

Chapter 1

I don't care what any of the assholes I live with tell you. I don't work at a bodega. It's a health food store. Says right there on the sign: M&A JUICE BAR DELI ORGANIC GROCERY CORP.

Whatever. It's *implied*.

In any case, it's well lit, huge by New York standards, with a battalion of Vitamix blenders right up front—4K worth at least. Plus, we sell every type of rich-people fetish food. Are you in the market for organic, non-sulfur-treated goji berries at eighteen bucks a bag? We got you. Gluten-free, sugar-free, dye-free cake for your non-immunized kid's next birthday? Yep. We even have cake mix *with gluten* that's just as expensive because it's ironic. See, we're fancy, not at all a bodega, never mind that we're open twenty-four hours a day, are owned by no-nonsense Koreans, and have a deli cat named Gusto. I'm telling you: Not. A. Bodega.

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Still, I just wish the damn health food store were a little closer to my apartment. Especially when the windchill mauls your face-meat to ribbons.

I slide my MetroCard smoothly—quickly—bracing for the *clang*, that hip check of an expired pass, but the turnstile clicks me through.

The reader flashes *EXP 2/13*.

Great, so my card's dying right at the stroke of midnight on the day I was born—Valentine's Day. Good thing I'm not extremely superstitious and prone to crippling anxiety. (I am.)

A can of Red Bull skitters on the tracks as a rat scurries past it. The fingers on my right hand are numb enough that watching them load up the shitty video on my phone is an out-of-body experience, as if I'm watching over someone else's shoulder.

How I got into Columbia with a free ride!

I should shove my dead hand into my pocket, but I can't. I have to know how she did it.

Because here's how I'm sick (everyone's sick in their own special way; the variety on the flavors of crazy is pretty endless, but me?): I'm convinced that the next video in the autoplay is the answer. That it'll be the antidote to my entire life. I believe (but would never admit) that watching the impossibly attractive, gap-toothed Black British chick reveal how she Instagram modeled her way into Columbia with a full scholarship will make that shit happen to me. As if reality is a Japanese horror movie where you watch the

crackly footage to become the next chosen one. That is, as soon as this thirteen-minute portal to a better me would hurry up and buffer in this tundra.

College.

Any talk of it makes my blood pressure spike. It's just one topic among many that I don't broach with my mom, who is Asian—Korean, specifically. *South* Korean if you're asking. A human woman who moved to America when she was nine to improve her station in life. The way she tells it though, it wasn't her benevolent, Virginia-based aunt to whom she owes her success. It's sheer determination and a seemingly inexhaustible reserve of rage that's responsible for her becoming a doctor. Mom wanted it that bad. And it's with the same single-minded grit that she despises my job. How it looks. The optics. The *melanin* of it. She doesn't care if I'm working at a bodega, a health food store, or as a mustachioed oyster shucker in the finest farm-to-table restaurant in Manhattan. She doesn't want me anywhere in the service industry. Not even a little. She didn't move seven thousand miles to put herself through college and then med school to become an anesthesiologist at New York-Presbyterian for her firstborn to work in what she calls a first-generation job.

My dad, who's Pakistani and was born in Jersey (he'll say Jersey when you ask him and not Princeton, which is more accurate), doesn't care so much. Despite his engineering degree *from Princeton*, he's the chilliest patriarch in the world. Seriously, he makes weed seem high-strung.

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He's Muslim-ish, but doesn't pray five times a day because he meditates constantly with this app that's free with ads. He doesn't eat pork, but he says it's for the same reason he doesn't eat octopus, because pigs are smart and experience fear. He'll get Filet-O-Fish at McDonald's, not because it's halal but because that's what he'd get when he was a kid, and he drinks hard cider and takes Baileys in his tea at Christmastime, which is not only haram but weirdly basic.

In short, my dad's a total ABCD. American-born confused desi. By his own admission. Born and raised on the East Coast, *his* dad, my dada abu, moved in the seventies to be a humanities professor. It was a huge deal, a massive point of pride for his family who were textile workers in Lahore. Everything was going according to plan until my dad forwent grad school to work at a video-game start-up and then married my mom. We've drifted from that side of the family. Ever since auntie Naz, my dad's little sister, moved to literal Tasmania ten years ago.

But the main reason dad doesn't care what job I have as long as I'm "following my dreams" (believe me, his words) is that I could work at NASA and people will still think I work in the service industry. In fact, me and my dad have talked about how, in most chain stores, randos assume we work there. It never fails. I know that if I pull up to CVS in a polo shirt, even if it's that Ralph Lauren Snow Beach drip, more than one person will have the audacity to ask me where the vitamins are or how late we're open. It's amazing when you think about it. How racism is a wave *and* a particle since we

also get followed around in stores as if we're going to steal something. I guess shoplifting's an inside job?

Train. Thank god. I snag a seat. My phone rings in my hand. Unavailable caller ID. Except I know exactly who it is. Anyone with enough juice to either have an unavailable come up or one of those 1-800 numbers that's suspiciously catchy—like 882-8888—that's a bill collector. Especially if they're calling around dinnertime.

I check my bank balance on my phone. Between credit cards, student loans, and rent, the situation is dire.

Only one of the car doors opens at my stop. Typical.

Shit. I'm late. My breath puffs out in cartoon clouds as I bolt down the platform and up the stairs. I didn't mean to be late. I never mean to be late.

"Ayo!" a kid in a red parka yells as I dash by. "Swipe me in, man."

"Please," I snap at the twerp, but double back anyway.

I haul ass down Seventh, fling open the plastic-screened door, pop a grape into my mouth from the cooler, then immediately regret it since the store's a panopticon and Mr. Kim's got CCTV eyes everywhere. Plus, I probably gave myself *E. coli* since I didn't wash my subway hands.

"Hey, Tina." Tina immediately checks the clock on the wall behind the register and shoots me the wild stink eye. "Come on," I wheedle. "I'm four minutes late." Tina's five foot even, with a photographic memory for numbers and grudges. Her baby hair's unruly, which is a good indicator of her mood, and there are dark smudges under her

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eyes. There was a time when she was fanatic about her red MAC lipstick. “It’s Ruby Woouoooo,” she’d coo in her high-pitched voice when customers remarked on it, but that was before morning sickness took her out. She sucks her teeth at me and goes back for her coat.

Ever since she got pregnant, Tina acts like she’s my boss. Only last summer we were for real friends. We went to the beach. It wasn’t a date-date, but we brought a cooler out to the Rockaways and had spaghetti with salami, which Tina said was traditional Dominican beach food. We washed it down with neon-blue nutcrackers with unicorn stickers on the plastic bottles, which of course is the traditional New York beach drink. Then we passed out cold until a gang of seagulls tried to steal our gigantic bag of Herr’s Honey Cheese Curls so I threw a Timb at them, which let me tell you doesn’t get any more New York as a beach activity. In any event, I miss that Tina. I get why she can’t act all silly with me anymore, but it sucks.

I take my time making my way to the counter, plucking the twelve-dollar pint of grass-fed Australian yogurt from the popcorn display, returning it to the fridge. As well as the nine-dollar matcha pound cake that’s strayed over by the teas. I make a big show of my conscientiousness.

Tina’s not having any of it. “You’re supposed to be here fifteen minutes before for put-backs, so you’re nineteen minutes late, Pab.” Tina pulls her gloves on so angrily she shoves two fingers in one slot.

“Ay,” I tell her, ripping off my beanie. “I already saved

the company, like, twenty dollars in twenty seconds.” I nod over to the coolers. “That’s two hours of work basically.” I’m wearing my XXXL hoodie, which signals the cusp of a laundry cycle. It barely fits under my coat, so I flap my sleeves to free my arms. “Come on, T,” I plead. “How are you going to stay mad at a man with seasonal affective disorder? You know my people ain’t built for these climates.” Tina’s about ready to kill me. “I’m sorry.” I shove my coat under the counter and nudge her, but she’s activated the launch sequence.

“You always do that, try to charm your way out of situations with that hair.” She stabs the air between us, on her tiptoes since I’m a foot taller. “And that face.” Stab, stab. “I’m tired of it!” She cuts her eyes at me dramatically and raises her red-gloved palm. “That shit doesn’t work on me anymore.”

Not to be a dick, but when it comes to women, that shit usually works.

“All right, look.” I reach over and grab two gold-wrapped Ferrero Rochers from the pile of fifty-cent candy by the register and put them in her wool-covered palm. They’re her favorite.

“Let me work half your next shift.”

I can’t stand when people are mad at me.

“My Valentine’s gift to you,” I continue.

“And Daniel,” she says, softening. Daniel’s her man. Total herb.

“And Daniel . . . even if he’s a herb.” I mug valiantly.

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Daniel's a good dude, but a job at the Verizon store is a struggle. Then again, I work at a bodega.

"Cover me for my birthday next month too," she says.

Man, I should have seen that scam from a mile away.

"Fine," I tell her.

Tina smiles squintily, bats her lashes, and pockets the candy.

"Plus, put a dollar in the register now," she says, nodding at the candy bowl and wrapping her scarf around her face as if she's stepping into a sandstorm. "Don't forget." And then, before she leaves, she comes up to the register and hugs me. "Happy birthday, Pablito."

The screen door clangs on her way out as Gusto jumps onto the counter. Gusto's black all over except for this white patch on his chin that deadass looks like a soul patch. As if he plays upright bass in an all-cat jazz ensemble or something. He and I have a special connection. Meaning he doesn't let anybody touch him but me. That's my dude.

I check my pockets for change. Mr. and Mrs. Kim are crazy about inventory. If you saw them, you'd think they were about to play a spontaneous round of golf—all resort-leisurely—but they don't miss a trick. They know exactly how many Ferrero Rocher and Baci are in the basket along with the chewy ginger candies that to me are a rip-off at fifty cents a pop.

I pump some sanitizer on my hands and look out the window. I don't even know why I bother. It's so bright in here the glass is a mirrored sheet.

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Some nights when I'm by myself, I'm convinced I'm being observed.

How I got back into NYU with abysmal grades and demoralizing student loan debt!

I watch myself looking back at me. I need a haircut. It's started to curl under my ears. And I could use some sleep.

Do I look like someone who would work at a bodega? Like, forreal forreal?

I smile. Wide. It's a genetic fluke in my family that I have perfect vision and perfect teeth. Never had braces or glasses.

I watch myself stop smiling. Who cares if I look like I'd work here? I've been doing it over a year.

I take a deep breath. Envision my lungs expand and contract. I'll find a way to get back into school. I will. I have to.

Gusto's ears perk. I look to the direction of his attention. I'm not scared to work overnight, but there are stretches where I get paranoid.

No surprises on how much my mom hates my graveyard shift. "It's not that I don't trust you," she says of my hours. "I don't trust other people. You could get robbed or jumped or god forbid somebody mistakes you for someone else and shoots you."

By someone else she means "an unarmed Black kid with a bag of Skittles."

Meanwhile, if I were pulling all-nighters as a medical resident, it would be completely different. Most people guess me and my little brother, Rain, are Armenian, thanks

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to a celebrity family that doesn't bear mentioning. I've gotten Hawaiian a few times too since it's every mixed kid's birthright to endure countless rounds of "yo, lemme guess what you are," for sport. Our names don't suggest much to our heritage either, and this will give you a further idea of what kind of guy my father is.

He named me Pablo Neruda after the Chilean poet, the "I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees" guy whose name wasn't even Pablo. His name was Ricardo, and Neruda was taken from another poet. It's confusing enough being called Pablo while not being Latinx, but personally I think it's corny that on my birth certificate it says Pablo Neruda as my first name, nothing as my middle name, and my last name is Rind. It feels dumb ESL.

My brother didn't get off easy either: Rainer Maria Rind after the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, whose sonnets I tried to read once in high school and then was like, nah. All I remember was that there were a lot of exclamations. Tons of "Os" and "Ahs" just doing the most.

At least the second part of my name isn't a woman's name—Maria. But everyone calls him Rain, yeah, like the hot Korean singer-actor dude from *Ninja Assassin* who has an eight-pack. Or, like, Leaf, Apple, Petal, some hippie celebrity's idiot kid.

Rain Smashes Tesla into Plaza Hotel

Rain Sizzles at Burning Man

Rain's Gains: The Cruelty-Free Protein Plan!

The girls call him *Rainy*, and it's accompanied by a lot

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of giggling. It's gross, but a few of the girls I've seen with him definitely don't look thirteen and they certainly don't dress thirteen. I remind myself to have the Talk with him beyond me yelling that he should wear rubbers the one time me and Tice saw him posted up with a girl on the stoop of my mom's building.

My mom's Kyung Hee, but she goes by Kay. My dad's Bilal, and interestingly enough, the only time he gets tight is when white people try to call him Bill. Mom wanted to name me either Daniel or David and Rain John since they're easy to pronounce. That's where *she's* coming from. Meanwhile, the names are so milquetoast they sound way more fresh off the boat than Kyung Hee.

To round out my biography, my parents aren't divorced. Just separated since before Rain was born. So even though I don't have a single memory of ever seeing them kiss, the evidence suggests that disgusting activities have occurred between them that I never want to imagine.

I kick off my boots, set them aside, and put on the gray fuzzy house shoes that say "sport" on the upper as if that's the brand. Mrs. Kim got them for me when I admired her red ones since boots feel like feet prison during a whole shift. My pinkie toe pokes through the hole in my sock, so I try to negotiate the rip over to the side so it lands on a different part.

When I'm successful and rich, these are the details of the biopic I'll have to remember to include for color and relatability.

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“Yoyoyoyoyoyoyoyoyoyo.”

“Oh shit, it’s the peanut gallery,” I call out to my roommates, Tice and Selwyn. Me and Tice are about the same height, six foot two, but he’s lean where I’m scrawny. He’s got a big famous-guy head and those Tupac-length eyelashes girls think are dreamy. He’s effectively my best friend though I’d never admit it to him. Selwyn the Slumlord is a kid I’ve known since grade school even if we weren’t friends until I moved into his apartment. To be honest though, I don’t know that I’d exactly call him my friend. He’s got zero chill. He’s that dude in the crew who’ll accidentally lock eyes with the violent homeless guy on the train or who’ll buy the exact same hat as you and not think it’s a problem.

“Pab.” Tice nods. “Hey, Mr. Kim.”

I swivel around. Sometimes Mr. Kim reminds me of Gusto the way he silently materializes. He’s reading the paper at the end of the counter. I have no idea how long he’s been there.

“Tice,” he says. “Hi, Wyn.” During college (the maniac finished Hunter in three years) Selwyn started going by Wyn. He even had that ringtone “All I do is win, win, win” DJ Khaled song for a while. Total corn nugget.

Wyn reaches for Gusto’s tail. The kid loves cats even though he’s allergic.

“You boys staying out of trouble?” asks Mr. Kim.

“Of course,” says Tice, and smiles his fullest smile. Tice’s thing lately is that he wants to be an actor. He takes night-school classes and everything after his shift at Zara. Before

that he wanted to be a DJ, but then again, everyone spends at least a year thinking they can be a DJ.

Mr. Kim goes back to his office and shoots me a look indicating how he's not paying me to kick it with my friends. His wife isn't so stern. She once gave Tice a free Baci even though we're not his day-to-day bodega. His regular spot is closer to the apartment and Black-owned.

"You're late," says Wyn in this officious tone, pointing to his open palm. Making as though he's going to beat my ass for being delinquent on rent. He's twenty-one going on fifty, and something in the way his Croatian mom's genes swirled with his dad's Jamaican ones makes him resemble an old man in the face. Plus, his pubes are orange, which is exactly the type of thing to make you have a different outlook on life.

"I know," I tell him. "I get paid today though." I don't tell him I'm going to be sixty short. And that's on *last* rent. Or sixty-one now after buying Tina apology candy 'cause I'm an idiot.

"This can't keep happening," says Wyn, rubbing his hands. He's got the kind of smile where it's half gums and half teeth. It's in these moments that I hate living with him. Part of me knows that 100 percent of the rent goes directly to his parents, who own the building, but I also know that Wyn only pays three hundred, where the rest of us pay about six, and I, as the last man in, fork over six hundred and forty for what's essentially a broom closet. Miggs, our fourth roommate, whose girlfriend, Dara, is our *unofficial*

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fifth, is a comedian. He's been there the longest and last month when he was high, he told me what everyone pays.

Wyn also has the biggest room, and it's so dumb to think about how it's not fair considering it's his apartment and how cheap it is by any New York standards, but depending on the day it makes me want to knock him around. His parents are crazy-elderly. They were grandparents age when they had him, so they think he hung the moon. *And* he's an only child. An only child with clown pubes.

"Come on, man," says Tice, rolling his eyes behind Wyn's back and urging him down the cookie aisle.

"Say," says Wyn to me after he's done gathering his provisions. I make him wait while I post a photo of his limited-edition mystery-flavor Oreos. I have a tidy little following of nineteen thousand under @Munchies_Paradise, a half-snack, half-sneaker account that my mom keeps following and unfollowing because she's torn about condoning the shit I eat.

Snacks *and* sneakers. It's basically all the Internet is good for. It's an outrage I'm not verified. I'll probably post the Oreos with Nike x ACW* Zoom Vomero 5s because the stuffing reminds me of the wedge in the back.

Wyn hands me one of his green-apple Hi-Chews.

"What are we doing for your birthday tomorrow?" he asks, chomping juicily.

"I'm working," I tell them, grabbing another piece of candy since I've pocketed one for later. "Off at six a.m., home by seven."

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“Bet,” says Wyn, rubbing his hands together. “Birthday breakfast.”

I both hate and love Wyn. He didn’t forget my birthday last year either, even though I’d moved in the week before. Kid baked brownies for me. With sprinkles. And a candle. It was adorable.

Chapter 2

As a work shift goes, ten p.m. to six a.m. is ungodly.

I make fifteen dollars an hour. It's both more and less than you'd think. Obviously the salary isn't what enticed me. Come to think of it, I couldn't tell you why I applied here. Only that I needed a job. It was a few weeks after I dropped out and I still lived at my mom's. I'd left some terrible New Year's party in Brooklyn Heights where everybody wouldn't stop talking about how "revelatory" the first semester of college was. Or else how "galvanizing." Ten-dollar words these ballsacks were bandying around as if we weren't raiding this chick's parents' liquor cabinet like we were still in high school.

I Irish goodbyed Randall, my best friend since middle school, who was home from Tufts. He'd texted me to come through as though it hadn't been since literal graduation day that we'd stopped talking for no reason beyond how we

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didn't really like each other that much. It was freezing that night too, and I was walking for forever trying to decide whether I was more drunk than high when I stopped in for a cup of coffee. There was a HELP WANTED sign posted for a cashier, and I figured if wandering around a bodega stoned was the one activity I was always up for, I might as well get paid for it. Cut to now. A full year and change later. Honestly, it scares me the way I end up living out the aftermath of decisions I don't remember making.

I glance around the store, then scan the CCTV monitors to the left of the lottery tickets for a grainy aerial view. I try to see it from the eyes of a customer. This used to be one of my favorite delis, but on some nights I feel the panic rise in my chest and I want to tear the skin off my arms. Every hour is interminable. I try not to check the time.

11:52.

Shit.

I count seconds (28,800 of them in an eight-hour shift), and I can't stop tapping a quarter on the counter or jogging my foot when I'm on the stool.

Be where your feet are.

That's what my mom says when I'm forecasting—or bugging out about the future. I'm supposed to let an ice cube melt in my hand or flick a rubber band around my wrist so I can, you know, snap out of it, but I don't do either. I let the circles spin.

"It's bad luck," says Mrs. Kim, nodding darkly at my restless foot. "All the good fortune escapes."

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“Sorry.”

I focus on keeping calm until she leaves for the back office. She gave me a strawberry ice-cream mochi for my birthday, so I’m trying to seem upbeat.

I watch another video. It’s a web series called *Watershed*, about the most important moments of entrepreneurs’ lives. The last one was about a nineteen-year-old millionaire who disrupted the salad industry from her dorm room, and as the next video cues up—with stats about how this creative’s “street art” sells for \$140,000 a piece at auction—I get a searing, acrid sensation in my throat. I know this asshole. It’s that dipshit Cruz. Yeah, *that* Cruz. Back when I knew him in the eighth grade, his name was Salvatore Caruso and he had a spine disorder or someshit, so we called him Scolio. Whatever. Kids are mean, and it’s not like they didn’t try to call me Pube until I bounced a few heads off some walls.

In any case, a couple of us watched *Wild Style*, that graffiti movie from the eighties, on literal VHS, which an older brother or uncle had, and we were obsessed. We would catch tags on everything. We couldn’t go into a bathroom without taking Sharpies in there and tagging over each other’s names. I used to write *esco* for Pablo Escobar the drug kingpin, since he was a badass and at thirteen I lacked imagination. Plus, *esco*’s real pretty to write, which is more than you can say for *Neruda*. *N*’s are hard. Mine were these pregnant hunchbacks.

I wasn’t in any danger of being good at it. I wasn’t ever going to be a Jester, Zephyr, Lee Quiñones, Dondi White, or

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those later art dudes like REAS and KAWS, but watching this toy Cruzo is excruciating. He's shameless. I hate-watch while he keeps his face covered in a bandanna and refuses to reveal what his crew, ACDB, stands for because he's an outlaw and the vandal squad is after him. I'll tell you what ACDB means; it means all-city dickbags. A name I made up when we were high as shit at Rosario's on Orchard, which will tell you how much of a joke it was.

It's demoralizing when wins have nothing to do with talent. Take Daniel Dalton. Her mom was that model Oliver, who was famous in the nineties for having a shaved head with a cobra tattoo on it. She opened a skate shop on Crosby that me and my friends hung out at. We didn't go to the same school (naturally Daniel Dalton went to Dalton), but she and I used to be cool on some "What's up?" shit except that stopped when she got an Oscar nomination for a short she made "ironically" on a shitty camcorder. Meanwhile her dad's family's so loaded they own that one ivory building in Midtown that swoops up in a curve.

You should have seen me when she lost to a Japanese woman who made a movie about people in an old folks' home run by robots. I was so hyped. F trust fund kids for real.

Because if I had piles of allowance and parent support to "make art," I'd be up to my nipples in sculpture or "found work" or whatever it's called when you throw a bunch of crap you picked up off the sidewalk into a white box gallery. In a few years I'd have awards coming out of my ears too.

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Not that that's what I want to do. In fact, I have unequivocally zero idea what the hell to pursue. I remember the guidance counselor in high school, Ms. Miranda, inquired about it sophomore year. Her eyes were concerned, her head was tilted, she'd punctuate her more salient points with these little touches to the back of my hand, but all I could hear was white noise. Where there should have been aspiration seeds blooming or urgent hopes detonating, all I had in my head was a pulsing asterisk. To this day I have no inkling as to what I care about the most. I care about everything equally until I care about so many things I get overwhelmed and care about nothing at all. When it comes to the single thing I want to focus the entire rest of my life on, it's a muscle I don't know how to flex. As if I'm a lightning bug that forgot how to turn its ass on.

"If money weren't an issue, what's the one thing you'd do for free?" she'd asked as I was leaving.

Yeah, right. Like anyone does anything for free.

A cluster of regulars file in one after another. I try to guess who they are from the puffy coats, hats, and scarves. Most of the time I get it right, and I can always tell from their purchases. The desi dude with the redheaded wife gives me this nod to note we're on the same team. He reliably buys two tallboys of Beck's at eight in the morning, but only on Tuesdays when his wife isn't with him. The Black vegan chick with a septum ring who subsists near-exclusively on coconut ice cream no matter the season. And the curly-haired girl with glasses who is the only other human Gusto

the cat will say hi to gets cigarettes and milk but only sometimes. There's the old guy who cops a different Amy's frozen meal every night but never more than one. Plus, the bearded man with bright blue eyes and a black wire cart who buys so many actual groceries I want to tell him about the supermarket four blocks over. I only know a few of their names, and they sure as hell don't know mine. You'd think there'd be a word for it. That city-living intimacy where you know the minutia of their routines, rituals, and clothes but absolutely nothing else.

Sometimes I've seen Mr. Kim give Koreans a discount. Nothing outlandish, but he never cuts a deal to this one kid who speaks Korean and does the deep bow and everything, and I swear it's because he's covered in tattoos and his ears are gauged.

"You okay?" Mr. Kim asks before he goes around back at about one. I nod. He usually stays in his office or else goes home to sleep, but he never tells me when he leaves. I'm forced to behave as though he's constantly clocking me. It's smart. How I'd play it as a boss. I put the space heater by my feet on blast because this is when the real party starts.

At three a.m. I buy myself chocolate-covered macadamia nuts for my birthday. Then create an eye-catching pyramid of seasonal heart-shaped candy at the front of the store. I'll have to mark them half price this time tomorrow and briefly consider bringing one to my mom. But my general opinion is that my birthday cancels out her Valentine's Day, which is why sons are trash.

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I won't give Alice, who's saved in my phone as Alice (Tinder), anything. She's the only one I'm seeing with any regularity, but I knew from the red wine she sent back on our first date—that she *ordered at a diner*—that it's not going anywhere. Get this. She once told me she hates flowers and babies. Who hates babies? They're mysterious tiny envoys from the other side that smell of powder-fresh sunshine.

Time crawls to a standstill at five a.m., and I can hear a staticky pitch in my ears. I used to think it was tinnitus or a by-product of too-loud headphones until Miggs told me it's the sound of blood moving in your body. Apparently you can hear your own blood and organs shift inside of you. The blood is higher pitched than the organs, and the whole thing blows my mind. Thinking about what's happening in the inside of your head while you're thinking about the inside of your head is exactly what I don't need to think about when I'm by myself. Man, I hate having me for company.

I need something to happen.

Anything.

I snap the rubber band around my wrist.

Hard.

Then in a rhythm.

Ha-ppy birth-day to me.

The Stevie Wonder version since it's more festive.

Ha-ppy birth-day to me.

Happy biiiiirthday . . .

A girl walks in.

Rushes in actually.

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Her chest heaves as if she's sprinted the last few blocks. Her sleeves are pulled over her hands, and she draws them close to her face to blow. She's got her hood up but no hat or scarf. Her jacket is a Supreme North Face collab from a few years ago, but at best it's a shell. She may as well be wearing a shower curtain. She looks right at me with huge brown eyes and starts, which startles me. It doesn't occur to either of us that the other is real. She's got to be freezing.

The girl up-nods so I up-nod back as the hair on the back of my neck stands on high alert. As she shuffles down the aisle, I notice that she's trailed by a long train of fabric.