
Opening Extract from...

Break in Case of Emergency

Written by Jessica Winter

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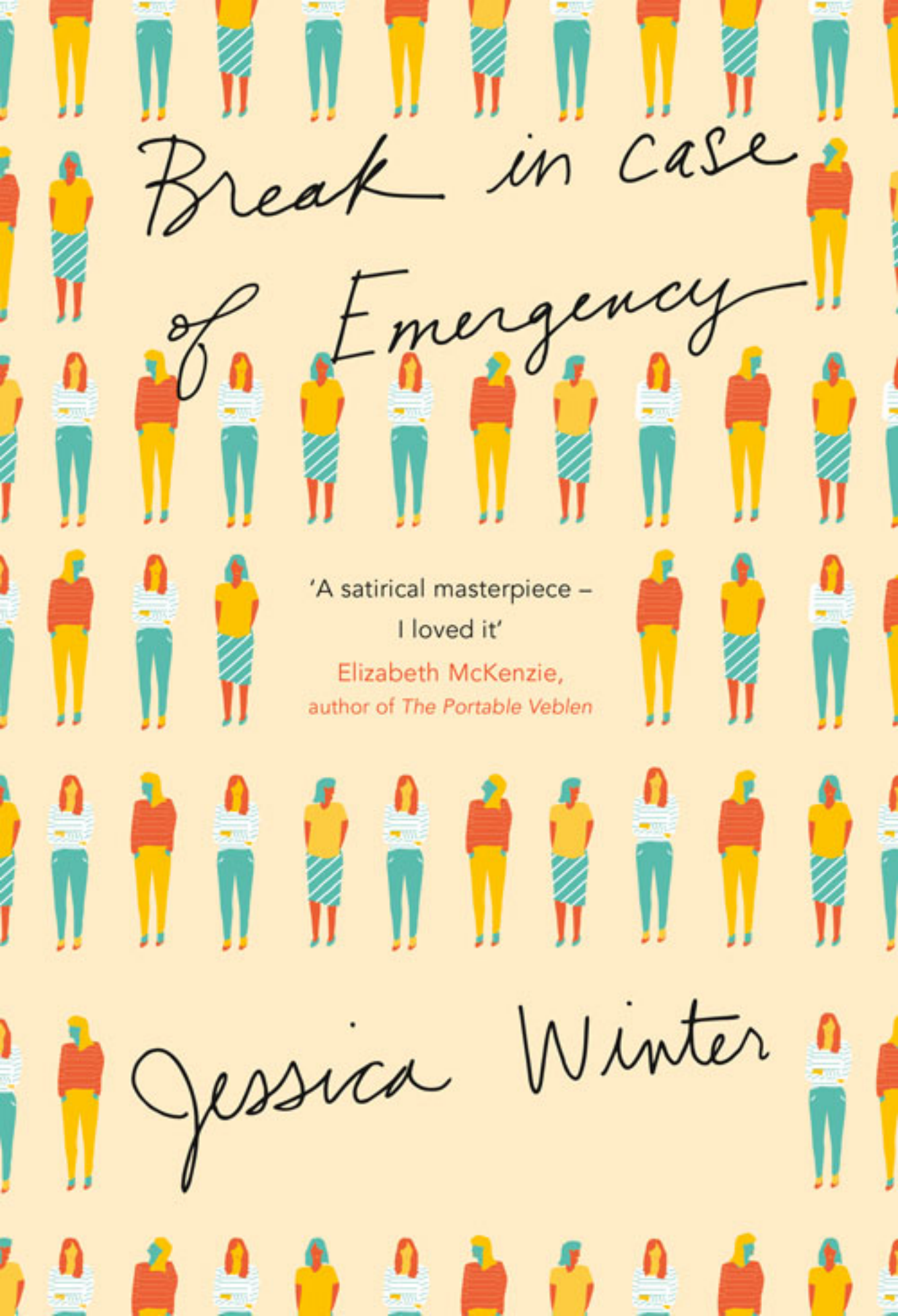
Break in Case of Emergency
'A satirical masterpiece – I loved it'
Elizabeth McKenzie,
author of The Portable Veblen
Jessica Winter

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For Adrian

We flatter ourselves by thinking this compulsion to please others an attractive trait: a gift for imaginative empathy, evidence of our willingness to give.

—Joan Didion, "On Self-Respect"

Everything behind those French doors is full and meaningful. The gestures, the glances, the conversation that can't be heard. How do you get to be so full? And so full of only meaningful things?

—Zadie Smith, *NW*

Spring

Our Focus Is Focus Itself

"It's hard to reproduce those kind of results if—oh, sorry," Jen said, realizing a beat too late that the rest of the room had gone quiet.

Leora Infinitas had already taken her place at the head of the table. For one silent-screaming moment, it looked as if she were attempting to rip her own face off, but in fact she was tugging at her eyelash extensions under the placid gaze of the members of her board, who were seated in a corner conference room at the headquarters of the Leora Infinitas Foundation, also known as LIFt.

Jen scanned the other women around the jade-and-walnut table, festooned with crystal-and-bamboo vases filled with fresh-cut gerbera daisies and flamingo lilies, selected at Leora's request for their air-filtering qualities and replaced every day, even on days when the conference room was not in use, which was most days. The other women sat in tranquil anticipation as Leora yanked with greater urgency at her right eyelid using the pincer of her thumb and forefinger, as if trying to thread a needle with her own flesh. The rain against LIFt's floor-to-ceiling windows chattered like a gathering crowd, even as the white noise that pumped in from every ceiling at LIFt—an undulating *whhooooossshhhhh,* an airless air-conditioning—began to hush.

Jen shivered. Even a month into her tenure at LIFt, her body still misapprehended the *whhooooossshhhhh* as an Arctic blast that required shuddering adjustments to her internal thermostat.

Leora Infinitas's lashes now lay on the tabletop before her, a squashed yet glamorous bug. Without them, Leora looked at once diminished and more beautiful. Flecks of glue balanced on her eyelids. She blinked rapidly and stared into the table, searching the lacquer for the script, the incantation, hidden below its glinting surface.

"I don't like the idea of limiting ourselves," Leora finally said. "I'm a big believer in not settling for twenty-four hours in a day."

Rain shattered against the windows, the applause track of a sitcom. A head nodded; a pair of lips buzzed "Mmm."

A pen tapping on the table stilled itself.

The flowers stood beguiled in their vases.

The electrons in the air murmured to one another in grave consultation, then telepathically cabled the message to the rest of the room that Leora, in twenty-one words, had concluded her opening statements. It would be up to her braintrust to, to borrow Leora's phrasing, "advance the conversation."

Whhooooossshhhhh

"*Whhooo* is to say," intoned Donna, the board chair and one of Leora's closest friends, "that there are not twenty-*five* hours in a day?"

"Ha, right, who decided *that,* anyway?" asked board member Sunny, who was also Leora's personal assistant.

"We always said we'd have a start-up mentality," Leora said. She peered down at the squashed eyelash bug. Soundlessly, Sunny materialized at her side, palmed it into a cupped tissue, and evanesced back into her seat.

"Start-ups never sleep," Leora continued. "Metaphorically speaking."

"Totally," Sunny said, nodding with her entire head and neck, the tissue of squashed eyelash bug clasped in her hand. *Totally* was something Sunny said a lot whenever Leora spoke. Sunny's *totally* was so total that it became two words. *Toe tally.*

"But at the same time, why bother doing everything if you're not doing everything *in. The right. Way,*" Leora asked.

"Mmmmm," Sunny moaned.

Donna squared her shoulders. "I think that, right now, at this moment in the young history of LIFt—and especially at this perilous moment in our global economy—our focus is *focus itself,*" she said. Her voice was deep and stern, the vowels round and sonorous as church bells. Her hands sculpted the air. Multiple bangles on each of her wrists clinked together in a wind chime of assent. "But shining a light

on certain ideas *now* doesn't mean that *other* worthy ideas are left to languish and wilt in the dark forever."

Sunny was slow-motion headbanging.

"We must focus on those projects that feel most immediate to us," Donna continued. "This sensation of the year two thousand and nine leaping bravely into spring after such a bitter winter—what does that *feel* like? Let's capture it; let's hold that moment and transform it. We can return to other, more timeless ideas later—a wellspring of creativity that will nourish us when we feel depleted from giving birth to our first idea-children. And we *cannot* be afraid."

"I love it!" Sunny said, clenching a fist to her sternum. "Donna, you are amazing."

"Karina," Leora said imperiously to LIFt's executive director, seated to her right. "What would you prioritize?"

Karina, who had been raking her fingers through her hair and then twisting the strands, raking and twisting, tossed her hair over her shoulder and widened her eyes, as if absorbing the shock and import of a happy epiphany. "I'm going to second what you're saying, Leora: focus, focus, *focus,*" she said. "The only way we can possibly limit ourselves is by taking on too much at once. We're empowering ourselves by making the choice *to make choices*. The newness of the foundation and the uncertainty of the historical moment—we can see them as *dares*. Dares to be bold, dares to *make* decisions and *own* those decisions."

Jen stifled a smile and looked down at her open notebook, where she'd written BOARD MEETING NOTES with her fountain pen and gradually added serifs and flourishes until the letters became a row of gerbera daisies and flamingo lilies. From the first time they'd met, Jen recognized Karina as a master of the filibuster, but she hadn't yet seen Karina cast the spell on Leora—the gift of shrouding any and every topic in a fluffy word cloud of reiterative agreement until the original query was swallowed up in the woozy vapor of resounding enthusiasm for an unstated but sublime goal.

Karina shook her head wonderingly and peered into a dazzling mid-

dle distance, taking in a new horizon line. "I'm really jazzed about this," she said. "I can't wait."

Forty-five minutes later, as the meeting did not adjourn but rather transitioned into a discussion of Leora's daughter's Bikram instructor's ayahuasca retreats in Oaxaca, Jen's line of gerbera daisies and flamingo lilies had sprouted into a garden of vines and ivy that plumed across both open pages of her notebook, speckled with topiary animals and actual bounding cats. The stippled-sketch form of Jen's toddler goddaughter, Millie, peeked around a flowering espalier with a little fistful of poppies, a wreath of gardenias and eucalyptus atop her black curls.

Jen closed the notebook, rose, and began to leave the room, but hovered at the head of the table beside Leora. She had resolved to hover in awkward mid-stride, resulting in a slight lurching motion that stirred up a gruesomely intact memory of balking on the pitcher's mound in Little League, with the bases loaded, on ball four. Jen had not yet been introduced to Leora, and keenly wanted to introduce herself now, but just as keenly wanted not to disrupt Leora's Oaxaca anecdote, which involved a surreally vivid dream—induced by a midnight snack of *chapulines* and chocolate *mole*—wherein a *mercado* stall reassembled itself as an animatronic giant and began *clank-clank*ing toward Leora, embroidered tunics and colorful straw handbags winging down from its bionic shoulders in a confetti of symbolism.

"You know, *mercado,* machines, merchandise, mechanical reproduction—the moment was just so *rich* in meaning," Leora was saying. "I don't have the *machinery* to deconstruct it."

"Haha *wow,*" Sunny said.

Swaying on her feet, Jen tried to catch Karina's eye to plead mutely for an assist. But in each of the rapt faces around the table, Jen recognized the temporary tunnel vision that she herself had adapted and perfected in high school as an overtaxed waitress at a casual-dining franchise. She arranged a grin on her face that was intended to convey merry diffidence and backed out of the room.

Looking Busy

"Do you want to talk about it?" Daisy asked when Jen returned to her desk.

Jen flopped theatrically into the chair behind her desk. "Wait, I have no idea why I just did that," she said. "I've been sitting for *days*." She stood up, then sat down again, more daintily.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Daisy said. "You only infiltrated a board meeting."

Daisy was flipping through a perfect-bound, magazinelike tome titled *Fur-Lined Teacup: Animals • Fashion • Feminism*. The cover depicted, against a white backdrop, an impassive Russian blue cat in a trilby.

"I infiltrated nothing—they just needed someone to take notes," Jen said. "And it would be my honor to talk about it. Leora broke her toe paragliding in Turks and Caicos, which her guru told her was a metaphor for a fundamental incompatibility between her *jingmai* and her *luomai*, so when the nail falls off her toe she has to wear it in a titanium locket around her neck until Mercury enters Virgo. Karina was at a party with the Russian billionaire who is building the cyborg clone of himself, and he asked her what she was going to bequeath to her brain in her will and she said 'fish oil,' and then he asked her out on a date. Donna bought a tapestry in Siem Reap and had it made into a pantsuit. Sunny has a new pizza stone."

Daisy tore out a page from *Fur-Lined Teacup* and handed it to Jen. It depicted a llama lounging in a square gazebo, reading a book.

"Is that llama wearing bifocals?" Jen asked, rubbing her fingers along the creamy, textured paper stock.

"Are they all still talking about the financial apocalypse?" Daisy asked.

"Of course," Jen said, handing the page back to Daisy. "All anyone ever does is talk about the financial apocalypse. Sunny is putting some

money into gold. Leora said she's still considering letting a couple of her house staff go because of the financial apocalypse."

"Do you think she'll let us go because of the financial apocalypse?" Daisy asked, picking up a pair of scissors.

"Not if we keep looking busy," Jen said, watching as Daisy cut a careful silhouette around the bookish llama's ears.

Real Jobs and Other Jobs

Before LIFt, Jen had worked as a communications officer at the revered Federloss Family Foundation, which focused on women's reproductive health initiatives in developing countries. When the foundation was blindsided by the compound effects of the economic crisis and significant investments impaled on Bernard Madoff's Ponzi schemes, Jen couldn't help but admire the balletic elegance of its subsequent budgetary adjustments, which absorbed the trauma by eliminating only positions, not the future budgets of pending initiatives. Midwife training schemes and prenatal-care pilot programs would go forward untouched. Jen's dental coverage and pretax deferred savings program would not.

"I always thought that if I ever got laid off I would at least enjoy a degree of purgative moral outrage," Jen said to her husband, Jim, on the day in January she was let go. She was calling him from the street just outside the foundation's dowdy offices in the East Thirties, one unmittened hand clasping her woolen coat to her unscarfed throat, the other clasping her phone to her unhatted ear. "I always thought there would be tears and recriminations. Rending of garments. But these layoffs are judicious and correct. I would have absolutely laid me off."

"It kind of takes all the fun out of it," Jim said.

Jen turned her face into the wind and squinted at the street, naked trees standing mournful watch over blackened geodes of day-old slush and stalled, sagging cars. "There's no one anywhere," she said. "Everyone's gone home. Does anyone live here anymore?"

Despite her statements to the contrary, Jen would have absolutely not laid herself off, because her salary was a rounding error, an irrelevant scrawl of marginalia in any organization's bookkeeping. Just the rent on Jen and Jim's two-bedroom apartment in Flatbush, the Brooklyn neighborhood where Jim taught fifth grade at a local public school, was equivalent to well over half of her monthly take-home pay. The apartment had been advertised as being located within the historic boundaries of Ditmas Park, home to a smorgasbord of Victorian and Queen Anne and neo-Tudor and Colonial Revival detached houses in various states of grandeur and disrepair, but you could not have found a single Spanish tile roof or Ionic column or stone lion guardsman on Jen and Jim's block, not a balustrade nor a gabled dormer nor a single oriel window, just a hulking quadrant of hundred-unit brick boxes whose signature architectural flourishes were the air-conditioning units—replete with company logo—installed beneath each window, which gave the reiterative impression that these buildings were not family residences at all but instead warehouses-cum-marketing experiments in service of FEDDERS AIR CONDITIONING.

Not Ditmas Park, as Jim took to calling their immediate area, was home to a Ditmas Avenue but not to a park or parklike domain, a source of perverse delight to Jim.

"The name itself is a broken promise," Jim had said, "and thus it's an honest and forthright guarantee of all the broken promises that Not Ditmas Park can offer its citizens in terms of amenities, community spirit, and educational opportunity. The name tells a meta-lie in service of a greater truth."

"It's smart to get in on the ground floor of an emerging district," the real estate agent had said. "Or, in this case, the *fourth* floor. You guys are ahead of the curve!"

"We don't really need the second bedroom," Jen had told the real estate agent. "But, you know, we're married now, and—"

"And *aspirations,*" said the real estate agent with a wink. "You're young!"

"We're not that young," Jen said.

Their closest subway station stood atop a perpetually dripping overground train line, where the fronts included a dollar store, a liquor store, and a "development corporation"; the indignities of time, weather, and pigeon droppings had chiseled the development corporation's fabric awning into a trompe l'oeil of corrugated tin. What Jen and Jim guessed to be an exposed sewer pipe snaked past one end of the hoarding fence around the train tracks. Behind the plaza sat a mysterious brick-and-concrete hut that evoked an armored-car repair depot near Checkpoint Charlie. The annihilating climate of Eastern Bloc filthy-slipshod brutalism was encapsulated in their nearest post office, which looked and smelled like it had been excavated from the rubble of a gas main explosion, replete with broken metal locks hanging from its doors and service windows, as if smashed in haste to rescue trapped survivors.

Jen and Jim lived within cardboard-thin walls and floors and ceilings unencumbered by insulation, all echoing beams and sound-conducting metal. If you pushed back a chair or Franny the cat batted your keys off the coffee table, the downstairs neighbors heard it. If you coughed or flushed a toilet, your upstairs neighbors heard it. To play recorded music with a bass line was a premeditated act of revenge. Residents who rarely met one another's eyes in the elevator or vestibule would register displeasure with their neighbors' squeaky hinges and furniture-rattling footfalls by leaving cans of WD-40 and fuzzy bedroom slippers on one another's welcome mats, offerings shot through with the sinister supplication of a cat dropping a headless field mouse on the back porch. Jen and Jim gingerly maneuvered around on their toes at all times to avert the wrath of their downstairs neighbor, a replica in pallid flesh-folds of an Easter Island statue perched in a motorized wheelchair who had spent much of Jen and Jim's

move-in weekend pounding her own ceiling with a broom handle in protest.

The building's architectural quirks struck Jen as most problematic on late Saturday evenings, when the upstairs neighbors' ungulate children repaired to their grandparents' house and their parents would celebrate their reprieve with a thumping multiroom sexual odyssey—what Jim called their "weekly all-hands meeting"—often scored to *Buena Vista Social Club* or, on at least one harrowing occasion, Raffi's *Singable Songs for the Very Young,* whose material provided a ready template for marching band–style refrains that the neighbors synced with recognizably percussive motions.

FIVE! LITTLE! SPECKLED! FROGS!
SAT! ON A! SPECKLED! LOG!
EATING! THE MOST! DELICIOUS! BUGS!

Then, occasionally, what sounded like a lamp would *chank* to the floor or a bedside table would *whomp* over on its side, followed by the scrabbling of either a small dog's or a large cat's paws as it fled for safety to another room.

"Should we tell them?" Jen asked Jim late one night as they lay in bed, eyes wide in the dark, as the woman upstairs improvised a bellowing descant to her husband's rapid Raffian melody. "It's like they're invading their own privacy."

ONE! JUMPED! INTO! THE POOL!
WHERE! IT! WAS NICE! AND COOL!
THEN! THEREWEREFOURGREENSPECKLEDFROGS

"I'm just glad they're happy," Jim said. Their downstairs neighbor broomed her ceiling, just once, as if in warning.

After the end of her Federloss job, Jen might have assumed that she and Jim would be giving their neighbors more opportunities to invade their privacy now that she was unencumbered by the everyday stresses

and timesucks of gainful employment. But Jen and Jim convened fewer all-hands meetings during her enforced sabbatical, for no reason that either could have pinpointed, save perhaps for a sheepishness that floated around the post-layoff Jen like a twilight cloud of gnats. She began too many emails—even to Meg, even to Pam—with "I know you must be totally busy, but I just wondered . . ." She thanked friends too profusely—even Meg, even Pam—when they met for coffee or a drink, and Jen always insisted on paying. She avoided parties, because she'd "have nothing to say."

"I just find it hard to do small talk if I can't account for my time," Jen said to Meg on the phone.

"Right," Meg replied, "because there's always a velvet rope and a horde of squealing fans around the guy at the party who wants to talk about *his job*."

Jen kept an Excel spreadsheet on her elderly laptop titled REAL JOBS AND OTHER JOBS. At first, tapping through fingerless gloves at a kitchen table made dizzy on its oak-finish-and-particleboard haunches by the humidity swings of too many New York City summers, Jen applied for only REAL JOBS: grantwriting, speechwriting, communications work for any worthy cause she could find. But as the winter grew colder and bleaker, she put in for more and more OTHER JOBS. She applied to write copy for the Feminist Porn Collective, but belatedly discovered that she would be paid mainly in feminist porn. She landed an interview to be the research assistant to an elderly romance novelist and semireclusive candle-wax heiress, only to find out ex post facto that the novelist had employed a total of six research assistants over forty years, and each was a white male with a poetry MFA and/or a direct or family connection to Phillips Exeter Academy. She drafted a few speeches for a third-party mayoral candidate whose campaign platform included the abolishment of both private schools and gender designations on government forms. She acted as writing tutor to the sixteen-year-old son of a well-known entertainment lawyer, until she refused to help him forge a Vyvanse prescription, whereupon the teen told his mother (untruthfully) that Jen had absconded with his Modafinil prescription.

Jen did not disclose to her charge that she herself had a prescription for a similar cognitive enhancer, Animexa, which she renewed at increasingly irregular intervals following the loss of her blue-chip Federloss Foundation health insurance.

"You live in a fake neighborhood," the sixteen-year-old had informed Jen one day.

"Ditmas Park?" Jen replied. "It's real. I've been there."

"You live," the sixteen-year-old said, "in a real estate agent's neologism."

This bothered Jen, mostly because the decision to live in a real estate agent's neologism had originally been a marker of grown-up prudence and long-term thinking: The mindful marrieds enter their thirties, conserve their resources, steadily pay down their student loans, live well within their means, reserve space for a hypothetical tiny future boarder.

"Feather your nest," the real estate agent had said.

Now, even living in a real estate agent's neologism seemed like a grim necessity bordering on presumptuous overreach, regardless of the scuffed thirdhand furniture, the chewed gum–like residue constantly and mysteriously accumulating between the kitchen tiles, the canoe-sized kitchen separated by a cheap flapping strip of countertop from the deluxe canoe–sized living room, the dry rot in the windowsills, the closet doors eight inches too narrow for their frames. Even Franny the cat seemed like a luxury, all those unmonetized hours logged napping and grooming.

Jen began writing down every single purchase she made in her notebook. With the same fountain pen, she also drew a picture of each item. Her student loan debit was represented one month by a graduation cap, another month by the hand-forged wrought-iron gate her college class had walked through on commencement day. Cat-food purchases were represented by drawings of Franny in various states of odalisque repose. Jen made stippled pencil drawings of toothpaste tubes and physics-defying stacks of little tissue packets from the pharmacy and curlicuing cornucopias from modest grocery runs.

The first entry in Jen's notebook was the price of the notebook.

Inside the open notebook, Jen drew a picture of the open notebook, then another inside that one and another, collapsing infinitely into the center.

That

"So, any news?" Jen's mom asked.

Jen's mom never telephoned her, but if Jen did not call at regular intervals, Jen's mom would complain to Jen's dad, who would then send an email to Jen asking why she was ignoring her mother. The subject heading of these emails was "Your Mother."

(Jen's mom became agitated, however, if Jen telephoned her too frequently. "Enough! I'm *fine,*" she'd say in lieu of greeting if one of Jen's calls followed another too closely. The acceptable interval between calls widened and narrowed at will.)

"Any news on work, you mean?" Jen asked. "Not just yet."

"Could that Meg find you a job?"

Meg was a program director at the Bluff Foundation for Justice and Human Rights, a private behemoth so agelessly fortified by old money that its temporary hiring freeze was itself a metric of dire economic crisis.

"Meg has been really helpful," Jen said. "But obviously I don't want to put it all on her to find me a job—"

"Fine, fine," Jen's mom broke in. "Anyway."

Jen never knew if her mother's conversational style was symptomatic of mere incuriosity or rather of an extreme wariness of any social transaction remotely resembling confrontation, which presumably included most exchanges of words. At cousins' weddings and sisters-in-law's

baby showers, Jen watched with dismay as her mother attempted to mingle with people she'd known all their lives: arms folded in front of her as a shield, chin pulled defensively to her neck, poorly conditioned limbic system misinterpreting a niece's attempts to inquire about her protracted kitchen renovation for a passive-aggressive face-off between two opposing parties.

"Could that Pam help you?" Jen's mom asked.

Jen had been dating Jim for nearly two years before he ceased being *that Jim*.

"That Pam always helps me, in her way," Jen replied.

Pam

A few weeks into her post-Federloss unemployment, Jen had started spending several afternoons a week at Pam's place. This pleased Jim, because Pam and her boyfriend, Paulo, were artists, and Jim thought of Jen as an artist, too.

"I was never *an artist,*" Jen would say. "I never *made art*. I drew things. I painted things. People."

Pam and Paulo rented a cheap cavernous space in Greenpoint close to Newtown Creek, the site of one of the largest underground oil-and-chemical spills in history. On the walk from the G train stop to Pam's, Jen could never discount the possibility that her air sacs were swelling with some kind of fine fecal mist of gamma rays and chlorinated benzene byproducts, a carcinogenic ambience that Pam enthusiastically leveraged in last-minute rental negotiations with their absentee landlord. The front half of Pam and Paulo's space, which was about the size of Jen and Jim's entire apartment and shared a wall with a

tavern, served as a studio by day and a gallery by night. Paulo had divided the back half into four narrow, windowless "rooms" created by particleboard partitions that stopped two feet short of the ceilings. Pam and Paulo slept in the largest partition, while a transient cast of roommates—tourists and students and the hollow-eyed recent survivors of imploded live-in relationships—took up monthly or quarterly residence in the other three spaces.

In the front studio, the drafting table, the kitchen table, and a futon relocated from the master bedroom were currently paired with miniature towers made of stools, pillows, and stacks of oversized books. Each stack was jerry-rigged to support Pam's leg, which had been crushed in a hit-and-run the previous year when a delivery van made a squealing right turn and threw her from her bicycle. Three operations and hundreds of hours of physical therapy later, the leg—which looked perfectly normal at first glance, and both shiny-swollen and shrunken at second glance—was still grinding and wheezing in its sockets. Jen imagined that Pam's powers of concentration were such that she'd occasionally see a drop of perspiration splat onto her laptop, and finally notice that the usual dull ache in her leg had escalated into jangling agony, thudding away at the double-glazed windows of Pam's flow state as her conscious mind deliquesced into oneness with Final Cut Pro or the Artnet biography of Sigmar Polke.

Jen and Pam had met their freshman year of college in a drawing class, where Pam had been impressed by Jen's hyperrealistic technical abilities and Jen had been enchanted by Pam's impassive terribleness—her wobbly, allegedly one-point-perspective *Still Life with Cranberry Vodka and Froot Loops* had so appalled their drawing teacher that he accused Pam of exploiting his class for another taught by his ex-girlfriend, "Kitsch-Kraft and Outsider Art: Toward a Deliberately Bad Avant-Garde."

Later, though, Jen experienced the growing recognition that Pam was "a real artist."

"You're like a *real artist,*" Jen blurted out drunkenly to Pam the first time they went to a party together.

Jen's talent-spotting acumen was confirmed their junior year, when Pam started convincing people to allow her to take their picture first thing in the morning, before they got out of bed, before they even fully awakened. Pam would then mock up the unairbrushed, usually unflattering photograph as a faux magazine cover, billboard, or author's jacket photo. The photos, taken in weak dawn light, were dusky, pearly, sometimes slightly out of focus; the best ones looked like secrets or accidents, or secret accidents. Pam called the pictures Wakes.

She started with the people who spent the most time under the roof of the drafty, creaking, badly wired hundred-year-old Colonial house that Meg, Pam, and Jen rented four blocks from campus. The first Wake, of Pam's then-boyfriend, looked like a seventies rock star's mug shot: alarmed and defiant, dazed and hairy. In the second Wake, a puffy-faced Jen ducks bashfully away from the camera; her face is captured in three-quarter profile, her hand blurring upward to check for traces of dried sleep.

The third Wake, of Meg—who was Jen's friend first, whom Jen had introduced to Pam at the "You're a real artist" party, which it often occurred to Jen to point out, though she never did—was the revelation. A double gash of mattress marks swooped across Meg's right cheekbone like a panther's caress. Her hair, which usually fell in computer-generated gentle waves, swirled and crashed around her heart-shaped face. Meg's lips fell slightly open; the strap of her tank top wiped sideward, tracing the curve of her shoulder. Instead of ducking away from Pam's camera, the half-asleep Meg leaned into it sensuously, chin forward, eyes heavy and intrigued.

Pam knew what she had. She blew up the picture big enough to swallow an entire gallery wall at her end-of-semester show. It was a stunning photograph, raw and gorgeous and discomfiting in its intimacy. That it was a stunning photograph of *Meg*—old-money Meg, moderately-famous-last-name-demi-campus-celebrity Meg, Phi Beta Kappa–as-a-first-semester-junior Meg, paragon-of-the-public-service-community Meg—made the photograph an event.

Now everyone wanted a Wake. The campus weekly kept an issue-

to-issue tally of everyone who had a Wake and should have a Wake and desperately wanted a Wake, and also a regularly updated online ranking of existing Wakes, with Meg permanently and ceremoniously lodged at No. 1. Pam won a grant to create a single-edition magazine composed of nothing but Wakes. Clem Bernadine, editor of the campus humor magazine, submitted his shirtless and chaotic Wake as his yearbook picture. Joseph Potter, a beloved tenured professor of theater studies, used his one-eye-closed Wake as the jacket photo to his book *Dre Gardens: Hip-Hop, New Money, and the Performance of the Self*.

Pam was now intuitively aware of her genius for talking people into doing things that were not ostensibly in their interest. For her senior thesis project, she convinced the university to allow her to change the signage on several sites around campus to verbatim transcriptions of graffiti from the men's bathrooms at the art school. Instead of directions to the buttery or the law library or the Women's Center, visitors during Parents' Weekend puzzled over commands and epigraphs such as STOP DRAWING D'S AND DRAW BIG TITTIES INSTEAD and SILENCE IS GOLDEN BUT DUCT TAPE IS SILVER and SINCE WRITING ON TOILET WALLS IS DONE NEITHER FOR CRITICAL ACCLAIM NOR FINANCIAL SUCCESS, IT IS THE PUREST FORM OF ART—DISCUSS, all presented in the university's elegant house typography, Demimonde Condensed Blackletter. (The sign outside the university art gallery's parking lot, which temporarily read FIRST-YEAR BOYS ARE TOY BOYS, may have caused the most consternation.) Pam also kitted out a trailer outside the art school as a fake "visitor's center" and filled it with mock posters and brochures advertising the art school. The promotional materials glowed with wholesome and bright-eyed ambassadors of the future of contemporary art, lounging on the campus green or peering rapturously at the art gallery's resident Pollock, their thoughts and hopes amplified in Demimonde Condensed Blackletter captions along the lines of DON'T JUDGE ME I ONLY NEEDED MONEY FOR COLLEGE or I HAD SEX WITH YR TRASH CAN IT WAS OKAY.

"I heard some guy call it 'interventionist art,' but that made you sound like a substance-abuse counselor," Meg said to Pam at her senior

thesis show. Meg was looking over Jen's shoulder at a thick, glossy "informational packet" that Jen held in her hands, titled STOP WRITING YOUR NAMES HERE HALF THESE PEOPLE ARE BROKEN UP ALREADY.

"Arbitration," Pam said. "If anyone asks, say this is arbitration."

Pam had continued in this arbitrative vein for the entirety of her postcollegiate art career, year after year producing little that was sellable and less that was sold, and occasionally running into a spot of potentially career-enhancing trouble, as when she used grant money to purchase a month's lease on a storefront next to a real estate agent's office, painted the storefront to appear indistinguishable from the real estate agent's, and posted property advertisements in the window that looked identical to the real estate agent's—that is, until you looked closer at the descriptions, which were written in Pam's recognizably run-on polemical style:

Panache! This dazzling new build destroyed three neoclassical buildings and a park and a dog run Now it's a fifteen-story tower block Steps from Boutiques Bathed in Light No one making less than 500% of the median local income can afford a studio here Turnkey terrific!!!

"It's a commentary on gentrification," Pam explained to Meg, whom Pam called for legal advice after receiving a cease-and-desist letter from the adjoining real estate agent.

To support herself, Pam presumably chugged along on enough one-off adjunct teaching jobs, freelance writing assignments, guest-curator gigs, and other odds and ends to get by. Pam and Jen never spoke of money, and to judge by the frigid winter temperatures in Pam's quasi-legal abode, the smelly-damp bathroom she shared with a revolving door of lost-seeming strangers, and her static college-era wardrobe of holey leggings and faded Champion sweatshirts, Pam didn't have any.

"Do you want to know how I know I'm not an artist?" Jen asked Jim one night, after coming home from one of her unemployed afternoons at Pam's. "Because I couldn't live like Pam lives."

"I doubt Pam needs you feeling sorry for her," Jim said.

"I don't feel sorry for her!" Jen said. "I feel sorry for me!"

"Pam and Paulo are doing fine," Jim said. "I liked that show they did about gentrification."

"That was Pam's show," Jen said. Paulo made large, gooey clumps of things that gelatinized in her memory. He'd tie together dolls, tree branches, and tire irons into a stakelike arrangement and then pour gallons of red paint over it, or lace stacks of 1980s-era issues of *The Economist* with strings of Christmas lights that were also looped around the necks of vintage lawn jockeys sourced on eBay, and then pour gallons of resin over it.

"And I know Pam and Paulo are doing fine!" Jen continued. "That's my whole point! I would *not* be fine, if I were them. But they are fine. More than fine."

Pam had enlisted Jen's collaboration on her current work-in-progress, although Pam was reticent about its exact nature. All Jen could glean about the project was her own role in it: to paint a series of five-by-four-foot portraits based on the grinning, healthy specimens in the promotional materials for WellnessSolutions, a health insurance company.

"So you just have to make sure you have a senior citizen, a new mom, and an apple-cheeked teen," Pam told Jen, handing over the Wellness-Solutions brochures, "and they should look *maniacally happy*."

In college, Jen painted larger-than-life photorealistic portraits of classmates, teachers, and celebrities: She projected a photograph onto a canvas, traced the main features in pencil, then painted in oil over the tracings. The aspirations toward extreme verisimilitude owed largely to an indelible nightmare Jen had as a freshman in which her first-year painting class was violently purged and repopulated by the blurry wraiths of Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof series. Though she would have admitted this to no one, Jen suspected that she had allowed her portraits to become so big because the ideas they contained were so small. Perhaps they didn't even contain ideas so much as self-projections, as wobbly and coarse-grained as the mechanical projections that propped up her technique. There was an element of self-portraiture in the grinning nervousness, the anxiety of obedience,

that could start creeping around her subjects' mouths in the transition from photograph to canvas, in the obsequious gleam of the eye that might twinkle in the canvas but not in the photograph.

In Jen's mind, she appropriated the outside of her work from photographs and the inside of her work from herself, and others mistook this for creativity.

"You are a fabulous copyist, Jen," said one of her professors. For that class, Jen had painted identical twins in the Diane Arbus mode, and titled the work *Biological Inheritance*.

"You are an *astonishing* technician," said another of her professors. "But what else are you?"

"I reproduce things," Jen would say. "Things that already exist. I don't even reproduce things—I reproduce reproductions of things."

"Jen saying her art is not art is the most Jen thing that ever happened," Meg would say.

"Jen, why do you make art if it's not art?" Pam asked.

"Pam just made you into a koan, Jen," Meg said.

"Why is your whole life a lie, Jen?" Pam asked.

"Hey, Pam," Meg said, "do you think we could get Jen to put herself down about how much she puts herself down?"

"Hey, Meg," Pam said, "if a snake ate its own tail, do you think Jen would apologize to the snake?"

Avoidance

Jen couldn't go to Pam's every day just because she was unemployed; or she probably could have, but she didn't want Pam to feel responsible for finding ways to occupy her time. She needed to construct another

rudder for her amorphous days, in which anxiety and sloth wrestled with each other only to reach a shaky alliance, usually culminating in a despondent, thrashing nap. Anxiety and sloth made a formidable team of antagonists because their shared goal was avoidance: avoidance of the gaping maw of job-posting sites; avoidance of other people with their helpful advice and compliments and solidarity, all of which Jen's brain translated into prayers for the dying; avoidance of the immediate outdoor environment, which was bitterly cold and covered in the scattering stacks of uncollected trash and unidentified melting black shit that signified the liminal space between winter and spring in Not Ditmas Park.

Jen decided that the rudder would be a daily deadline: By the time Jim returned home from school, at around five p.m., Jen would have X number of cover letters written, Y job-research tasks fulfilled, Z closets or drawers cleaned out. And she would have drawings to show to Jim, and maybe even paintings.

Jim's support of Jen's dormant art career was as unconditional as it was uncorroborated, and it had maintained that sincerity ever since they'd first met, a year after college, when they both taught at the same summer enrichment program for children of low-income families in southeast Brooklyn. In the final blasting-oven days of August, Jen had presented each of their kids with a crayon-on-construction-paper portrait of him- or herself, carefully rolled into a scroll and tied with a blue silk ribbon like a diploma.

"Maybe that was presumptuous of me," Jen had said to Jim as they watched their students ripple and zigzag out the classroom door one last time, a few of the portraits strewn on the cracked linoleum behind them, others rolled inside clementine-sized fists and *thwack*ing proximate shoulders. "It's not like any of our kids were asking for the priceless gift of my artistic expression, like it's some kind of reward. And drawing someone's face is such an intimate act. Literally holding up a mirror to someone takes a lot of mutual trust. It's a kind of disclosure. I mean, who am I to tell them what they look like?"

"Do you want to go on a date with me?" Jim replied.

His faith-based position on Jen's real artistic calling extended itself even to casual introductions at parties: "Please meet my wife, Jen; she's an artist!" His stance wholly lacked in passive-aggression or latent accusation. To him it was simply a statement of fact, and the factual basis of the statement had no statute of limitations.

"You should use your free time to paint," Jim would say during Jen's unemployment. "Or at least do some drawing."

"I should," Jen would say.

"Just don't *make any art,*" Jim would say.

Sometimes Jim would come home to a new end table constructed out of stray dowels and disused neckties, two rhubarb pies cooling on the kitchen counter (one crust made with shortening, one not), and a calligraphic note—each letter written in alternating shades of glitter pen—informing him that Jen had volunteered to take the Aggression-Challenged Mixed Breeds at their local animal shelter for a walk. Upon her return, Jen would have much to download on a really interesting *Guardian* piece she'd read on the new patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church and his stance on female clerics, and another really interesting *Guardian* piece she'd read on the civil conflict in Puthukkudiyiruppu, Sri Lanka.

Sometimes Jim would come home to the entire contents of their bookcase redistributed across the floor of the front room in short stacks, as if an inept soldier had begun fortifying his trench too late before the shelling started, and down the hall, his wife asleep on their bed—the bed itself sandbagged by half the contents of their closet—in gym socks and her bridesmaid's dress from a cousin's wedding.

"Are you home?" she asked, stirring from her nap in a flutter of tulle as Jim sat down gently on the edge of the bed. "Are you sick? Is it dark?"