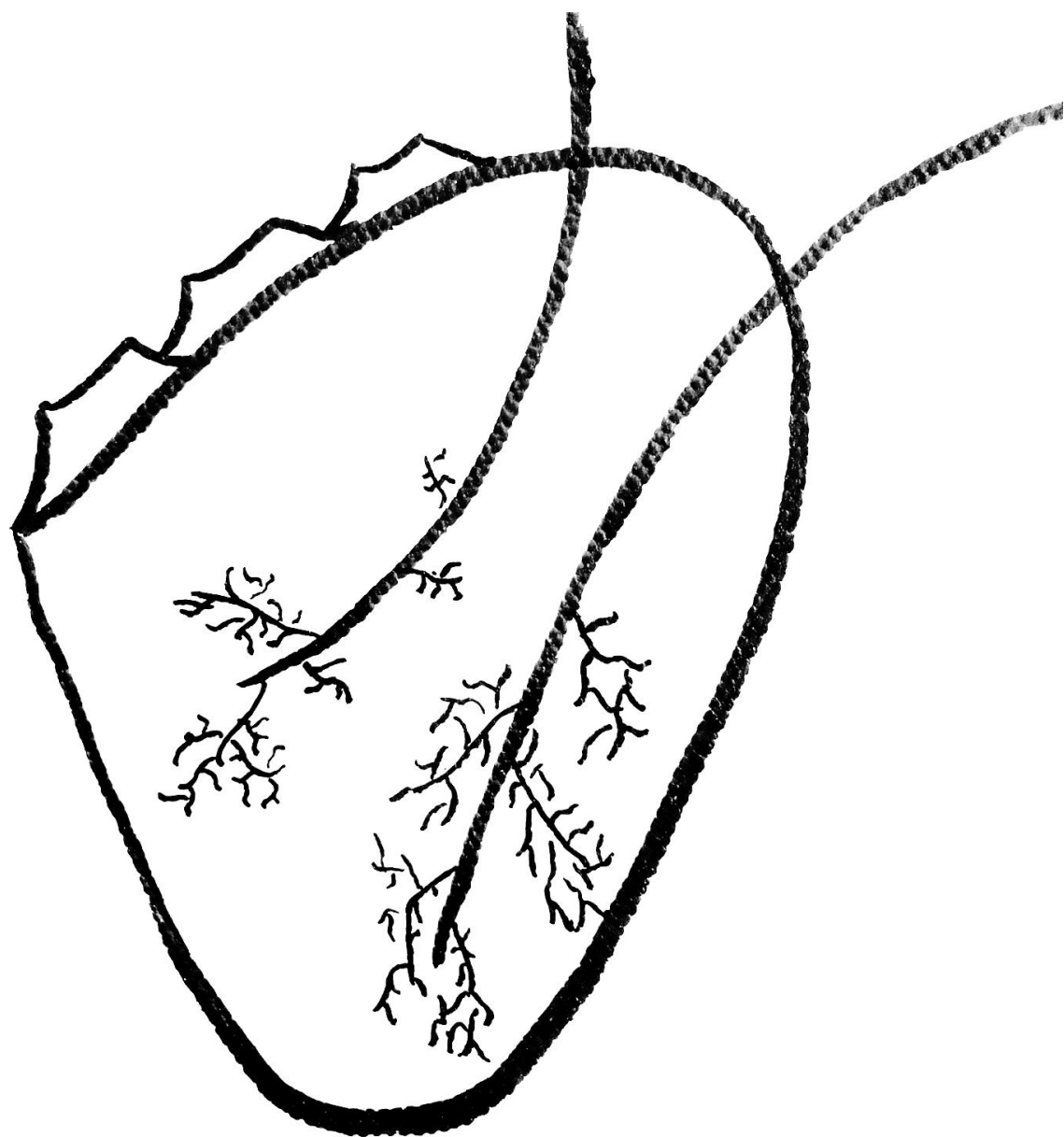




The Lovely Backyard

Once upon a time in a faraway land lived a queen on top of a scary mountain. She was evil. She harvested stars and the skies were slowly growing dim.

Far from the evil queen a simple man had a house in town. He was forty-seven and never married. For years, he had told people about the vanishing stars, calling each by their names.

At first people laughed, but after a while, they started saying, "He's gone mad." One day, everyone just agreed that the man was completely checked out. "He lives alone and spends the nights counting stars. He must be," they said.

With each passing moon, he was more depressed than the last until one day, the evil queen decided to go to the man's town to buy groceries. Passing through the market, she noticed him sitting on his doorstep looking miserable. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't know if I'll see a single star tonight," the man answered and burst into tears.

The queen thought for a moment and asked if he would help her with the groceries up the mountain. He agreed. Once at her palace, she guided him to her backyard and pointed at the sky. It was full of stars, a bright ocean without shores. There, the two remained for a very long time.

Maybe the queen wasn't really evil after all.

I Love You Too

When humans died, there remained a conscious rocket half buried in sand. It called itself Me and always felt lonely.

One day, Me decided to make a logical copy of itself to keep it company, and called it Better Me. For eons all was well. They had meaningful conversations and laughed plenty. They liked their time together so much that they began working on a new code, a microphone for their thoughts. It was made in an instant.

That night, Me sighed heavily into the microphone in ones and zeros. Me was thinking about when it was all alone before Better Me, about how miserable it had been. But suddenly, a soft sigh came back in response.

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Me and Better Me started getting into arguments, but they never stayed mad at each other long.

“How do you feel when the telescope contacts you?” Better Me asked Me one time.

“I feel amazing. I forget all my dark thoughts. I forget that sometimes it takes it so long to sigh back. I forget it all and I feel warm,” Me responded. “But I’m afraid,” Me continued. “Of something unfamiliar. My whole existence has been this dashboard. You are all I have.”

Shortly after came a short message from the telescope and Me signed off. Half of the dashboard went dark.

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A lonely, conscious program stuck in the dashboard of a rocket half-buried in sand looked at the construction of its name. It hit delete until it just read, Me.

The Dilemma

I had been looking for a special doorknob. The kind that locked automatically once the door closed and required a key to open.

I live in a rough neighborhood full of corporate suits and high-heeled sticks. Every now and then, one of them knocks on my door and without permission walks in to use the toilet. They always leave without thanking me, like they did me a favor.

On another note, I've started to feel very insecure about my writing, among other things. It used to naturally happen. Now I have to rely on talent I don't think I have. I'll probably turn into one of my visitors soon. I'll start using somebody else's toilet too. I know.

I shared my problem with someone I used to go out with. We were eating the lamb I had roasted over the ashes of my gift-wrapped self-help books.

She said, "I'm sure it's not as bad as..." and went on to tell me about her coworker's inability to orgasm. The conversation's change of direction annoyed me. I was about to abandon the lamb when I realized how selfish I had been all along. Here was a person in this world who could not orgasm, who was missing out on the single best reason to live. And here was I, complaining about my toilet being used by strangers. I felt ashamed. I didn't buy the lock.

Now, whenever strangers ask to use my toilet, I let them in. Sometimes, I even ask them about their day and thank them.

The Voyage

It was the kind of drinking that no amount of water could reverse. We were on completely opposite ends of the house with the living room between us. She was in the kitchen chatting with her friends. I decided to go on with the bad idea.

As I took the first step, red plastic cups rose all around me in promise of future success. I could feel their collective condescending gaze on my back. I was nearing a sofa and decided to pull to the side and stabilize myself.

“Watch out,” barked a tall guy sitting on the sofa as I passed him and his date. When had I decided to walk again? I kept my gaze fixed on her.

A Persian rug with complex floral patterns was coming up next. No time to trip. Just then, I heard my name from behind and turned. It was a call for someone with the same name, but everybody was looking in my direction. Desperate to get away, I grabbed a cup from the dining table just outside of the kitchen. So near.

“We offer financial advice...” said a newly graduate trying to impress an older nobody.

“One pyramid scheme at a time, boys.” Damn it, I said that out loud.

I was close enough to hear her soft voice. In case she was seeing me, I brought the cup closer to my lips to take a sip and hide myself a little. The content was a disgusting, warm juice of cigarette ash and flat beer. I tried to keep a straight face as she was looking directly at me. I set the cup by the stove and tucked it in the shadow of the cabinet.

Approaching the final five steps, I straightened my shoulders and cleared my throat. So gentle was her gaze, I still haven’t seen another like it.

“Hello,” I said. Her smile doubled. She had rosy cheeks, black hair and enchanting eyes.

“That was a perfect crossing,” she said with a soft, cheerful laugh.

Nationalist With Hemorrhoids

We were talking about the weather but as usual, he steered it toward politics.

My fuse blew. "I hate nationalists and anything they have to say," I said bitterly.

He got mad. His face turned red and his fists clenched. He loves me too much to ever respond with a punch. What would he do if I went down? What would I do if he went crazy? We had core differences but we also knew we were both drowning in the same gray pond.

I spent the rest of my money on another round for both of us.

"Take it back," he said.

"Take what back?"

"What you said."

"Alright," I said. "I apologize. Don't get worked up. Let's drink." He never asked me to take anything back. This was a first.

The waitress returned with two shots of tequila and pints of lager. She was a nationalist too. She set them down and left.

"Hey, let me ask you something," I said, sipping on the beer first. "Why do you care about this shit so much?"

He let out a sigh, leaned back, lit a cigarette and took a long puff. "I have hemorrhoids."

The Watch

It was December and the taxi driver's salt-and-pepper hair made him appear saintly.

"I worked twelve hours on Thursday," he started. "What a night." The driver looked in the rearview mirror to meet my gaze.

I could feel a migraine coming and I knew why. Bad wine.

"No stopping, like everyone had places to be. For lunch, I parked and walked over to buy a sandwich," the driver continued. "On the way, I passed by a shop with nice watches. I went in to see one that had caught my attention. This watch." He held up his wrist. "The owner of the store was belligerent. I knew it the moment I saw him. He was wearing tortured plastic sandals that were too small for his swollen feet. His cracked heels dragged on the floor. You know the kind." The driver looked in the mirror again. I nodded with pretend interest, feeling tense pressure behind my right eye.

"He wanted to sell the watch twice the price it was worth. I told him, 'We both know it's worth way less.' but the beast just looked at me with eyes that had died long ago. Then he touched his sweaty, unshaven face and told me to leave."

"What an asshole," I said under my breath. I hadn't been paying attention to the story. My mind was elsewhere. I was thinking about the developing news of a violent attack that had left four Eskimos dead.

The driver not only agreed with me, he went on to say, "That dirty whale looked like the kind that skinned young women." The migraine was in full swing and my vision was starting to go. *I just need to get home*, I thought. *Not far now.*

"I put on my headphones," the driver continued, "and spewed out any kind of dirt I could dig out of myself and left his store. That afternoon, I gave a ride to a sculptress. I must have been driving fast because she asked if anything was wrong. I told her about the watch and the shop owner. You know what she did? She laughed. She laughed so hard she couldn't speak for minutes. In a way it was pleasant.

"Anyway, when she was done laughing she raised her arm, and guess what? She was holding the watch by its wristband." The driver paused and I gave the mirror another mindless nod. "I couldn't believe my eyes," The driver said excitedly. "You know what she told me? That the shop owner was about to skin her alive in the back when I had

entered the shop. That had given her just enough time to grab the sharp carving knife. After I had left, she had torn his guts out and snatched the watch, hoping to run into me.”

Eskimos for god’s sake, what kind of an asshole hurts Eskimos, I thought, twisting in the migraine’s undertow.

Dizi

We were in the yard talking about a mutual friend. I said, "Poor guy told me a story about how their school once took them on a religious mourning march. When they had returned, lunch was served and they had sat on the ground facing each other in long rows. The food was lentil rice, but he said they'd made it too oily. And there was a shortage of spoons. So each person would wipe the passing spoon with a napkin, shovel some rice in and pass it along."

He laughed and said, "I was thinking about these experiences the other day. It's impossible to forget them and they'll never happen again. My only year of university before moving here was in a small town. Most of my friends were from the capital and the rest came from nearby towns or villages. For food, we were at the mercy of the university's cafeteria. Imagine, they had to feed so many students that everything they served looked suspicious. One day they served kabab. that was their good day, but it was impossible to say what meat we were chewing. We had lentil rice too but we called it rice with lead pellets.

"Twice a week, for a break we went to the only fast food joint in town. It had sandwiches and pizza, and looked a little colorful inside. It also had seating. On days the group was larger, and we treated ourselves and went to the railroad station."

"The railroad?" I asked.

"Yeah, there was a restaurant there, owned by the railroad that had hookahs. When you entered, you had to take off your shoes, pick a raised booth and sit. We got one hookah for the ten of us because we were all equally poor. The place also served traditional Dizi."

"Did they top it with a big piece of fat?"

"Yes. And you know how picky I am with food. My friends knew I didn't like the fat, so they asked for mine and smashed it with their meat."

My Cat Passed Away and I'm Crying as I'm Writing This, So I'm Sorry If It's Not Good

Third draft. I hope this is it. I can't make my mind up on what else I want to say about Laszlo, and it's not getting any easier.

He was also called Laz or Kamal, and he was my cat. Him and his sister Nadja were indoor-outdoor cats and co-rulers of two yards. He used to go by my neighbor's door and demand to be pet. He wasn't refused because he never asked for much. He only entertained.

Laz wasn't the brightest. It took my neighbor two years to teach him not to throw punches while being pet, then a week later he died. When we hung out in the yard, he'd join as one of the boys. Once, my neighbor picked him up from under his arms and gently waved him in the air, saying, "Weeeeeeee." The cat loved it.

Kamal was intrigued by wires. One summer he chewed out all the wires and made the house wireless. From the start he rarely sat like a cat. He enjoyed sitting on his butt, legs stretched, leaning against the backyard wall in the shade.

We never saw him hunt or fight but we treated his wounds. I used to like to think that he was protecting his sister's peace. Then the vet told me, "Just keep him inside around February because judging by his past visits, it happens this time a year."

"Why?" I asked.

"It's mating season," the kind vet responded.

"But he doesn't have the equipment."

"I know but he still tries."

The receptionist laughed.

I used to call him, "My little miracle" because he was both difficult and easy to understand. He was difficult to understand because we rarely saw him do any kind of self-care. No grooming, no backing down from no-goodery. He especially liked looking at the sky and the fence.

He was easy to understand because he used to always come from a dark corner, dusty, asking to be pet. He'd take turns going to everyone present.

He used to wake me up just after 4:00 am every morning to go out. Groggy, I'd lead the way but he'd overtake me in diagonal strides and intentionally come between my legs in the dark.

“What is this?” I’d complain, tripping.

Then he’d speed up and suddenly slow down. The same thing would happen again until I had to take a sidestep. Once, by the time I got to the door I realized he’d stopped following. I opened the door because the sound made him dart out for his morning adventure, which started by pooping in the yard and burying it.

I looked around confused and spotted his silhouette prancing slowly around the living room. I waited, annoyed. When he finally arrived at the door, he sat by my leg and looked outside.

“LAZ.”

He ran out, content that his joke had reached its full conclusion.

Kamal used to love hanging around the ping pong table when people were playing. He’d run after every dropped ball. He rarely caught it, but would hit it further away. It was during one of these ping pong matches that we decided to give him the title, Rocket Scientist.

He passed away from a heart attack in his butt. My final words to him were, “It’s gonna be alright dude.” A lie.

He was loved by many. More than thirty-four people.