

the Roma Khan complex
 a short story by jakob free
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heaven knows you're miserable now
 but it's the path you chose
 and now you pay with years
 in pelican bay (here we come for sure)
 so you shanked a few
 and you've gone a bit numb to it

but on the day the doors open up for you
 you believe there will be
 a life waiting there for you
 in the fields of Salinas

—ice cream shout

Roma Khan sat across from her most immediate superior—her "direct report," as it was called in the corporate world, a one Louisa Garcia. Louisa's official job title was long and complicated, yet it described her responsibilities in only the vaguest of ways (Senior Vice President, Content Enrichment & Supervision, E-Vendor Liaison). Separating the two women was a large glass and metal desk. Although the desk provided Roma with a reasonable amount of physical distance from her boss, she still felt that she was too close to Louisa for comfort.

"How do I put this," Louisa said. "I feel like you're not *here*."

"My parents are dying," Roma said. "I told you this was going to be a process."

"Oh no, I didn't mean it like that," Louisa said. She put her right hand over her heart, and tried to form a sympathetic facial expression, but managed only to create the impression that she was experiencing slight intestinal discomfort. This was not a woman known for sympathy, nor emotion in general, save for greed and sometimes divine fury. "My god, Roma. My prayers are with you and yours. All of our prayers..."

"I, uh, appreciate that..."

Louisa placed both of her palms face down on the desk. Her wedding band clanked against the glass surface. Roma stared at the diamond-encrusted gold ring and found it obnoxiously ornate. The idea of *any* man taking Louisa to be his lawfully-wedded wife confounded Roma.

And the thought of Louisa's husband, whoever he may have been, reminded Roma of a piece she had recently read in the *New York Times*. It was a profile of a man who had lived with a peculiar form of autism for decades. His condition had manifested itself as such: The man was incapable of

feeling empathy, sympathy, or any other form of sentiment or reaction that might connect him to another human being. He could not read social cues, nor could he tell when a joke was being made. He had made it all the way to his forties with this quasi-medical-grade apathy, until an experimental medical procedure—high-intensity magnetic energy beamed directly into the brain—gave him the power to feel for the very first time. Many things came to light for him rather quickly, most notably: He became acutely aware of the hatred he had possessed for his own wife, and so divorced her immediately. It was very easy for Roma to imagine a person without any real form of emotion—she of limited capacities herself—falling for a woman like Louisa. And Roma could envision—again without much effort—Louisa as that jilted wife, once her husband had powerful rays shot into his skull. It even gave Roma—and she was not ashamed to admit this to herself—pleasure to imagine this scenario, one in which Louisa was deeply hurt by someone who simply did not like her.

“But the matter remains,” she said. “You are a *valued* member of Electro-Fiscal's Content Dev Team. And that team needs you. Desperately. They're practically falling apart.”

“I highly doubt that, Louisa,” Roma said. “Besides, I'm not asking for your permission. This is literally a matter of life or death.”

“*This* is very troubling is what *it* is,” Louisa said.

“Yeah, well I'm leaving.”

“**H**e's trying to kill me in my sleep!” Myra Khan said.

Roma's mother's hospital bed was exactly one and one half meters away from Roma's father's bed, the distance he himself had stipulated time and time again for months before the hospital staff relented to his seemingly insane demands. Roma sat in a chair in front of the two beds, equidistant between them. Her distance and orientation was also stipulated by her father, who claimed that he could not tolerate any signs of preferential treatment towards either parent, as they should both be considered equals in the eyes of their daughter. But in actuality, what he could not tolerate were any signs of favoritism specifically from his daughter towards his wife. Truth be told, had it been the other way around he would not so much as have batted an eye. Furthermore, he had always hoped that he was Roma's favorite parent.

“Amми, please stop,” Roma said. “Where's Oscar and Remy? You told me they would be here.”

“Your brothers are very busy,” Roma's mother said. “They are married to beautiful women and have many children and lead very successful lives.”

“My brothers are dead!” said Arthur Khan.

“Damn you, crazy man!” Myra said as she threw a rolled-up magazine at her husband’s head and missed. “She’s talking about *her* brothers, not yours’, you old fool! Your sons!”

“Look at this television,” he said, his demeanor changing instantaneously, and pointed with his television remote—attached to the wall via a thick cable so that it could not be misplaced by a deranged patient—to an area behind Roma’s head. “I think it’s live!”

With her eyes on the floor, Roma noticed a lifetime’s worth of tread marks from gurneys being moved in and out of the room. Burning rubber in a battle zone. She took in a deep breath, rubbed the tips of her shoes together. “That’s a regular show, dad. It’s antiques or something.”

“I think if we’re still alive when this show ends, then we’ll have a very good chance of being rescued,” he said. “A. Very. Good. Chance.”

Roma’s mother—hands clasped together, eyes closed—began to pray. She rocked back and forth rapidly from the waist up. “*Inshallah*, I shall be rescued from this madness by a merciful and just God.”

“Abbu, who do you think is going to rescue us?” Roma said.

“I don’t know,” he said.

This was a good day, all things considered. Roma’s parents fought incessantly, usually accusing one another of conspiring with hospital staff to... exactly what, Roma could never quite understand. And as fate would have it, Myra and Arthur Khan’s quiet moments were never in sync, so one or both of them was always screaming. But at least today they were not throwing anything more lethal than rolled-up copies of *People*.

Small victories, Roma thought. Small victories.

Since she had arrived at the hospital, located at the outskirts of *beautiful* Jersey City, Roma had received upwards of a dozen emails from Louisa back in Manhattan. The tone of these communiques ranged from frantic to borderline abusive. She would read each one of the emails as her parents continued to wage war against one another in the background, the sounds of their skirmishes hardly breaking Roma’s concentration. Her ability to ignore their volleys was a skill she had honed over the course of many years.

Roma had a process for dealing with these emails, a *workflow* some might say: She would absorb the contents of a message, breathing the whole thing in, rereading it, if necessary, to fully comprehend what was being asked of her (or told *to* her). She would then allow herself to stress out intensely for a few, brief moments, bringing herself to the verge of panic. This was because, on a regular basis, what was being asked of her by Louisa was unreasonable or physically impossible or both. Once she had processed a message in this way, she would promptly delete it, and her stress would travel with that message into the depths of her phone’s digital wastebasket.

Receive. Panic. Delete. Repeat as necessary.

But it wasn't as if Roma had ever worried about being fired. She was needed at Electro-Fiscal and everyone knew it, though many of her coworkers hated her for the immunity her position afforded her. As the de facto Chief of Diversity Content (which came with no additional compensation after her "promotion" from Associate Content Editor), it was her responsibility to keep the company in good standing with the ever-growing minority demographics it sought to dominate in its hunt for millennial approval. These demographics were integral to Electro-Fiscal's business development strategy, and as their figurehead, she of minority status herself, Electro Fiscal's slate of TV shows, movies, comic books, and video games would usher in a new age of prosperity for the company. It was a political move, her promotion, and the role was ill-defined, but she wore it like a badge of honor.

And Roma wasn't stupid. Years of being the token person of color in her various circles of white NYU friends had honed her ability to tell when she was being used for representational purposes or to assuage someone's liberal guilt. This is how Electro-Fiscal operated as well: The company trotted her out at events and expos, galas and fancy executive dinners and said "Look at us! We get it!" But what did it really matter to Roma? She had everything to gain. Her star was rising: She was verified on Twitter, had more money in her bank account than she ever thought possible, and most importantly, everyone she now crossed paths with was certain that at any given moment Roma knew precisely what she was talking about, even when she had nothing but corporate buzzwords pouring from her lips.

And! Even if she weren't needed, even if she were some lowly corporate slave, she was certain that she'd never have to worry about life after being fired. Money was never, *ever* going to be a problem for her...

Because her lunatic parents still paid the rent.

Roma lived in a grey high-rise called the Monolith in the Manhattan neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen, on a block that almost always seemed barren and vaguely dystopian, like the set from a B-movie.

Amongst the real estate agency elite all the way down to the broker wannabes, it was a building notorious for its unusual brand of ugly. In a previous life, the Monolith had served as a mega-project for the underprivileged. And both the facade and interior still bore the charming design ethos of that time. Sprayed-on cottage cheese ceilings, pissed-in elevators, a half-full fish tank in the lobby, and a magnificently tall and useless radio antennae on its roof were some of the Monolith's more notable features.

There were even some holdover residents (junkies and thieves and nutjobs) from that bygone era, due to zoning restrictions that required a certain percentage of the units be reserved for those

living below the poverty line. This engendered a very lively environment in and around the building. The word they used in the real estate industry for this was “character.”

Roma couldn't admit to herself or anyone else that she hated the place if only because she had defended it for so long from her friends and family. She cited the affordable rent as her primary reason for staying put, which was a misleading defense for two reasons: First, the unit she lived in, a *very* small studio apartment on the 34th floor, was incredibly expensive (and the exorbitance of the rent was exacerbated by the fact that she was living in a glorified opium palace, not a luxury building) and, second, as we now know, she simply was not picking up the tab. So it was all bullshit, and Roma knew it was bullshit, but she had gotten so good at convincing herself that her bullshit was anything *but* bullshit that it actually worked.

The truth was that she was too lazy to move. It was three blocks from work and the idea of looking for a new place activated the core of mild panic ever-stewing inside of her.

Laziness was the name of Roma's game. She excelled at it; she felt a sort of pride at the lengths she would go to in an effort to *not* do something. For the entire first year at the Monolith, she refused to hang curtains over her tiny East-facing window (her one and only window actually). And then one morning she awoke, hungover beyond the pale of human dignity (a very common weekend occurrence), a throwaway lover snoozing beside her (a less common weekend occurrence), the sun stabbing her in the eyes, and frantically nailed a bed sheet over the small square of glass. The bed sheet remained to this very day.

It's also worth noting that Roma had yet to fully unpack her boxes from when she “moved in” two years ago.

"Hey, Ms. Khan," she heard her doorwoman say from a far-off place. "You've got a package in the mailroom."

But the doorwoman wasn't far off at all. She was sitting behind her desk, as she had been everyday, during the night shift, for the last two years.

Roma couldn't recall how long she had been standing there in the lobby, apartment keys in hand. Fatigue and worry bore down on her. She felt like a zombie set loose in that B-movie set. Her mind had become an echo chamber.

"Oh, okay," Roma said. "Thanks."

In truth, the mailroom wasn't even a room. It was a cordoned-off area behind the semi-circular reception desk in the crumbling lobby of the Monolith. Packages were haphazardly dropped there and left to be discovered or forgotten. Usually the doorwoman, whose name was Dolores, didn't mention anything to residents when a new box or parcel came in. But Roma had surmised that the silver-haired, pink-fingernailed doorwoman saw in Roma a kindred spirit: A tired soul wandering around this grey city they both called home. They had something of a relationship, insofar as Roma acknowledged Dolores' existence, which was not necessarily the norm in resident/doorperson relations.

Roma walked around the reception desk to discover a large bouquet of flowers waiting for her. She sighed at the thought of having to thank someone for them, picked them up off the floor, and headed to the elevator bank, wishing Dolores a good night along the way.

Once inside her apartment, she took off her shoes, dropped her pocketbook on the floor of her “foyer,” gingerly placed the bouquet beside it, and stepped inside the sliver of an alcove that served as her kitchen. She sought out a mug from a cabinet and after finding there was nothing clean she pulled a chipped one from the sink, inspected it, and filled it with tap water. After placing it inside the microwave and setting the cook timer for ninety seconds she retrieved the card stapled to the plastic wrap enshrouding the bouquet.

Hey, baby. Just thinking of you. Can't wait until we're together again. I love you. — Colin

She looked at the flowers on the floor, the back at the card, then at the timer on the microwave.

47...46...45...

Colin was, technically speaking, her boyfriend. He lived in Texas, presumably there to receive his masters in Business Administration or something equally mind numbing, although Roma found it incredibly unlikely that Texas was the place to go for anything like that. But he was far away, and that made having a relationship with him very easy for her, so she didn't ask too many questions about how he was actually spending his days.

The microwave emitted a small chirping sound to let Roma know her water had finished receiving its radioactive energies. She opened the microwave door, bouquet card still in one hand, and pulled out the piping hot mug.

"Ow, goddamit," she said, attempting to keep the hot water from spilling over the sides of the mug and failing. She found a crumbled box of green teabags in the back of the cabinet, dunked a bag in the water, and took a seat on the microscopic couch in her "living room."

She read the card again.

I love you.

And promptly flicked it at the television. It bounced off the surface of the screen and onto the floor below.

"Remember the Alamo," she said, and from the coffee table she picked up a small black rectangle of plastic. She pressed a button. Her television winked on.

An hour of soul-rending reality programming became two, and two hours became four. Kim Kardashian and Kanye West discussed, with a rather dubious-looking white-toothed medical professional, the possibility of genetically engineering their next child. A group of oiled men and women, hunting for something in the jungle, traded insults as sun beamed in through the dense

canopy above. A small, white toddler screamed at a black woman who had swapped places with his real mother. One could imagine the white child's mother also being being victimized by a diminutive black boy in another town, in another state. And on and on.

Roma glanced at her phone. It was after midnight. In the midst of her "entertainment" binge, she had ordered takeout from the Turkish place down the street. Her order: The Vegetarian Special, with chicken for three dollars extra. She was the only patron of the restaurant who ordered in this fashion. Cartons and bags and napkins littered the surface of the Ikea coffee table in front of her. She had already decided, while at the hospital in fact, that she would be going into work late the next day. And though the idea of staying up and continuing to tune out appealed to her, her body ached and her eyelids had grown heavy. Her bed called to her.

Most nights, Roma prayed before she went to sleep, but tonight that was simply not an option. Her exhaustion had mounted exponentially in the brief time it took for her to stand up and shamble toward her bed. The idea of expending any sort of spiritual energy only served to endear her further to her pillows and sheets. And after briefly casting her thoughts in the direction of her parents as a compromise to a heavenly appeal, she peeled off her jeans and removed her blouse. She threw both items in the corner of the room that the rest of her soiled laundry called home. It occurred to her that she was running out of clean clothes.

After slipping into her favorite black nightgown, a stretchy spandex and cotton number she had stolen from an ex-boyfriend's ex-girlfriend, she half-fell/half-crawled into her bed, pulling the comforter up to her chin.

But sleep never came. The illuminated red digits on her Timex alarm clock ticked by, as they do on those nights where rest escapes the weary, in fast-forward. Every time she glanced at the clock another twenty or thirty minutes had elapsed.

At four in the morning she resolved to masturbate.

She got out of bed to retrieve her laptop. It was dark. Too dark to find anything with only the power of sight and hearing. So she stumbled around instead, combing through couch cushions, and slapping at the floor underneath the coffee table. Eventually she came upon it. With it in hand, she scurried back into bed.

Roma's pornography preferences changed with the wind, but at present she was very much into *queerebony.com*, a site she had recently happened upon while searching the web late at night for racially-nondescript male-on-male action. She found this particular site's production value to be of exceeding quality. The lighting, the camera work, the talent; all of it was top-notch. There were no plots to speak of, and although a competently spun narrative was usually a requirement for Roma to fully immerse herself in the digital flesh trade that awaited her, she found that everything else on the site was so perfect that she had forgiven the lack of character drama.

After a few clicks she settled into a frenetically-paced outdoor sequence involving a large dark-skinned power-top with bulging musculature remorselessly penetrating a much smaller light-skinned twink with a tattoo on his lower back that read "Daddy's Girl." Sweat poured forth from

the power-top's brow and chest while the twink squealed like a stuck pig. With her eyes transfixed on the screen, her hand darted into her night table drawer and produced a small chrome cylinder. She activated it by turning a nub at its end in a counter-clockwise motion. It hummed with intensity.

Slowly, and with great anticipation, she slipped the cylinder under the sheets.

Maximillian was waiting for her in the coffee shop down the street from Electro-Fiscal HQ.

"Maxi-baby, sorry I'm late," she said, throwing her purse down on the chair next to him.

"You're sorry, you're sorry," he said. "You're an 'ask for forgiveness, never permission' kind of girl, you know that?"

"Sure," she said. "Whatever."

"Here, I got you your usual," he said, sliding a frozen concoction in front of her. "Whatever this lightly caffeinated milkshake thing is."

"Shut up," she said. "What's going on with you? Did anyone notice I'm late?"

It was just before noon and the coffee shop was packed with those in need of a late morning pick-me-up. Roma and Maximillian were seated at a table near the large floor to ceiling windows with a view of the hustle and bustle on 50th street. Roma looked at and through her own reflection in the glass. An all black cop car cruised by ominously. Two Japanese tourists wearing tinsel-wigs took pictures of a pigeon pecking at an abandoned sandwich. A sad-looking man in a thousand dollar suit sat on a bench and smoked a cigarette. This was the world, she thought. This was all there was to it.

"With the exception of Louisa, do they ever notice?" Maximillian said. "Did you hear what happened last night? Justin Bieber's heart exploded on stage in front of like, a million people."

"His heart exploded?" she said. "Is that even possible?"

Maximillian took a sip of his coffee and eyed Roma curiously. "Sure it's possible," he said. "Haven't you ever seen ER?"

"Yes, I've seen the television show ER about fictional doctors working in a fictional hospital. But that still doesn't answer my question as to whether or not it is possible for a human being's heart to explode."

"My god, Roma. Michael Crichton was a *medical* doctor!"

"He also wrote Jurassic Park."

"And your point is?"

"My point is—never mind...tell me what happened with Bieber."

Maximillian's eyes widened. "So he's doing this show out in LA, right?" He began to gesticulate wildly, his fingers tracing invisible arcs in the air. "And everything is business as usual, you know how these shows go—"

"I absolutely do not."

"Well, whatever, that's not important. He's doing his thing and everyone in the crowd is going wild. I mean it's *electric*. Roma, you should really go to one of these shows sometime. I'll take you. Hell, I'll *pay*. Anyway, he finishes up a song—I think it was 'LOL 4 Me' or something similar—and just as the last word of the last line leaves his mouth—BAM—the electricity in the entire place shuts off."

"The sound of the lights going off made a 'bam' sound?" Roma said.

"Huh?" said Maximillian. "What? No, you don't get it, not just the lights, *all of the electricity* went off. The lights, the speakers, the cellphones, the *everything*. It was like someone had dropped a giant EMP bomb-thingy or something. And panic ensues, right? People are going insane. Screaming, clawing at each other, just fucking mayhem, you know? Some guy got put in the hospital by a pack of twelve year old girls."

"How can all of this have happened and I haven't heard one word about it?" Roma said.

"*Betch*, check the clock, ok-ay?" Maximillian said. "You've slept through the entire last millennium. Do I even want to know what you were doing last night? Never mind, let me finish and then you can tell me what kind of sordid shit you got into." He paused to gulp down the last of his coffee. Then he cleared his throat and said "So a minute goes by, then two, then three. It's a bloodbath. And it's getting hot and moist in there, almost like a storm is brewing. I know it sounds crazy but that's what they said, they said 'like a hurricane was about to hit the venue.' I don't know what to make of it."

Maximillian stopped. For some reason he was having difficulty finishing his story. He looked as if he might cry or throw up or both.

"Are...are you okay, Max?" Roma said.

"Just give me a second, please," Maximillian said, trying to make his eyes water, but failing. "This is horrible stuff. Truly."

He dabbed at his tearless eyes with a paper napkin. "When the power came back on, and it came back on all at once, like whatever switch that had been turned off had simply been turned back on, well, Justin was just lying there on the stage. And..."

Roma waited, then said "And what?"

"And a geyser of blood was just shooting upward, like a forty foot column of blood, Roma, from his chest!"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Roma said.

Maximillian slapped the table top and said "No, of course not! You think I'd make this shit up?"

Roma instinctively placed her palm over her drink, afraid that in his current state, Maximillian might accidentally spit in it. "No, I don't think you would. But where did you hear about this?"

"Where else?" he said. "Gawker."

Roma was not at all surprised by the amount of emails she had received from Louisa since the last time she checked her inbox. If anything, she was amused that a woman who seemed to care so deeply about when Roma was and was not around couldn't be bothered to get up and check for her. Subject lines that read "R u here?" and "Give me quick call plz" and "State of emergency" danced through her inbox. If these were any indication of her mental state, Louisa must have been experiencing a psychotic episode at her desk.

Roma imagined Louisa in her office: The door locked, strange alphabets scrawled in blood on the walls, windows, and ceiling. She was screaming Roma's name. Screaming at the heavens.

"What the hell are you smirking at?" came a voice from the doorway into her office.

It was Chuck Forster, a good friend of Roma's who worked in Digital Brand Activation or something with an equally meaningless department title. Roma had always thought he was cute-ish and funny, but he seemed to have his life too-well-put-together for her, even though he was constantly going on about how dramatic and unpredictable his weekends were.

"Hi," Roma said. "Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about something funny."

"Does it involve the misfortune of others?" Chuck said. "I love stuff like that."

"Yes, of course. You know me too well."

Chuck stepped into Roma's office and sat at the edge of her desk. There was a sheaf of print-outs next to him. He rifled through some of them as if there might be something of interest. He stopped on a sheet with nothing more than a few scribbles on it and feigned incredulity, like he had come across some conspiratorial government secret. Roma pretended to ignore him.

"So what's going?" he said, giving up on his joke. "How are your parents?"

"Oh my god, so great," she said. "They're on vacation right now. Abbu— I mean Dad...*Dad* won't shut up about how amazing the hotel is. Some sort of crazy view from their balcony."

"I know what 'abbu' means," Chuck said. "You don't have to do that every time."

"Do what?"

Chuck cocked an eyebrow at her. "You don't have to define things for me. I've known you for what, four years now? I've picked up enough Roma-nese to get around in these parts."

"I think you mean Urdu," she said. "So what's happening with you?"

Chuck sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "They're giving me hell over there. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing in this shit hole." He lowered his gaze towards his fingernails and began to pick at them mercilessly. "I'm a design— "

"Design major, for chrissakes. Yes we know, Chuck."

"Well, I'm telling you again," he said. "Should I just quit, Ro?"

"Do you want to quit?"

"Would you be upset if I did?" he said.

"Of course," she said way too quickly and without the required amount of enthusiasm. "You know I would... But that shouldn't stop you from going, obviously."

"Right, yeah, totally."

The sound of Chuck picking at his fingernails began to work on Roma's nerves. Staring at his hands, she frowned. He noticed and stopped.

"So what are you doing tonight?" he said. "You never answered my text yesterday."

"Oh sorry! I went to sleep early last night. Conked out right after dinner."

"Shit, that's early, girl," he said. "Well it's Friday, in case you haven't noticed. I'm free if you want to get a drink or something."

Roma looked to her computer screen, as if a perfectly lined-up excuse was waiting there for her. Chuck sensed her hesitation.

"Or, you know, we could do it another night," he said.

"No," she said. "No, I'm probably around later. I have a dinner date with Maximillian and then I have to get a drink with my friend Amber, but I could be free after that."

"Cool," Chuck said. "Text me later."

"This facility was brought up from the South by locomotive," Arthur Khan said.

"Yeah, Abbu?" Roma was sitting in her usual chair in her usual spot in her parents' hospital room. Roma's mother snoozed spasmodically in her bed while the last beams of summer sun shot through the window and played in whirls and helixes on the floor. Smells of antiseptic and blood filled the air. "Go on," she said. Sometimes it was best just to let her father tire himself out rather than try to explain to him that his delusions were just that: The rantings of a neurologically-disadvantaged geriatric in a middle-tier New Jersey hospital.

"Indeed," he said. "This facility is an old one. Very old, Roma. Originally built down South in a town called Sarasota. That's a city in Florida. They built it with brick and mortar and with many years of hard labor. And I was inside of it for a time. You all visited me there."

"Who visited you, Abbu?"

"You, of course. Then, let's see, ah yes, the other boys, ah—"

"Remy?"

"Yes, him. And the other?"

"You don't remember his name."

"No...surely I do. Surely I can remember my own child's name..."

Roma crossed her arms. "Well then what is it?" she said. "You can do it, can't you?"

"Omar?"

"No, Abbu. It's Oscar."

"Indeed," Arthur Khan said. "You remember this facility in Florida?"

"Sure."

"So you'll also remember that when it came time to move your harpy of a mother and I up here from Sarasota, the organization that runs this hotel encountered a problem. Unfortunately, my condition is such that anything new introduced into the environment can cause agitation to my nervous system. So great care was taken to ensure that the environment remained as stable as possible. To achieve this, the Organization disassembled the facility methodically...quietly...they took it down brick by brick. They worked only at night. While myself and your demon-mother and the other patients slept, the workers—mostly Latino laborers, very able-bodied men, very hardworking—took down the entire building around me. Rooms disappeared, then wings, then eventually everything was gone, save only for my room. They loaded every single brick, medical device, doctor, nurse, patient, what have you, onto train cars. And while I slept they even loaded your foul-mouthed mother, myself, and *my* room into a car of our very own."

"That's impressive," Roma said. "Very impressive."

"The ultimate understatement, my young daughter," Arthur said. "Are you aware that a project of that magnitude is very-nearly impossible? Forgetting logistical concerns—who goes where and on what time frame and so forth—for a moment, but can you imagine the architectural abilities required for such a feat? Think about what they had to do to restore this place once we arrived in New Jersey! Can you imagine?!"

"I cannot," Roma said. "Elaborate for me, okay?"

"What I'm about to say is, of course, a gross oversimplification," Arthur said. "But essentially, once the train arrived, the process was reversed. The foundation was re-laid, the first floor was rebuilt, the first-floor patients were reinstated, and so it went like that, all the way to the top. Your vixen of a mother and I were eventually placed inside. And then the doctors were let back in with the rest of the hospital staff. One day, when the complex was complete and found to be structurally sound, someone simply flipped a switch."

"A switch?" Roma said. "What did it do?"

The entire time he had been telling his story, Arthur Khan had not once looked at his daughter. His eyes were fixed on an invisible horizon, perhaps he had found himself in an antique land. Until now. Now his expression was one of disdain and it was targeted directly at Roma.

"Daughter," he spat. "What else would it do? It turned this place on!"

"Okay, okay, I didn't understand that part—Abbu?"

Suddenly, his eyes glazed over and his head jerked upwards. A spasm played out across the left side of his face while a thin strand of spittle fell out from the corner of his mouth.

"Abbu!"

Roma stumbled up from her chair and grabbed her father by the shoulders and began to shake him.

"Abbu!"

His head ticked back and forth and up and down in a grotesque display of neurological self-conflict while one side of his lip curled upward. The sounds of his bio-monitor wailing drowned out Roma's screams.

"It was some kind of seizure," she said into the phone. "I don't even know why I'm telling you this."

"Well, probably because I'm your boyfriend and you're supposed to be able to talk to me about these things."

"Colin, look, we need to talk."

She paced back in forth in her apartment, biting her nails and wishing she could've actually seen out her windows for once. If it weren't for that damn sheet, she thought, she would've had some sort of view of the city at night, which may have calmed her nerves, but probably not. She thought of tearing it down but decided not to; she would want it there to block out the sun in the morning.

"Babe," he said. "I'm buying tickets right now. I'm coming back."

"No, absolutely not! Don't you dare!"

"Did you get my flowers?" he said. Roma could tell he was smiling on the other end. Somehow.

She looked to where she had left the bouquet on the floor, and the flowers were still there, right where she left them. They had already begun to wither.

"Yes, I love them," she said through gritted teeth. "That was really thoughtful of you."

"Did you read the note?" He was practically laughing. Roma realized in this moment that she despised Colin and his cheerful disposition. Why was she with him? Where was this going?

"You've never given me an orgasm, Colin, you know that?"

Roma heard a sharp intake of breath through the receiver.

"W-what?" he said.

"I simply cannot remember a time when I've achieved climax through anything other than self-stimulation. Isn't that crazy?"

"Babe, what are you saying?"

"Did you know that there are some women who are physiologically incapable of having an orgasm? Thankfully, I'm not one of them, but still...what a horrible existence."

Recalling the moment later, she would swear to herself she had heard a minuscule sob on the other end of the line.

"Why are you like this?"

"Because I am what I am, Colin." And then she said, "Grow up."

She hung up the phone.

The club was filled with men who were precisely Roma's type: Unavailable and gay. It was a well-known but newish place called *Enflamed Chariots*.

"I cannot understand why you won't just fuck Chuck, honey," Maximillian screamed. The electronic music—and Roma found it hard to imagine how the tones being ejaculated from the sound system were even considered music in a general sense—had rendered any other form of verbal communication completely ineffective. "He's okay, right? He's sort-of okay."

"Just okay?" she said, after sucking back her fourth Tito's and soda (with a thin lime wedge).

"I'd fuck him," he said. "I'm not even sure he's one hundred percent straight."

"Where's your date?" Roma said. She signaled the beefy bartender for another round. He summarily ignored her.

Maximillian flashed a smile the bartender's way. The hulking beast of a man approached swiftly, leaned over the bar, and asked him what he wanted.

"Tequila on the rocks," he said, assuming a hyper-masculine affectation. "And another one for my girlfriend, bro. Whatever she wants."

The bartender sneered and went off to make the drinks.

"That bitch stood me up," Maximillian said, returning to his usual vocal pitch and pattern. "I have to stop meeting these faggots on the internet."

Roma looked around. The bar, the room, the people, all of it bathed in red and green light. Men danced with abandon. For every few dozen of them there was one woman, someone like Roma maybe, chatting with someone like Maximillian, maybe. All of it seemed pointless to her now. Another night. Another weekend. Monday would come and crush her again. Louisa would crush her again. Her parents would crush her again.

"Do you think I'm too old, Maxi-Baby?" Roma said.

Maximillian choked on his drink. He picked up a napkin from the bar and dabbed at his lips and chin. "What?" he said. "You're like twenty-eight."

"I'm thirty-four!" she said, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Who gives a shit?" he said. "I hope I have an ass like yours when I'm old."

The bartender came back with their drinks.

"You can put it on my tab," Roma said, but the bartender had already walked away. Turning back to Maximillian, she said, "So you *do* think I'm old."

Maximillian puffed his cheeks up and closed his eyes while he considered what he was about to say.

"I think...I think you're old-adjacent..." and then noticing her expression, "if I'm forced to make the least generous assessment possible."

Tears formed at the rims of Roma's eyes. She felt a warmth in her throat and knew that if she said anything, anything at all, she would break down crying and wouldn't be able to stop. To cover, she finished her drink in one long, dramatic swig.

"Is someone trying to get brown-girl wasted tonight or what?" Maximillian said, his head swiveling up and down on his neck to trace the arc of Roma's drink from mouth to bar-top.

"Maybe," she said, and she knew now that she was indeed drunk. "Do you have any drugs?"

Max looked over one shoulder and then the other. He eyed Roma judgmentally. "Why would you ask me that? I should cut you."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm totally serious. Why would you ask me such a thing?"

"You always have drugs," she said, slurring her words slightly.

"You traitorous bitch," he said. "Oh well. I guess my secrets are not my secrets at all. *C'est la vie*. But if I give you something, you have to promise not to ask what it is or where I got it."

"Promises are for the innocent," she said, but had no idea what she meant by it.

She was in a room.

Roma was standing in a room.

The room was familiar.

She was not allowed to be there. Not only was she not allowed, but it wasn't even possible for her to be there. Physically. Temporally.

She was in her parents' hospital room.

And she was watching them descend into their madness.

It must have been months earlier. Arthur Khan was twenty pounds heavier, upright, mobile. Myra Khan looked basically the same. The only major difference that Roma could discern was that the light behind her mother's eyes, the light that was there before All Hell Had Broken Loose, was present. This was before everything took a turn. This was before they had run their tires bald.

Arthur Khan was stuffing an assortment of garments into a small plastic bag with the words "Hazardous Materials" printed on it, while Myra Khan placed her fists to her mouth and her body shook with agitation.

"Hurry, Myra," Arthur said. "Pack your bags!"

"Arthur, what are you talking about?"

"Robots!" he said. "Goddamned robots! This place is overrun with them. The staff—they're all cybernetic organisms! Trained for death! Built for murder!"

Roma leaned her back against the wall and scratched her chin. Her fingers were cold. She noticed that the hospital staff had not yet placed her parents' bed at the precise distances her father would soon require. Without thinking, she applied subtle pressure into the wall with her shoulders. The wall felt soft, softer than a wall had any right to be. She flexed her back experimentally. Her shoulder blades pressed into its surface.

She applied more pressure. This time on purpose. Something was not right.

The wall gave way and she passed through it like a spoon through the skin that forms on top of school-lunch pudding. Once she crossed through the threshold or membrane or whatever it was, she was pulled upward through a viscous fluid. She could not breathe but she did not have to. The sensation was that of sinking, but in the opposite direction. There was a sucking sound, like a space station airlock reaching equilibrium and then the world was nothing but green and blue with flashes of white-hot light, like depth charges going off in a dark sea.

And she fell. This time downward...

Into a black chair at a black table in a black bar.

Chuck Forster sat across from her.

"...think it's crazy, the whole idea of it. If I ever get married, it's going to be something small. A few witnesses. Maybe my parents. I don't know. What about you?"

She stared at her hands, felt the hard surface of the table in front of her, turned to see if the hospital room was behind her.

"Where is this?" she said. "Where are we?"

"Do you not like it here?" Chuck said. "You picked the place. I told you that I don't really know anything in Hell's Kitchen."

"Where?"

"What do you mean?" Chuck said. "I think this is called 'As If' or something— the bartender is a real asshole, by the way. You know, Ro, you've been acting strange. You told that guy on the street you liked his cat."

"So?"

"It was a giant dog. A Great Dane. The biggest I've ever seen."

"I want a big wedding," Roma said. "Something grand and ridiculous." The molecules behind Chuck's head were vibrating and Roma was sure she could feel the Earth rotating beneath her feet. "I want something like Kim and Kanye's wedding." She stood up abruptly and knocked over her chair. The other bar patrons began to stare.

"Dude, what the fuck are you doing?"

Roma started to walk toward the door, but the floor was the surface of an air hockey table, so she took careful steps, raising her arms so that they were parallel to the floor like a gymnast on the balance beam.

"Ro!"

But she was out the door and into the street, zig-zagging back and forth while cars narrowly avoided her. Horns blared, curses were uttered. Chuck followed her out, ran after her, grabbed her tightly and picked her up. He wasn't strong enough to carry her all the way to the curb, but he eventually made it there without her or him dying.

"My hero!" Roma said and moved in close to Chuck's face, to kiss him. "Pucker up bi-atch!"

Chuck turned his head away. "Ro, you're shithoused."

"What of it, pussy?" she said. "Got the time?"

"It's 4am," he said. His expression was a hybridization of fear, confusion, and exasperation. "I think I'm going to go home."

Roma wrapped her arms around him, put her head on his chest. The night was cool. Chuck began to shiver. Roma hummed the tune to the *Star-Spangled Banner*.

She said, "Don't you have girlfriend? Christine or something? Kinda big. Italian?"

Chuck shook his head and sighed. "Julia," he said. "Average weight. Armenian."

Roma looked up at him. She was almost exactly two inches shorter than Chuck. She liked taller guys. A freckle in her left eye, something Roma didn't even know she had, glinted in the moonlight. "Do you want to come home with me?" she said.

"Yes," Chuck said.

It was very dark in Roma's apartment. Chuck struggled with his jeans. One pant leg came off easy, like wax paper sliding over the surface of a greased ham, but the other was stuck around his ankle. As he hopped around the room, grabbing and pulling desperately at the dark blue denim, Roma rolled around in her bed, stark naked and hallucinating vividly.

"Is this bed heated?" she said. "I know, I know. *I* bought it. But I think the manufacturer failed to disclose that it contained a heating element."

"Sorry," Chuck said. "I'll be right there. Just give me a second."

"Is it a water bed? It feels very...watery. Like a hot water situation. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm in hot water."

Chuck gave his pants one final, all-or-nothing tug. They came free and flew through the air, across the room, landing on the floor, narrowly avoiding Roma's dirty laundry pile. Now pantsless, Chuck climbed into the bed, wearing only his briefs, his socks, and a vintage Megaman t-shirt.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted this" he said, and he kissed her hard on the lips.

Roma laughed. "Yes I do-oo," she said and kissed him back like she meant it.

But she didn't mean it. All she could think about now was Colin. Her dear, sweet Colin, whom she left in Vegas. Or was it Dallas? Los Angeles? Roma was starting to realize just how big the world was. So many places to remember. But only one Colin. Dear, sweet Colin.

"I missed you," she said. She stuck her tongue in Chuck's ear. "My god, I missed you."

Roma heard herself speak as if she were floating somewhere above her own body. They seemed genuine, but they hardly made sense. Missed him? She saw him every day of the work week. She tried to read Chuck's expression but could see nothing in the darkness.

"You do?" Chuck said. He kissed her again: First on her lips, then her neck and breasts. Goosebumps formed on her forearms and the back of her neck. He slid down her stomach and kissed her navel, then between her legs. She let out a very loud, very curt moan, like a stereo being turned on and off in quick succession. The sound seemed to startle Chuck. It was a much deeper sound than Roma thought she herself was capable of making. It might have been categorized as guttural even. Chuck pulled his head away.

"Don't stop. Don't you dare stop," she said, grabbing him by the hair and impatiently reinstating him to his task.

He didn't stop for a while after that. For twenty-two whole minutes he lapped at her. And in this way they became more acquainted with one another in those twenty-two minutes than they had in the previous four years. Roma's body moved in somewhat distressing ways. Her elbows were double jointed, allowing her arms to bend the wrong way as she stretched them upward along her headboard, her fists curling around the back of the wood. She twitched violently, intermittently, as Chuck moved his tongue up and down, left and right, in and out. She grunted and hissed and ground her teeth back and forth.

For Roma, those twenty-two minutes moved in a different way than they most likely moved for Chuck; she felt them roll by as years, then centuries, then millennia. She was in place of color and light, floating through another realm. The combination of hallucinogenic stimulants and clitoral stimulation had resulted in something of a euphoric neural override. She embraced it, no longer of the world. Now, she was a being of pure light.

"Colin," she said. "Colin, please. I want you to be inside of me. I want you to be with me."

Far off in the distance came a noise that cut through the static of Manhattan. It was the sound of a five-car pileup on the Queensboro Bridge. Screeching tires, rending metal, human screams. Carnage, death, flame. Roma would not recall the sound in the morning, nor would she ever know exactly what it was or how it was able to travel across virtually the entire width of the island. But in that moment she intuitively understood that it was the toll sounding the Witching Hour. The fun was over, now it was the time for someone to pay.

"What did you just call me?" Chuck said.

"*Please please please,*" she said.

Chuck pulled away, sat upright. "What the hell did you just say? Did you just call me 'Colin?'"

"Huh?" Roma said.

"You just called me another guy's name. Is that your boyfriend or something?"

Roma attempted to pull Chuck, by his arms, back toward her. He rebuffed her.

"I did not," she said. She was whining now. "Chucky, I want you so bad. Plee-ase have your way with me. Don't be a little baby."

Sitting on his ankles, in his underwear, in his vintage Megaman t-shirt, in the dark, Chuck considered seemed to consider his options. Roma could just make out the outline of his body and head. In that moment she was reminded of one of her favorite books: *The Fellowship of the Ring*. In that tale, the royal elf Galadriel issues a warning to the titular Fellowship during an important make-or-break moment:

"The Quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little, and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains while the Company is true."

Roma had no real understanding of the quote's meaning, nor could she surmise why it would come up at such a strange moment.

"Okay, let's do it," Chuck said abruptly.

Roma tore his underwear off and took to his genitals like a dog takes to a bowl of food. She gobbled his testicles with vim and vigor. She moaned and licked and growled and sucked and did all the things she knew men liked. She also did many of the things she *didn't* know men *didn't* like. And all things being equal, in an overwhelming majority of cases, the net would've been a positive. But all things were not equal.

It soon became depressingly clear that Chuck was experiencing a particularly disheartening strain of performance anxiety. But Roma wasn't ready to admit defeat, she was pulling at his flaccid penis like a taffy maker on the Jersey Shore.

"Come on!" she said.

Chuck let his arms fall to his sides with a loud *smack*.

"I can't," he said, and collapsed from exhaustion and defeat.

It was the morning and Chuck was gone. Light peered in from around the edges of the sheet that covered Roma's window. Her body felt hollow. The smell of dying flowers hung heavy in the air. The sounds of the city—honking, laughter, screams—crept slowly into her apartment.

It took her a while, but she eventually crawled out of bed and made it to the bathroom where she proceeded to regurgitate at length. She was still naked.

She found her nightgown and put it on.

Then it was a mad hunt for her cellphone. Of course it was in the one place she should have looked first: In between the couch cushions. She scrolled through her notifications. Missed calls from Maximillian and Colin; a slew of text messages from her friend Amber, one of which stating that Amber would call the police if she did not hear back from Roma in the morning; several photographs of a penis, from different angles, from a man she had slept with three weeks previously named Georgio (the man, not the penis); and a voicemail from a unknown number.

She tapped into her voicemail. Her hand hovered over the small white triangle that would play the message. She hesitated for several moments, pressed the button, and placed the phone to her ear. It was the hospital. There was news. She called back immediately.

For a long time after she had gotten off the phone, Roma sat on her couch, flipping through channels on her television. She never stayed on a channel for more than a minute or two. Things were happening in the world. Big things, small things. Bad things and good things. Depending on your perspective the world might have been ending or just beginning.

Roma's father was dead.

And Roma felt nothing.

end.