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Department of English

Alouette

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Alouette

It had been raining for five days, hard enough that the music filtering through the speakers was all but drowned out by the sound of drops hitting the pavement. Lenore was sufficiently absorbed in her task—coaxing the dust bunnies out from under the café’s single refrigerator and into the waiting maw of the dustpan—that she didn’t catch much more than the occasional snippet of sophomoric lyric. “Love, love,” crooned the members of the boy band du jour in an autotuned baritone, “it’s rockin’ my world, it’s makin’ you sore.” Once, Lenore remembered with a twinge of embarrassment, she had screamed along to songs like that at birthday parties and Jewish friends’ bat mitzvahs; now, they seemed stupid, mildly ridiculous in the way that only past obsessions can. How absurd the twentysomething men she had idolized back then must have felt standing onstage in their matching wifebeaters, ministering to audience after audience of fanatical teenage girls like underdressed priests.

They seemed so long ago now, those dances and bat mitzvahs, even though it had been less than a decade since her high school days; she was only twenty-nine, a young woman still by all but the most medieval of standards, as her parents had taken pains to remind her since she’d moved in with them two months ago. That first night back in her childhood bedroom, staring up at a ceiling still bright with glow-in-the-dark stars, she’d had the strange sensation that that the hands of the clock on the wall were reversing course, that the lines creasing her forehead were disappearing, that she was time-traveling back to an era in her life when the entire scope of her experience was limited to a series of brief sensory thrills—the feel of Bill Wilson’s hand in hers,

the acrid taste of a vodka shot, the run-over-skunk smell of weed—and had felt a sharp, almost unbearable pang of mixed regret and nostalgia as this, a compilation video of her greatest hits, played on a loop in her head.

She wondered in passing if Rena, for whom high school must be much more than ten years removed, had ever stuck glow-in-the-dark stars to her ceiling. Had they even existed when she was a girl?

Rena was the manager of the café, a stout German woman who'd hired Lenore two weeks ago after an excruciating interview and an even more excruciating trial shift and had made no secret of the fact that she would have Lenore's head if she found so much as a single mote of dust within three feet of the food prep area. "Lenore," she was fond of saying in a thick accent that mangled the *th*- sound in *this* and *that* and concluded each sentence with a guttural trill, "think of what kind of Yelp review *you* would leave if you ate at a restaurant you thought was dirty." Inevitably, she concluded each lecture—though Rena, humorless as she was, would doubtless have preferred the term "pep talk"—with a slow, emphatic roll of her head that looked more like a tantric yoga move than a nod, rosacea-reddened jowls swinging like pendulums. Sonia, who had aspirations of becoming a stand-up comic—"Something like Amy Schumer or Ali Wong," she'd explained to Lenore during their first shift together—sometimes imitated her out of boredom on slow days, pinching her cheeks until they were red and widening her eyes in mock earnesty.

Sonia was supposed to be here today, but she had called in sick twenty minutes before her shift was set to begin, coughing in a way that seemed suspiciously overwrought. It hadn't ended up mattering much, though; only seven people had stopped by in two hours, five middle-aged men who looked like they worked in law or finance and a pair of graduate students who had the reddened eyes of the recently high. Saturday afternoons were always slow. Only the students, AirPods tucked into their ears, were still here, typing away on laptops plastered with stickers that read things like "Save the Whales" and "Say Yes to Drugs."

One, a person of unidentifiable gender with enormous gages in their ears, ordered another cappuccino, and Lenore dumped a half-cup of Kona beans into the Keurig to brew before resuming her sweeping. Hers, she knew, was low-level work, more suited for a teenager or college kid than a nearly thirty-year-old woman, but there was something comforting in it nonetheless, something soothing about the slow, repetitive motions of the broom as it ferreted for dust, tenacious as a beagle after a rabbit. Same for mopping up the puddles that collected in the cracks between the linoleum tiles of the entranceway on rainy days like this one. Cathartic was the word, she thought, feeling a little thrill of satisfaction at having found the right adjective. Therapeutic. Soothing as one of the lullabies she'd sung to Thomas when he was still small enough not to refuse such maternal attentions. "Alouette" had been his favorite, though Lenore, who had double-majored in French and music in college, still remembered enough of her coursework to be able to wince at the lyrics. But something about the song's jaunty staccato rhythm had charmed Thomas, and he had demanded it what seemed like every night for years,

scoffing at every one of the alternatives she proposed: “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep,” even “Frère Jacques.”

“Ah-loo-at,” he had insisted with childish stubbornness, disregarding the tonic stress.

So, invariably, she had settled at the foot of his bed to describe the torture of a lark, watching his face turn as rapt as if he was in the presence of God.

Now, instead of singing to him, she read to him from dog-eared service manuals she found in the “PRACTICAL” section of the local library, Thomas having recently discovered a passion for vehicular history that had extended to his taste in toys as well as bedtime rituals. Between Christmas and birthday presents, he’d amassed quite a collection of Matchbox cars, a fleet of BMWs and Porsches and Ferraris and McLarens that would have rivaled any billionaire’s had it not been rendered in miniature. Like any billionaire, though, he was careless with his possessions, so numerous and expendable were they; he tended to strew the cars all over the kitchen floor, where the light from the overhead fixture reflected off of their hoods and made them shine in shades of silver and red and blue like the carapaces of scarab beetles.

They had shone like that the day Sam told her, sparkling around her feet like so many pennies on the sidewalk or pieces of seaglass on the beach as she made dinner—four-cheese lasagna. He had come home from work around six, but she had been so engrossed in layering sheets of pasta, meat sauce, and cottage cheese that she had barely heard the wind chimes above

the entryway tinkle as the door opened and closed. “Lenore,” he had said, not even bothering to loosen his tie or put down his briefcase before striding over to her. “I need to talk to you.” His face, which was only a little more weathered than it had been when she first met him, had been grave, his tone serious; she had wondered, with some trepidation, what exactly was going on. Had there been a death in the family? Had he been fired from the engineering firm where he worked? Was their landlord trying to evict them? (No, it can’t be an eviction, she had thought. We’ve never defaulted on our rent).

“Okay,” she had said, wiping her hands, white with flour, on a dish towel before following him into the dining room. “But not too long, okay? I still need to finish making dinner.”

In the end, neither of them had eaten that night; the half-finished lasagna had languished on the kitchen counter until four the next day, when Lenore, who had spent most of the intervening hours crying, emerged from the spare bedroom and scraped it unceremoniously into the trash.

She felt a pang as the memory resurfaced, and her inner machinery—the beating of her heart, the thumping of her pulse, the whirr of her myriad physiological cogs and gears—seemed to suddenly slow, entering a lower key.

Anyone who says that they'd rather know the truth than live in denial, she thought, is lying. People awaiting biopsy results, wives of closeted gay men, I don't care. I would rather be happy and ignorant than miserable and aware.

She had not cried, and she cried at everything: the sight of a dead sparrow, the pain of a paper cut, a news story about starving orphans in Angola. Some tiny part of her brain had marveled at her composure with mixed astonishment and gratitude, although she had acknowledged to herself that the tears would surely come later, when she had had time to process it all.

Process, she thought with a sudden, scathing vehemence, her hands tightening around the handle of the broom. What a silly, stupid, New Age-y word, a word meant for lifestyle gurus and Hollywood starlets and social media influencers and mommy bloggers and people who didn't actually live in the real world, people who could afford to bury their heads in the sand and surround themselves with sycophants. Same with that phrase that was all the rage in Hollywood these days, "speak your truth." What truth was there to speak, she wanted to know, besides the one that involved the fact that her husband of eight years and the father of her seven-year-old son no longer loved her?

Toss yourself off a bridge for all I care, Sam, she thought. Down some sleeping pills. Put rocks in your pockets and jump in the bay. Don't let me hold you back. In fact, please, be my guest.

There was something primal about her anger, something that made her want to resort to the vicious, unoriginal insults of her early adolescence: “Screw you.” “Go fuck yourself.” “Go to hell.” She had to put down the broom and sit on the counter for a second, her chest aching, her heart beating at what seemed like twice its normal pace, her mind filling with memories of wedding vows and morning sex and the sight of the little pink plus sign on the window of the pregnancy test as if some mental dam had suddenly given way. This hurts, she thought with a sense of panicked bewilderment. Pain seemed to take hold of the four chambers of her heart with the strength of a strongman’s fist. This hurts.

She felt a momentary flicker of embarrassment at how angsty she sounded, one that faded as soon as the world began to dissolve into a swirl of shapes and colors and her throat sprouted a lump as swollen and painful as an ingrown hair.

Oh, God. Come on, Lenny. Don’t cry, she thought, reasoning with herself in the low, soothing tone she would’ve used with an injured bird or a vicious dog or a histrionic child on the playground. You can’t cry. You’re getting drinks with Vicky later, remember? You don’t want her to ask why your eyes are so red or your voice is so hoarse. Besides, what about the customers? Rena’ll kill you if one of them leaves a bad Yelp review.

An image of Vicky’s face, round and pale and sprinkled with freckles, came to mind, though it would surely be a little more lined now, a little older; didn’t redheads tend to age faster

than blondes and brunettes? Though Lenore hadn't seen Vicky face-to-face in years, she'd picked up the phone and called her last month, sobbing out the recent events of her life with an abandon more appropriate for a toddler than a woman on the cusp of thirty: the infidelity, the divorce, how alone she was, how sad and angry she was. It had been a relief to know that someone was listening to her, albeit a college friend she probably had very little in common with anymore. She must've babbled on for the better part of twenty minutes, but to her credit, Vicky had taken it in stride, interjecting only to offer soft exclamations of support: "Oh, no." "Oh, Lenore." "I'm so sorry." She was going to be in town on the seventh for a job interview, she said; would Lenore like to meet up?

"Please," Lenore had said. "Please."

Only one more hour to go, Lenore thought now, checking the battered face of the watch on her wrist. 4:01. You can make it sixty minutes. She pushed herself off the counter, surreptitiously wiping away the tears that had collected in the corners of her eyes, and resumed her sweeping. The graduate students, focused on their various screens as they were, hadn't noticed anything at all.

Don't think about Sam or Thomas, she thought. Don't think about anything at all until after you get home. Then you can cry all you want. You can sob your little heart out, you can eat the entire pint of Phish Food in the freezer, you can watch five episodes of *Friends* in a row, you can do whatever you want. But not now.

She had seen a therapist only once, right after the divorce had been finalized and she was half-seriously entertaining thoughts of slitting her wrists or throwing herself off the city bridge into the polluted water below or washing a handful of sleeping pills down with a swig of Everclear. (She hadn't drunk Everclear since her freshman year of college, back when alcohol in all its forms was still an edgy novelty). "You need to process," her mother had entreated her over breakfast one morning, a point Lenore had found hard to contest. Some part of her had hoped that talking it out with a licensed professional would exorcise her psychological demons, but the appointment, which had taken place at 3 p.m. the following Tuesday, had passed in a blur of psychobabble about "healing" and the importance of "self-care" during "major life transitions," none of which Lenore retained for any meaningful amount of time after she said her goodbyes and left the office. Once back in her car, she had laid her head on the steering wheel and breathed deeply, inhaling for three seconds and exhaling for another three like the YouTube yogis said to do. You can do this, she had told herself before turning the key in the ignition and pulling out into the road, her tires sowing serpentine lines of burned rubber on the asphalt. Don't let the bastards get you down. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Life is suffering. This too shall pass.

At home, her mother, a small, weedy woman to whom she bore only the most passing of resemblances, had asked her, in a tone of studied casualness, how the appointment had gone.

"Well," Lenore had said, forcing a smile before turning around and climbing the stairs to her room to wring out a few lingering tears, the glow-in-the-dark stars glittering dispassionately

above her. Sitting at her vanity dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, she'd caught sight of her own reflection in the mirror—white-faced, stringy-haired—and felt a spurt of horror. She looked like a witch in a fairy tale, an evil stepmother, a bag lady of the sort who pushed contraband shopping carts around the streets of New York City. Experimentally, she scowled, stretching her mouth wide and wrinkling her nose, and watched as the figure in the mirror, more horrifying than Bloody Mary or the Pig Man or any one of the dozens of other villains of urban legend, did the same.

No wonder he left me, she had thought. I wouldn't have wanted to be married to someone who looked like that, either.

She had put her head down on the marble of the sink and cried for real then, sobs wracking her body with all the force of waves breaking against a sea wall. There was something admittedly satisfying about reveling in her misery, about hitting rock bottom and making herself at home there rather than trying to claw her way back up to the surface world. Wallowing, her mother would have called it, a word that always called to mind absurd images of water buffalo floundering withers-deep in mud on the banks of the Nile. She had nothing left to lose, and that was somehow comforting; nothing she did mattered because her life couldn't get any worse than it already was. Why not shoplift from the outlet stores at the local mall? Why not get drunk in broad daylight? What did it matter?

You're being childish, she scolded herself, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. Stop acting like a self-absorbed teenager who just got broken up with. Be an adult. Pick up the pieces, pick yourself up from the floor, and get on with your life. Walk downstairs and make small talk as you have dinner with your parents. For Thomas's sake if not your own. Don't let Sam get the better of you.

With a last look into her own puffy eyes, she had.

Her most deeply held desire was so simple that she was ashamed to admit it to herself: a friend. Sometimes she felt like Atlas shouldering the world, so heavy was the burden of her aloneness. Since marrying, her social circle had narrowed until it included only Sam's buddies' wives, women around five to ten years older than her who treated her like den mothers would a Cub Scout. Her coworkers at the coffee shop, high-school girls consumed by the minutiae of first dates and school dances, were nice enough, but she could tell they thought of her as a stick, a square, an old wizened crone with one foot already in the grave. Most of her college friends, meanwhile, had evaporated into Facebook profiles and names on the return addresses of Christmas cards, a turn of events that saddened but did not surprise her. They had celebrated with her when Sam proposed, they had thrown her a bachelorette party complete with a cadre of male strippers, they had come to her wedding, but at heart, she had known they harbored reservations about her decision to get hitched so young. It was unusual to get married right out of college these days, especially for girls who wanted to make something of themselves professionally, and she *had* wanted to make something of herself professionally. That, perhaps, was more painful to

her than the divorce itself: the what-ifs it set to circling in her mind like vultures over an animal on death's door. What if she'd put off marrying Sam until she'd earned her M.A.? What if she hadn't accepted his proposal at all? She had never seriously regretted the choices she'd made in her life until Sam told her he wanted a divorce, but then she had regretted them with a vengeance. Rather than cooking and cleaning and caring for a baby who grew into a toddler who grew into a boy, she could've spent the past eight years making a name for herself in some capacity. She could've been a local news anchor, a personal assistant, a secretary. She could've been a teacher, a technician, an educational consultant. Maybe she would've even won acclaim for her work, Employee of the Month or a cash prize or a promotion or something. But at the back of her mind, she knew that it was useless to speculate about the course her life would've taken had she not said yes to Samuel when he got down on one knee that night at the yacht club. The fact was, she would never know.

I could've *been* somebody, she thought, though she had enough self-awareness to realize that every failure, every dropout and sellout and corporate stooge, thought that. Maybe. Just maybe.

But then again, maybe she wouldn't have been; the economy had already been in the toilet by the time she graduated, after all.

More and more now she found herself escaping into the vanished world cached in her memory, letting her thoughts dwell on the day she'd met Samuel at a barbecue hosted by Vicky's

family. It had been a small, family-and-close-friends affair held solely because there was nothing else to do in the dead of summer in the sleepy suburban town where Vicky lived, Maskaskawet or Malagnawet—something vaguely Native American-sounding, at any rate. She and Vicky had been working on campus that summer, toiling from nine to five four-and-a-half days a week for the princely sum of \$7.35 an hour and the occasional free lunch. The work itself was as dull as dull could be: assigning dormitory rooms to incoming students, assigning RAs to dormitories, installing air conditioners, matching up roommate pairs, making sure the various appliances, the microwaves and air conditioners and heaters, were in working condition. In mid-July, a heat wave had rolled through the area, spawning a whole slew of alarmist segments on the local news channels; the uniformly blond and blue-eyed weatherwomen hadn't been able to get enough of it while it lasted. "It's the *third consecutive day* temperatures have risen above one hundred degrees!" they had squalled into their microphones, barely able to contain their glee, while Lenore and Vicky, sprawled in bras and panties in front of their single fan, closed their eyes and tried to lie as still as possible. Neither of them tanned easily; their bodies had been as white as the soft innards of scallops, shiny and clammy with sweat. Beads of moisture had collected at their collarbones, in their navels, in their armpits, and Lenore remembered her gaze traveling up, up, up to the junction of Vicky's thighs, where wires of pubic hair poked through the seams of her underwear.

The door to the café slammed as a gust of wind rattled the hinges, and she looked up, realizing with a start that the graduate students were gone. The shop was empty; she was alone.

Seems to be a running theme these days, she thought with a flash of black humor, lifting her work-issue apron over her head and running her hands, sticky with caramel syrup, under the sink.

Vicky had lived just forty-five minutes south of campus, so it was a small thing for them to pile into her little blue Volvo, a hand-me-down from her mother, and drive down one Saturday toward the end of the summer, shitty pop music blasting from the stereo. “Teeny boppers,” Lenore’s father, a hard-bitten Army veteran, would’ve snorted disgustedly if he’d passed them on the freeway, never once imagining that his very own daughter could be sitting on the other side of the Volvo’s tinted glass. They had pulled into Vicky’s parents’ driveway around one, the scent of barbecue smoke already thick in the air. Greetings were exchanged, hugs given, Vicky and Lenore plied with ironical questions about how they liked the working world. Before the food was served, Vicky had taken it upon herself to introduce Lenore to her brother Ben’s friends, a seemingly endless stream of good ol’ boys with names like Mike and Josh and Justin. Sam had been among them, a crew-cut graduate student studying mechanical engineering.

“Hi,” she’d said, smiling up at him and extending her hand as she’d done with all the others. His, she remembered distinctly, had swallowed hers like a baseball glove.

He was not the first- or second- or third-most handsome man there—those honors belonged to Ben, Mike, and Justin, respectively—but he had possessed a sort of benevolent self-assurance that had drawn her to him like a moth to a flame. She had sought him out after

lunch, struck up a conversation, and said yes when, taking the hint, he'd asked her out. Their first date had been at a local restaurant, their second at a movie theater, their third at his house. By the time he proposed, a year and a half later, she had been so senselessly head-over-heels that she had barely been able to wait until after she graduated to marry him. The wedding had taken place on a Saturday that June at a Presbyterian church two streets away from Sam's parents' house, which Lenore remembered as a tall white building topped with a spire that tapered to a cross. "It's historic," the minister had said when he saw her tilting her head back, all the better to trace its ascent into the clouds. "Built by the acclaimed architect Mervin Rogers in the early twentieth century."

He had been a tall, solemn man with a hangdog face and surprisingly beautiful hands. They were white and elegant, more suited (so she had thought) to flying over the ivory keys of a piano than turning the pages of the King James Bible. But he had officiated the ceremony as though he'd been born to do it, pronouncing them husband and wife with the gravity of a high-powered defense attorney giving a closing statement. She and Sam had spent the next two weeks honeymooning on the tiny Caribbean island of St. Barts, swimming and snorkeling and having sex to their hearts' content. By the time they had returned to the States and settled back into the rhythms of everyday life, Lenore had been pregnant, but they had waited until she was well into her second trimester before making an announcement. "We don't want to jinx things," Sam, who was mildly superstitious, had said, and Lenore, thinking of her own mother's multiple miscarriages, hadn't argued with him.

How had it gone so wrong? Since their divorce, she'd driven herself half crazy trying to identify the exact moment when their relationship, for him, had passed the point of no return. Was it when she'd berated him for forgetting to pick Thomas up from school? Was it when he'd blown up at her for making a minor mistake on their tax returns? Or had his feelings for her changed over time, evolving from affection to apathy to disdain with the inexorability of *Australopithecus* mutating into *Homo erectus* mutating into *Homo sapiens* millions of years ago? Or had he liked her just fine all along but simply met someone he liked more? She knew he'd been unfaithful; he'd told her as much when he took her aside that day, asking for a divorce as casually as he might've requested a refund on a defective toy.

She shook herself out of her reverie with an irritated little jerk of her head and punched out, noting the time: 5:07. (Seven minutes after five, she thought. What was that, an extra thirty cents to put toward an apartment of her own?) She went through the familiar motions of closing: scrubbing down the tables, counting the money in the cash register, turning off the music, switching off the lights, and double-locking the doors before emerging onto the sidewalk, blinking at the sudden change in light intensity. The rain was still falling, but more softly now, coming down in drops rather than sheets. The bar where she and Vicky had agreed to meet up, McCarr's, was a little over a mile and a half away, but she thought of the low three digits' worth of money in her bank account and began to walk, wincing as she felt water seep through the eroded soles of her shoes. A mojito or two would do her some good. She tried to recall Vicky's go-to order. A vodka cranberry? Once, Vicky had downed five of them in a row on a dare and Lenore had had to enlist some passing frat boys to help carry her back to campus, Vicky

babbling incoherently about how attractive Putin had been as a young man the entire way. They still exchanged texts and emails from time to time, still commented on each other's Facebook posts, but the ties of shared experience that had tethered them back in their late teens and early twenties had slackened in the ensuing years. It was only after Sam's admission that Vicky had crossed Lenore's mind for the first time in months, that Vicky had taken on the aspect of a flesh-and-blood human being rather than a ghost from her past. Lenore wasn't even entirely sure what Vicky did for a living, only that it was probably leagues more prestigious than brewing coffee for a rotating cast of suits and students.

It was a thought that spawned equal parts pride and envy—pride in her friend's achievements, envy that she personally had none to speak of. Once Lenore, too, had harbored concrete hopes, dreams, aspirations, but these days it was difficult to bring herself to get out of bed or get dressed, let alone apply for a real job. Not that applying was likely to yield results, anyway. In the early days of her marriage, self-conscious about the fact that Sam was the sole breadwinner but too proud to resort to bartending or waitressing, she had tried to parlay her bachelor's into more entry-level corporate positions than she could count: data analyst, sales representative, personal assistant, paralegal. By the time she gave up, discouraged by the endless stream of rejections, she had grown to understand that “Well, actually, I'm married and I have a son to take care of, so I'm pretty tied up for the foreseeable future” was not the answer interviewers were looking for when they asked questions about continuing education. Inevitably, she was always ushered out of the office shortly afterward with a firm handshake and a promise of a follow-up that never materialized.

She was so lost in thought that she nearly missed her turn. The sign for McCarr's, an Irish sports bar popular with the middle-aged fathers in town, was battered and weathered-looking, though Lenore couldn't tell if it was by design or artifice. She saw a flash of red out of the corner of her eyes before she heard someone call "Lenore!"

There were no hugs or kisses; they had not seen each other in so long that any sort of attempt at physical intimacy would have been awkward. Instead, they held each other at arm's length, smiling in that strained way of people who want to talk to each other but are not quite sure where to start. Lenore was discomfited to find that she felt as though she was about to be interviewed for a job or introduced to a boyfriend's parents. This was her oldest, and only remaining, friend; they should be able to pick up right where they had left off, not hem and haw or beat around the bush with each other like near-strangers. It was a strange feeling, staring at someone you'd once carried home from the bar and feeling tongue-tied.

They got a table in the back corner of the bar and began to talk, slowly and haltingly. They spoke of the terrible weather, the miserable state of the roads, a recent sex scandal that had engulfed their alma mater. Superficial stuff, Lenore thought even as she complained about the endless days of rain and the potholes that had blown out her tires more than once. What she wanted, what she craved, was connection, camaraderie, chemistry neither forced nor fake.

She and Vicky had had it once, though nearly a decade ago now—Lenore still found it hard to believe how much time had elapsed since the days when they had fretted over papers and problem sets and whether or not the captain of the football team thought they were pretty. They had met in a throwaway class on the ethics of performing tribal dances during their second year of college; their professor, a rotund woman with a funny, high-pitched way of speaking, had paired them up for a group project. Details of their personal lives, bad hookups and messy roommates and obtuse parents, had eventually infiltrated their conversations about the assignment, which in turn migrated to the dining hall, the library, and their respective dorm rooms. The next Halloween, right around when Lenore's relationship with Sam had gotten serious, they had dressed up as two peas in a pod, zipping themselves into green onesies and daubing cheap craft-store paint on their cheeks. The night before graduation, they had climbed the water tower on the outskirts of town and surveyed the sprawl of suburbia before them, a swath of darkness broken only by the reflection of the moon off satellite dishes, before heading back down. The rungs on the ladder, rusty with decades' worth of disuse, had stained their palms as red as though they'd just taken a blood oath.

Vicky had been present for Thomas's birth, a process Lenore remembered as both agonizingly painful and mind-numbingly boring. The sky had been dark when she went into labor, light when the nurses finally administered the epidural, dark again when Thomas, a sizable baby at six pounds and four ounces, had made his final exit, skin as red as the shell of a boiled lobster. Though Lenore had been conscious of little by that point, she had dimly registered sounds of celebration: the pop of champagne corks, the click of cameras, the repetitive buzz of

well-wishes. Sam had told her that he loved her. Her mother had asked her how she felt. Someone had placed Thomas, cleaned and swaddled in a blue blanket, in her arms. Lenore had wanted nothing more than to tell them all to go away, to leave her alone and let her sleep for a decade, a century, a millennium, but she had found her energy too depleted even for that. It had been all she could do to keep her eyes open when Vicky's face, hovering above her own like a freckled helicopter, swum into focus.

“Congratulations,” she'd said. “How does it feel to have created new life?”

It had been a wicked allusion to the health studies class they'd taken as juniors, which had been taught by a professor who maintained a semi-perversed interest in the process of human reproduction, and Lenore had mustered a laugh in spite of herself before drifting into a deep, anesthesia-induced sleep.

Now, looking at Vicky, she was conscious of a keen sense of regret for all the time they'd lost together. How had she allowed Vicky—her onetime best friend, her maid of honor, her unofficial birth doula—to drift out of her life? The small talk had run its course, and now they sat in a silence pregnant with the weight of everything they knew about each other but were hesitant to bring up for fear of reopening wounds old and new alike.

Vicky was the first to take the plunge. “So,” she said, eyes limpid with sympathy, “you and Sam. That was a surprise—you guys had made it work for so long, and you had Thomas to think of.”

Lenore dipped her head in acknowledgment. Here we go, she thought before launching into the whole sordid tale: the revelation, the move-out, the custody battle. The stars had begun to emerge by the time she was finished, and through a chink in the blinds, she spotted the telltale curve of the Big Dipper’s handle. She had distracted herself from the pain of her first contractions by naming each individual star in the constellation: Alkaid, Mizar, Alioth, Megrez, Phad, Merak, Dubhe.

“So have you worked out a custody agreement yet?” Vicky asked. She had a faint line between her eyebrows, Lenore observed, that hadn’t been there when they had last seen each other in person four—was it four? As long as that?—years ago.

“Yeah,” she said. “I get Tom during the week, and Sam has him on the weekends.”

“How does that gel with Sam’s work schedule?” Vicky asked, cocking her head. She knew as well as Lenore did that Samuel was a bona fide workaholic; he’d been known to put in six-day weeks and ten-hour days before, toiling from morning until night over product designs and 3-D printer components.

“He’s got a nanny,” Lenore said. “Melanie. She takes care of Tom when he’s not around.” For once it was a relief to not have to keep her expression neutral, to let anger and hurt and bitterness pass over her face like thunderclouds over an otherwise clear sky. She often wondered whether Melanie, a blond, curvaceous woman whose style seemed modelled on that of the original Barbie doll, was the other woman to her beleaguered housewife. Melanie was certainly pretty enough to be a homewrecker, assuming you liked big, teased hair, shellacked lips, and age-inappropriate tube tops that exposed a sliver of appendicitis-scarred abdomen, and the timeline was undeniably suspicious: Sam had hired her right after Lenore moved out of their shared apartment and back in with her parents, the past eight years of her life reduced to what she could fit in two suitcases and a duffel bag. She had felt guilty for inconveniencing her mother and father, but she could no more have gone on cohabiting with Sam than she could have kidnapped a child. All her memories of their marriage—honeymooning on St. Barts, camping in Yosemite, road-tripping through the Midwest—were sullied, tainted, filtered through the dark lenses of infidelity and divorce. She did not want Sam back, no, but the mental image of him with another woman still caused her pain when it bobbed to the surface of her mind. It did so now, ghastly as a gaseous corpse, and Lenore suddenly felt as though she would scream or break into tears, one or the other, if Vicky probed any further into the abysmal state of her life.

“But enough about me,” she said, pivoting in a desperate bid to keep herself from coming apart at the seams. “How’s things with you? You’re—you’re getting your doctorate in Slavic studies, right?” She thought she’d seen some life event post to that effect on Facebook.

Vicky laughed. “Got it around a year ago, actually,” she said. “What a slog that was. I probably racked up a million-plus words on my computer.”

“Well,” Lenore said, cringing internally at her faux pas. “Impressive. So what are you doing now?”

She had thought that Vicky would be eager to talk about her career, to pontificate about the trappings of academic success—bylines in scholarly journals, invitations to major conferences, the unstinting admiration of undergrads—so she was surprised to see the familiar signs of displeasure appear on Vicky’s face: pursed lips, narrowed eyes, tightened jaw.

“I’m finding it hard to get work, actually,” Vicky said neutrally. She speared an olive. “It’s just—well, uh, the market for adjuncts and associates is really bad right now, and nowhere’s really hiring. I interviewed at LaTerre and McGoughvy and Greensborough and Saracen, you know, all the local schools, right after I got my Ph.D., but none of them so much as even gave me the courtesy of a formal rejection. Nothing. Nada. No bites on my line.”

She looked Lenore straight in the eyes and lifted and lowered her shoulders in one smooth motion.

“What can you do,” she said, a sour note in her voice. “Comes with the territory, I guess.”

Lenore found herself at a loss for words. What hope was there for her if Vicky, overachieving Vicky who had been constantly hung up on grades and standardized test scores in college, couldn't land a job?

"I'm sorry," she said lamely, reaching out and touching Vicky's hand. Thin and bony and traced with the blue lines of veins it was, tipped with nails bitten almost to the quick. A coping mechanism?

"Yeah," Vicky said. "Well. You know. The economy. Nobody's really hiring right now."

"But you were in town for an interview this week, right?" Lenore asked. "How'd that go?"

Vicky threw up her hands in a gesture of frustration. "Not great," she said. "It took up the whole of Thursday and Friday, and after all that the guy basically told me he wanted someone older, someone with more experience. So my hopes aren't high."

"Well," Lenore said. "You never know." She tried and failed to come up with something comforting to say. "So what are you doing right now? To make ends meet, you know, pay the bills."

“Uh,” Vicky said, averting her eyes and taking a sudden interest in a knothole in the wood of the table. “Waitressing, mostly. At this little Italian place in Cheswick, Girardi’s. Great use of my degrees, right?”

She smiled wanly at Lenore.

“Well,” Lenore said, thinking of her own job making cappuccinos and mopping up spills. “There are worse things in the world.”

Vicky’s eyes widened apologetically. “Oh, of course,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking. Obviously waitressing can’t compare to what you’ve been through with Sam and Thomas. Sorry—I’m just, you know, a little bit bitter about the whole rigmarole. I feel like I did all this work, took all these classes, for nothing. For what? To get a job waiting tables.”

She paused, twirling the miniature umbrella that had come with her martini. The knuckles of her fingers whitened on the stem.

“But, you know,” she said, “please stop by Girardi’s if you’re ever in the area. It’s owned by Greeks, not Italians, but the pizza is still to die for, especially the cheese with anchovies.”

Lenore watched the canopy of the umbrella rotate like the blades of a windmill in a nor’easter.

“Of course,” she said, thinking of the paltry funds in her bank account. “I’d love to.”

As casually as some people embark on relationships, their hands migrated across the table, through the stains and spills and splinters, and found one another.

They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the babble of talk from other tables. Discussions of misbehaving children, military schools, tax rebates, asshole bosses, disastrous interviews, sordid affairs, ugly divorces, ugly mistresses. A blond woman talking on the phone gesticulated wildly. A girl who could not possibly be twenty-one nursed what looked like a gin and tonic, lost in thought. Two frat boys guffawed in the corner, high-fiving each other with the gusto of mafiosos who’d just successfully offed one of their associates. A man with salt-and-pepper hair and a mustache to match prodded at a piece of lamb in his stew, eyeing it as though he suspected it of having illicit designs upon him.

Lenore had once read that everybody passes around sixteen murderers in their lifetime. Walks by them on the street. Sits to the left or right of them at the doctor’s or dentist’s office. Stands next to them on the subway, clinging to one of the overhead railings as the train thunders through the pitch-black tunnels, maybe even smiling or nodding or making friendly eye contact once your eyes adjust to the darkness. It was a game she had played with herself as a child and resumed as a divorcée, trying to guess if any of the people trapped in rush hour or waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store with her were hiding a monstrous secret behind the pleasant

facade of their faces. And she wondered if they wondered the same thing about her, or if, at the very least, they could guess at the recent events of her life by some minute tell: a furrowed brow, a nervous tic, an expression that vacillated between neutrality in public spaces and abject misery in private ones.

Complicated Domesticity and Employment Anxiety in “Alouette”: Challenging Popular Narratives About the American Household and Coming of Age in the Post-Recession Era

In the fall of 2018, when I began seriously thinking about my senior thesis, I knew almost immediately that I wanted it to be creative rather than critical in nature. Though the act of writing an academic essay is often intellectually rewarding, I have always found that the greatest joys lie in the process of creating characters, scenarios, and storylines from scratch. This time around, however, that process was relatively fraught: I found it difficult to juggle thesis work and classwork, I suffered from a prolonged bout of writer’s block, and I encountered issues with characterization and tone once I did get going. In addition, I struggled mightily to identify the import of my story: prior to starting “Alouette,” I had never before been pressed to consider the overarching significance of my writing, to ask myself, first, what I had to say and, second, why what I had to say was important. Prompted in large part by my advisor, Professor of English Christina Zwarg, I came to feel that the basic plot should be indirectly put in conversation with the systematic dysfunction that has shaped the way my generation thinks, feels, works, and relaxes, a goal I hope I have achieved with “Alouette.” In this incarnation of that short story, a young woman, Lenore, is blindsided by her husband Sam’s sudden insistence on a divorce. Lenore, who married Sam right out of college (they shared a relatively whirlwind romance after meeting by chance at a barbecue hosted by her best friend’s family the summer after her sophomore year) and has been a stay-at-home mom, albeit not by choice, ever since, finds her prospects limited by the fact that she did not pursue higher education, and is reduced to working as a barista in a local coffee shop. Over the course of a shift, she recalls moments happy and sad

from her marriage—her wedding day, her honeymoon, the birth of her and Sam’s son Thomas, the night Sam told her he no longer loved her— and reflects on how different her life might’ve been had she not gotten married and had a child at a young age. Once her shift ends, she makes her way to a local bar to meet up for drinks with her best friend from college, Vicky, whom she lost touch with some years prior. To her surprise, Lenore discovers that Vicky, despite having both a master’s and a doctorate, is struggling to find a suitable job and is working part-time as a waitress at an Italian restaurant to make ends meet. The story ends with Lenore meditating on the difficulty of ever truly knowing the facts of someone else’s internal or external struggles.

In writing this story, I wanted to, in part, interrogate the role of domesticity in realistic fiction. If the purpose of writing is to make profound observations about the surrounding world and the figures that populate it, what better setting than the suburban household, which in both real life and literature provides the backdrop for countless moments of human drama? Having typed that sentence, I am reminded of the famous opening line of Leo Tolstoy’s 1878 magnum opus *Anna Karenina*, itself perhaps the quintessential example of the domestic novel: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Since Tolstoy’s time, such “unhappy families” have been memorialized in great literature time and time again, a testament to the enduring fascination they hold for writers regardless of race, gender, or life experience. Alice Munro and Jhumpa Lahiri made their names writing about the small-scale dilemmas of women navigating life as, variously, wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. Even Ernest Hemingway, that most stereotypically macho of authors, lent his hand to nuanced, insightful tales of broken marriages, unrealized sexual desires, and the unforeseen consequences

of physical relationships when not writing adventure stories set in the savannas of Africa, the bullrings of Madrid, or the waters off Cuba.

As a brief digression, I will introduce, summarize, and analyze some of these stories, among them Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"; Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter"; Munro's "Runaway"; and Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in a bid to demonstrate how their presentation of domestic tension shaped my own.

In Hemingway's 1936 short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," the titular character, a wealthy but milquetoast New York City businessman, finds himself trapped in a mediocre marriage to a former model named Margot. The dysfunctional nature of their relationship is thrown into sharp relief early on when, while on safari in an unnamed African country, Margot sleeps with their hunting guide to punish Francis for an act of perceived cowardice. During a tense breakfast in their shared tent the morning afterwards, Francis, who is aware of Margot's infidelity, can barely keep himself from launching himself at the guide and pummeling him into oblivion. By weaponizing familiar trappings of domesticity, such as sexual relations and communal meals, to advance the storyline and provide insight into individual characters' states of mind, such plot points implicitly emphasize the emotionally charged nature of the household (and thus its relevance to the larger narrative).

By contrast, O'Connor's 1953 short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" takes issue not with the features of domesticity but with the figures of domesticity. The narrative follows several

members of an extended family—a grandmother, her son, her daughter-in-law, and her three young grandchildren—as they embark on a trip to Florida. Though all six main characters eventually meet a grisly fate at the hands of an escaped prisoner known only as “the Misfit” and his ghoulish henchmen, the rising action is almost entirely taken up with descriptions of domestic dysfunction: the two oldest children’s constant squabbling, the daughter-in-law’s emotional exhaustion, the son’s exasperation with his offspring, and the grandmother’s penchant for needless nagging. Critically, it is the son’s inability to defy or discipline his children that results in all of their deaths, a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it detail that suggests that the story, at heart, is far more concerned with elucidating the dynamics of extended families than it is with recounting the dirty deeds of highwaymen.

The premise of Jhumpa Lahiri’s 1998 short story “A Temporary Matter,” meanwhile, hinges on a common domestic inconvenience: a power outage, the “temporary matter” the title refers to. Emotionally (if not yet legally) estranged husband and wife Shukumar and Shoba return home one evening to find a flyer notifying them of the situation tacked to their door. Over the next four days, the approximate length of the outage, they begin to open up to one another again, sharing memories and speaking honestly about their feelings regarding Shoba’s recent miscarriage. In this story, the domestic in the form of a technological problem enables the plot to unfold; unable to escape one another in their three-bedroom house, Shukumar and Shoba are forced to address the problems with their relationship.

The household also serves as the setting for Alice Munro's 2003 short story "Runaway." Cora, a physically and verbally battered wife, and Cliff, her abusive older husband, reside in a trailer on the outskirts of their small Canadian town and run a horse-boarding business to make ends meet. While Cliff acts the part of a loving husband when he and Cora are out in public, he has no qualms about mocking her, talking down to her, and even hitting her in the privacy of their mobile home. Despairing and desperate, Cora seeks refuge at the house of their neighbor Sylvia Jamison under the pretense of trying to blackmail Ms. Jamison for money. Once in Ms. Jamison's house, however, Cora breaks down in tears and begs for help leaving town. As with "A Temporary Matter," "Runaway" 's domestic spaces enable the story to emerge because they function as sites in which truth invariably comes to light, despite the characters' best efforts to maintain their respective facades.

In reading these stories as preparation for starting the writing process, I found myself unconsciously attending to the ways in which Hemingway, O'Connor, Lahiri, and Munro invoked the domestic in all its forms—domestic spaces such as the kitchen, domestic events such as the family meal, domestic figures such as the mother and the father, domestic problems such as malfunctioning dishwashers and missed parent-teacher conferences, et cetera—to develop characters and/or move plots forward by inciting conflict. This narrative model was one I intentionally deployed in "Alouette" to breathe life into Lenore. Venues—such as the café where Lenore works—and acts—such as cleaning and brewing coffee—of seeming benignness shed their connotations of tranquillity for turbulence as they trigger the memory of acts of emotional violence in the character: while making a cappuccino, she remembers the moment Samuel took

her aside in the kitchen of their apartment and told her that he no longer wanted to be married to her; while sweeping the floor of the barista's nook, she recalls a visit to a psychiatrist prompted by a moment of suicidal ideation. In allowing Lenore's tragic, tortured story to unfold in domestic spaces and around domestic objects, I wanted to draw attention to the disparity between the reputation and the function of domestic institutions and, in doing so, complicate the narrative of blissful domesticity we are fed as consumers of popular culture. For most families, life no more resembles *The Brady Bunch* than it does *Arrested Development*; consequently, the events of Lenore's—divorce, depression, underemployment—fall within the normal range of modern experience. However personally painful they are to her (and they are certainly personally painful), they are everyday rather than extraordinary, relatable rather than titillating, and all the more worthy of creative exhibition for it.

Taken in isolation, the concrete plot points of “Alouette”—a woman works a shift at a coffee shop, walks to a bar, and has a conversation with an old friend—are far from the stuff of riveting fiction. As a writer, I have always found that the richest stories take place in the private space of the human psyche rather than the decidedly public one of the physical world; accordingly, much of “Alouette” takes the form of Lenore's internal monologue, a running commentary on her thoughts and feelings about her recent divorce, dead-end job, and lack of satisfying relationships which include, but are not limited to, her anger at her now-ex-husband, her sense that she missed out on foundational opportunities as a result of marrying and becoming a mother at a young age, and her sense of detachment from the people around her. By setting the story primarily in the interior environment of Lenore's mind rather than the exterior environment

of the fictional college-town setting, I was able to avail myself of flashbacks to provide necessary background information, such as the circumstances surrounding her divorce and the close nature of her relationship with Vicky. Besides solving the chronological problems I was facing, i.e. the issue of how to depict events that had taken place months before the story is supposed to be set, using flashbacks allowed me to develop Lenore as a character by putting her rich inner life on display.

In depicting the employment struggles of a relatively young woman, I wanted to speak to the specific professional uncertainties and insecurities that have shaped the course of millennials' lives. On page 13, Lenore briefly wonders if she would have been professionally successful had she not met and married Samuel before bringing herself down to earth by acknowledging that "But then again, maybe she wouldn't have been; the economy had already been in the toilet by the time she graduated, after all." Her suspicions are implicitly confirmed when Vicky, who holds a Ph.D. in Slavic studies, confesses that she is having trouble finding work. In an exchange that is shot through with tension, Vicky reveals that she has taken to waitressing at a local restaurant to make ends meet:

"I'm finding it hard to get work, actually," Vicky said neutrally. She speared an olive. "It's just—well, uh, the market for adjuncts and associates is really bad right now, and nowhere's really hiring. I interviewed at LaTerre and McGoughvy and Greensborough and Saracen, you know, all the local schools, right after I got my Ph.D., but none of them so much as even gave me the courtesy of a formal rejection. Nothing. Nada. No bites on my line."

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Lenore found herself at a loss for words. What hope was there for her if Vicky, overachieving Vicky who had been constantly hung up on grades and standardized test scores in college, couldn't land a job?

“I'm sorry,” she said lamely, reaching out and touching Vicky's hand. Thin and bony and traced with the blue lines of veins it was, tipped with nails bitten almost to the quick. A coping mechanism?

“Yeah,” Vicky said. “Well. You know. The economy. Nobody's really hiring right now” (emphasis mine).

“But you were in town for an interview this week, right?” Lenore asked. “How'd that go?”

Vicky threw up her hands in a gesture of frustration. “Not great,” she said. “It took up the whole of Thursday and Friday, and after all that the guy basically told me he wanted someone older, someone with more experience. So my hopes aren't high.”

“Well,” Lenore said. “You never know.” She tried and failed to come up with something comforting to say. “So what are you doing right now? To make ends meet, you know, pay the bills.”

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She smiled wanly at Lenore.

— “Alouette” 24-26.

Though Lenore's specific experiences with employment are not necessarily meant to be relatable, her attitude toward them is. Woefully overqualified for her job as a barista, she affects a tone that is almost cynical in its world-weariness, a tone that suggests that she cannot and

should not expect anything better than what she has. Though she knows that hers is “low-level work, more suited for a teenager or college kid than a nearly thirty-year-old woman,” she does not attempt to find another once over the course of the story, partly due to her depression and lack of ambition but also partly due to her sense that to do so would be fruitless (“Alouette” 4). Haunted by the memory of how she had tried and failed to find a job early on in her marriage, she thinks, “...These days it was difficult to bring herself to get out of bed or get dressed, let alone apply for a real job. **Not that applying was likely to yield results, anyway**” (emphasis mine) (“Alouette” 18). The profound sense of personal impotence and helplessness in the face of an unaccountably tough job market Lenore evinces here is near-ubiquitous among those who came of age in the post-recession era. How are students and young professionals supposed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps if those bootstraps are nailed to the ground by the weight of economic inequality, salary stagnation, and (in some cases) blatant nepotism? With this story, I hope in some way to give a voice to the young millennials and old Gen Z-ers whose careers have been, or will be, blighted by the aftereffects of crises like the 2008 housing crisis and the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Though the name Lenore might seem anachronistic, it was chosen deliberately as a reference to the character’s socially and professionally downtrodden status. The name has frequently been invoked by masters of romantic poetry and prose, most notably Edgar Allan Poe, to represent women, who, much to their lovers’ and would-be lovers’ dismay, died before their time. In Poe’s 1843 poem “Lenore,” an unnamed narrator attends the funeral of Lenore, “the queenliest dead that ever died so young” (“Lenore” line 6), and imagines the ascent of her soul to

heaven; in Poe's 1845 poem "The Raven," an unnamed narrator mourns the recent passing of Lenore, alternately characterized as "a sainted maiden" ("The Raven" line 94) and "the most rare and radiant maiden who ever lived" ("The Raven" line 95). Though my Lenore, breaking from tradition, makes it out of her literary vessel alive, she resembles Poe's Lenores in that she intended to be an object of pity, a sad, luckless figure who has been sorely used and abused by life.

The title of the story itself is also an allusion to the character of Lenore, by way of a song mentioned in the course of the story, "Alouette." French-Canadian in origin, it describes, in gory detail, the prolonged torture of a lark by two schoolboys. "Lark, nice lark, I will pluck you...I will pluck your head...I will pluck your beak...I will pluck your eyes...I will pluck your neck...I will pluck your wings...I will pluck your legs...I will pluck your tail...I will pluck your back" ("French Folk Song 'Allouette' [sic]"). Though some have contended that the song actually summarizes the process of preparing a lark stew, a popular dish in the colonial era, its lyrics are still undeniably unsettling when understood ("French Folk Song 'Allouette' [sic]"). Like the lark that is the subject of the song, Lenore has suffered grievously; like the song, the story is essentially a description and close analysis of personal misfortune and misery.

But neither is it without rays of hope, namely, the solidarity in shared experience Lenore and Vicky find with each other on the final page. Though no words are exchanged, their hands migrate "across the table, through the stains and spills and splinters" in a moment of physical contact that symbolizes emotional commiseration ("Alouette" 27). While people of older

generations might not understand or relate to the employment anxiety that plagues Lenore, Vicky, too, knows what it is like to feel that no matter how intelligent you are or how hard you work, you are doomed to be undervalued all your life. Though the story does not end on a happy note, it ends on, perhaps, a hopeful one; the value of knowing that you are not alone in your circumstances is not to be underestimated. What an irony to have written about the employment-related ennui that consumes my generation at a time when the country is in the middle of a recession that will cripple the job market for decades to come. But also, what a gift to have written something that is so immediately relevant to readers.

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