

MELVIN, LILLY, RASPBERRY WHISKEY

1) Mel is 21 and on winter break from college

Last night I discovered that when I get severely drunk, I do not keep secrets. Previously this had never been a matter of consequence, as I had only ever been severely drunk alone.

Around noon yesterday, after a terrifyingly blizzardy two hour drive from Meriville to New Denton, I arrive at Ben's house with a backpack in one freezing hand and a 24 pack of tall cans in the other freezing hand, and I am literally shivering from just the walk from the car to Ben's front door. I am invited in by Ben and his Saint Bernard Toros, and after dropping everything to kneel down and rub Toros and absorb his warmth as he leans into me and wags, Ben and I head to the fridge to unpack the cans, finding space in the fridge among the deli meats and cheeses and condiments—my friend Ben is assertively not vegan. I am vegan, but I don't say a word about it to him. At this point in my life no world events have radicalized me enough to realize that immoral behaviors, even the most normalized ones, by definition, are more than personal choices. That doe eyed innocence won't last forever in me. Watch this space, I guess. But, in the meantime, back to pretending that I don't know what happens at the end, and that I am still writing as a linguistics undergrad—we overanalyze our own speech and talk unlike any native speaker, it's not charming, but it was realistically how I talked for a few years.

As Ben and I find space for the tall cans, he asks me a few questions about college life. “Learning much about languages? How many languages do you speak now? Lots of parties?” Yes, three fluently, no not really. By the time we’re done, half of the cans have fit into the fridge, and the other half are left to wait their turn in their box that is left on the kitchen counter.

“Still see many people from high school?” I ask Ben.

He shrugs. “I see them around, but I only really talk to the people at work.”

“Jason, Millie, Kylie?”

“Kylie moved away like a year back. But yeah, Jason and Millie.”

“Ah.”

“You still talk to anyone from around here?” Ben asks me.

I shake my head. As we’re standing there in the kitchen and I’m trying to think of how to explain how I’m bad at keeping in touch—as though Ben would be unaware—the power goes out. It’s oddly startling, every light going out at once. We stand around for a few seconds, wondering if it will just come back on.

After a bit, Ben takes out his phone and turns on the flashlight. He mutters something to the effect of, “Check out the breaker I guess.”

I come with him, and stand and watch as he flips some of the breaker switches back and forth to no effect. We step outside, and it appears that power is out for the entire neighborhood. No other lights on on the entire street.

In case of the event that the power will be out for a long time, Ben gets out a couple of coolers, and we bring them outside and pack icy snow into them. We bring them into the kitchen and put the remaining cans of beer into them, as well as some of the items from Ben’s fridge that he most wants to avoid going bad—those being the deli meats and cheeses and condiments, so, more or less every item that had been in the fridge, to the best of our cooler packing ability. Ben has also brought out an electric lantern, which sits on the kitchen counter, providing surprisingly good lighting to the entire kitchen, with dim light into the living room.

As Ben is assessing what he wants to do about the frozen meats in the freezer that he’s just remembered, the front door

flies open. Although he is a blur who never stops to say hello, I immediately recognize my best friend from growing up who I haven't seen in person since I was fourteen: Harry. Toros does not recognize him, and begins barking at this intruder into his house. Harry drops some paper grocery bags by the door—literally drops them—and flies to the kitchen sink and turns it on, and only when he stops there do I notice all the blood on him.

“Mel!” Harry yells, turning to me with a big smile on his face. It looks eerie, his smile lit only from the side by the light of the lantern, much of his face left in shadows. He winces as he puts his hand under the stream of water.

I take a second to kneel down by Toros, who is at Harry's leg, barking viciously. I tell the big hound that it's okay, and although he doesn't believe me right away, he eventually stops barking and walks off, keeping an eye on Harry from afar, beside Ben who is dumbfounded.

I stand up and look at Harry. He's wearing a black and grey long-sleeve shirt. The left sleeve has a line of blood all the way up to the shoulder, and the front of the shirt and his frayed jeans are wet with blood too. His left hand, which he is washing, has cuts on it. One cut goes across the side of his thumb, the back of his pointer finger, and the back of his index finger. The other cut goes across the back of his wrist.

“You need stitches,” I tell him.

Harry cranes his neck to look over me at Ben. “First aid kit?”

Ben stutters the beginning of a response, and then gives up on it and gets on his hands and knees between us, reaching around in the cupboard under the sink. He comes up with a dusty tin box, with a white circle and a red plus sign on the face.

Harry applies an ointment to his cuts and wraps a bandage around his injured hand, only allowing us to help by holding things for him.

As Harry is finishing up the bandage, Ben asks what happened.

“Slipped on some ice, somehow caught the edge of a fucking storm drain on the curb.”

Ben winces, believing Harry.

Harry goes to his grocery bags that he dropped by the door, and out of one of them, he pulls out a flask-shaped bottle of liquor. He yanks off the stopper which comes out with a *pop!*, holds the bottle up to us in a salute, and downs several gulps. When he's done, he smiles at me. "How have *you* been?"

After I ask again if he wants to go to the hospital and he insists that he does not, I tell him that I've been good, which is a lie and not a lie. In truth, I enjoy my studies, but I don't have any friends in Meriville who I see outside of class. I enjoy going on long walks through Meriville. I enjoy swimming in the lake near campus. I enjoy reading in the campus library and in the city library. I have not dated anyone in my three years there and I hate my nights and weekends job as a dish washer. My life is fine. I am depressed and think of suicide every day. Nothing is physically wrong with me and there is no threat to my safety. There is a hole in my life that was ripped out when I was seventeen and I have never been able to talk about it with anyone and the emptiness is killing me. I want nothing more in life than a dog but I'm too busy. I want nothing more in life than to drop out and live far away from everything but if I do I am a failure who does not deserve nice things.

I ask Harry what he's drinking.

Harry shows me the flask-shaped bottle. "Raspberry whiskey." On the label is a painted scene of a dog—a Jack Russell but mixed with a taller breed—standing in a raspberry patch, facing the left side of the label and pointing to something unseen.

I go to the coolers and get beers for myself and Ben. Ben goes with Harry to find him a change of clothes and show him to the shower. When they return, Ben grabs the lantern and brings it to the living room, and the three of us sit down to play cards. The night goes on. We talk about movies, mostly. Ben yawns about a hundred times before eventually deciding he will go to bed. Before he does, he shows Harry and I his brothers' bedrooms—his brothers are out of town visiting their parents' house downstate, and Harry and I are bumming the rooms for as long as we're staying here. After showing us the rooms Ben goes downstairs to his own bedroom, and Harry and I find ourselves standing out on the porch that leads out from one of

the second floor bedrooms, in spite of the horrific stinging cold that has me shivering immediately and wondering how Harry seems literally unphased by it. Harry lights up a cigarette. He can still hold it with his bandaged hand. I sip on my I-don't-knowth beer, and discover it is empty. I toss it back at the porch floor behind us, where it lands on a snow drift with the tiniest empty clang.

"Want a sip?" Harry offers, and shows me the raspberry whiskey.

I take the bottle, have a sip, and feel a warmth in my chest that explains much. I take another, bigger drink, and although I'm sure the world is still icy and terrible, I feel immune and it is wonderful. My shivering stops as I lean forward against the railing, holding the raspberry whiskey bottle for a while. I find myself looking down at the label with the Jack Russell mix.

"The dog on that label is hot," I tell Harry, revealing apropos of nothing my biggest secret in life that I thought I would take to the grave.

Harry is quiet. I realize I've said a thing that I wish I hadn't said. Ice creeps back through my chest, and my hands begin to shake, but it is not cold, I still feel warm physically. It's one hundred percent nerves.

Harry eventually asks, in a tone of his that I know is cautious: "You into that? Bestiality?"

I've made a mistake. I want to lie to him and back out of this but I don't. "Me and Chester were soulmates and I've never gotten over him," is what I begin to say, but I don't make it through the end before my face is a mess of tears and snot and I can't take a breath without shaking. A wave of drunkenness pulses over me and I feel off balance, and I lean heavily on the railing as I cry, wishing I was a lot, lot more together than I am.

Harry takes the bottle of raspberry whiskey from me, drops his cigarette onto the snow and stomps it out. He wraps an arm around my shoulders and leans onto me. He rubs my bicep through my sweatshirt. I don't know if I want this—being this close with someone—but I know that I'm glad Harry hasn't called me a rapist and left to call the police to have me arrested.

"I didn't know," he tells me. "Sorry if I ever... I don't know, said anything wrong."

I shake my head.

He squeezes me with the arm he already has around me.

I compose myself a bit, and snort in the snot that's coming out of my nose.

"Let's go in," Harry suggests, and I follow him inside. We sit at the foot of one of Ben's brothers' beds, both facing the floor in the dark, side by side, passing the raspberry whiskey back and forth. I take very light sips whenever it comes back to me.

"I know Chester meant the world to you, and you meant the world to Chester." He has taken his arm off of me by this point. He has a sip of his whiskey.

"Thank you," I tell him, and I don't know if he understands how much him saying that means to me, that he could recognize the bond Chester and I had had growing up, that he could remember it now instead of assuming something different.

"So just dogs, or?"

"I don't know." My hands are still shaking. I am residually extremely nervous and cold, but now it is a nervousness of freedom, of being opened and allowed to spill myself forth, tangled up, unplanned, rolling with the punches as they come. I am afraid but hopeful. I try to focus on the matter at hand, and ignore the fact that I am actually still freezing from how fucking cold it was outside. "Dogs definitely," I tell Harry. "Horses and farm animals like that, I mean, I'm curious about them, but I don't really know much first-hand."

"Is there porn?"

I give a very upset sigh. "Some. I don't really... most of it seems nonconsensual."

"Oh."

I am quiet, and hope he will ask me more. There is a wellspring of knowledge in me that is being tapped for the first time.

"Any interest in humans?"

"Not much."

"Good, we suck. You just gay for animals, or?"

"Bisexual." It feels weird to say this out loud, as I don't ever really think of myself as bisexual. The zoophilia eclipses it. Not to mention, the LGBT community has been loudly not-welcoming of my kind.

Harry and I talk for a long time. I black out at some point so I'm not sure what all was said, but when I wake up I am in Ben's brother's bed with a hangover. Physically I have a pervading hunch that I am going to die of alcohol poisoning. Emotionally it has been a long time since I was happier. If Harry tells anyone my secret my life will be ruined. I swore to myself for the last four years I was permanently scarred and would never have sexual interest in another soul and yet here and now, somehow, against it all, I know that I want to find an excuse to be alone with Toros today.

2) Mel is 23 and living alone and there is a global pandemic

It feels like a decade ago that I graduated with a bachelor's degree, majoring in Linguistics and minoring in Art History. I work freelance as a transcriptionist. The pay is close to minimum and I work long hours to make up for it, because I am lucky to have a job where I can work from home, when so many others are jobless and are not going to be looked out for. Knowledge of linguistics makes this job less bearable, not more. I live alone in a single bedroom apartment. The weather is very hot this week, and my AC unit is not working, and maintenance is only handling emergency requests because of the global pandemic and this does not rise to their standard of an emergency.

Someone knocks at the door. I do not know who it would be, other than that I know it is not maintenance.

I grab a mask off of the kitchen table, and as I put it on, I look through the door's peep hole. Standing outside my door is a man with combed-back hair wearing a mask and carrying a paper grocery bag. I can hear panting through the door, and looking down farther through the peep hole, I can make out a white and tan Husky.

I open the door, and ask, "Harry?"

The dog is wagging their entire body and trying to come meet me, but Harry has them on a short leash. He is smiling behind his mask. I haven't seen him since that week at Ben's house in college a couple years ago. "Care if I come in?"

I do consider it for a second. For most people I wouldn't have even answered the door. I give him a nod in.

Harry unclips the leash, and the Husky rushes forward. I kneel down to rub them as they lick me and get their back pet and their sides rubbed.

"Not surprised she likes you," Harry says, walking around us. He sets the grocery bag on the kitchen table. He reaches inside it and pulls out a flask-shaped bottle of raspberry whiskey.

The door has closed, and I have sat down with the Husky, petting her and leaning away as she licks my face.

"So what's going on?" I ask Harry.

"Global pandemic. Police and feds committing war crimes against citizens on a nightly basis. President's a maniac." He takes the stopper off of the whiskey bottle and takes a drink. "Wanted to see if you were still alive."

I gather that he's not lying about wanting to check in. Last I knew of, neither of us are on social media and Harry does not have a phone.

"You got a dog?"

"Lilly," he says. Lilly looks up at him with her head tilted for a second. "Good girl," he tells her. She walks off to go sniff around the apartment.

"Good girl," I agree.

"Is it always a furnace in here?"

"Maintenance won't come in to fix the AC."

Harry takes another drink from the raspberry whiskey and then sets the bottle on the table. "Lemme at it."

The day goes on, and it has become clear that Harry is going to be spending the night on my couch, and I am glad to have him. As a friend, and as thanks for him fixing the AC, which probably didn't take him more than ten minutes, including all the times we stopped to chitchat.

It is the nighttime, and Harry and I are both drunk, sitting cross-legged on my living room floor, Lilly at my side. I don't know that Harry and I have ever talked about the news before, but in the world we're living in now, the noteworthy news seems endless. Broadly, Harry and I agree that masks are good, that black lives matter, and that the president should be impeached.

"You follow the protests much?" Harry asks me.

“Not closely. Lot of burning and looting.”

Harry shakes his head. “A little burning and looting. Lot of people just standing there and then getting tear gassed and bull rushed.”

I take his word for it.

“I appreciate the work that they’re doing,” he tells me. “I’m impressed by their restraint.”

I wonder if I should broach a subject with him, since it verges on the level of conspiracy theory, but I decide we are already at this point, and drunk as I am, the hurdle to me saying what’s on my mind is low. “Do you want a civil war?”

Harry sighs through his nose. “Do I *want* one? No. I think our government does a lot of evil—always has done. I think a lot of people are seeing it for the first time now en-masse.” He sighs again through his nose. “But I don’t think a civil war would be good. For a problem as big as the United States of America, I don’t think there’s a silver bullet. We’ve been metastasized for a pretty long time by now.”

“Do you think there *will* be a civil war?”

Harry smiles to himself, looking down at his lap, and then after a moment he shrugs. “I think we’re pretty well fucked some way or another. It’s already too late to stop climate disaster. But honestly, no. We’ll see how much the pandemic changes things, but I think as things stand, most people here are too comfortable to start a war any time soon.”

I nod, and then yawn. Before too much longer, Harry is lying on the couch with a blanket, Lilly is lying on the ground beside him on another blanket, and I have gone to my bed.

In the morning, I wake up happy, remembering that Harry has come to visit. I get out of bed, and find Lilly lying on the floor at the foot of my bed. She looks up at me. She seems nervous about something, but seems to think I may be of help. I walk out to the living room, and Harry is gone. Not on the couch, not in the bathroom, not hiding around a corner somewhere. No note as to where he’s gone. I am not concerned until I see three big bags of dog food leaning against the wall beside the front door. One is opened, and in front of the bags are two dog bowls. One is filled with food and the other is filled with water.

3) Mel is 23 and might have a dog now

Two days have passed. Harry is not coming back. I suspected that he was not coming back on the first day. Now I know it to be so. This morning I searched his name on the internet, and I discovered that my best friend Harry is wanted on suspicion of over a dozen murders. There are many articles breaking down his targets: almost entirely lawyers, one CEO, two philanthropic though relatively unknown multimillionaires. At least three and upwards of six of his targets have ties to oil. All of his targets have ties to the GOP. He does not steal, only kills. The leading theory is that he is an eco terrorist. There is a forum that has been active for three years whose aim is to thwart him, whether by providing actionable information against him to a three letter agency or by vigilantism. They have not had a credible location on him in eight months—Meriville, and the trail was a week old by the time they got to it, and he was gone. They know his full name and date of birth and every address he has stayed at on the record before he had been found out and had to continue on ephemerally. They know the full names and addresses of several people he has been seen in photographs with, though I am not one of them. To be fair, Harry and I have not been in a photograph together since we were children.

So I have a dog now. She likes me but I think she is hesitant to accept me as someone who will stick around with her. I don't know if Harry had her for years or hours before arriving at my door two days ago. I do think Lilly is her real name. I think she is fully grown but still young, possibly three or four years old. She is eating and she seems to be healthy, though I will be taking her to the vet.

4) Mel is 23 and Lilly is 3

We get up around 9 AM. We go for walks in the morning. We look out the window together, smelling the world through the screen mesh. We go for walks in the afternoon. We go to the store and she picks out a toy and I pick out meaty treats. We trade information for the treats: she knows the words sit, lay

down, shake, roll over, come, and stay, although she does not take them as commands, rather, she knows what they mean and may do what the word entails if she decides she would like to—she can often be bribed. We have her checked out: she is in excellent health, a good weight, her teeth and bloodwork look good, her nails should be trimmed shorter, she is likely three years old, we can get her spayed today (I decline). We go to the dog park, and she is friendly with the other dogs. We share a bed, and she sleeps at my feet. We get up around 9 AM, and if I am sleeping in, she will whine, and I will be up. We go for walks in the morning, the afternoon, the evening, and at night.

5) Mel is 23 and copes with chronic anxiety by supplementing it with chronic stress

I send off my last email of the day and shut off the computer. It is 8 PM, and I have been working since 9 AM. This is the shortest workday I have had in ten days.

When Harry left me Lilly, I probably didn't work more than 5 hours in the two weeks that followed. I am not rich, though. I have savings, but they are not inexhaustible and were not trivially earned. For the last month, my workdays have been getting longer and my weekends have been theoretical.

As I lean back in my chair and the computer finishes powering off, Lilly has gotten up and is standing looking at me, wagging her tail with metered excitement. I stand up, and she licks her lips and wags freely, and walks to the front door ahead of me. I meet her there, put on my shoes, grab some bags, put on her collar and leash, and we go out and walk, and I know how happy she is as she trots along the sidewalk, as she buries her nose into the grass and leaves and we take her time as she smells, and I realize, standing and watching her examine a leaf that has fallen onto a bush, that I too, here, am happy.

The following day at 9 AM, I snap awake with a start, as I often do. On the bed at my feet, Lilly wags her tail. I manage my way out of the covers and lay on the bed the opposite way so that I can lie and pet her for a while. When I get up and walk out of the bedroom, she stands up on the bed, shakes herself, and follows after me. She is happy. A thing I love about dogs: they

are intelligent, and emotionally intelligent, and if one is not astute with dogs then a dog can often be reserved about the fact that they are afraid or upset if they want to, but I have never known a dog to hide that they are happy. I put on my shoes, and Lilly is happy. I grab her collar and my car keys, and Lilly's happiness is overflowing, and she bays and trots in place. When we are out of the door she pulls me all the way to the car, and we get in. We are going somewhere we have not gone together before, and somewhere I have not been in a long time.

The drive is roughly twenty minutes. For the first while, Lilly stood and sat in the passenger seat, sticking her nose against the cracked window. After we are on the highway and I have rolled the window up, she has laid down. As we are arriving, she has gotten up again. We arrive at the parking lot of the state park in Meriville. I myself have only been a handful of times, as it was not in walking distance from campus, and my walks were typically more impromptu, but I have certainly been here enough that it is familiar, and pleasantly so. It is a cool day, and I realize all at once that it is no longer summer. In the air is a heavy scent of fallen leaves.

I clip on Lilly's leash, and she follows me out of the driver's side door, and we run together, around and around the lawn of the visitor's center, hurriedly sniffing along the edge between the lawn and the woods, constantly doubling back and back again, closely following trails of scents that I am overjoyed to know that she is overjoyed to follow.

When we get onto the trail we are still running at a jog, and we go on for a while like this, although eventually we settle down into a walk. All the way we go, we go at her pace. She is meticulous, stepping along with her beautiful paws at the edge of the path, nose to the ground.

Deep into the woods, we arrive at a clearing of long brown grass, rippling in the wind. I look around. We have not seen a soul out here, nor was there any other car in the parking lot when we arrived.

I kneel down beside her, and leaning my head against her head, I tell her, "Stay close to me," and unclip her leash. She turns and licks my forehead, and then trots away, walking through the long grass, letting it brush against her head as she

parts it. She explores, and I feel I am blessed to be here to watch.

When she has explored thoroughly and is getting farther out than I would like, I call her back. She stands still a while, looking outward in the direction she had been walking. I do not rush her. Eventually, she turns and comes back to me. She is panting, and I ask if she wants to lay down. She lays down on the trail, back legs out to her side, tongue lolled out as she breathes. I sit down on the trail beside her. We are in an autumn house with walls of rippling grass.

As we stay a while, she stops panting, and lays over on her side. I lay down in front of her on the trail, face to face, and am stricken by her beauty, and the light catching in the fur of her muzzle, white and tan, and her black whiskers, and her black and pink lips. I kiss her. I have kissed her before on the top of the head, or on the back as I am petting her, but until now I have not kissed her like this, lip to lip. It is quick, and warm and perfect, and my heart speeds up as we look into each other's eyes afterwards. She considers only briefly before leaning forward and licking at my lips, and then we are making out, man and dog in the autumn house, and something has changed and it is wonderful.

6) Mel is 23 and is readjusting to what love feels like

We get up at 9 AM. We go on walks. I work full time, but less, and with breaks to appreciate each other and life. We are like rabbits or teenagers. We share a bed, and sometimes she sleeps at my feet and sometimes we sleep side by side. We lay on the floor together. We lay with her on her side and me spooning against her back and petting her and then resting my hand on her. We lay with me on my back and her on her chest with my head or arm pinned down as she licks me. We kiss with unbridled expressions of joy for one another. We kiss as I pass by her from my desk to the kitchen, or the kitchen to the couch, or so on. We look out the window together, smelling the world through the screen mesh. I do not know what to label us as because I have previously sworn that I will never love again, but I do not fight what is here between me and Lilly. I take it as it

comes. We go on walks. We sleep well and wake up ensnared in one another, a snug satisfied pile of human limb and canine. Each morning she rolls onto her back and I rub her belly as her jowls flop back and I look at her teeth, and at her chest where I can see her pink and white skin through the areas where the fur is thinner. I am utterly in love with her.

7) Mel is 24 and is contacted

It is 1PM and I have just sat back down to work after Lilly and I have been on a walk. My phone's text tone goes off in my pocket, and I am surprised by it. I take the phone out of my pocket and look. It is a message from Ben and it contains no words. It is a picture of a bottle of raspberry whiskey on his kitchen counter.

I close what I'm doing and shut off the computer. A minute later, Lilly and I are driving to New Denton and I do not have the music on, I am riding in silence and allowing all of the words to exist in my head, rabid.

I park on the side of the street in front of Ben's house and leave Lilly in the car, and she barks after me as I walk up to Ben's door. I knock and wait. I hear the door being locked or unlocked, but nobody opens it. I open it myself and walk in, and there is Harry. He is smiling. "Ben's at work. Should be back around five."

I want to punch Harry and hug him. I want to accuse him of murdering Ben because I have not actually seen Ben yet, although I know it is unlikely that Harry has murdered Ben.

"You keep a secret better than I do," I tell the asshole in front of me.

"Great minds," he says to the asshole in front of him.

We hug, and I go out to get Lilly. When she comes in, she is friendly with Harry, though I am stricken by how she does not seem to really remember him. "Where did you get her?" I ask.

"Farm in Iowa," he says. "They had an ad out. Picked her up and brought her to yours." He grabs his bottle of raspberry whiskey and holds it up, showing off the dog on the label. "Looked kinda similar."

I breath in, and sigh out.

"You still have her," he says, cautious.

I nod.

He looks at her and at me.

“Head over heels in love,” I tell him, and can’t help but smile at the admission, even though somehow, I am mad at him right now. “Thank you. Why the fuck did you get me a dog?”

“I try to balance my evil good things with good good things.”

He goes to the living room where Lilly is sniffing around. She sniffs up at him, wagging, and he puts his hand out to her nose to let her smell. After she turns away from him to continue sniffing elsewhere, he sits down on the couch. Looking at me, he pats the spot next to him.

I steal a beer out of Ben’s fridge and then go and sit beside Harry.

“Did you really do it all?”

He tells me every name. He adds, “I’d do it again.”

“Reason?”

“Pretty on-the-face. They were tyrants and if it weren’t for me they would still be getting away with it.”

We sit in quiet for a moment, but it is not an uncomfortable quiet. I am nodding. Eventually, we are both leaning back.

Harry toys with the whiskey bottle, turning the stopper back and forth in the mouth. “I want to ask if I have your blessing on something.”

My throat closes up, and I cannot utter a response.

He goes on. “Meat and dairy industry. I won’t tell you the names but I’ve done my research. Say go and I’ll go.”

I have nothing to consider here and my answer arises effortlessly. “Kill every damn one of them.”

Ben comes home around 5:30. The three of us play cards and catch up, Lilly lying at my side.

8) Mel is 25 and has recently moved

Working remotely, my job actually does not require me to live anywhere all that urban. In truth, I can live in a place surrounded by farms, where some days I may see a horse passing more often than I see a car. I am embarrassed that it takes me so long to let go of things and seek betterness of my own accord, but I am here and she is here, and we have arrived.

Our things are still boxed up, aside from her food and water dishes. We are lying on the carpet of the new living room, sun shining in through the window, I on my back and her pinning my head down, licking me. Then she is kissing me, and I am kissing her back, and I am thankful for the brightness she is in my life.