into tears.

She was supposed to come here with Jess, but Jess is in Montauk with her family and a fat stack of divorce papers. On the interminable drive over, Melissa had chanted *it’s already paid for* like a mantra. Now, alone outside the frigid cabin, her Uggs rapidly taking on water, she wonders whether she should have let the sunk cost sink.

Melissa thinks about her old laptop. She had used the same one all through college, and for seven years after. One day, she gave it a close look—sticky keys, dead pixels, fan louder than the AC—and admitted,

loyalty aside, that chucking it and getting something new would make her life so much easier. Her marriage ended in much the same way, with a big, heaving sigh of *I don't have to live like this*. She didn't have to endure the sullen conversations, the perfunctory intimacy, the empty tooth-socket where she used to have something gold. Neither did Jess. They took a look at the thing, chugging along, doing its best, and decided their well-worn model had outgrown its use.

That didn't make it any less of a tragedy. It just fuzzed the edges. Now, Melissa lives with the feeling that she ought to blame someone, or something, but there's nothing there. It's an unfocused, gooey grief. She gets mad at her therapist about it. *You don't have to feel any sort of way*, Barbara says, and Melissa gnashes her terrible teeth and rolls her eyes until they ache. *I'm going to the cabin*, she tells Barbara, and Barbara says *Won't you be lonely?* And Melissa says, *I think it will be good for me*, because what does Barbara know?

Melissa is so lonely. The snow is vast and uncaring. Melissa can taste absence in the air, wispy and cold. Her socks are wet. She thinks about doing something divorce-ish, something that might look right in a Nancy Meyers movie. She could scream or dunk her face in the snow or, or, or...take her tits out? The idea catches fire in her brain. Tits. Out. Tits out now. She unzips her black puffer, lifts up her Wesleyan sweatshirt, and bears her breasts to the night.

Her nipples have never felt this uniquely bad. She dashes back into the cabin, where it's just as cold but there are walls, which is a comfort. The space heater is blaring and creaking. She looks at the fireplace and makes a decision.

Her apartment in the city, the one she shared with Jess, had a vestigial fireplace. It was the sort of fireplace the landlord warns you against using under pain of death. The sort Melissa was always certain housed an ecosystem of rats and pigeons, maybe a bat or two. A colony of roaches at the very least. That fireplace had been a big, dead hole, covered in years of landlord special paint jobs. How humiliating, to be rendered decorative. She pities it, and her old computer, and wonders if her feelings are broken. She wonders how fucked she is, that she has to turn every inanimate object into a one-eyed teddy bear with a ripped seam. She thinks of a one-eyed teddy bear with a ripped seam and has to wipe her eyes.

The fireplace in the cabin is needed. Living. She offers it a Duraflame, balanced on the metal frame-y bits, and throws some cedar tinder around for authenticity. She lights it with her lighter (she

brought weed) and settles in to watch it from the couch, snuggled under a blanket that smells of dust and Downy Unstoppables. The fire pops and crackles and licks the air like a curious lizard. She wants to put on a podcast to sleep to, but she's too tired already, the heat loosening her up like CBD gummies. She reminds herself that this was the whole point: to go into nature and maybe do something a little different from her usual. Feel something. Be changed. Be new.

A spark pops in the hearth like it's laughing at her. She feels a little drunk. Jess used to tell her that she hummed to herself while she fell asleep. She tries not to cry. She hums.

## Cat

The next morning, a cat falls out of the fireplace.

It wakes Melissa up. She had fallen asleep on the couch, and her back is whining like the one friend who insists on reminding her that they aren't in their twenties anymore and *maybe don't drink like that if you have work tomorrow, Melissa*. But she's fit enough, she can stretch it away. She's not getting old, she's *maturing*, she's—is that a cat?

It's not an easy question to answer. It looks like a soot sprite; she and Jess went to a Miyazaki marathon at the Nitehawk a few years ago, holding hands through *Totoro*, smiling because things were good. God they were good back then, when they would just—seriously, is that a *cat*?

It's mostly eyes and fur; big, golden eyes and heaps of black fur, blurring any discernible feature into a blob of vague beast. It's small, somewhere between kitten and cat, and stomps around, clearly indignant, snorting and snuffling and sneezing. Then, it meows. Sort of. It's more of a blaring "Mah!" nearly human in its nasality. It stamps its foot. It has at least three feet, maybe four—maybe five? Melissa can't be sure. It perambulates strangely, a combination of marching and rolling over its own head. Melissa once cat-sat a kitten with cerebellar hypoplasia. That pathetic creature had trembled like her grandfather in his final stages of Parkinson's. This cat does not have cerebellar hypoplasia, unless the cat sat kitten hadn't had it and cerebellar hypoplasia actually looks like this, like a tufted ball tumbling hither and thither and sometimes laying flat in a dust puddle of soot.

"Hello," Melissa says, to be polite.

"Mah," says the cat. "Mah. Mah, mah, mah."

"Do you have a collar?"



“Mah!”

“Can I see?”

“Mah!”

She approaches cautiously. The cat does not. It proudly stomps towards her, closing the distance, presenting itself in its filthy, big-eyed glory. It doesn't have a collar.

“Are you chipped?” she asks, half expecting an answer. Melissa has met her fair share of stupid cats, orange trash-dwellers who force their lumpy bodies into cookie jars and shoeboxes. This cat has wisdom in its glowing eyes, and a strange, other-worldly sense of belonging. She wonders if it has been here this whole time, the whole day she spent unpacking her bags and arranging her toothpaste on the little sink just so. That would make more sense than it actually falling from the fireplace, which had been roaring only the night before. Pigeons could live in a fireplace, and bats and roaches. But a cat? Absolutely not.

“Do you live here?”

“Mah!”

“Did you come from the roof? Did it hurt?” She waits a beat. “When you fell from heaven?”

The cat doesn't get it. “Mah!”

She sends off a text to the owner, an old woman who had listed her deceased mother's cabin on AirBnB six months ago, but didn't have a single guest until Melissa. *Do you have a cat?* She doesn't expect an answer to come in quickly, but it does. *No. If you found one, bring it inside. It's cold out there.*

“You don't live here,” Melissa says to the cat.

“Mah,” it tells her solemnly. “Mah, mah.”

“Sure. Right.”

She considers what to do, which unfortunately means she considers what Jess might do, because Jess had always been the more responsible one. The responsible thing, Melissa decides, is to go to a vet to see if the cat is chipped. She types VETERINARIAN into her phone and finds a large animal practice 12.3 miles away.

“Okay,” she says to the cat. “Do you like...cars?”

“Mah.”

It's moot, anyway, because when she opens the door she finds her car completely covered in snow. Another quick check on her phone (she did not come to the middle of nowhere to play with her *phone*) finds the rural roads shut down, with delayed plows warning hours and hours and maybe days of blocked roads. She shuts the door.

“Well,” she says. “I guess the universal cat distribution system found me worthy, huh.”

“Mah,” agrees the cat, and curls into a ball in front of the space heater.

Melissa has the sudden, terrifying thought that if the power dies out here, she’ll freeze to death. She combats this—the fear and the freezing—with another Duraflame, a sprinkling of kindle, and crumpled pages of the Sunday Times. Before she starts the fire, she peers up into the chimney, her phone flashlight illuminating an open flue and a dark tunnel to nowhere.

“Hello?” she calls. “Um, meow? Anybody up there?”

After a silent, meow-free moment, she lights the log. The cat approves, shuffling close to the fire, folding itself into the extra-planar shape of which only cats are capable.

She remembers that cats need water. She puts a shallow bowl of it down, along with a plate of canned tuna.

“Food,” she says. “Water.”

The cat opens one eye. “Mah.”

“Good. Great.”

She makes herself an egg. Food hasn’t tasted right since she moved out of her place with Jess, so she bought herself too much at the grocery store. Pop tarts, frozen meals, a rotisserie chicken, Ferrero Rochers, a panettone, a whole bouquet of kale. Canned tuna. The egg tastes weird.

The cat is asleep, she assumes. It no longer has visible eyes, nor visible limbs. It’s a gently snuffling ball. Melissa is very grateful for this ball.

“Thanks for coming,” she tells it, but it doesn’t answer.

## *Knock*

Two hours later, there's a knock at the door. Melissa nearly jumps out of her skin.

"Coming!"

She puts down her book, which she had barely been reading, and spares a thought for her braless, sweat-panted appearance. She can't care; she cares a lot less about a lot more these days.

"Hello?" She opens the door and is too scared to scream.

The figure outside is very tall. Melissa is tall for a woman, a solid five-foot-nine, but this visitor is tall for a *person*. Six-six, maybe, or six-seven. NBA player tall. Three kids in a trench coat tall. But never mind the height—the visitor is wearing a *cloak*. They're covered head-to-toe in black fabric, woolen in some places, gauzy in others. The hood hangs low, shading the visitor's face. Only the hands are visible, long-fingered and red from the cold.

A voice comes from deep in the dark hood.

"Sorry." The hood is thrown back, and a face comes into view.

Melissa played Dungeons and Dragons exactly twice, both times as a drow: an under-elf with lavender skin. This visitor's skin is distinctly drow-like, an almost mushroom-y brown with undertones of gray and purple. Porcini brown, like there might be white gills hidden somewhere under the cloak. The hair is long and swept back, similarly purplish, but a few shades darker than their skin. Melissa can't immediately tie the face to one gender. The lips are big and soft, the eyes wide and rimmed with wet, dark lashes. The brows are heavy. The cheeks are angular, the hollows pronounced. A welter of freckles decorate the long, straight nose, which is sniffing and pinkish at the nostrils.

"Sorry," the visitor repeats. They clear their throat. "Sorry, but is the

Gravewalker here?"

The voice is high for a man, low for a woman. Melissa opens and closes her mouth a few times.

"The what?"

"The Gravewalker." They shuffle their feet nervously. "Can I come in?"

Melissa is too startled to say no. She steps back to let them in. They duck under the lintel.

"Ah," they say, pointing at the cat. "There it is."

"Mah," says the cat.

"Sorry," says Melissa, remembering belatedly to close the door. "Is that your cat?"

"Mine?" The visitor wipes their nose on their sleeve. "No."

"But you were looking for it."

"Yes."

"Because it's the...Gravewalker?"

The visitor appears relieved to be understood. "Yes. Exactly. Can I sit?"

"Oh, sure." Melissa hastily gathers the blankets from the couch and throws them into the corner of the room. "Do you, uh, want anything to drink? Or eat?"

The visitor blinks a few times. "Food?"

"Yeah." Melissa looks over at the open box of strawberry Pop Tarts. "Food. Or water? Tea?"

The visitor contemplates this, dark brows drawing together. "Turkey?"

Melissa can do turkey. "You want a sandwich? I have sliced cheddar, tomatoes, lettuce, mayo, mustard—that sound good? On rye?"

The visitor looks very unsure. "A-as big as me?"

"Yeah," says Melissa, at a similar loss. "Big sandwich?"

The visitor nods. "Thank you."

"No problem."

Melissa is relieved to have something to do. She heads over to the little kitchen, watching through the corner of her eye how the little cat climbs up on the visitors lap and makes itself comfortable. This puts her at ease. Animals are decent judges of character. Melissa isn't in any danger. Probably.

As she slices the tomato, she wonders how lonely she must be to have let a cloaked stranger in without any hesitation. Well, if she dies, she dies. She knows the thought should make her sadder than it does.

"Here." She presents the visitor with the sandwich. The visitor stares at it with unconcealed wonder.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," she says, then sits at the little table in the corner to watch her guest eat.

As she watches, Melissa decides that, whatever this visitor is, they aren't entirely human. This cabin is at the edge of a state park. The visitor, cloaked and strange, must be some sort of cryptid, or benevolent fairy—god, she hopes it's benevolent. Jess wouldn't agree. She would think it was a vagrant and that Melissa was supremely stupid for opening the door at all. But Jess is gone, and Melissa is allowed to be whimsical if she wants.

The visitor finishes the sandwich and wipes their mouth.

"That was good." They stretch very long arms over their head. "Can I sleep?"

"Here?"

The visitor bounces on the cushion. "It's soft."

"Oh. Sure."

"It's only for a few hours." The visitor pulls an old pocket watch from a fold in their cloak. "I have work at twelve bongos."

"Bongs?"

"You know," they say. "Bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong."

"Midnight?" Melissa guesses.

The visitor snaps their fingers. "That's it. Midnight."

"Yeah. Yeah, go ahead."

The visitor smiles. They have charmingly crooked teeth. Their cheeks get a little dark, nearly portobello. They might be blushing. "Thank you."

"Wait." Melissa has a lot of questions. Only one comes out. "What are your pronouns?"

"My...pronouns?"

Melissa cannot believe she asked a spirit of the forest their pronouns. She wants to punch herself in the face. "You know, like she/her or he/him or they/them? Or, like, a neopronoun?" She wants to knock her own teeth out.

"Oh." The visitor thinks about this. "You."

"Me?"

"No, you. Like." They raise a hand with a long, pointed finger. Their eyes get very large. "You!"

"Oh, um. I see."

"Wait." They run a hand over their chest, and then between their legs. Now it's Melissa who is blushing. "She," the visitor says. "Her."

Melissa does not want to explain gender theory to a forest fairy.

"Okay."

The visitor smiles again. "Can I have the blanket?"

"Sure."

The visitor lays back, waiting. Melissa steels herself, then awkwardly tucks the fairy with she/her pronouns into bed. Couch.

"Well," Melissa says. "I'm going to read. If you need anything."

"To you a good night," the spirit says, and immediately starts to snore.

Melissa turns to the cat. The Gravewalker. "Are you a spirit, too?"

"Mah!"

"Sure," she says. "Why not."

## *Awake*

The visitor wakes up at six bongs. She looks around fretfully. When her eyes fall on Melissa, she relaxes.

"Thank you," she says. "I needed that. It's been so busy. Makes me sleepy."

Melissa puts down her book. She was barely reading it. She was mostly staring at the sleeping...being? Person? Creature? The sleeping *visitor* on her couch.

"No problem." She had come up with a few questions while her guest slept, but she doesn't want to say the wrong thing. She starts out simple. "You said you have work at midnight?"

"Oh, yeah." The visitor tucks some hair behind her ear. The ear is long and a little pointed, which feels appropriate for a fairy. "It's that time of year."

"What time?"

"Christmas." She shrugs, like *What can you do?* "Busy."

Melissa wonders if what she had assumed was a spirit is actually a heavily concussed retail worker. "What do you do?"

The visitor takes her time answering. "Help people figure out how to be good."

"Like a life coach?" *No, you idiot*, Melissa tells herself. *Not like a fucking life coach*. She wants to bury herself in the snow.

"A life coach?" The visitor clearly does not know what this is. She looks down and notices the cat on her lap. "Hello, Gravewalker. Are you coming with me tonight?"

"Mah!"

"Staying, then. I don't blame you." The visitor looks around. "It's nice here."

The wallpaper is old and yellowed, with a faded pattern of tiny

daisies. "I like it," says Melissa.

"Can I come back tomorrow?" The visitor is not meeting Melissa's eyes. She's uncomfortable. Hopeful. Melissa catches the hope, and lets it sit in her chest; it's nice not to be alone.

"Yeah, of course," Melissa says. The visitor beams. Melissa beams back, though she feels somewhat out of practice. "But I don't know how you'll get to work and back. The roads are snowed over."

The visitor shakes her head. "Not a problem."

"Right." Fairy, then. Fairy life coach. "I'm Melissa, by the way."

"Melissa," the visitor repeats. "Melissa."

"Do you, uh, have a name?"

"Oh." The visitor's brows furrow in thought. "Good question."

Melissa waits. The visitor thinks. Eventually she says, "Future."

"Your name is Future?"

The visitor chews on this for a moment. "Yes," she concludes. "Future."

"Like the rapper?"

"Oh," Future says. "I thought everybody did that at home."

"What?" says Melissa.

"What?" says Future.

"Mah!" says the Gravewalker.

Melissa decides to drop it. "Do you want something to eat before work? I was going to make spaghetti for dinner."

"Yes, please." Future gets up very quickly, displacing the blanket and the Gravewalker, who tumbles to the floor with a disgruntled *Mah!* "Can I help?"

Melissa bought all of the ingredients for tomato sauce. She also bought a jar of Rao's, just in case she didn't have in in her to cook. She decides she has it in her to cook.

"Sure," she says. "Can you chop garlic?"

Future cannot chop garlic, but she learns quickly, delighted to smash the cloves with the flat of her knife and slice them up into little pieces.

"This smells good," she says. "Spicy."

"Wait until it starts cooking."

When the onions begin to caramelize, Future moans in pleasure. "It's like magic."

Melissa bops her hip against Future's. Future bops back. Her hip is around the height of Melissa's waist.

When the water starts to simmer, Future points a finger. "Boiling. That one I know."



"It's an important one," Melissa says, and decides not to add mushrooms to the sauce.

They sit at the table with their pasta and cans of Pamplemousse LaCroix. The Gravewalker weaves between their ankles, mah-ing for scraps. Future takes a bite of pasta and moans again, deep and pleased, and Melissa thinks it would probably be impolite to entertain the tingle between her thighs.

"Good?" she asks.

Future nods fervently. "So good. Nobody's made me a meal before."

Melissa is aghast. "If I had known that, I would have made something nicer than pasta."

"No!" Future says, earnest and raw. "Nononono. This is so nice. I like that we made it together. It felt good to be helpful."

"I get that," Melissa says. Jess was a restaurant chef, so their fridge was always filled with plastic deli containers of this and that, labeled with masking tape and sharpie. The kitchen was Jess's domain. Jess indulged Melissa's urge to help from time to time, but Melissa knew she was mostly just getting underfoot. "I like to feel helpful."

"Right," Future agrees. "It's always *No, I don't want to see!* or *Am I that man upon that bed?*"

"Ye-e-s."

Future smiles uncertainly. "Is your business partner living?"

"My—" Melissa thinks back, pretty sure she hadn't mentioned Jess, or the word "partner," which she'd never used after they were married. She loved to say "wife." When she was a kid, marriage had seemed like the worst possible idea. Then she realized she could marry a woman, and, *well*. "I don't have a business partner."

"Right, right." Future blushes down into her pasta. "Not everybody has one."

"Um, do you?"

"Me? Hm." She twirls some pasta onto her fork. "Two. Kind of."

"Is that..." Melissa wants so badly to say the right thing. "Is that hard?"

"The people are harder. The, um, clients. I guess. They're never happy to see me."

Melissa thinks back to when she opened the door to find a tall, hooded figure with no visible face. "Do you think it's maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

"Um, the cloak?"

Future smiles. "Yeah. That's the point of it." She wiggles her fingers.

"Ooh. Spooky."

Melissa laughs. "It is pretty spooky."

"You didn't seem scared," Future observes. "Then again, you weren't expecting me."

"I wasn't." She dabs her mouth with a paper towel. "I'm glad you came, though."

Future's smile is so bright it's hard to look at.

After dinner, they play Scrabble. Future says she's never played before, but she kicks Melissa's ass with BEREFT, UNWATCHED, and UNWEPT, which Melissa challenges and has to look up. Future grins in triumph, and lays ODIIOUS around the U.

Melissa makes a fire and they retire to the couch together, watching the flames. Melissa wants to touch Future. She wants it so much. She chalks it up to gratitude; it's much nicer to have company than to be alone. She hates that Barbara was right. She wonders what Barbara would say about this.

Around the time Melissa's yawns start to get serious, the Gravewalker says, "Mah!"

"Oh!" Future pulls out her pocket watch. "Eleven bongs and thirty-three-hundred ticks. I should get going."

Melissa jumps to her feet, a little dizzy. "You'll come back tomorrow, though?" She'd be embarrassed for her eagerness if Future didn't look just as eager.

"Yes," Future says. "Around three bongs, if that's okay. Three afternoon bongs."

"Perfect." Not perfect. Melissa wants it to be earlier. She walks Future to the door. "See you tomorrow then."

"See you." Future brings a very long finger to Melissa's nose. "Bong, Melissa."

"Bong," says Melissa, as Future disappears into the surprisingly-bright night. She closes the door and turns to the Gravewalker.

"Bong," she says.

"Mah," the cat tells her, and munches down on some tuna.

### Three

At bong, bong, bong, there's a knock at the door. Melissa runs over. She had spent the morning *getting cute*, showering in the tiny bathroom and blow-drying her hair with the ancient blowdryer. She hadn't brought much makeup, but there was always some at the bottom of her purse. Lipgloss, a little blush, and a little mascara—*there*. A pretty girl, kind of. She hasn't gotten her hair dyed in a while. Her roots are dark, the balayage brassy. She had secured herself a crappy little short term lease when they decided Jess would keep the apartment, and the last tenant had left some drugstore shampoo in the shower. Melissa had started using that when her purple shampoo ran out. What was the point of getting a new bottle, anyway? Now, she sees what the point was.

She gives her bra a courtesy readjustment before opening the door. Her smile falls away when she sees Future on the other side.

Future looks like shit. Her eyes are red and bloodshot, her hair scraggly. Her nose is leaking. Her eyelashes are clumped together. She seems shorter.

"God. *Future*." Melissa pulls her inside and deposits her on the couch. Future stares at the unlit fireplace. The Gravewalker jumps up beside her with a conciliatory *Mah*.

"Do you want some tea?" Melissa asks. Future looks up.

"Tea?" Her voice is crackly.

"Yeah," Melissa says gently. "It might make you feel better."

"I'd like to feel better," Future says, dropping her head onto the back of the couch. Melissa goes to the kitchen. A few minutes later, she returns with hot water, a gallon of milk, a bag of sugar, and every tea she has. Future blinks at all of it.

"How do I...?"

"Oh!" Melissa hops into action. "Caffeinated? Decaf?"

"I don't—" Future's voice breaks. "I don't know what that *means*."

"Right. Of course." Melissa decides on Earl Grey, and dunks it into the mug. "Milk? Sugar?"

"Yeah." Future wipes her nose on the sleeve of her cloak. "I know those."

Melissa makes the cup and sits down on the couch. Future hovers over the mug, breathing in the steam. She lets out a sigh.

"You were right," she says. "Feels nice."

"You can drink it when it cools down a little."

Future's lips quirk. "I know *that*."

"Of course." Melissa bleats out a nervous laugh. "Of course you do."

The silence is absolute. It started snowing again last night and hasn't stopped since. There's no wind, no leaves rustling. The ploughs have postponed their ploughing.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Melissa asks.

Future looks at the ceiling. "Why?"

"It might feel good."

"Okay." She sucks in a big breath. "It didn't work."

"What didn't?"

"Last night." She sips her tea. It's too hot. She hisses, putting it down on the coffee table next to the milk and sugar and dozens of teabags. "Usually, by the time they get to me, it's already done. They see the young bits—the girl, or the boy or whatever. The one that got away. And then they regret. And *then* they see who they've hurt, and they realize they don't *have* to regret, and they can fix things. And then it's my job to show them, just in case, that they could still fuck up. And it would be *bad*." She wrings her hands. "I don't have to say anything. I just, you know." She points forward, then to the left, then the right. "And he wasn't even scared last night. He just looked at me and said *everybody dies alone*."

Melissa has no idea what Future is talking about, but it sounds bad.

"Do you think that's true?"

"No!" She tries her tea again. "Oof, still too hot. No, not everybody dies alone. It's super easy to not die alone. Just love people. It's so simple."

In the shitty short term rental, Melissa had begun to wonder whether she would die alone. She had loved Jess so much. "I don't think it's that simple."

"It can be. For this guy at least. Ugh, fuck Exxon Mobil."

"Yeah," says Melissa. "Fuck 'em. Are they, uh, destroying your habitat?"

"Yes," Future says with feeling. "Your habitat." She gets quiet. "Kids will die. That's the choice he made."

"I'm so sorry." Kids dying is unambiguously bad. "Is there anything I can do? Picket? Or, uh, get you an environmental lawyer?"

"No, but it's sweet of you to offer." Future drops her head onto Melissa's shoulder and Melissa feels it in her capillaries. "You were right. It was good to talk about it."

"Yeah." Future's hair is smooth on her cheek. She nuzzles into it and feels Future hum. "I'm so sorry, Future."

"Thank you."

"Do you have work again tonight?"

She feels Future's nod. "Yeah. Christmas Eve Eve. Second biggest."

"Oh." The house without Future in it is so much worse. "Hm."

"Yeah." Future lifts her head to drink her tea. Melissa bitterly regrets the loss. "It's perfect," Future says. "The perfect temperature."

"I'm glad."

Future smiles at her weakly. Melissa's heart aches.

"Is it..." Future looks uncertain. "Would you want to sleep with me?"

Melissa chokes. "*Sleep with you?*"

"Is that not okay?" Future retreats into herself. "It's only, I'm so tired, but I don't want to be alone."

Right. Sleep. Of course. "We won't fit on the couch. But maybe the bed?"

"Are you sure?" Future frowns into her milky tea. "I don't know what people do. I don't know what's right."

"You do, Future. You do know what's right." Melissa takes the tea out of Future's hand and replaces it with her own. Together, they walk into the bedroom, the Gravewalker weaving at their heels. Melissa thinks its *Mah* sounds like *I don't know how to help her*, but that's a lot to put on a cat.

The bed is a creaky queen with a crinkly mattress cover and old, floral sheets. Future falls onto it, her cloak riding up to her ankles. She doesn't have any shoes. Her feet aren't frostbitten. She has all her toes. Her soles are suspiciously clean. *Fairy*, Melissa thinks, her breath short.

Future scrambles under the covers and waits, eyes baldly hopeful, blanket up to her chin. Melissa can't help but follow her, can't help but

tug their bodies close. The cloak is softer than she expected, and doesn't hide the shape of the being (person? Creature?) underneath. Long, slender legs. A thin, bony torso. Wiry arms that wrap Melissa up tightly and squeeze. Melissa's so happy, she doesn't even care that Future is wearing outside clothes to bed.

Eventually, Future settles with her head on Melissa's chest. Her legs hang off the bottom of the bed.

"Thank you," she says.

"Of course."

"Not just for this. For not being scared of me. You don't know how hard it is that no one is ever happy to see me."

Melissa rakes a hand through Future's slippery hair. "I was so happy to see you today."

"Even though I was sad?"

"Even though you were sad." Melissa takes a chance and drops a kiss on Future's head. Future shivers.

"You're so good," Future says. "We would have never met the regular way."

"You're good," Melissa says. "Sleep. You've got a big night."

Future nods and closes her eyes. Melissa stays awake, a fairy in her arms and the Gravewalker nestled at her feet, and wonders whether she's ever felt like this before, and if she can keep feeling it forever.

## *Bath*

When Melissa wakes up at one am (bong) Future is already gone. She eats a few forkfuls of pasta in front of the open fridge, then crawls her way back into bed. On a whim, she opens instagram. Jess is on the beach in a big, striped sweater, her short, auburn hair caught in a breeze. She's laughing, her tiny mom clinging to her arm. Melissa was never convinced Jess's mom liked her. Every visit, she would ask Jess for reassurance. *She loves you*, Jess would say. *Of course she does*. Melissa wonders what Jess's mom said when she heard about the divorce. If she thinks her daughter could do better. If she's relieved.

It stings, looking at the picture. But it stings a little less than it used to. She wonders whether Future has ever been to the beach. She would love to take Future to the beach. She would love to watch Future smile at things.

Melissa isn't tired enough to fall back to sleep, so she decides to take a bath. Baths were always Jess's thing, like cooking. Melissa never took the time to figure out whether she liked baths. They only had one bathtub. If Melissa liked baths, they would have had to share, and Jess really loved being able to take a bath whenever she wanted. But now, Melissa doesn't have to worry about sharing. She doesn't have to worry about Jess at all. She goes to the tiny cabin bathroom and draws a bath.

The pipes scream. For a moment, there isn't any water. Then, it shoots out, ice cold. It takes a few minutes to get blissfully hot, the steam rising in beckoning curls. Melissa strips and lowers herself in, an involuntary sigh escaping. It's so warm and so wet and so *good*. How did she go without this?

She imagines Future at the other side of the tub and considers bringing a hand between her legs. She stops herself. It doesn't feel

right, getting off to the thought of that cloaked, woodland mystery. Future picked her gender by feeling herself up, for fuck's sake. That doesn't sound like something a sexual being would do.

She runs through some possibilities of what Future might be. Werewolf. Sprite. Eccentric human with a colloidal silver habit. Melissa loves mysteries; reading them, solving them, discovering whether her high school bully got divorced, etc. Future's mystery doesn't pull her like that. Future is *Future*. She's company. If she's hiding something, let her hide. Melissa's hiding, too—what's spending Christmas alone in a secluded cabin if not hiding? They might as well hide together.

Anyway, no solved mystery is better than spaghetti and scrabble and falling asleep pressed to the impossible fabric of a long, black cloak. It's nice here, with Future. It feels better than anything has felt in a really long time.

She thinks about her apartment in the city, and work in January, and all the friends she lost because they had belonged to Jess, and considers the possibility that she might throw up.

The Gravewalker marches in, as though it knew she needed company.

"Mah!" it says.

"Mah," Melissa replies, and unclenches her muscles. The Gravewalker settles on the bathmat and stares.

"Who is she?" Melissa asks the cat. "Why is she here? Why did you come find me? Am I cursed, or am I lucky?"

"Mah," says the Gravewalker. "Mah, mah, mah."

Melissa reaches for her phone and googles *Allegany State Park cryptid* just in case, but nothing seems like Future. There's a werewolf and maybe Bigfoot. The park also appears to be haunted. Melissa entertains the idea of a ghost and tosses it away.

When the water gets cool, she hauls herself out and stumbles to the couch, wrapped in a towel.

"That was a good experiment, Gravewalker," she says. "I like baths."

"Mah!"

She googles *Gravewalker* for good measure and comes upon something Lord of the Rings-adjacent, which definitely is not a cat.

"Mah," she says.

"Mah," the Gravewalker agrees.

She slips back into bed. It already feels too big, already gives her a pain in her chest. Maybe she feels so much because she has felt so little



for so long, ever since Jess sat her down and said, *We can't keep avoiding this*. But maybe, even if she weren't all broken up inside, Future would make her feel like this. They've barely spent two days together, and Melissa can already believe this is something special. This could be, if it's real. If this isn't a carbon monoxide leak or, like, a siren situation. If Melissa doesn't end this thing drowned.

By the bong, bong of two, she's asleep.

## *Christmas Eve*

At eleven morning bong, Future knocks on the door.

"It was such a good one last night," she announces. "She's going to do so much good. I see it already."

"That's great, Future. I'm so happy for you," Melissa says, and means it. "Do you want a sandwich? I'm making myself one."

"Sandwich! Yes, I loved the one you made for me!" Future follows her in the kitchen and Melissa remembers her dad's warning not to feed wildlife.

"Is roast beef good?" Melissa asks. "We could also do turkey again."

"Roast beef is so good. Thank you." Future is bouncing on her toes.

"I know you want to tell me about it," Melissa says. "Go ahead."

Future exhales in a rush. "Well, it was like normal, right? Like, she had seen the one that got away, and then saw that she could help this boy with leukemia. She could pay his hospital bills, you know? Her assistant's kid. He was so cute. He had no hair and his tooth fell out." She opens her mouth and touches her right central incisor. "That one. She was a total goner. So when she saw me she wasn't even scared, just resigned. Just like, *show me the way if you must*, which I did. And then we went to her grave."

Melissa is lost. Kid with leukemia? "Wait, you showed her her grave?"

Future nods. "That's part of it, yeah. And she was so sad, like soooooo sad. She wasn't even pleading with me, just kind of staring at it. So." She wriggles her nose. "You know what I did?"

No. Melissa doesn't know. Also, she's kind of freaking out. "Not at all."

"I held her hand." Future giggles as she says it, her cheeks dark, her eyes bright. "I thought about yesterday, how good you made me feel

just by touching me. And I thought, *just show her it's okay*. I could see she was going to pick the right thing. The kid is going to get better because of her. She sends him to Sweden for this experimental treatment, and then she lobbies to get it to the US. So I held her hand, and she *thanked* me. She even squeezed back. Gosh." She leans back against the counter. "I needed this one."

"Wait." It all comes together. Melissa's face gets very cold and then very hot. "You're the Ghost of Christmas Future."

"Well, traditionally it's 'Yet to Come,' but I like Future better." She plucks a discarded piece of lettuce off of the cutting board. "It says The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come on all my paperwork, though."

"Like from Dickens? Like the Muppets?"

"Yeah exactly." She picks up their plates. "I'll take these to the table. Could you bring the stuff we drank on Christmas Eve Eve Eve? The stuff with the bubbles?"

"La Croix?"

"Yeah, that." She walks off with the sandwiches. "Thank you!"

Melissa gets a Pamplermousse La Croix for the Ghost of Christmas Future.

She doesn't blink much for the next half hour. She just listens, poking in a few questions when there's room. Future has done this forever. She does it every night of December. The Muppet version is her favorite, obviously. She and her two business partners commissioned Dickens because people kept dying of fear.

"It was Noel's idea," Future says. "The people we see, they're pretty old. We wanted them a little more prepared, you know?"

"And Noel is..."

"The Ghost of Christmas Present." Future swallows her last bit of crust. "Sorry, should have said."

"How come Noel gets a name? It seemed like you just kind of landed on Future the other day."

"I didn't need one," Future says. "Noel talks to people. He gets invited back for the next Christmas. They want to see him, you know? May less so, but her, too."

"May is..."

"The Ghost of Christmas Past. People don't like her as much when they find out she can't bring them to the past over and over, but they like her fine. Noel is a party." She sips on her La Croix. "You're the first person I talked to."

"Ever?"

"Yeah." Future shrugs. "That's not my job. I mostly point and do paperwork."

"God," Melissa says. "That's so sad."

"It wasn't until now." She considers the room. When her gaze lands on Melissa, she smiles. "This is so much better."

Melissa smiles back. "Yeah."

"Um." Future drums her fingers on the table. "I get to go to the past sometimes. With May, you know? I see some stuff there." She drums some more, nervous and fidgety. "Can we try something?"

"Yeah," says Melissa. "Sure."

Future grins. "You're not going to ask what it is?"

"If I start asking questions, I'll never stop," Melissa says. "I'd rather just do stuff."

"Okay. But we need to stand." They stand. "Hm." Future surveys the scene. "I'm going to sit. You stand."

"Sure."

"Okay." She plunks down onto the wooden dining chair and spreads her legs. "Step here."

Melissa steps between the outstretched knees of the Ghost of Christmas Future. No. Just *Future*, just her weird woodland friend, who is so sensitive and so curious and talks so much when she gets a chance. Who doesn't have shoes and wants nothing more than a cuddle. Who changed hundreds of years of tradition because she was touched once.

"Okay," says Future. She loops a hand around Melissa's neck, gently tugging her down. "So I put my face...I mean, *you* put *your* face...."

Melissa gets it. "Here, like this," she says, and kisses Future on the mouth. Future gasps, her lips opening, and Melissa pushes in. Future groans. Her hands move, unsure where to land. Melissa takes them, puts one on her waist and one on her nape. Future's thumb traces her jaw. Future makes sounds. Melissa pulls back.

"Are those good sounds?" she asks. "Or bad sounds?"

"So good." Future's eyes are dazed. "I felt that everywhere. Not just my face. I felt it—" She waves her hand around her middle, her neck, her breasts, between her legs. Melissa feels like a bubble of La Croix. "Is that supposed to happen?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that's the goal."

"Does it happen every time?"

"No." She thinks back on years of perfunctory kisses. "Not every time."

"But this time," Future confirms.

"Yeah."

"You're feeling what I'm feeling?"

"Yeah."

Future's eyes are dinner plates. "That makes me want to..." She pinches her nipple. "Wow. Wow, that felt good."

Melissa tips her head back and laughs, wild and joyous. "Let's go to bed."

"Bed!" Future bonks her head with the heel of her hand. *Duh.* "That's where they do it. That is..." She cuts her gaze up coquettishly. Oh, she's a natural. "You don't want to sleep, do you?"

"No, Future." She kisses her once, then once again, because it's too nice. "I don't want to sleep."

## *Bed*

Under the cloak, Future's body is a marvel. Her skin is the same purplish-brown all over, darker at her knees and elbows, and lighter, somehow, at the tips of her ears. Her nipples are dark, too, and she's flushed down to her collarbone. Her hair is so long, so silky and strange. It spreads over the chintzy floral duvet like moth wings. Melissa gets a hand in it and Future thrusts against her clothed thigh.

"Take your clothes off," Future says, breathless. "Please, Melissa. Melissa. *Please.*"

Melissa does. Future gapes at her like a horny cartoon wolf. Melissa has never felt this powerful, this fucking sexy. She isn't worried about her hairy legs or soft stomach, or the weird zit on her back that she can't reach. Future is looking at her like she's Niagara Falls. Like she's startled by the majesty. Like she can't believe that something so vast and marvelous can naturally occur.

Future doesn't stop talking. She talks as Melissa licks her neck (Ohmygosh, ohmygosh, *ohmygosh.*) She talks as Melissa gets a nipple between tongue and teeth (Why does that feel so good? I can't believe that feels so *good.*) She talks as Melissa mouths the place her belly button would be if she had one (Wow. Okay, wow.) She only stops talking when Melissa brings a hand between her legs. Then she can only moan and shake.

"Oh my god," says Melissa. "You're so wet."

Future gulps air. "Is that bad?"

"No. It's so, so good."

Future goes back to moaning.

She comes so quickly. She screams through it, raw and unleashed, and Melissa is grateful for their isolation because that must have shaken the trees.

"What was that?" Future asks.

"An orgasm," Melissa says. "You came."

"Can everyone do that?"

"Mostly, yeah."

"Wow." She pushes sweaty hair off of her face. "No wonder that's what they see in the past. That would make anyone good."

Melissa is smiling so hard her cheeks hurt. "You're amazing."

"Melissa," says Future. "You have yet to come."

"Yeah. It's okay."

"No." Future looks at her with wide, hungry eyes. "Show me."

Melissa does. Future learns, getting her off with long fingers and such intense eye contact Melissa has to shut her eyes. Future's smell is everywhere, grave dirt and truffles, warm spices and fruitcake. Melissa comes through a kiss, Future breathing into her mouth, the room full of who they are together.

After, Melissa opens the pantry and makes Future try everything. Pop tarts. Nerds ropes. Hot Cheetos. Future laughs and shrieks and groans appreciatively. Melissa shows her own appreciation by going down on Future right there, on the chilly linoleum. Future's hands are so tight in her hair. Her moans sound like sobs. When they're done, she needs a big, cold glass of water.

Melissa gives Future a pair of pajamas. The pants stop at mid-calf, but the shirt fits pretty well. Melissa tries to explain why it's funny to see the Ghost of Christmas Past in a shirt that says Eisenhower High School Marching Band, but she can't quite figure it out. They sit on the couch with hastily constructed pita pizzas, and Melissa tells Future all about Jess and the divorce, about the apartment and the kitchen and the bathtub, and the picture of Jess on the beach in Montauk.

She says, "I wasn't looking forward to Christmas this year, but I'm so excited to spend it with you."

"Oh," Future says. "I'm not going to be here for Christmas."

Melissa's heart sinks. "Do you have other plans?"

"No. I just won't be here."

"You just..." Melissa stares at her. Future stares back. "What do you mean?"

"Tonight is Christmas Eve," Future explains. "It's my big night. Then, I'm done until December."

Melissa is starting to panic. "What do you mean 'done'?"

"I mean I'm not needed until next Christmas season." She shrugs. "The rest of the year, I just don't."

"Don't *what*?"

Future seems confused. "I don't know. I just...don't."

"Don't visit?" Melissa demands. "Don't scare people? Don't exist?"

"Um, mostly the last one?" She plays with the hem of the tee shirt. "I'm not needed."

*I need you*, Melissa wants to say, but it feels too pathetic. "But Noel visits people. You said he visits people."

"Yeah," Future says. "But I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I *don't*." She's wringing her hands, shoulders hunched. "I don't know, Melissa. It's just how it is."

"How it *is*?" Melissa is crying. She's crying so much. It's way too early to be crying like this. They've fucked twice. Melissa doesn't even know what species Future is. "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"*This*." She gestures at her snotty nose and her red eyes and her shoulders, heaving and shaking. "I hate that. *It's just how it is*. With you, with Jess. You can try and try, but sometimes, it just how it is."

"Yeah."

"I gave her the apartment," Melissa admits. "Jess. I don't even know why. That's just how it had to be." She sniffles. "I wish everything wasn't how it was. I want this thing with us to be, you know...I want it to be how it *isn't*."

She sobs into her hands, messy and broken and an inch off from getting an awful headache. When Future puts an arm around her, she can't help but sink into the embrace. She cries into a shirt that says Eisenhower High School Marching Band.

"I think I understand, now," Future says.

Melissa rubs her eyes. "What?"

"Why I'm here. Why the Gravewalker found you."

"What..."

"You were afraid of the future," Future says. "You didn't care about it anymore. I'm here to help you care about the future."

"Bullshit," Melissa says. "This whole thing with us, it isn't a lesson for me. Both of us are here. Both of us are part of this." She swallows painfully. "Right?"

"I..." Future stares off at nothing. "I don't know. I've never been meant for enjoying myself. The reason I exist is to help other people get to goodness. I think that's why I'm here with you, too."

"But you felt something," Melissa says, desperate. "Didn't you?"



Future looks away. "I can't know."

Melissa grab's Futures hand and squeezes. "Yes. Yes you can."

"I've never felt anything before," Future says. "I've never even talked to a person. And now there's you, and it's all just..." She sighs. "It's inexplicable. The only thing that makes sense is that I'm here as a lesson. That's the only reason I'm ever anywhere. That's why I *am*."

"Don't you want to be more than that?"

"I *can't*," she says. "That's not the world I exist in. I'm not a *person*. I don't get to eat food and have orgasms and sleep next to you. I really liked it, though." She tries to smile. Melissa isn't fooled. "I gave you hope, didn't I? You thought you were done. Now you know you aren't. Now you can meet a person."

"I met *you*."

"I'm not a *person*." She's frustrated. Melissa can see it so clearly. "Don't make me do things I can't."

"I'm not making you do anything," Melissa says. "I care about you. I feel so nice when I'm with you."

"You care about the future," Future says. "It will feel nice in the future."

"No."

"Mah!" says the Gravewalker.

Melissa looks at it. Her little friend. The creature that saved her from loneliness. "Is the Gravewalker leaving, too?"

Future swallows. "It's part of me."

"So it's leaving."

"Yeah."

Melissa reaches out to pet it. It hops into her lap, fur and big eyes and an unknowable amount of limbs. "Why is it called the Gravewalker?"

"Do you ever get chills?"

"Is that when it's walking on my grave?"

"Yeah." Future wraps Melissa and the Gravewalker up in her long arms. "If I could feel something, Melissa, I think I would feel it with you."

Melissa cries into the Gravewalker's fur. She cries as Future gets up, goes to the bedroom, and returns in her cloak. She cries as Future walks to the door.

"I won't forget you," says Future. She waits at the door for a long time. When she finally opens it, she waits some more.

"Bong," she says.

"Bong," says Melissa.  
In the distance, a clock strikes twelve.

## *Christmas*

When Melissa was a kid, her family would get Chinese food on Christmas. This year, she bought dumpling wrappers and fish sauce and mirin and ginger and ground pork and scallions, because making dumplings on Christmas sounded like a really good thing to do.

She doesn't make dumplings on Christmas. She puts a frozen pizza in the oven and watches someone on YouTube play a video game she doesn't care about.

The Gravewalker was gone when she woke up. She knew it would be, she was prepared, but the reality makes her hands numb. She goes on Petfinder and looks for cats. She knows it's probably really stupid to bring a cat to an AirBnB, but it feels like something she needs to do. She realizes the animal shelters are closed on Christmas and barely avoids throwing her phone across the room.

She feels really gross after her pizza so she puts on a dance workout video set to the Shrek soundtrack and cries through the whole thing. After, she plays "Holding Out for a Hero" on loop and gets angry at herself for not taking any pictures of Future. She wonders whether Future would even show up in pictures. She thinks yes, but hates that she'll never know. She hates a lot of things right now, particularly herself.

She puts on *The Muppet Christmas Carol* and yells at it like it's Rocky Horror. When the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come arrives, she gives it the finger. She hydrates. She cries some more.

She falls asleep on the couch and wakes up on the floor. It's six in the morning on December twenty-sixth (bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong.) She looks around at the dirty plates and empty LaCroix cans languishing in the gray, morning light and decides she doesn't have to live like this. An hour later, the house is clean and so is she. The roads

are finally ploughed, so she scrapes the ice off of her windows and drives-thru a Honeydew Donuts on her way to the nearest animal shelter. It doesn't open for another hour, so she watches scenes of not-Futures on her phone. The *Scrooged* not-Future with the TV face. The weird Jim Carrey CGI not-Future that's only a shadow. She laughs instead of crying, which is definitely progress, but she still says *fuck you* under her breath, which might be a backslide.

At nine bongs, she's filling out an application for a cat. The place is strictly local, so she puts down the AirBnB address. The woman behind the desk looks it up.

"That's an AirBnB," the woman says.

"Yeah, uh, I travel a lot?" Melissa is definitely not getting a cat today. "I rent it out because I travel a lot. In my car."

The woman smiles at her coworker and they both retreat to the back. When they return, they're carrying the largest cat Melissa has ever seen. They're both carrying it. Between them.

"Oh," says Melissa. "Wow."

"We were hoping to give him to a van-lifer," the woman says. "You seem to be the closest thing."

Melissa feels really, really bad. "I spend, um, a lot of time in cities?"

"That's perfect!" The woman hands her a leash. The leash is attached to a harness. The harness is attached to a cat. "He loves to go on walks. Hikes are great, but his former owner had a place in the city. He does really well there."

"What happened to the former owner?"

"He fell off a cliff."

"Sure," says Melissa. "Yeah." She looks down at the cat. It's staring up at her with open curiosity. This is a very smart cat. She loves smart cats. Her eyes start to ache.

"I'll take him," she says. "What's his name?"

At nine bongs thirty, she's driving back to the cabin with a cat named Ebenezer in her passenger seat.

"Ebenezer is an objectively dumb name for a cat," she tells him. "You should be Lucifer instead. Or, like, Greenbeans."

"Meow," he says.

"Or, or—Pancake. Do you look like a Pancake?"

"Meow."

She looks at him. He looks like an Ebenezer. "Fuck."

At the pet store, everyone is interested in the cat on a leash. Ebenezer basks in the attention, flopping on his side so that three

women, one man, and two children can pet his tummy. Melissa talks to seven people, which is more people than she's talked to in a single day in a really long time.

"Thanks," she tells Ebenezer when they're back in the car. "I think you're going to force me to, um, do stuff. To be social."

"Meow," he says.

The women at the shelter told Melissa it would take a few days for Ebenezer to warm up to her, and that he would probably spend some time hiding under furniture. The second Melissa's butt hits the couch, so do Ebenezer's paws. He curls up on her lap, purring. They watch Bake Off together, and Melissa decides to make cookies. Ebenezer spends the whole time weaving between her ankles and Melissa laughs so much.

"You're a menace," she says. "Oh my god. You are not getting any cookies. *Stop.*" She laughs some more.

They have dinner together. Melissa has a turkey sandwich. Ebenezer has wet food. Melissa eats a bunch of cookies and decides to not be weird to herself about it.

When she's ready for bed, Ebenezer curls up on the other pillow.

"You know what?" she says, petting the coarse fur around his nose. "I think this is going to work out great."

The next morning, she's startled out of bed by the screams of the dying. She runs to the living room. Ebenezer is standing by the door, meowing to raise the dead.

"Wha?" She blinks herself awake. "What?"

He shuts up when she gets his harness on. Together, they walk through the pristine morning, breathing out clouds. Ebenezer pounces on mounds of snow, and Melissa promises him that she'll take him on hikes. She tells him about the Metro North and how easy it is to get to Bear Mountain, or the Gunks. She tells him about Central Park and the Ramble, and the Diana Ross Playground where her parents used to take her as a kid. She tells him about Jess and the kitchen and the bathtub, and how it might have been worth it for Melissa to actually ask for what she wanted, instead of expecting Jess to read her mind. About how she's not really angry anymore, but she *is* sad, and that's fine, at least for now. Maybe for a while.

She tells him about Future. About how she's not a person, but still so human—painfully so. About how she may not even exist right now. About how all she wants is to help people be good, even if she has to be a monster to do it. About how she doesn't quite understand what

she is, or what she can be, and how maybe it's not Melissa's job to figure it out for her. About how nice it was to know her, and about how much she misses her, and the Gravewalker, oh, god, the *Gravewalker*. What a cat.

When they get back to the cabin, Melissa makes coffee and Ebenezer eats his wet food in a really loud, lip-smacky way that Melissa recognizes she will have to get used to.

"What do you want to do today, Eb?" She pops a strawberry Pop Tart into the toaster oven. "We can look up some hikes, if you're into it. Ooh, do you think we could do a hay ride?"

They go on a hike. The next day, they go on another hike. Melissa makes dumplings one night and frozen macaroni and cheese another. She tells herself that they are equal and the same and Ebenezer meows at her, but she thinks he gets it. She cries a lot, and then less, and then more. She considers going back to the city, but she has the place until New Years day, so she chants *it's already paid for* and carries on. She takes a bath, hotboxing the bathroom then furiously googling "can weed smoke kill cats" while Ebenezer meows dramatically outside the closed door. She writes a letter to Future and throws it in the fire, and then gets really sad that she threw it in the fire. She writes another one and shoves it in her suitcase. She ties some string to a wooden spoon and plays with Ebenezer for hours.

On December thirty-first, she goes to the pet store to get Ebenezer a festive little hat and ends up talking to six people, one of whom is an old, rural dyke with a carabiner. That makes her feel really good. She chats with Ebenezer the whole way home.

"I know you don't like the hat," she says, "but you need to understand that we do this sort of thing. We're a festive family. You don't have to wear it all night, I promise. Just for pictures. Oh, stop meowing. We're almost home. See? That's the house, and—"

She slams on the brakes. A tall figure in a big, black cloak is standing by the cabin door.

## *Beyond*

Ebenezer can tell something is wrong. His hackles are raised and he's making a sound like a steamy radiator.

"Chill," says Melissa. "I know her."

Melissa isn't chill. Her ears are throbbing and her hands are gripping the steering wheel so hard she can hear the leather creak. She tells herself that she is very brave, and reaches for her cat.

"Okay," she tells him. "Be cool. Just...just be cool."

Melissa leaves the car stomps over, snow crunching underfoot. Future drops her hood. Her smile is nearly a wince. She's wringing her hands. She waves way too early, and Melissa gets a little satisfaction out of slowing down and watching Future fidget.

Melissa doesn't say hello. She shoves the key into the door and walks inside. Future follows.

"Hey," Future says. "Sorry, you, um, probably don't want to see me right now."

There is no one in the world Melissa wants to see more. "Yeah, I've been a little busy."

"You got a cat." Future kneels down. Ebenezer, the traitor, pads over to be pet. Melissa should have been more specific about what she meant by *be cool*. "What's his name?"

"Eb."

Future's brow wrinkles. "Eb, like..."

"He came with the name." Melissa's face is hot. "I thought it would be rude to change it."

"Yeah." Future's lips twitch. "Yeah, definitely."

"It's true."

"I believe you." She very clearly does not. "Oh, that reminds me." She reaches into her cloak and pulls out a strange black ball of fur and

eyes.

“Gravewalker!” Melissa falls to the floor and opens her arms for the cat. It tumbles towards her, ass over ears, and lands in her arms. She presses it to her face.

Ebenezer pokes her with his nose. “Meow?”

“Oh,” Melissa says. “A friend.” She drops the Gravewalker so the cats can smell each other. Next to Ebenezer—graceful, athletic, huge—the Gravewalker looks even more like a vacuum clog. They grace each other with tentative sniffs and come to a quick, aloof detente.

“That’s a nice cat,” says Future. “Were you walking it?”

“Him. Yeah, I was walking him. He walks.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah.”

They’re both down in cat-petting crouches. The cloak pools around Future’s long legs. Melissa keeps petting the Gravewalker for something to do with her hands.

Future tucks some hair behind her pointed ear. “Can we talk?”

“Go ahead.”

“Right.” Future stands. “Maybe the couch?”

Melissa goes to the couch. Not because Future asked, but because her knees were starting to hurt. “Talk.”

“Okay.” Future takes a big breath. “The three of us—me, May, and Noel—we hadn’t talked in a long time. Really talked. Not since nineteen-ninety-two. The year the—”

“*The Muppet Christmas Carol* came out. I know.”

“Yeah. Of course you do.” She breathes again; big in, big out. “We’ve had to have serious talks a few times. Like, when we expanded to all of December, instead of just Christmas Eve. Or when we moved our base to America, because you guys needed us way more.”

“That makes sense.”

“Like soooo much more.”

“Yeah. I get it.”

“So I called a meeting on Christmas because some, um, some things changed for me recently,” she says. “And I needed to figure out, uh, stuff.”

“Things?” says Melissa. “Stuff?”

“Ugh, don’t make fun of me. Yeah, Melissa. Things and stuff.” Future drags her hands over her face. “I’ve been really afraid, I think. Of change. I never thought I was particularly adaptable until I met you.”



"What happened what you met me?"

"I adapted." She smiles. Her crooked teeth. Her freckled nose. The way her skin looks like fresh, woodland fungus. There she is. God, it's *her*. "I told them about when I held hands with the Christmas Eve client, and how I think it could be good to keep doing stuff like that. Sometimes."

"How did it go?"

"Well, they've never heard me talk that much, so it was a little strange for them." She laughs, self-deprecating and small. "But they're open to it. It was nice that they heard me. It was nice to, um, speak up for myself. And we're going to expand operations." Her cheeks darken with pride. "We're going year-round."

"Wow," Melissa says. "That's a big change."

Future shrugs. "You guys really need it. I didn't realize how bad it was out there. Do you know about what Nestlé is doing? Oh my *gosh*."

"I know vaguely," Melissa admits. "I should really know more."

"You *should*."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry," Future says. "I shouldn't have left like that."

"I'm sorry, too," Melissa says. "I expected a lot of you really quickly. I think I leaned too hard on you when I should have been figuring out some stuff on my own."

"I didn't mind. Um, Melissa?" Future's eyes are really big. They're wet, too, and Melissa feels a pang in her chest that goes through her back and into the next town. "Could I see you again?"

Melissa doesn't want to believe it can have this. It was too big, her thing with Future. Too fast. It turned her into jelly when she was just getting solid again.

"I can't—" She exhales slowly so she won't cry. "I can't see you if you're just going to disappear again."

"I won't, Melissa. Gosh." She takes Melissa's hands in her long fingers and Melissa feels so good. So incredibly good. "I figured that out."

"Figured out non-existence?"

"Actually, yeah." She relaxes her shoulders, centering herself. "Noel said that in order to be in the present, I have to let go of the future."

"You *are* the future."

She tilts her head. "Mostly. But maybe that's not all I am."

"Oh my god," Melissa says. She wonders if it would be condescending to tell Future how proud she is. "I broke you."

"I broke me." She grins. Her nose wriggles, and Melissa wants to doodle that nose on her middle school math folder. "I think I needed breaking."

"Some things need to break," says Melissa.

"Yeah." Future nods. "Yeah. So, I think, maybe I could stick around for a while? Visit you?" She's so hopeful, so bright and shiny, and Melissa thinks about how this strange creature had never spoken to a person before now. How, for hundreds of years, she was just fingers and a cloak.

"I think," says Melissa, "that the Gravewalker didn't just come here for me. I think it came here for you, too."

"Oh, wow." Future blushes, dark and purplish. "I think you're right."

"Mah," says the Gravewalker.

"Meow," says Ebenezer.

"Hey," says Melissa. "Do you want to do New Years with me?"

Melissa bought lobster tails to make bisque. She teaches Future how to boil the shells for stock and add the carrots for color. Future is enamored of the immersion blender. She remembers halfway through cooking that she brought Melissa a Christmas present, and ducks away to get it. When she comes back, she hands over a beautifully wrapped little box, covered in curled ribbon.

"Now there are two wrappers named Future," she says, and Melissa doubles over with laughter.

Inside the box is a tiny top hat. "I nabbed that off of Rizzo," Future says. Melissa tells her she's never gotten a better present in her life. They put it on the Gravewalker, who tolerates it, and Ebenezer, who does not.

Later, their hair frizzed from hovering over boiling soup, they settle in to watch a live stream of a network New Years special. It's boring, so they switch to another one. That one's boring, too. Luckily, the hosts on the third stream are incredibly drunk, which is fun. They barely watch. They talk about what they did when they were apart, and the noises Ebenezer makes when he wants to go outside, and whether Future thinks she'll spend a lot of time in DC this year (Yes.) They talk about going on a date. Taking things slow. Not making any real plans, because they don't have to.

"It's wild that you have freckles," Melissa says. "Considering you only exist in December."

"Oh yeah." Future rubs her nose. "Snow is really reflective. The light

bounces up into my hood.”

“That makes so much sense,” Melissa says.

At twelve bongs, they kiss. Neither one of them makes a resolution.