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A Visit from the Goon Squad

Written by Jennifer Egan

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A Visit From the Goon Squad

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*For Peter M.,
with gratitude*

‘Poets claim that we recapture for a moment the self that we were long ago when we enter some house or garden in which we used to live in our youth. But these are most hazardous pilgrimages, which end as often in disappointment as in success. It is in ourselves that we should rather seek to find those fixed places, contemporaneous with different years.’

‘The unknown element of the lives of other people is like that of nature, which each fresh scientific discovery merely reduces but does not abolish.’

– Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*

A

1

Found Objects

It began the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel. Sasha was adjusting her yellow eye shadow in the mirror when she noticed a bag on the floor beside the sink that must have belonged to the woman whose peeing she could faintly hear through the vaultlike door of a toilet stall. Inside the rim of the bag, barely visible, was a wallet made of pale green leather. It was easy for Sasha to recognize, looking back, that the peeing woman's blind trust had provoked her: *We live in a city where people will steal the hair off your head if you give them half a chance, but you leave your stuff lying in plain sight and expect it to be waiting for you when you come back?* It made her want to teach the woman a lesson. But this wish only camouflaged the deeper feeling Sasha always had: that fat, tender wallet, offering itself to her hand – it seemed so dull, so life-as-usual to just leave it there rather than seize the moment, accept the challenge, take the leap, fly the coop, throw caution to the wind, live dangerously ('I get it,' Coz, her therapist, said), and *take* the fucking thing.

‘You mean steal it.’

He was trying to get Sasha to use that word, which was harder to avoid in the case of a wallet than with a lot of the things she’d lifted over the past year, when her condition (as Coz referred to it) had begun to accelerate: five sets of keys, fourteen pairs of sunglasses, a child’s striped scarf, binoculars, a cheese grater, a pocketknife, twenty-eight bars of soap, and eighty-five pens, ranging from cheap ballpoints she’d used to sign debit-card slips to the aubergine Visconti that cost two hundred sixty dollars online, which she’d lifted from her former boss’s lawyer during a contracts meeting. Sasha no longer took anything from stores – their cold, inert goods didn’t tempt her. Only from people.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Steal it.’

Sasha and Coz had dubbed that feeling she got the ‘personal challenge’, as in: taking the wallet was a way for Sasha to assert her toughness, her individuality. What they needed to do was switch things around in her head so that the challenge became not taking the wallet but *leaving* it. That would be the cure, although Coz never used words like ‘cure’. He wore funky sweaters and let her call him Coz, but he was old school inscrutable, to the point where Sasha couldn’t tell if he was gay or straight, if he’d written famous books, or if (as she sometimes suspected) he was one of those escaped cons who impersonate surgeons and wind up leaving their operating tools inside people’s skulls. Of course, these questions could have been resolved on Google in less than a minute, but they were useful questions (according to Coz), and so far, Sasha had resisted.

The couch where she lay in his office was blue leather and very soft. Coz liked the couch, he’d told her, because it relieved them both of the burden of eye contact. ‘You don’t like eye contact?’ Sasha had asked. It seemed like a weird thing for a therapist to admit.

‘I find it tiring,’ he’d said. ‘This way, we can both look where we want.’

‘Where will you look?’

He smiled. ‘You can see my options.’

‘Where do you usually look? When people are on the couch.’

‘Around the room,’ Coz said. ‘At the ceiling. Into space.’

‘Do you ever sleep?’

‘No.’

Sasha usually looked at the window, which faced the street, and tonight, as she continued her story, was rippled with rain. She’d glimpsed the wallet, tender and overripe as a peach. She’d plucked it from the woman’s bag and slipped it into her own small handbag, which she’d zipped shut before the sound of peeing had stopped. She’d flicked open the bathroom door and floated back through the lobby to the bar. She and the wallet’s owner had never seen each other.

Prewallet, Sasha had been in the grip of a dire evening: lame date (yet another) brooding behind dark bangs, sometimes glancing at the flat-screen TV, where a Jets game seemed to interest him more than Sasha’s admittedly overhandled tales of Bennie Salazar, her old boss, who was famous for founding the Sow’s Ear record label and who also (Sasha happened to know) sprinkled gold flakes into his coffee – as an aphrodisiac, she suspected – and sprayed pesticide in his armpits.

Postwallet, however, the scene tingled with mirthful possibility. Sasha felt the waiters eyeing her as she sidled back to the table holding her handbag with its secret weight. She sat down and took a sip of her Melon Madness Martini and cocked her head at Alex. She smiled her yes/no smile. ‘Hello,’ she said.

The yes/no smile was amazingly effective.

‘You’re happy,’ Alex said.

‘I’m always happy,’ Sasha said. ‘Sometimes I just forget.’

Alex had paid the bill while she was in the bathroom – clear proof that he’d been on the verge of aborting their date. Now he studied her. ‘You feel like going somewhere else?’

They stood. Alex wore black cords and a white button-up shirt. He was a legal secretary. On e-mail he’d been fanciful, almost goofy, but in person he seemed simultaneously anxious and bored. She could tell that he was in excellent shape, not from going to the gym but from being young enough that his body was still imprinted with whatever sports he’d played in high school and college. Sasha, who was thirty-five, had passed that point. Still, not even Coz knew her real age. The closest anyone had come to guessing it was thirty-one, and most put her in her twenties. She worked out daily and avoided the sun. Her online profiles all listed her as twenty-eight.

As she followed Alex from the bar, she couldn’t resist unzipping her purse and touching the fat green wallet just for a second, for the contraction it made her feel around her heart.

‘You’re aware of how the theft makes *you* feel,’ Coz said. ‘To the point where you remind yourself of it to improve your mood. But do you think about how it makes the other person feel?’

Sasha tipped back her head to look at him. She made a point of doing this now and then, just to remind Coz that she wasn’t an idiot – she knew the question had a right answer. She and Coz were collaborators, writing a story whose end had already been determined: she would get well. She would stop stealing from people and start caring again about the things that had once guided her: music; the network of friends she’d made when she first came to New York; a set of goals she’d scrawled on a big sheet of newsprint and taped to the walls of her early apartments:

Find a band to manage
Understand the news
Study Japanese
Practice the harp

‘I don’t think about the people,’ Sasha said.

‘But it isn’t that you lack empathy,’ Coz said. ‘We know that, because of the plumber.’

Sasha sighed. She’d told Coz the plumber story about a month ago, and he’d found a way to bring it up at almost every session since. The plumber was an old man, sent by Sasha’s landlord to investigate a leak in the apartment below hers. He’d appeared in Sasha’s doorway, tufts of gray on his head, and within a minute – *boom* – he’d hit the floor and crawled under her bathtub like an animal fumbling its way into a familiar hole. The fingers he’d groped toward the bolts behind the tub were grimed to cigar stubs, and reaching made his sweatshirt hike up, exposing a soft white back. Sasha turned away, stricken by the old man’s abasement, anxious to leave for her temp job, except that the plumber was talking to her, asking about the length and frequency of her showers. ‘I never use it,’ she told him curtly. ‘I shower at the gym.’ He nodded without acknowledging her rudeness, apparently used to it. Sasha’s nose began to prickle; she shut her eyes and pushed hard on both temples.

Opening her eyes, she saw the plumber’s tool belt lying on the floor at her feet. It had a beautiful screwdriver in it, the orange translucent handle gleaming like a lollipop in its worn leather loop, the silvery shaft sculpted, sparkling. Sasha felt herself contract around the object in a single yawn of appetite; she needed to hold the screwdriver, just for a minute. She bent her knees and plucked it noiselessly from the belt. Not a bangle jangled; her bony hands were spastic at most things, but she was good at this – *made for it*, she often thought, in

the first drifty moments after lifting something. And once the screwdriver was in her hand, she felt instant relief from the pain of having an old soft-backed man snuffling under her tub, and then something more than relief: a blessed indifference, as if the very idea of feeling pain over such a thing were baffling.

‘And what about after he’d gone?’ Coz had asked when Sasha told him the story. ‘How did the screwdriver look to you then?’

There was a pause. ‘Normal,’ she said.

‘Really. Not special anymore?’

‘Like any screwdriver.’

Sasha had heard Coz shift behind her and felt something happen in the room: the screwdriver, which she’d placed on the table (recently supplemented with a second table) where she kept the things she’d lifted, and which she’d barely looked at since, seemed to hang in the air of Coz’s office. It floated between them: a symbol.

‘And how did you feel?’ Coz asked quietly. ‘About having taken it from the plumber you pitied?’

How did she feel? *How did she feel?* There was a right answer, of course. At times, Sasha had to fight the urge to lie simply as a way of depriving Coz of it.

‘Bad,’ she said. ‘Okay? I felt bad. Shit, I’m bankrupting myself to pay for you – obviously I get that this isn’t a great way to live.’

More than once, Coz had tried to connect the plumber to Sasha’s father, who had disappeared when she was six. She was careful not to indulge this line of thinking. ‘I don’t remember him,’ she told Coz. ‘I have nothing to say.’ She did this for Coz’s protection and her own – they were writing a story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances. But in that direction lay only sorrow.

Sasha and Alex crossed the lobby of the Lassimo Hotel in the direction of the street. Sasha hugged her purse to her shoulder, the warm ball of wallet snuggled in her armpit. As they passed the angular budded branches by the big glass doors to the street, a woman zigzagged into their path. 'Wait,' she said. 'You haven't seen – I'm desperate.'

Sasha felt a twang of terror. It was the woman whose wallet she'd taken – she knew this instantly, although the person before her had nothing in common with the blithe, raven-haired wallet owner she'd pictured. This woman had vulnerable brown eyes and flat pointy shoes that clicked too loudly on the marble floor. There was plenty of gray in her frizzy brown hair.

Sasha took Alex's arm, trying to steer him through the doors. She felt his pulse of surprise at her touch, but he stayed put. 'Have we seen what?' he said.

'Someone stole my wallet. My ID is gone, and I have to catch a plane tomorrow morning. I'm just desperate!' She stared beseechingly at both of them. It was the sort of frank need that New Yorkers quickly learn how to hide, and Sasha recoiled. It had never occurred to her that the woman was from out of town.

'Have you called the police?' Alex asked.

'The concierge said he would call. But I'm also wondering – could it have fallen out somewhere?' She looked helplessly at the marble floor around their feet. Sasha relaxed slightly. This woman was the type who annoyed people without meaning to; apology shadowed her movements even now, as she followed Alex to the concierge desk. Sasha trailed behind.

'Is someone helping this person?' she heard Alex ask.

The concierge was young and spiky haired. 'We've called the police,' he said defensively.

Alex turned to the woman. 'Where did this happen?'

'In the ladies' room. I think.'

‘Who else was there?’

‘No one.’

‘It was empty?’

‘There might have been someone, but I didn’t see her.’

Alex swung around to Sasha. ‘You were just in the bathroom,’ he said. ‘Did you see anyone?’

‘No,’ she managed to say. She had Xanax in her purse, but she couldn’t open her purse. Even with it zipped, she feared that the wallet would blurt into view in some way that she couldn’t control, unleashing a cascade of horrors: arrest, shame, poverty, death.

Alex turned to the concierge. ‘How come I’m asking these questions instead of you?’ he said. ‘Someone just got robbed in your hotel. Don’t you have, like, security?’

The words ‘robbed’ and ‘security’ managed to pierce the soothing backbeat that pumped through not just the Lassimo but every hotel like it in New York City. There was a mild ripple of interest from the lobby.

‘I’ve called security,’ the concierge said, adjusting his neck. ‘I’ll call them again.’

Sasha glanced at Alex. He was angry, and the anger made him recognizable in a way that an hour of aimless chatter (mostly hers, it was true) had not: he was new to New York. He came from someplace smaller. He had a thing or two to prove about how people should treat one another.

Two security guys showed up, the same on TV and in life: beefy guys whose scrupulous politeness was somehow linked to their willingness to crack skulls. They dispersed to search the bar. Sasha wished feverishly that she’d left the wallet there, as if this were an impulse she’d barely resisted.

‘I’ll check the bathroom,’ she told Alex, and forced herself to walk slowly around the elevator bank. The bathroom was empty. Sasha opened her purse, took out the wallet, unearthed her vial of Xanax, and popped one between her

teeth. They worked faster if you chewed them. As the caustic taste flooded her mouth, she scanned the room, trying to decide where to ditch the wallet: In the stall? Under the sink? The decision paralyzed her. She had to do this right, to emerge unscathed, and if she could, if she did – she had a frenzied sense of making a promise to Coz.

The bathroom door opened, and the woman walked in. Her frantic eyes met Sasha's in the bathroom mirror: narrow, green, equally frantic. There was a pause, during which Sasha felt that she was being confronted; the woman knew, had known all along. Sasha handed her the wallet. She saw, from the woman's stunned expression, that she was wrong.

'I'm sorry,' Sasha said quickly. 'It's a problem I have.'

The woman opened the wallet. Her physical relief at having it back coursed through Sasha in a warm rush, as if their bodies had fused. 'Everything's there, I swear,' she said. 'I didn't even open it. It's this problem I have, but I'm getting help. I just – please don't tell. I'm hanging on by a thread.'

The woman glanced up, her soft brown eyes moving over Sasha's face. What did she see? Sasha wished that she could turn and peer in the mirror again, as if something about herself might at last be revealed – some lost thing. But she didn't turn. She held still and let the woman look. It struck her that the woman was close to her own age – her real age. She probably had children at home.

'Okay,' the woman said, looking down. 'It's between us.'

'Thank you,' Sasha said. 'Thank you, thank you.' Relief and the first gentle waves of Xanax made her feel faint, and she leaned against the wall. She sensed the woman's eagerness to get away. She longed to slide to the floor.

There was a rap on the door, a man's voice: 'Any luck?'

Sasha and Alex left the hotel and stepped into desolate, windy Tribeca. She'd suggested the Lasso out of habit; it was near Sow's Ear Records, where she'd worked for twelve years as Bennie Salazar's assistant. But she hated the neighborhood at night without the World Trade Center, whose blazing free-ways of light had always filled her with hope. She was tired of Alex. In a mere twenty minutes, they'd blown past the desired point of meaningful-connection-through-shared-experience into the less appealing state of knowing-each-other-too-well. Alex wore a knit cap pulled over his forehead. His eyelashes were long and black. 'That was weird,' he said finally.

'Yeah,' Sasha said. Then, after a pause, 'You mean, finding it?'

'The whole thing. But yeah.' He turned to her. 'Was it, like, concealed from view?'

'It was lying on the floor. In the corner. Kind of behind a planter.' The utterance of this lie caused pinpricks of sweat to emerge on Sasha's Xanax-soothed skull. She considered saying, *Actually, there was no planter*, but managed not to.

'It's almost like she did it on purpose,' Alex said. 'For attention or something.'

'She didn't seem like that type.'

'You can't tell. That's something I'm learning, here in NYC: you have no fucking idea what people are really like. They're not even two-faced – they're, like, multiple personalities.'

'She wasn't from New York,' Sasha said, irked by his obliviousness even as she strove to preserve it. 'Remember? She was getting on a plane?'

'True,' Alex said. He paused and cocked his head, regarding Sasha across the ill-lit sidewalk. 'But you know what I'm talking about? That thing about people?'

'I do know,' she said carefully. 'But I think you get used to it.'

'I'd rather just go somewhere else.'

It took Sasha a moment to understand. ‘There is nowhere else,’ she said.

Alex turned to her, startled. Then he grinned. Sasha grinned back – not the yes/no smile, but related.

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Alex said.

They took a cab and climbed the four flights to Sasha’s Lower East Side walk-up. She’d lived there six years. The place smelled of scented candles, and there was a velvet throw cloth on her sofa bed and lots of pillows, and an old color TV with a very good picture, and an array of souvenirs from her travels lining the windowsills: a white seashell, a pair of red dice, a small canister of Tiger Balm from China, now dried to the texture of rubber, a tiny bonsai tree that she watered faithfully.

‘Look at this,’ Alex said. ‘You’ve got a tub in the kitchen! I’ve heard of that – I mean I’ve read about it, but I wasn’t sure there were any left. The shower thing is new, right? This is a bathtub-in-the-kitchen apartment, right?’

‘Yup,’ Sasha said. ‘But I almost never use it. I shower at the gym.’

The tub was covered with a fitted board where Sasha stacked her plates. Alex ran his hands under the rim of the bath and examined its clawed feet. Sasha lit her candles, took a bottle of grappa from the kitchen cupboard and filled two small glasses.

‘I love this place,’ Alex said. ‘It feels like old New York. You know this stuff is around, but how do you find it?’

Sasha leaned against the tub beside him and took a tiny sip of grappa. It tasted like Xanax. She was trying to remember Alex’s age on his profile. Twenty-eight, she thought, but he seemed younger than that, maybe a lot younger. She saw her apartment as he must see it – a bit of local color that would

fade almost instantly into the tumble of adventures that everyone has on first coming to New York. It jarred Sasha to think of herself as a glint in the hazy memories that Alex would struggle to organize a year or two from now: *Where was that place with the bathtub? Who was that girl?*

He left the tub to explore the rest of the apartment. To one side of the kitchen was Sasha's bedroom. On the other side, facing the street, was her living room—den—office, which contained two upholstered chairs and the desk she reserved for projects outside of work – publicity for bands she believed in, short reviews for *Vibe* and *Spin* – although these had fallen off sharply in recent years. In fact the whole apartment, which six years ago had seemed like a way station to some better place, had ended up solidifying around Sasha, gathering mass and weight, until she felt both mired in it and lucky to have it – as if she not only couldn't move on but didn't want to.

Alex leaned over to peer at the tiny collection on her windowsills. He paused at the picture of Rob, Sasha's friend who had drowned in college, but made no comment. He hadn't noticed the tables where she kept the pile of things she'd stolen: the pens, the binoculars, the keys, the child's scarf, which she'd lifted simply by not returning it when it dropped from a little girl's neck as her mother led her by the hand from a Starbucks. Sasha was already seeing Coz by then, so she recognized the litany of excuses even as they throbbed through her head: winter is almost over; children grow so fast; kids hate scarves; it's too late, they're out the door; I'm embarrassed to return it; I could easily not have seen it fall – in fact I didn't, I'm just noticing it now: *Look, a scarf! A kid's bright yellow scarf with pink stripes – too bad, who could it belong to? Well, I'll just pick it up and hold it for a minute . . .* At home she'd washed the scarf by hand and folded it neatly. It was one of the things she liked best.

‘What’s all this?’ Alex asked.

He’d discovered the tables now and was staring at the pile. It looked like the work of a miniaturist beaver: a heap of objects that was illegible yet clearly not random. To Sasha’s eye, it almost shook under its load of embarrassments and close shaves and little triumphs and moments of pure exhilaration. It contained years of her life compressed. The screwdriver was at the outer edge. Sasha moved closer to Alex, drawn to the sight of him taking everything in.

‘And how did you feel, standing with Alex in front of all those things you’d stolen?’ Coz asked.

Sasha turned her face into the blue couch because her cheeks were heating up and she hated that. She didn’t want to explain to Coz the mix of feelings she’d had, standing there with Alex: the pride she took in these objects, a tenderness that was only heightened by the shame of their acquisition. She’d risked everything, and here was the result: the raw, warped core of her life. Watching Alex move his eyes over the pile of objects stirred something in Sasha. She put her arms around him from behind, and he turned, surprised, but willing. She kissed him full on the mouth, then undid his zipper and kicked off her boots. Alex tried to lead her toward the other room, where they could lie down on the sofa bed, but Sasha dropped to her knees beside the tables and pulled him down, the Persian carpet prickling her back, street light falling through the window onto his hungry, hopeful face, his bare white thighs.

Afterward, they lay on the rug for a long time. The candles started to sputter. Sasha saw the prickly shape of the bonsai silhouetted against the window near her head. All her excitement had seeped away, leaving behind a terrible sadness, an emptiness that felt violent, as if she’d been gouged. She tottered to her feet, hoping Alex would leave soon. He still had his shirt on.

‘You know what I feel like doing?’ he said, standing up. ‘Taking a bath in that tub.’

‘You can,’ Sasha said dully. ‘It works. The plumber was just here.’

She pulled up her jeans and collapsed onto a chair. Alex went to the tub, carefully removed the plates from the wood cover, and lifted it off. Water gushed from the faucet. Its force had always startled Sasha, the few times she’d used it.

Alex’s black pants were crumpled on the floor at Sasha’s feet. The square of his wallet had worn away the corduroy from one of the back pockets, as if he often wore these pants, and always with the wallet in that place. Sasha glanced over at him. Steam rose from the tub as he dipped in a hand to test the water. Then he came back to the pile of objects and leaned close, as if looking for something specific. Sasha watched him, hoping for a tremor of the excitement she’d felt before, but it was gone.

‘Can I put some of these in?’ He was holding up a packet of bath salts Sasha had taken from her best friend, Lizzie, a couple of years ago, before they’d stopped speaking. The salts were still in their polka-dot wrapping. They’d been deep in the middle of the pile, which had collapsed a little from the extraction. How had Alex even seen them?

Sasha hesitated. She and Coz had talked at length about why she kept the stolen objects separate from the rest of her life: because using them would imply greed or self-interest; because leaving them untouched made it seem as if she might one day give them back; because piling them in a heap kept their power from leaking away.

‘I guess,’ she said. ‘I guess you can.’ She was aware of having made a move in the story she and Coz were writing, taken a symbolic step. But toward the happy ending, or away from it?

She felt Alex’s hand on the back of her head, stroking

her hair. 'You like it hot?' he asked. 'Or medium.'

'Hot,' she said. 'Really, really hot.'

'Me too.' He went back to the tub and fiddled with the knobs and shook in some of the salts, and the room instantly filled with a steamy plantlike odor that was deeply familiar to Sasha: the smell of Lizzie's bathroom, from the days when Sasha used to shower there after she and Lizzie went running together in Central Park.

'Where are your towels?' Alex called.

She kept them folded in a basket in the bathroom. Alex went to get them, then shut the bathroom door. Sasha heard him starting to pee. She knelt on the floor and slipped his wallet from his pants pocket and opened it, her heart firing with a sudden pressure. It was a plain black wallet, worn to gray along the edges. Rapidly she flicked through its contents: a debit card, a work ID, a gym card. In a side pocket, a faded picture of two boys and a girl in braces, squinting on a beach. A sports team in yellow uniforms, heads so small she couldn't tell if one of them belonged to Alex. From among these dog-eared photos, a scrap of binder paper dropped into Sasha's lap. It looked very old, the edges torn, the pale blue lines rubbed almost away. Sasha unfolded it and saw written, in blunt pencil, *I BELIEVE IN YOU*. She froze, staring at the words. They seemed to tunnel toward her from their meager scrap, bringing a flush of embarrassment for Alex, who'd kept this disintegrating tribute in his disintegrating wallet, and then shame at herself for having looked at it. She was faintly aware of the sink taps being turned on, and of the need to move quickly. Hastily, mechanically, she reassembled the wallet, keeping the slip of paper in her hand. I'm just going to hold this, she was aware of telling herself as she tucked the wallet back into Alex's pocket. I'll put it back later; he probably doesn't remember it's in there; I'll actually be doing him a favor by getting it out of the way before someone finds it. I'll

say, *Hey, I noticed this on the rug, is it yours?* And he'll say, *That? I've never seen it before – it must be yours, Sasha.* And maybe that's true. Maybe someone gave it to me years ago, and I forgot.

'And did you? Put it back?' Coz asked.

'I didn't have a chance. He came out of the bathroom.'

'And what about later? After the bath. Or the next time you saw him.'

'After the bath he put on his pants and left. I haven't talked to him since.'

There was a pause, during which Sasha was keenly aware of Coz behind her, waiting. She wanted badly to please him, to say something like *It was a turning point; everything feels different now*, or *I called Lizzie and we made up finally*, or *I've picked up the harp again*, or just *I'm changing I'm changing I'm changing: I've changed!* Redemption, transformation – God how she wanted these things. Every day, every minute. Didn't everyone?

'Please,' she told Coz. 'Don't ask me how I feel.'

'All right,' he said quietly.

They sat in silence, the longest silence that ever had passed between them. Sasha looked at the windowpane, rinsed continually with rain, smearing lights in the falling dark. She lay with her body tensed, claiming the couch, her spot in this room, her view of the window and the walls, the faint hum that was always there when she listened, and these minutes of Coz's time: another, then another, then one more.