



Conflict

Angelo V. Suárez

Debord: *[I]t sometimes happens that the transition to the media provides the cover for several different enterprises, officially independent but in fact secretly linked by various ad hoc networks. With the result that occasionally the social division of labor, along with the foreseeable unity of its application, reappears in quite new forms: for example, one can now publish a novel in order to arrange an assassination.*

Lazzarato: *[I]t is never an individual who thinks, never an individual who creates. An individual who thinks and creates does so within a network of institutions (schools, theaters, museums, libraries, etc.), technologies (books, electronic networks, computers, etc.), and sources of public and private financing; an individual immersed in traditions of thought and aesthetic practices—engulfed in a circulation of signs, ideas, and tasks—that force him or her to think and create.*

I did it for the money: A foreword

For over a decade I have made my living in marketing. In 2014—between writing ad copy for an alcohol brand profited from by a labor union-busting millionaire, & writing ad copy for a telco brand chaired by a comprador whose taste for economic terrorism is evident in this penchant for buying off public utilities—I took on the side hustle of churning out a branded serialized novella for a brand of cheese.

Conflict documents every fragmentary draft I submitted for this project, in the order I submitted them. By doing so it is the story of a story unfolding under duress; “duress” here can be taken w/ the full range of its associations, from the coercion of wage slavery to the constraint of Oulipian proceduralism. More accurately, *Conflict* is a story as a conflict of interest, about a story composed in the conflict of interest; as a conflict of interest performed in the interest of a conflict of interest, *Conflict* is a poem.

That I took on the job as a side hustle constitutes a conflict of interest. The idea of an electronically distributed serial novella was developed specifically for a client serviced by the advertising agency I was then working for, by a team I wasn’t part of. I stepped in when the idea was approved, & someone finally had to actually write the thing out for release. While I cld have taken on the task as among the copywriters employed by the agency—the novella cld simply have been added to my list of deliverables for w/c I received a monthly salary—I didn’t. Instead, I took it on as a freelancer, earning in tranches a considerable writer’s fee on top of my pay as an employee. While I took on the job partly because I cld use the accumulative text for this poem, I need to underscore that my primary interest in it was as a means to augment my salary to cover a myriad practical expenses—i.e., *I did it for the money*.

More importantly, publishing this work now constitutes an even heightened conflict of interest. By releasing these drafts, I lay bare the device of an ad from my end as a precarious service provider—& doing so requires the repurposing of intellectual property whose ownership is questionable & the making public of private documents intended to be kept hidden. These alone endanger me legally, & put into question my professional ability to keep corporate documents—even those as petty as fragmentary drafts of a work of branded kitsch—secret, putting my employability at risk. Having working-class roots, I have neither savings nor a hedge fund for a safety net, & categorically no inheritance of cash or land to look forward to.

By attaching my name to the text—that is, by reflexively *authoring* the novella—I also end up taking responsibility for the manner the novella is written. This renders my craftsmanship suspect, regardless of the following so-called client mandates—compositional constraints—that came w/ the task:

- a. Released gradually to encourage more visits to the website thru w/c the novella cld be accessed, the narrative had to be structured episodically, each chapter ending w/ a sort of cliffhanger to generate anticipation for the next.
- b. To call attention to the brand, a couple of recipes, more or less detailed, had to be embedded in every chapter, prepared by the chef-protagonist after whom the novella had been titled.
- c. Every recipe must flag the cheese brand's indispensable role, w/ crucial attention paid to its taste & texture rhapsodically described.
- d. The overall narrative grammar must adhere to what had been perceived to be the demands of a socially constructed readership, that is, of the imagined community of a market w/ the following characteristics: housewives in their 30s-40s w/ limited spending power, who wld go online to expand their kitchen repertoire thru affordable means, weaned on fan & Wattpad fiction alongside primetime soap operas.

That I locate the production of poetry in the production I do for a living is not to shit on the prospect of autonomy in art but to underscore that the aspiration to make art is the aspiration to smash existing conditions of exploitation that remain in the way of autonomy.

CRASHING INTO THE KITCHEN

Feels good to be back, Cristiano tells himself. But he's not sure he means it.

He drags his luggage from the hallway and into the flat, his arm taut as his fingers tighten around the handle. The lean slope of a bicep bulges through a sleeve as he pushes the door in. Javelins of jetlag spear at his tired body from nowhere, but the scent of familiarity fends them off: Same old sofa, same old bed, he says in his head. Same old me, he continues. Though a little bit more exhausted than usual, a little bit more dead inside. Everything's tidy save for a plastic bag of empty beer bottles in the corner, a few bones from chicken wings that didn't make it into the bin, flecks of ketchup on the bedside table.

On the mirror of the dresser he looks at himself, an accumulation of years on his chin, venturing toward his cheeks. Five years in Europe, told in increments of hair, waiting for a trim. He pulls out a razor from the drawer. But as the blade draws closer to this smooth skin blemished only by strands of beard, a Polaroid taped on the corner of the dresser catches his attention: a *selfie* of him with Isabel, her arm around his neck, at a party from six years ago, the environs bathed in strobes, their cheeks flushed from being smashed on beer. On the photo he is wearing a beard, cut close to the chin.

I think I'll keep the beard, he says in his head. For old times' sake. He puts the razor back and fishes out a pair of scissors from the dresser. He sits intently, careful with every cut. Once in a while, he checks the photo, making sure he is doing it right. Once in a while, he slides his hair back, thick and dark brown, to see some more of his face, hoping to recognize himself. After a long trip you don't know yourself anymore sometimes.

Hours of flight cooped up on a plane make you want to just lie down and blanket yourself in dizziness—but Cristiano chooses life. More specifically, he chooses food. He ditches his baggage in the bedroom to head back out to the kitchen. Expecting to see no more than leftover jam and crackers inside the ref, he is surprised by a breathtaking abundance of edible content, dazzling in standard ref-interior fluorescent. On the filled-up egg-tray is a note: "Welcome back, man! Least I cld do was

stock up. Thanks for letting me crash awhile.” Good to know I still have friends, Cristiano sighs.

He takes from the ref and the cupboard everything he needs—butter, onions, bell peppers, eggs. Sheets of phyllo pastry. Italian sausage. And what relief he feels when his hazelnut eyes crowned with the most delicate lashes catch glimpses of some riveting ricotta, some mouthwatering Perfect Italiano Mozzarella, some piquant Perfect Italiano Pizza Plus. Enough for a tart to tart himself up.

There’s a coziness to working up a large pan at home again, he thinks, consoled, like he’s sautéing his feelings instead of the meat and the bell peppers and the onions. The cheerful cheeses combine with egg and the sausage mixture in a bowl, making a filling not so much for the tart but for the howling emptiness inside him. He spoons it over eight sheets of phyllo pastry he has brushed with melted butter and placed in a baking dish, then top it with even more brushed phyllo sheets. Talk about being cooped up. Then he cuts it up into squares like he feels he ought to be cut up into squares, and bake his pent-up self-loathing for 35 minutes.

When the Italian sausage and cheese tart comes out of the oven, he feels as miraculously golden, the crust a shade darker than his skin, begging for a bite. Golden! My five years spent learning to cook in Italy have paid off, he tells himself with some relief. Triumph buoys up from his gut—an elation he cannot distinguish from hunger. With much eagerness he takes a nibble, lets its smoothness roll on his ravenous tastebuds, cheeses erupting delicately in the most elegant of explosions. He tongues the moist filling as he would a woman’s tongue, small wet mound of texture, of pleasure—and upon realizing this, with a swiftness that matches his eagerness to eat, his elation dissipates.

He touches his lip with the tip of his tongue and closes his eyes. He concentrates on his palate, considers the familiar flavor. Salty-sweet, like sweat dripping down the nape of a loved one under the spell of sleep, what he tastes is not the tart.

What he tastes is Isabel.

He grabs a beer from the ref and proceeds to the sofa. Like a child about to crash from a sugar high he fidgets in his seat, looking for a position.

He crosses his legs and feels anxious. He lies horizontally with his head on the arm of the sofa and feels anxious. He turns on his side, back to the backrest, arm bent upward so his head rests on his hand—the position he used to be in when he shared the sofa with Isabel. He feels more anxious than ever.

She would also be lying in front of me, he reminisces. She would be sideways, her head also resting on her hand, her body facing the TV, her back pressed against him, her buttocks to his thighs. He would drape his arm down her waist in a haphazard half-hug, and his hand would crawl its way beneath her shirt, his palm attentive, his forefinger circling her navel over and over, over and over.

Over and over, like a story without end, a circle like a ring on the finger, in the shape of forever. A forever he wasn't sure he could handle. An uncertainty that has taken him five years to regret, five years till he could come back and make everything right.

The TV is on, but no image seems to register; he tries to watch, but ends up watching himself in his head watching TV with Isabel. Everything else is static. He sits back up again and takes a swig of the beer. He detects a chip on the mouth of the bottle and thinks of the scar on Isabel's mouth, detectable not so much by sight but by kiss—the littlest dent on the smoothest groove of that softest horizon of skin where her upper sea of lip and sky of philtrum meet.

Parched, he greets the bubbly cool of beer in his mouth with his tongue, hoping it was her. And just as he used to take his time with every kiss, he takes his time with his drink. After swallowing his sadness, a bitter aftertaste follows.

Slits of sun have begun to intrude, making their way through the slats of the blinds. A snake of sunlight slithers up his body strewn exhausted on the sofa, from his firm legs and chiseled abdomen, sneaking up through the shallow crest of his chest, crawling toward his half-open eyes. Startled into renewed wakefulness, he realizes he's been brooding sleeplessly for hours now, jetlag lurking in the corner.

He gets up and stretches and the day stretches with him. He throws some ground Sumatra in the coffee press, some giddy Beach Boys beats on the

phonograph. Volume full blast on “Surfin’ Safari.” The sun jumps some jacks with him. He jogs in place to make the endorphins jog around. Every lift of the barbell lifts the spirit, he likes to think, and while thinking it, flexes his arms gloriously in the sun.

He forgets about the delicious tart that darted him anyway toward depression, and decides to break his heartbreak fast with breakfast. Parmesan pancakes with whipped cream and pear compote ought to do the trick.

To the tune of “Surfer Girl,” he makes his compote, brings to a simmer some wine, some vanilla, some anise, some salt and pepper—then sugar, pears, and water. A mixture as syrupy as this song, as sweet as how he wants his day to start. Separately, he combines milk, melted butter, and egg. Ingredients crash into each other like bodies under the blanket, the bowl a bed of excitement.

He puts flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt together. What goes in last is the salty-sweet goodness of Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese, a bag whose light-yellow grated majesty he pours. He catches some of it in his palm, letting it fall through his fingers as if it were Isabel’s hair, a small waterfall of delicacy. The little parmesan he has left on his fingers, he brings to his lips and relishes with zest. He licks his fingers, remembering how he used to lick Isabel’s. Then he mixes in the milk and egg, he mixes in a dash of hope, he mixes in a pinch of good faith. He mixes everything till it’s nice and moist and ready for love.

And indeed it’s love what these pancakes are ready for, plump and fluffy right out of the pan, their surface like skin begging for contact. He touches one, his fingers sliding across its warmth, smooth like thighs waiting to be parted. He pokes, pushing his finger further in till he feels the fervid flesh of its interior—hot. Soft. Damp. Then with a quick flick of the wrist he flips each of them to a plate, lying flat on the porcelain, like a body preparing itself for a lover’s ministrations. He defiles the pristine brown of its surface, smearing it with whipped cream, and beside it readies the compote.

He grabs a mug striped green, white, and red—colors of the country he has just come from—and pours coffee into it from the press. He argues with the hipster in him about what music to play next, and the hipster

wins and takes some jazz off the shelf to replace the Beach Boys with—light taps on keyboard to accompany a light meal to start off this day light. The piano gives his step some lilt, and his spirits are up once more.

He takes the seat at the head of the table. He looks around and takes a sip of coffee, carefully drinking in the fact that he is having his breakfast alone. He tries not to mind it. Around him is luggage from a life left in Italy, waiting to be unpacked.

I'll tend to the bags after this meal, he tells himself.

I'll tend to the rest of my life after this meal, he tells himself.

As his knife cuts into the fluff of his pancake, he cuts into the meat of his predicament. He thinks: When I open those bags I will once again be opening my life to this place. And to be open is to be vulnerable. He knows that to put his things back on those shelves is a commitment to settle back into this life he has already once abandoned, to revisit a commitment he has already once left.

And just as he is about to bite into his parmesan pancake—just as he is about to bite into this life—he hears a knock on the door. He gets up and hears it again. He walks toward the door and hears it again. He reaches for the doorknob and hears it again.

He opens the door and sees his old life: Isabel.

She leans on the doorframe, holding a massive garbage bag filled with God knows what. She is wearing an old, white tank top, a cap, a pair of faded jeans. A strap of bra peeks from her shoulder. He catches a glimpse of navel as her top rises—same navel he used to play with. He smells vanilla on her neck, and the scent of the remains of sleep.

“You’ve probably told yourself it feels good to be back,” she says. “And I’m sure you didn’t mean a word of it.”

Jetlag is coming.

OLD RECIPES

Even the neighbors at the end of the hallway can hear his determination—a certainty in every fall of his foot on the floor. I will get her back, Cristiano tells himself, his pace as hurried as his breathing. I will get her back.

He dashes to the door of his flat, his arm taut as his grip tightens around the handle of his luggage. A flick of the wrist to turn the knob, and the lean slope of a bicep bulges through a sleeve as he pushes the door in with his palm. Javelins of jetlag spear at his tired body from nowhere, but the scent of familiarity fends them off: Same old sofa, same old bed. But how much of me has changed? he wonders.

On the mirror of the dresser he looks at himself, an accumulation of years on his chin. Five years in Europe, told in increments of stubble. A photo in the corner of the dresser mirror catches his eye—a selfie of him with Isabel caught on Polaroid, her arm around his neck, at a party from six years back, the environs bathed in strobes, their cheeks flushed from being smashed on beer. I'm not the same man, he observes. I can't be the same man who loses her all over again.

He opts to keep the thin beard as a reminder of change—a mark of growing up—but fishes out a pair of scissors to clean himself up anyway. He is good with his hands, his movement nimble, precise as any perfectionist's. In the midst of a quick trim, he examines the rest of his apartment on the mirror. Everything within view is brimming with past love: here was where they played Scrabble, there was where they shared a pot of hot cocoa. This was the table where he first served her dinner. That was the counter where they made pancakes before they made love.

He closes his eyes briefly, shutting them tight as if enough pressure would bring to view all the memories he has of this place, good and bad. Feeling his sight get watery, he proceeds to the bathroom to wash his face, to take the loneliness out of his eyes. Upon approaching the sink, he turns to the shower and parts the curtain: this was where we kissed last, he reminisces. He remembers her arms around his waist, her palm caressing the groove of his back, their torsos dripping with the shower-head's liquid blessing, their bodies warming each other in the cool midst

of water. He even remembers the faint taste of soap in her mouth. He closes the curtain and feels the jetlag creeping in. Hours of flight cooped up on a plane make you want to just lie down and blanket yourself in dizziness—but Cristiano deflects the nausea with a craving. A flood of craving prompted by the deluge of memory he is wading through.

He retreats to his haven—the kitchen. Expecting to see no more than leftover jam and crackers inside the ref, he is surprised by a breathtaking abundance of edible content, dazzling in standard ref-interior fluorescent. On the filled-up egg-tray is a note: “Welcome back, man! Least I cld do was stock up. Thanks for letting me crash awhile.” Good to know I still have friends, he sighs.

He takes from the ref and the cupboard everything he needs—butter, onions, bell peppers, eggs. Sheets of phyllo pastry. Italian sausage. And what relief he feels when his hazelnut eyes crowned with the most delicate lashes catch glimpses of some riveting ricotta, some seductive Perfect Italiano Mozzarella, some tempting Perfect Italiano Pizza Plus. Enough for a tart to tart himself up.

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He touches his lip with the tip of his tongue and closes his eyes. He

concentrates on his palate, considers the familiar flavor. Salty-sweet, like sweat dripping down the nape of a loved one under the spell of sleep, what he tastes is not the tart.

What he tastes is Isabel.

He grabs a beer from the ref and proceeds to the sofa. Like a child about to crash from a sugar high he fidgets in his seat, looking for a position. He crosses his legs and feels anxious. He lies horizontally with his head on the arm of the sofa and feels anxious. He turns on his side, back to the backrest, arm bent upward so his head rests on his hand—the position he used to be in when he shared the sofa with Isabel. He feels more anxious than ever.

She would also be lying in front of me, he recalls, imagining her exact position. She would be sideways, her head also resting on her hand, her body facing the TV, her back pressed against him, her buttocks to his thighs. He would drape his arm down her waist in a half-hug, and his hand would crawl its way beneath her shirt, his palm attentive, his forefinger circling her navel. Her hand would reach for his in a caress, leading him upward, further up the slopes where she wants to be touched, his palm feverish with longing.

The scene plays out in his head over and over, over and over. Like a story without end, a circle like a ring on the finger, in the shape of forever. A forever he wasn't sure he could handle. An uncertainty that has taken him five years to regret, five years till he could come back and make everything right. An uncertainty that made him run away.

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aftertaste follows.

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He gets up and stretches and the day stretches with him. He throws some ground Sumatra in the coffee press, some giddy Beach Boys beats on the phonograph. Volume full blast on "Surfin' Safari." The sun jumps some jacks with him. He jogs in place to make the endorphins jog around. Every lift of the barbell lifts the spirit, he likes to think, and while thinking it, flexes his arms gloriously in the sun.

Looking at the plate of unfinished tart, he decides to finish it. He tells himself: I didn't come back to leave things hanging again. Not even food. Not anymore. He takes a break from heartbreak with breakfast. With sweat down his brow, he takes the seat at the head of the table. He looks around and takes a sip of coffee, carefully drinking in the fact that he is having his meal alone, his breakfast of leftover tart. He tries not to mind the quiet, and welcomes it in fact. Gives me space to think, he thinks. He slips a forkful of tart in his mouth, and this time tastes more of the sweetness than the salt. More hope than despair. The taste of a new beginning. The zest of moving forward.

Around him is luggage from a life left in Italy, waiting to be unpacked. I'll tend to the bags after this meal, he tells himself. I'll tend to the rest of my life after this meal, he tells himself.

As his knife cuts further into the crust of his tart, he cuts into the meat of his predicament. He thinks: When I open those bags I will once again be opening my life to this place. And to be open is to be vulnerable. He knows that to put his things back on those shelves is a commitment to settle back into this life he has already once abandoned, to revisit a commitment he has already once left.

And just as he is about to take another bite—just as he is about to bite into this life—he hears a knock on the door. He gets up and hears it

again. He walks toward the door and hears it again. He reaches for the doorknob and hears it again.

He opens the door and sees his old life: Isabel.

She leans on the doorframe, holding a massive garbage bag filled with God knows what. She is wearing an old, white tank top, a cap, a pair of faded jeans. A strap of bra peeks from her shoulder. He catches a glimpse of navel as her top rises—same navel he used to play with. He smells vanilla on her neck, and the scent of sleep.

You've probably told yourself you will get me back, she says. And I'm here to tell you that you won't.

Jetlag finally knocks Cristiano out.

THE STOVE BURNS ANEW

Even the neighbors at the end of the hallway can hear his determination—a certainty in every fall of his foot on the floor. I will get her back, Cristiano tells himself, his pace as hurried as his breathing. I will get her back.

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head's liquid blessing, their bodies warming each other in the cool midst of water. He even remembers the faint taste of soap on her lips. He closes the curtain and feels the jetlag creeping in. Hours of flight cooped up on a plane make you want to just lie down and blanket yourself in dizziness—but Cristiano deflects the nausea with a craving. A flood of craving prompted by the deluge of memory he is wading through.

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What he tastes is Isabel.

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Looking at the plate of unfinished tart, he decides to finish it. He tells himself: I didn't come back to leave things hanging again. He intends to continue his meal just as he intends to find a way to continue his relationship with Isabel. With sweat down his brow, he takes the seat at the head of the table. He looks around and takes a sip of coffee, carefully drinking in the fact that he is having his meal alone, his breakfast of leftover tart. He tries not to mind the quiet, and welcomes it in fact. Gives me space to think, he thinks. He slips a forkful of tart in his mouth, and this time tastes more of the sweetness than the salt. More hope than despair. The taste of a new beginning. The zest of moving forward.

Around him is luggage from a life left in Italy, waiting to be unpacked. I'll tend to the bags after this meal, he tells himself. I'll tend to my life after this meal, he tells himself.

As his knife cuts further into the crust of his tart, he cuts into the meat of his predicament. He thinks: When I open those bags I will once again be opening my life to this place. And to be open is to be vulnerable. He knows that to put his things back on those shelves is a commitment to settle back into this life he has already once abandoned, to revisit a commitment he has already once left.

And just as he is about to take another bite—just as he is about to bite into this life—he hears a knock on the door. He gets up and hears it again. He walks toward the door and hears it again. He reaches for the doorknob and hears it again.

He opens the door and sees his old life: Isabel.

She leans on the doorframe, holding a massive garbage bag filled with God knows what. She is wearing an old, white tank top, a cap, a pair of faded jeans. Her hair falls on her shoulder as a lotus lies on a pond, a vision of grace. When she inhales, he catches a glimpse of navel as her top rises—same navel he used to play with. He smells vanilla on her neck, and the scent of sleep.

“You’ve probably told yourself you will get me back,” she says. “And I’m here to tell you that you won’t.”

Jetlag finally knocks Cristiano out.

COOKING UP A SECOND CHANCE

Even the neighbors at the end of the hallway can hear his determination—a certainty in every fall of his foot on the floor. I will get her back, Cristiano tells himself, his pace as hurried as his breathing. I will get her back.

He dashes to the door of his flat, his arm taut as his grip tightens around the handle of his luggage. A flick of the wrist to turn the knob, and the lean slope of a bicep bulges through a sleeve as he pushes the door in with his palm. Javelins of jetlag spear at his tired body from nowhere, but the scent of familiarity fends them off: Same old sofa, same old bed. But how much of me has changed? He wonders.

On the mirror of the dresser he looks at himself, an accumulation of years on his chin. Five years in Europe, told in increments of stubble. A photo in the corner of the dresser mirror catches his eye—a selfie of him with Isabel caught on Polaroid, her arm around his neck, at a party from six years back, the environs bathed in strobes, their cheeks flushed from being smashed on beer. I'm not the same man, he observes. I can't be the same man who loses her all over again.

He opts to keep the thin beard as a reminder of change—a mark of growing up—but fishes out a pair of scissors to clean himself up anyway. He is good with his hands, his movement nimble, precise as any perfectionist's. In the midst of a quick trim, he examines the rest of his apartment on the mirror. Everything within view is brimming with past love: here was where they played Scrabble, there was where they shared a pot of hot cocoa. This was the table where he first served her dinner. That was the counter where they made pancakes before they made love.

He closes his eyes briefly, shutting them tight as if enough pressure would bring to view all the memories he has of this place, good and bad. Feeling his sight get watery, he proceeds to the bathroom to wash his face, to take the loneliness out of his eyes. Upon approaching the sink, he turns to the shower and parts the curtain: this was where we kissed last, he reminisces. He remembers her arms around his waist, her palm caressing the groove of his back, their torsos dripping with the shower head's liquid blessing, their bodies warming each other in the cool midst

of water. He even remembers the faint taste of soap on her lips.

He closes the curtain and feels the jetlag creeping in. Hours of flight cooped up on a plane make you want to just lie down and blanket yourself in dizziness— but Cristiano deflects the nausea with a craving. A flood of craving prompted by the deluge of memory he is wading through.

He retreats to his haven—the kitchen. Expecting to see no more than leftover jam and crackers inside the ref, he is surprised by a breathtaking abundance of edible content, dazzling in standard ref-interior fluorescent. On the filled-up egg- tray is a note: “Welcome back, man! Least I could do was stock up. Thanks for letting me crash awhile.” Good to know I still have friends, he sighs.

He takes from the ref and the cupboard everything he needs—butter, onions, bell peppers, eggs, sheets of phyllo pastry and Italian sausage. And what relief he feels when his hazelnut eyes crowned with the most delicate lashes catch glimpses of some riveting ricotta, some seductive Perfect Italiano Mozzarella, some tempting Perfect Italiano Pizza Plus. Enough for a tart, to tart himself up.

There’s a coziness to working up a large pan at home again, he thinks, consoled, like he’s sautéing his feelings instead of the meat and the bell peppers and the onions. The cheerful cheeses combine with egg and the sausage mixture in a bowl, making a filling not so much for the tart but for the howling emptiness inside him. He spoons it over eight sheets of phyllo pastry he has brushed with melted butter and placed in a baking dish, then top it with even more brushed phyllo sheets. Talk about being cooped up. Then he cuts it up into squares, baking his relief for 35 minutes into a crusty magnificence.

When the Italian sausage and cheese tart comes out of the oven, he feels as miraculously golden, the crust a shade darker than his skin, begging for a bite. Golden! Triumph buoys up from his gut—an elation he cannot distinguish from hunger. With much eagerness he takes a nibble, lets its smoothness roll on his ravenous taste buds, cheeses erupting delicately in the most elegant of explosions. As in the most intimate of kisses, his tongue meets the moist filling as if it, too, were a tongue—small wet mound of texture, pleasure—and upon realizing this, with a swiftness that matches his eagerness to eat, his elation dissipates.

He touches his lip with the tip of his tongue and closes his eyes. He concentrates on his palate, considers the familiar flavor. Salty-sweet, like sweat dripping down the nape of a loved one under the spell of sleep, what he tastes is not the tart.

What he tastes is Isabel.

He grabs a beer from the ref and proceeds to the sofa. Like a child about to crash from a sugar high he fidgets in his seat, looking for a position. He crosses his legs and feels anxious. He lies horizontally with his head on the arm of the sofa and feels anxious. He turns on his side, back to the backrest, arm bent upward so his head rests on his hand—the position he used to be in when he shared the sofa with Isabel. He feels more anxious than ever.

She would also be lying in front of me, he recalls, imagining her exact position.

She would be sideways, her head also resting on her hand, her body facing the TV, her back pressed against him, her buttocks to his thighs. He would drape his arm down her waist in a half-hug, and his hand would crawl its way beneath her shirt, his palm attentive, and his forefinger circling her navel. Her hand would reach for his in a caress, leading him upward, further up the slopes where she wants to be touched, his palm feverish with longing.

The scene plays out in his head over and over, over and over. Like a story without end, a circle like a ring on the finger, in the shape of forever. A forever he wasn't sure he could handle. An uncertainty that has taken him five years to regret, five years till he could come back and make everything right. An uncertainty that made him run away.

He takes another swig of the beer. Parched, he welcomes the bubbly cool of beer in his mouth, letting the liquid slide slowly. Just as he used to take his time with every kiss, he takes his time with his drink. After swallowing his sadness, a bitter aftertaste follows.

Slits of sun have begun to intrude, making their way through the slats of the blinds. A snake of sunlight slithers up his body strewn exhausted on the sofa, from his firm legs and chiseled abdomen, sneaking up through

the shallow crest of his chest, crawling toward his half-open eyes. Startled into renewed wakefulness, he realizes he's been brooding sleeplessly for hours now.

He gets up and stretches and the day stretches with him. He jumps some jacks with the sun. He jogs in place to make the endorphins jog around. Every lift of the barbell lifts the spirit, he likes to think, and while thinking it, flexes his arms gloriously toward the sky.

Looking at the plate of unfinished tart, he decides to finish it. He tells himself: I didn't come back to leave things hanging again. He intends to continue his meal just as he intends to find a way to continue his relationship with Isabel. With sweat down his brow, he takes the seat at the head of the table. He looks around and takes a sip of coffee, carefully drinking in the fact that he is having his meal alone, his breakfast of left-over tart. He tries not to mind the quiet, and welcomes it in fact. Gives me space to think, he thinks. He slips a forkful of tart in his mouth, and this time tastes more of the sweetness than the salt. More hope than despair. The taste of a new beginning. The zest of moving forward.

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“You’ve probably told yourself you will get me back,” she says. “And I’m here to tell you that you won’t.”

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ROMANCE REHEATED

Where am I? Cristiano wakes with a startle.

His neck feels stiff from lying on the couch. He reaches up to massage its firm curve, made firmer by tension, sweat sliding down its slope. As he turns to his side, his cheek feels the velvety arm of the sofa—soaked, like the white sando that clings to his torso dampened by noon.

Wait—a white sando? I don't remember changing into a white sando.

He looks around, a bit groggy, but finally recognizes the apartment surrounding him: it's his. He sits up, wipes the sweat off his brow, then reaches over the sharp turn of his shoulder to ease a knot of numbness on his back; a few presses with his strong fingers, and it's gone. He gets up, slowly, trying to think back to the occurrences that led to him lying on the couch. He can't seem to remember anything. In frustration, he scratches the back of his head, ruffling up his crown of dark brown hair, a couple of strands falling.

Wired to automatically walk toward food, he is brought to the kitchen by his instincts. Uncertain, his steps are light, tentative, soundless. He inspects the counter, the dining table; he peers into the sink—nothing. Weird, he thinks, I thought I made myself a meal last night, or was it early this morning? Then, like a baseball bat to the head of a thief, a flash of realization smacks him.

Isabel was here!

Ridiculous, he surmises. A hearty guffaw builds deep inside him, crawls up his esophagus a laugh, reaches his throat a chuckle, but exits his mouth a mere snicker. She couldn't have been here—could she? He toys with the thought nervously for a while, then quickly dismisses it. Nah, he chortles with some worry, it must have been a dream. A dream in which he had a meal interrupted by her arrival, a dream in which... What exactly did happen in the dream?

He remembers eating. Trying to recall what it was he ate in his imagina-

tion, he saunters to the bathroom for a shower. He slips his pants off, the corduroy gliding down his thighs, collecting like a lake of fabric around him. He undoes his boxers, pulling the garter away from his waist, revealing the carved V that dips down his navel. And when he takes off his shirt—the bottom edge of it brushing up and against the rise and cleft of his abdomen—he takes a whiff of a familiar scent when it touches his nose, a scent that once again catches him by surprise. The scent of vanilla. Isabel.

As he feels the warm water crash on his scalp and split into a hundred streams slipping on and off him, he thinks of Isabel, how she couldn't—shouldn't—have been here, but how so badly he wants her to be, now, with him, in the shower. He closes his eyes, imagining her in her white tank-top, imagining her parting the curtain, imagining her stepping into the shared wetness of the room—him pulling her toward him under the showerhead. Dripping, her top clings to her tight, the stark silhouette of her palpable to his gaze and grasp. He gasps. Water slides down the back of his head, curling forward, coming together in the small groove amid his clavicle and neck—a shallow pool of soap, water, and flesh—into which Isabel's tongue makes a delirious dive.

Suddenly the heat of the shower begins to scald. Too hot. He snaps out of his reverie, red with embarrassment. He turns the knob to lower the shower temperature—much, much lower. Sufficiently cool, to douse his fiery passion, ice his heat, calm his desire hardening into fullness. He then proceeds with his bath unceremoniously, as fast as he can.

After toweling himself to dryness, he leaves the shower, feeling fresh. He looks in the bathroom mirror, pleased by the squeaky sparkle on his face. But the grime of worry clings to him fast: Was it really Isabel I smelled on my clothes?

Stepping out of the bathroom, he is greeted by confirmation—a big, black garbage bag of confirmation. She really did drop by! The bag lies quiet by the bathroom doorway, visible only once you close the door, its opening neatly tied with straw. Burgeoning with mystery, the bag looks heavy, almost ominous in its weight, as if it held a corpse within.

And it might as well have been a corpse—for upon opening it, Cristiano finds the remains of an old relationship, now moved on to an afterlife,

after love: a pile of love letters, yellowed mildly by the years, compiled by thin rope; a teddy bear the size of a toddler, patches of it now going bald; a 24-inch toy replica of the human anatomy, male, with felt-tip scribbling on the thigh, “hug this if you miss me,” barely legible; some clothes, all his; a variety of books, from novels to gonzo journalism, some comics, mostly cookbooks; even a small desk fan, of which he has fond memories, once providing what little breeze it could muster, aimed at the heated ministrations taking place in bed.

Cristiano reaches further into the garbage bag, his fingers feeling a small metallic box at the far end. He wraps his fingers around the object, then fishes it out—a wind-up musical box. His eyes widen upon seeing it, then turn moist, then turn watery. He turns the key behind it; metallic clangs of varying pitches constellate into a recognizable rhythm. “Moon River” fills the air as tears fill his eyes. And as the crescent moon impaled on the top of the box rotates, he begins to feel as if the ground itself beneath his feet were rotating, too, sadness slowly impaling his heart. I’m crossing you in style someday, he whispers softly.

It shouldn’t be the bathroom that’s called the comfort room—it should be the kitchen, he jokes to himself. But he means it anyway. For here he finds not just solace, but the ingredients he needs for the spinach lasagna he wants. And he wants it almost as badly as he wants Isabel. Almost.

He rips open a bag of Perfect Italiano Mozzarella cheese, then fingers its tasty consistency to excite his already-excitabile senses. Next, he frees from its container with a pair of trusty scissors some grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese, its salty aroma escaping into the air and wafting into his nostrils. He takes a pinch of it—yellow splendor of powder on his fingertips—rubbing his fingers against each other to feel its grainy elegance, its rough delicacy. He mixes these in a bowl with parsley and egg, blending them to perfection.

Then he heats up a pan, browns some meat. Adds onions, garlic, carrots, celery. For five minutes he sautés, the scent of sea evaporating on the pan, leaving the delicate flavor of salt mixing with everything else in the midst of heat. Then after draining the meat—moist, like his chest glistening in the glint of early afternoon—he adds some whipped cream

cheese and blanched spinach leaves. He watches them mix as he recalls his fingers mixing with Isabel's in the tightest of clasps, once upon a time. A ritual clasp they did every time they would walk together, side by side, along the beach or promenade, by light of sun or moon—what do the details matter now, it was being with each other that mattered.

Memory stirs as he stirs in the marinara sauce and water. A cup of meat sauce, layers of lasagna noodles, another cup of meat sauce, a third of the cheese mixture—all of these come together on the orgiastic bed of culinary passion that is the baking dish. He repeats the layers twice, topping them with the remaining noodles, then more generously with even more meat sauce, even more cheese—ingredients as perfect as the perfect Italiano that he is in the kitchen. Then after covering it with buttered foil, he lets it bake for an hour.

When he pulls the lasagna out of the oven, a fog of excitement hijacks his senses. The exuberance of hot cheese, delightfully burnt in patches, emits a fragrance he can almost taste. His grasp firm around the handle of the knife, he carves into his creation deep—its flesh parting succulently as his pointed implement penetrates, further and further, an endless penetration—till its opening lets out a moist sigh, fragrant steam, juice of meat crashing with the juice of melted cheese. Layers upon layers of cheese.

And layers upon layers his delight equally is, satisfied by the hot explosion of flavor in his mouth, a forkful of it gnashed lovingly by his teeth. A bit of juice seeps out from between his lips; he catches it on his chin, some of it hanging on stray strands of beard, then wipes it off with his thumb, which he then licks the flavor off of. Gratified, he begins to entertain more positive thoughts.

For instance: If Isabel resented me so much, why would she even bother to bring me to the couch, put me in a position to rest? Butterflies in his stomach, in the tasty company of munched lasagna, begin to go wild. So now I know why I could smell her on my clothes. She took off my polo, then replaced it with the sando. That must mean she cares, right?

But then, if she wanted me to know that she still cared—why would she leave all the remnants of our past with me?

He spends the rest of his afternoon ponderous, sitting back on the couch as the TV plays a rerun. But his mind's eye watches a different sort of show, a different sort of rerun: that of his previous life with Isabel, playing over and over in the cinema of his head.

Six pm, he knocks on Pocholo's door. He's at the flat of an old college buddy, the one who crashed at his place while he was away in Italy. He anticipates familiar faces, refuge in the company of old friends—all of them presumably hungry at this hour.

We've missed you! everyone exclaims as they see him. Yeah right, you just miss my cooking, he retorts with a smile. The usual ceremony takes place every time a homecoming takes place: pats on the back, embraces exchanged, conversations of varying levels of ease and awkwardness, kisses on the cheek that sometimes mean something more, sometimes not.

The host graciously leads him to the kitchen, where most of them expect him to be in the next hour or so, preparing everyone's dinner. These bastards, he laughs, making me cook at my own welcome-back party. He ransacks Pocholo's pantry, searching for noodles with which to prepare his friends' favorite dish by him: a crusty curiosity called spaghetti pie. Never mind that he just had pasta a few hours ago; I'm doing this for my buddies, he thinks.

With the swiftness of a master he cooks and drains the noodles. Al dente like his arms, like his conviction. He doesn't trust Pocholo's taste in cheese, however, so he brought his own, more of the stash of Perfect Italiano Parmesan he takes stock of, digging for it in his leather knapsack. Half the cheese he tosses in with egg, the strands of spaghetti now lathered with cream, the mix of which he places in a pie plate, careful to press on its bottom and upside to form the crust.

Done with preparing the meat, he then fuses it with spaghetti sauce—a rich and meaty consistency he spoons into the spaghetti crust. A hearty sprinkling of mozzarella and parmesan blankets the creamy body of taste resting on its crusty bed. After slipping all the delightful whole of it into the oven for baking, he leans back on the kitchen counter, whiling the

time away in stasis.

He whistles a tune, but doesn't catch himself whistling a familiar one—"Moon River," yet again. And just in time, really, for in the midst of his whistle comes the figure he most associates with it: In the kitchen now, with him, enters Isabel, in a black sheer frock, diaphanous in the kitchen's loud fluorescent.

Welcome back, she says. Thanks, he says. So, she says. So, he says. She gives him a light hug—the most fleeting hug he has ever experienced in his life. I'll maybe just wait for you outside, I mean, I'll just maybe wait *for the food* outside, she says. And he nods, unsure whether he should smile or keep a blank stare. He goes for something in between, like a smirk bent wrong, giving off a goofy look as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words for it.

Yes? she asks. Nothing, he replies. I know you want to ask me something, she says. But ask me later, she continues.

She steps out of the kitchen, the door swinging in her wake. Her skirt sashays as she saunters out of the premises. Elegant as ever, this woman, effortlessly so. But the air she leaves is thick with tension, as thick as the pie Cristiano pulls out of the oven, steaming hot.

Hands in mittens, he takes a deep breath, and lifts the tray of spaghetti pie off the counter. He lingers a few minutes, rehearsing a fake smile on his face, knowing he will have to wear it all throughout dinner, all throughout the evening.

As he takes his first step toward the kitchen door, he looks into the dish longingly, his eyes glazed with a strange mix of emotions, despair and supplication perhaps, as if the dish were an old friend. Wish me luck, spaghetti pie, he whispers, it's going to be one weird night.

It's going to be one weird night indeed.

ROMANCE REHEATED

Where am I? Cristiano wakes with a startle.

His neck feels stiff from lying on the couch—must be the December breeze settling on his muscles. He reaches up to massage its firm curve, made firmer by tension, sweat sliding down its slope. As he turns to his side, his cheek feels the velvety arm of the sofa—soaked, like the white undershirt that clings to his torso like a second skin, made diaphanous by sweat yielded by Yuletide noon.

Wait—a white undershirt? I don't remember changing into this.

He looks around, a bit groggy, but finally recognizes the apartment surrounding him: it's his. He sits up, wipes the sweat off his brow, then reaches over the sharp turn of his shoulder to ease a knot of numbness on his back; a few presses with his strong fingers, and it's gone. He gets up, slowly, trying to think back to the occurrences that led to him lying on the couch. He can't seem to remember anything. In frustration, he scratches the back of his head, ruffling up his crown of dark brown hair, a couple of strands falling.

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He remembers eating. Trying to recall what it was he ate in his imagination, he saunters to the bathroom for a shower. He slips his pants off, the corduroy gliding down his thighs, collecting like a lake of fabric around him. He undoes his boxers, pulling the garter away from his waist, revealing the carved V that dips down his navel. And when he takes off his shirt—the bottom edge of it brushing up and against the rise and cleft of his abdomen—he takes a whiff of a familiar scent when it touches his nose, a scent that once again catches him by surprise. The scent of vanilla. Isabel.

At first the water comes out cold, chilled by the weather. Then as the heater kicks in he feels the warm water crash on his scalp and split into a hundred streams slipping on and off him. He thinks of Isabel, how she couldn't—shouldn't—have been here, but how so badly he wants her to be, now, with him, in the shower. He closes his eyes, imagining her in her white tank-top, imagining her parting the curtain, imagining her stepping into the shared wetness of the room—him pulling her toward him under the showerhead. Dripping, her top clings to her tight, the stark silhouette of her palpable to his gaze and grasp. He gasps. Water slides down the back of his head, curling forward, coming together in the small groove amid his clavicle and neck—a shallow pool of soap, water, and flesh—into which Isabel's tongue makes a delirious dive.

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And it might as well have been a corpse—for upon opening it, Cristiano finds the remains of an old relationship, now moved on to an afterlife,

after love: a pile of love letters, yellowed mildly by the years, compiled by thin rope; a teddy bear the size of a toddler, patches of it now going bald; a 24-inch toy replica of the human anatomy, male, with felt-tip scribbling on the thigh, “hug this if you miss me,” barely legible; some shirts, all his; a variety of books, from novels to gonzo journalism, some comics, mostly cookbooks; a small desk fan, of which he has fond memories, once providing what little breeze it could muster, aimed at the heated ministrations taking place in the room; even a graying snowglobe which they bought some Christmases ago, whose snowflakes would drizzle on the reindeer below when it shook on the bedside in the rhythm of the shaking of the bed.

Out of the bag he also pulls a pair of boxers, the regularity of its checkers interrupted by a stain. He snickers upon recall of what it’s a stain of—the crusty remains of whipped cream, from the first breakfast he ever made her: Parmesan pancakes with whipped cream and pear compote. Reverie takes over, as well the imagined scent of a kitchen brimming with romance. He recalls her emerging from the shower in a bathrobe, catching him make his compote, bringing to a simmer some wine, some vanilla, some anise, some salt and pepper—then sugar, pears, and water. A mixture as syrupy as the song on the vinyl player then—“Surfer Girl” by the Beach Boys—as sweet as how he had wanted their day to start. Separately, he combined milk, melted butter, egg. In her gaze, the ingredients crashed into each other like bodies under the blanket, the bowl a bed of excitement.

In the kitchen of his memory he put flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt together. What went in last was the salty-sweet goodness of Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese, a bag whose light-yellow grated majesty he poured. He caught some of it in his palm, like yellowing snow, letting it fall through his fingers as if it were Isabel’s hair, a small waterfall of delicacy. The little parmesan he had left on his fingers, he brought to his lips and relished with zest to tickle Isabel’s fancy. Then he mixed in the milk and egg, a dash of desire, a pinch of pining; he mixed everything till it’s nice and moist and ready for love.

And indeed it was love what those pancakes had been ready for, plump and fluffy right out of the pan, their surface like skin begging for contact. After serving them to her, he touched one, his fingers sliding across its warmth, smooth like thighs waiting to be parted. Then he poked, push-

ing his finger further in till he felt the fervid flesh of its interior. Hot—soft—damp. Then with a quick flick of the wrist he flipped each of them onto a plate, then winked at the woman of his dreams at the head of the table. As if he were a master in the bedroom as much as he was a master in the kitchen, he defiled the pristine brown of pancake's surface, smearing it with whipped cream, and beside it readied the compote. He remembers Isabel taking a dab of the whipped cream with her fingers, then caressing his thigh by the opening of his boxers, leaving a daub of white on the patterned fabric.

Feeling elated, Cristiano reaches further into the garbage bag, his fingers feeling a small metallic box at the far end. He wraps his fingers around the object, then fishes it out—a wind-up musical box. His eyes widen upon seeing it, then turn moist, then turn watery. He turns the key behind it; metallic clangs of varying pitches constellate into a recognizable rhythm. “Moon River” fills the air as tears fill his eyes. And as the crescent moon impaled on the top of the box rotates, he begins to feel as if the ground itself beneath his feet were rotating, too, sadness slowly impaling his heart. How apt for this memento of their parting to follow his memory of their first breakfast.

It had been a gift from her for his birthday, during a phase he was fixated on old songs. With a penchant for the dramatic he thought it a fitting gesture, the return of a gift, to conduct a breaking-up with. Two drifters off to see the world, the song went, there's such a lot of world to see. But I don't think we're after the same rainbow's end, he told her. Or maybe we are, but I'm not ready to go there with you—or with anyone for that matter. Not yet. His cowardice had closed the door on her, but love kept a small opening intact. An opening that now burst widely ajar.

It shouldn't be the bathroom that's called the comfort room—it should be the kitchen, he jokes to himself. But he means it anyway. For here he finds not just solace, but the ingredients he needs for the spinach lasagna he wants. And he wants this lasagna badly—almost as badly as he wants Isabel back.

He rips open a bag of Perfect Italiano Mozzarella cheese, then fingers its tasty consistency to excite his already-excitabile senses. Next, he frees

from its container with a pair of trusty scissors some grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese, its salty aroma escaping into the air and wafting into his nostrils. He takes a pinch of it—yellow splendor of powder on his fingertips—rubbing his fingers against each other to feel its grainy elegance, its rough delicacy. He mixes these in a bowl with parsley and egg, blending them to perfection. With contentment he breathes in, deeply, feeling his resolve to get his love back collecting inside him.

Then he heats up a pan, browns some meat. Adds onions, garlic, carrots, celery—a Christmas-y combination of color. For five minutes he sautés, the scent of sea evaporating on the pan, leaving the delicate flavor of salt mixing with everything else in the midst of heat. Then after draining the meat—moist, like his chest glistening in the glint of early afternoon—he adds some whipped cream cheese and blanched spinach leaves. He watches them mix as he recalls his fingers mixing with Isabel's in the tightest of clasps, once upon a time. A ritual clasp they did every time they would walk together, side by side, along the beach or promenade, by light of sun or moon—what do the details matter now, it was being with each other that mattered.

Memory stirs as he stirs in the marinara sauce and water. A cup of meat sauce, layers of lasagna noodles, another cup of meat sauce, a third of the cheese mixture—all of these come together on the orgiastic bed of culinary passion that is the baking dish. He repeats the layers twice, topping them with the remaining noodles, then more generously with even more meat sauce, even more cheese—ingredients as perfect as the perfect Italiano that he is in the kitchen. Then after covering it with buttered foil, he lets it bake for an hour.

When he pulls the lasagna out of the oven, a fog of excitement hijacks his senses. The exuberance of hot cheese, delightfully burnt in patches, emits a fragrance he can almost taste. His grasp firm around the handle of the knife, he carves into his creation deep—its flesh parting succulently as his pointed implement penetrates, further and further, an endless penetration—till its opening lets out a moist sigh, fragrant steam, juice of meat crashing with the juice of melted cheese. Layers upon layers of cheese.

And layers upon layers his delight equally is, satisfied by the hot explosion of flavor in his mouth, a forkful of it gnashed lovingly by his teeth.

A bit of juice seeps out from between his lips; he catches it on his chin, some of it hanging on stray strands of beard, then wipes it off with his thumb, which he then licks the flavor off of. Gratified, he begins to entertain more positive thoughts.

For instance: If Isabel resented me so much, why would she even bother to bring me to the couch, put me in a position to rest? Butterflies in his stomach, in the tasty company of munched lasagna, begin to go wild. So now I know why I could smell her on my clothes. She took off my polo, then replaced it with the sando. That must mean she cares, right?

He finishes his meal, even licking the remaining cheese off the plate, his lasagna punctuated by optimism. I'll get her back, he whispers to no one in particular, I'll get her back, certain in his resolve.

Six pm, he knocks on Pocholo's door, a stuffed fabric Christmas tree hanging on the knob. He's at the flat of an old college buddy, the one who crashed at his place while he was away in Italy. He anticipates familiar faces, refuge in the company of old friends—all of them presumably hungry at this hour.

We've missed you!, everyone exclaims as they see him. Yeah right, you just miss my cooking, he retorts with a smile. The usual ceremony takes place every time a homecoming takes place: pats on the back, embraces exchanged, conversations of varying levels of ease and awkwardness, kisses on the cheek that sometimes mean something more, sometimes not.

But no one told him of another guest whose presence he has not anticipated. At the far end of the couch sits Isabel, her figure lithe, her silhouette lissome against the light of the lamp beside her. Despite this distance he catches her fragrance—the scent of vanilla escaping from her chest and neck, slipping out of the underside of her dress, then finally reaching his nostrils, every pore of him now rapt with attention. She looks away, refusing to even acknowledge his presence, leaving him frozen a couple of meters from the door.

Breaking the awkwardness, the host cuts in—Ahem!, he clears his throat

sans hesitation—to lead Cristiano to the kitchen, where most of them expect him to be in the next hour or so, preparing everyone’s dinner. You bastards, he laughs, making me cook at my own welcome-back party. We couldn’t deprive you of your joy, Pocholo retorts, the least we can do is leave you to your cooking. Cristiano ransacks the pantry, searching for noodles with which to prepare his friends’ favorite dish by him: a crusty curiosity called spaghetti pie. Never mind that he just had pasta a few hours ago; I’m doing this for my buddies, he thinks. Never mind that Isabel gave me the cold shoulder; I’ll warm that ice queen up like I used to.

With the swiftness of a master he cooks and drains the noodles. Al dente like his arms, like his conviction. He doesn’t trust Pocholo’s taste in cheese, however, so he has brought his own, more of the stash of Perfect Italiano Parmesan he takes stock of, digging for it in his leather knapsack. Half the cheese he tosses in with egg, the strands of spaghetti now lathered with cream, the mix of which he places in a pie plate, careful to press on its bottom and upside to form the crust.

Done with preparing the meat, he then fuses it with spaghetti sauce—a rich and meaty consistency he spoons into the spaghetti crust. A hearty sprinkling of mozzarella and parmesan blankets the creamy body of taste resting on its crusty bed. After slipping all the delightful whole of it into the oven for baking, he leans back on the kitchen counter, whiling the time away in stasis.

He has intended to whistle a carol while working, but out of his lips come a more familiar tune instead—“Moon River,” yet again. And just in time, really, for in the midst of his whistle comes the figure he most associates with it: In the kitchen now, with him, enters Isabel, in her glorious black sheer frock, diaphanous in the kitchen’s loud fluorescent.

Welcome back, she says. Thanks, he says. Merry Christmas, she says. It’s not yet Christmas, he says. Want me to make it feel like Christmas yet? she asks. I thought you were going to pretend you didn’t see me the whole night, he responds. She gives him a light hug—the most fleeting hug he has ever experienced in his life. I’ll maybe just wait for you outside, I mean, I’ll just maybe wait for the food outside, she says. But don’t you want to have a first taste, he asks, unsure whether he should smile or keep a blank stare. He goes for something in between, like a smirk bent wrong, giving off a goofy look as if he wanted to say something but

couldn't find the words for it.

Sure, why not, she replies. From a drawer he fishes out a fork, digs into the lasagna with it. Steaming hot, a chunk of goodness at the silver tip of the utensil. He blows gently to cool it down—gently, gently—and as he blows he steps closer and closer to Isabel, closer and closer: Step, blow. Step, blow. One more step and he cranes his neck toward her to blow her a surprise kiss. But with her lips an inch away from his lips she retracts and turns her back to him.

She steps out of the kitchen, the door swinging in her wake. Her skirt sashays as she saunters out of the premises. Elegant as ever, this woman, effortlessly so. But the air she leaves is thick with tension, as thick as the pie Cristiano has pulled out of the oven, as thick his face doing the stunt he just tried to pull on her.

Hands in mittens, he takes a deep breath—At least I tried, he thinks, but good thing I have the rest of the night to try harder—and lifts the tray of spaghetti pie off the counter. For a few minutes he lingers, rehearsing a fake smile on his face, knowing he will have to wear it all throughout dinner, all throughout the evening. As he takes his first step toward the kitchen door, he looks into the dish longingly, his eyes glazed with a strange mix of emotions, despair and supplication perhaps, as if the dish were an old friend. Wish me luck, spaghetti pie, he whispers, it's going to be one weird night.

One weird night indeed, for abruptly he spots in the dining room not Isabel but her absence, a gaping Isabel-less absence. He looks in all directions—no trace of her, save for the remains of her scent. In mild panic he leaves the dish on the table, his thumb burning from inadvertent contact with its hot surface, and looks in the direction of the door: it is open. Bewildered by his actions, his friends look on, stunned by his manic movement, fidgeting in all directions but getting nowhere. Shit, shit, I have to get her back in here, I have to get her back, he shouts inside his head, the volume of his voice falling only on his mind's ears.

He runs to the doorway and looks to his left—nothing. Then he looks to his right, and catches a good few meters into the corridor and into the service elevator a glimpse of Isabel, flanked by the frames of the lift about to close, leaving Pocholo's flat without even saying goodbye—

without even tasting the dish he had been hoping he could impress her with—her arm around the waist of a man he has never seen before, the arm of this man draped on the nape of this woman whom he has longed for throughout the duration of his sojourn—this woman he intends to chase after, to get back, to be with, to reunite with—this woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with—now being taken away from him by this stranger, this strange jerk, this nameless asshole. This abominable fuckface.

Like mad he dashes to the elevator, but the closer he gets the smaller the gap between the closing frames becomes. By the time he pushes the Down button, the door wouldn't open anymore. He is too late. The lift has begun its dreary descent, and along with it descends his hope. It's going to be a cold Christmas.

ROMANCE REHEATED

Where am I? Cristiano wakes with a startle.

His neck feels stiff from lying on the couch—must be the strange weather settling on his muscles. He reaches up to massage its firm curve, made firmer by tension, sweat sliding down its slope. As he turns to his side, his cheek feels the velvety arm of the sofa—soaked, like the white undershirt that clings to his torso like a second skin, made diaphanous by sweat yielded by noon.

Wait—a white undershirt? I don't remember changing into this.

He looks around, a bit groggy, but finally recognizes the apartment surrounding him: it's his. He sits up, wipes the sweat off his brow, then reaches over the sharp turn of his shoulder to ease a knot of numbness on his back; a few presses with his strong fingers, and it's gone. He gets up, slowly, trying to think back to the occurrences that led to him lying on the couch. He can't seem to remember anything. In frustration, he scratches the back of his head, ruffling up his crown of dark brown hair, a couple of strands falling.

Wired to automatically walk toward food, he is brought to the kitchen by his instincts. Uncertain, his steps are light, tentative, soundless. He inspects the counter, the dining table; he peers into the sink—nothing. Weird, he thinks, I thought I made myself a meal last night, or was it early this morning? Then, like a baseball bat to the head of a thief, realization smacks him.

Isabel was here!

Ridiculous, he surmises. A hearty guffaw builds deep inside him, crawls up his esophagus a laugh, reaches his throat a chuckle, but exits his mouth a mere snicker. She couldn't have been here—could she? He toys with the thought nervously for a while, then quickly dismisses it. Nah, he chortles with some worry, it must have been a dream. A dream in which he had a meal interrupted by her arrival, a dream in which... What exactly did happen in the dream?

He remembers eating. Trying to recall what it was he ate in his imagination, he saunters to the bathroom for a shower. He slips his pants off, the corduroy gliding down his thighs, collecting like a lake of fabric around him. He undoes his boxers, pulling the garter away from his waist, revealing the carved V that dips down his navel. And when he takes off his shirt—the bottom edge of it brushing up and against the rise and cleft of his abdomen—he takes a whiff of a familiar scent when it touches his nose, a scent that once again catches him by surprise. The scent of vanilla. Isabel.

At first the water comes out cold, chilled by the weather. Then as the heater kicks in he feels the warm water crash on his scalp and split into a hundred streams slipping on and off him. He thinks of Isabel, how she couldn't—shouldn't—have been here, but how so badly he wants her to be, now, with him, in the shower. He closes his eyes, imagining her in her white tank-top, imagining her parting the curtain, imagining her stepping into the shared wetness of the room—him pulling her toward him under the showerhead. Dripping, her top clings to her tight, the stark silhouette of her palpable to his gaze and grasp. He gasps. Water slides down the back of his head, curling forward, coming together in the small groove amid his clavicle and neck—a shallow pool of soap, water, and flesh—into which Isabel's tongue makes a delirious dive.

Suddenly—too hot!—the heat of the shower begins to scald. He snaps out of it, red with embarrassment. He turns the knob to lower the shower temperature. Sufficiently cool, to douse his fiery passion, ice his heat, calm his desire hardening into fullness. After unceremoniously toweling himself to dryness, he leaves the shower, feeling fresh. He looks in the bathroom mirror, pleased by the squeaky sparkle on his face. But the grime of worry clings to him fast: Was it really Isabel I smelled on my clothes?

Stepping out of the bathroom, he is greeted by confirmation—a big, black garbage bag of confirmation. She really did drop by! The bag lies quiet by the bathroom doorway, visible only once you close the door, its opening neatly tied with straw. Burgeoning with mystery, the bag looks heavy, almost ominous in its weight, like it kept a corpse.

And it might as well have been a corpse—for upon opening it, Cristiano

finds the remains of an old relationship, love in the afterlife: a pile of love letters, yellowed mildly by the years, compiled by thin rope; a teddy bear the size of a toddler, patches of it now going bald; a 24-inch toy replica of the human anatomy, male, with felt-tip scribbling on the thigh, “hug this if you miss me,” barely legible; some shirts, all his; a variety of books, from novels to gonzo journalism, some comics, mostly cookbooks; a small desk fan, of which he has fond memories, once providing what little breeze it could muster, aimed at the heated ministrations taking place in the room; even a graying snowglobe which they bought some Christmases ago, whose snowflakes would drizzle on the reindeer below when it shook on the bedside in the rhythm of the shaking of the bed.

Out of the bag he also pulls a pair of boxers, the regularity of its checkers interrupted by a stain. He snickers upon recall of what it’s a stain of—the crusty remains of whipped cream, from the first breakfast he ever made her: Parmesan pancakes with whipped cream and pear compote. Reverie takes over, as well the imagined scent of a kitchen brimming with romance. He recalls her emerging from the shower in a bathrobe, catching him make his compote, bringing to a simmer some wine, some vanilla, some anise, some salt and pepper—then sugar, pears, and water. A mixture as syrupy as the song on the vinyl player then—“Surfer Girl” by the Beach Boys—as sweet as how he had wanted their day to start. Separately, he combined milk, melted butter, egg. In her gaze, the ingredients crashed into each other like bodies under the blanket, the bowl a bed of excitement.

In the kitchen of his memory he put flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt together. What went in last was the salty-sweet goodness of Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese, a bag whose light-yellow grated majesty he poured. He caught some of it in his palm, like yellowing snow, letting it fall through his fingers as if it were Isabel’s hair, a small waterfall of delicacy. The little parmesan he had left on his fingers, he brought to his lips and relished with zest to tickle Isabel’s fancy. Then he mixed in the milk and egg, a dash of desire, a pinch of pining; he mixed everything till it’s nice and moist and ready for love.

And indeed it was love what those pancakes had been ready for, plump and fluffy right out of the pan, their surface like skin begging for contact. After serving them to her, he touched one, his fingers sliding across its warmth, smooth like thighs waiting to be parted. Then he poked, push-

ing his finger further in till he felt the fervid flesh of its interior. Hot—soft—damp. Then with a quick flick of the wrist he flipped each of them onto a plate, then winked at the woman of his dreams at the head of the table. As if he were a master in the bedroom as much as he was a master in the kitchen, he defiled the pristine brown of pancake's surface, smearing it with whipped cream, and beside it readied the compote. He remembers Isabel taking a dab of the whipped cream with her fingers, then caressing his thigh by the opening of his boxers, leaving a daub of white on the patterned fabric.

Feeling elated, Cristiano reaches further into the garbage bag, his fingers feeling a small metallic box at the far end. He wraps his fingers around the object, then fishes it out—a wind-up musical box. His eyes widen upon seeing it, then turn moist, then turn watery. He turns the key behind it; metallic clangs of varying pitches constellate into a recognizable rhythm. “Moon River” fills the air as tears fill his eyes. And as the crescent moon impaled on the top of the box rotates, he begins to feel as if the ground itself beneath his feet were rotating, too, sadness slowly impaling his heart. How apt for this memento of their parting to follow his memory of their first breakfast.

It had been a gift from her for his birthday, during a phase he was fixated on old songs. With a penchant for the dramatic he thought it a fitting gesture, the return of a gift, to conduct a break-up with. Two drifters off to see the world, the song went, there's such a lot of world to see. But I don't think we're after the same rainbow's end, he told her. Or maybe we are, but I'm not ready to go there with you—or with anyone for that matter. Not yet. His cowardice had closed the door on her, but love kept a small opening intact. An opening that now burst widely ajar.

It shouldn't be the bathroom that's called the comfort room—it should be the kitchen, he jokes to himself. But he means it anyway. For here he finds not just solace, but the ingredients he needs for the spinach lasagna he wants. And he wants this lasagna badly—almost as badly as he wants Isabel back. As Cristiano does what he does best in the kitchen, a scene replays itself in his head.

Isabel: Hey there, handsome.

Cristiano: You're up a little early, aren't you?

Isabel: I've a meeting today.

Cristiano: I'll whip up a quick breakfast then.

He rips open a bag of Perfect Italiano Mozzarella cheese, then fingers its tasty consistency to excite his already-excitabile senses. Next, he frees from its container with a pair of trusty scissors some grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese, its salty aroma escaping into the air and wafting into his nostrils. He takes a pinch of it—yellow splendor of powder on his fingertips—rubbing his fingers against each other to feel its grainy elegance, its rough delicacy. He mixes these in a bowl with parsley and egg, blending them to perfection. With contentment he breathes in, deeply, feeling his resolve to get his love back collecting inside him.

Isabel: Two years and counting, love.

Cristiano: Two years and counting to infinity.

Isabel: Then what are we waiting for?

Cristiano: What do you mean 'what are we waiting for?'

Then he heats up a pan, browns some meat. Adds onions, garlic, carrots, celery—a Christmas-y combination of color. For five minutes he sautés, the scent of sea evaporating on the pan, leaving the delicate flavor of salt mixing with everything else in the midst of heat. Then after draining the meat—moist, like his chest glistening in the glint of early afternoon—he adds some whipped cream cheese and blanched spinach leaves. He watches them mix as he recalls his fingers mixing with Isabel's in the tightest of clasps, once upon a time. A ritual clasp they did every time they would walk together, side by side, along the beach or promenade, by light of sun or moon—what do the details matter now, it was being with each other that mattered.

Isabel: Shouldn't we be making plans already? For the future?

Cristiano: But we have been making plans. We're touring Europe next year, aren't we?

Isabel: You know that's not what I mean.

Cristiano: Then what do you mean exactly?

Memory stirs as he stirs in the marinara sauce and water. A cup of meat sauce, layers of lasagna noodles, another cup of meat sauce, a third of the

cheese mixture—all of these come together on the orgiastic bed of culinary passion that is the baking dish. He repeats the layers twice, topping them with the remaining noodles, then more generously with even more meat sauce, even more cheese—ingredients as perfect as the perfect Italian that he is in the kitchen. Then after covering it with buttered foil, he lets it bake for an hour.

Isabel: I don't want to have to keep waiting, Cristiano.

Cristiano: Don't worry, this'll be ready in a few minutes.

Isabel: I don't give a shit about breakfast.

Cristiano: Well, I don't give a shit about marriage!

When he pulls the lasagna out of the oven, a fog of excitement hijacks his senses. The exuberance of hot cheese, delightfully burnt in patches, emits a fragrance he can almost taste. His grasp firm around the handle of the knife, he carves into his creation deep—its flesh parting succulently as his pointed implement penetrates, further and further, an endless penetration—till its opening lets out a moist sigh, fragrant steam, juice of meat crashing with the juice of melted cheese. Layers upon layers of cheese.

Isabel: Then there's nothing to wait for then.

Cristiano: Why do you have to be so darned impatient?

Isabel: Because I love you.

Cristiano: Love makes you impatient?

And layers upon layers his delight equally is, satisfied by the hot explosion of flavor in his mouth, a forkful of it gnashed lovingly by his teeth. A bit of juice seeps out from between his lips; he catches it on his chin, some of it hanging on stray strands of beard, then wipes it off with his thumb, which he then licks the flavor off of. Gratified, he begins to entertain more positive thoughts.

Isabel: No, it makes me hungry.

Cristiano: Then let's eat before you leave for work.

Isabel: Oh I think I'll be eating something else, loverboy.

Cristiano: You're being cryptic this morning, love.

For instance: If Isabel resented me so much, why would she even bother to bring me to the couch, put me in a position to rest? Butterflies in his

stomach, in the tasty company of munched lasagna, begin to go wild. So now I know why I could smell her on my clothes. She took off my polo, then replaced it with the sando. That must mean she cares, right?

Isabel: I have this huge craving—for eggs.

Cristiano: Good thing I made eggs!

Isabel: Those aren't the eggs I meant, you adorable, innocent little thing.

Cristiano: Wait, won't you be late for work?

He finishes his meal, even licking the remaining cheese off the plate, his lasagna punctuated by optimism. I'll get her back, he whispers to no one in particular, I'll get her back, certain in his resolve.

Isabel: Do I look like I care?

Cristiano: Breakfast just turned into breakquicky, I see.

Isabel: Stop being clever and kiss me.

Isabel: Yes, Ma'am.

He lifts the music box across him and winds its key. See you at the party tonight, Isabel.

Six pm, he knocks on Pocholo's door. He's at the flat of an old college buddy, the one who crashed at his place while he was away in Italy. He anticipates familiar faces, refuge in the company of old friends—all of them presumably hungry at this hour.

We've missed you!, everyone exclaims as they see him. Yeah right, you just miss my cooking, he retorts with a smile. The usual ceremony takes place every time a homecoming takes place: pats on the back, embraces exchanged, conversations of varying levels of ease and awkwardness.

As anticipated, she is there. At the far end of the couch sits Isabel, her figure lithe, her silhouette lissome against the light of the lamp beside her. Despite this distance he catches her fragrance—the scent of vanilla escaping from her chest and neck, slipping out of the underside of her dress, then finally reaching his nostrils, every pore of him now rapt with attention. Hello there, Isabel, he greets her—but she immediately looks away, refusing to even acknowledge his presence, leaving his greeting

unanswered a couple of meters from the door.

Breaking the still air, the host cuts in—Ahem!, he clears his throat sans hesitation—to lead Cristiano to the kitchen, where most of them expect him to be in the next hour or so, preparing everyone’s dinner. You bastards, he laughs, making me cook at my own welcome-back party. We couldn’t deprive you of your joy, Pocholo retorts, the least we can do is leave you to your cooking. Cristiano ransacks the pantry, searching for noodles with which to prepare his friends’ favorite dish by him: a crusty curiosity called spaghetti pie. Never mind that he just had pasta a few hours ago; I’m doing this for my buddies, he thinks. Never mind that Isabel gave me the cold shoulder; I’ll warm that ice queen up like I used to.

With the swiftness of a master he cooks and drains the noodles. Al dente like his arms, like his conviction. He doesn’t trust Pocholo’s taste in cheese, however, so he has brought his own, more of the stash of Perfect Italiano Parmesan he takes stock of, digging for it in his leather knapsack. Half the cheese he tosses in with egg, the strands of spaghetti now lathered with cream, the mix of which he places in a pie plate, careful to press on its bottom and upside to form the crust.

Done with preparing the meat, he then fuses it with spaghetti sauce—a rich and meaty consistency he spoons into the spaghetti crust. A hearty sprinkling of mozzarella and parmesan blankets the creamy body of taste resting on its crusty bed. After slipping all the delightful whole of it into the oven for baking, he leans back on the kitchen counter, whiling the time away in stasis.

He has intended to whistle a carol while working, but out of his lips come a more familiar tune instead—“Moon River,” yet again. And just in time, really, for in the midst of his whistle comes the figure he most associates with it: In the kitchen now, with him, enters Isabel, in her glorious black sheer frock, diaphanous in the kitchen’s loud fluorescent.

Welcome back, she says. Thanks, he says. Merry Christmas, she says. Isn’t Christmas over already, he says. Want me to make it feel like Christmas all over again, she asks. Why don’t you move a little bit to the right, he responds, pointing to the mistletoe above. Yuletide’s over, so that mistletoe’s expired, she says. No harm in trying, he exclaims, laughing. Charmed, she shakes her head and gives him a light hug—the most

fleeting hug he has ever experienced in his life. I'll maybe just wait for you outside, I mean, I'll just maybe wait *for the food* outside, she says. But don't you want to have a first taste, he asks.

Sure, why not, she replies. From a drawer he fishes out a fork, digs into the spaghetti with it. Steaming hot, a chunk of goodness at the silver tip of the utensil. He blows gently to cool it down—gently, gently—and as he blows he steps closer and closer to Isabel, closer and closer: Step, blow. Step, blow. One more step and he cranes his neck toward her to blow her a surprise kiss—an aggressive move, certainly, but worth a shot, he thinks. But with her lips an inch away from his lips she retracts and turns her back to him.

She steps out of the kitchen, the door swinging in her wake. Her skirt sashays as she saunters out of the premises. Elegant as ever, this woman, effortlessly so. But the air she leaves is thick with tension, as thick as the pie Cristiano has pulled out of the oven, as thick his face doing the stunt he just tried to pull on her.

Hands in mittens, he takes a deep breath—What a tease, he mutters to himself—and lifts the tray of spaghetti pie off the counter. For a few minutes he lingers, looking into the dish longingly, his eyes glazed with a strange mix of emotions—confidence bit a bit of fright, resolve with a dash of worry—as if the dish were an old friend he could confine in. Wish me luck, spaghetti pie, he whispers, it's going to be one weird night.

One weird night indeed, for abruptly he spots in the dining room not Isabel but her absence, a gaping Isabel-less absence. He looks in all directions—no trace of her, save for the remains of her scent. In mild panic he leaves the dish on the table, his thumb burning from inadvertent contact with its hot surface, and looks in the direction of the door: it is open. Bewildered by his actions, his friends look on, stunned by his manic movement, fidgeting in all directions but getting nowhere. Shit, shit, I have to get her back in here, I have to get her back, he shouts inside his head, the volume of his voice falling only on his mind's ears.

He runs to the doorway and looks to his left—nothing. Then he looks to his right, and catches a good few meters into the corridor and into the service elevator a glimpse of Isabel, flanked by the frames of the

lift about to close, leaving Pocholo's flat without even saying goodbye—without even tasting the dish he had been hoping he could impress her with—her arm around the waist of a man he has never seen before, the arm of this man draped on the nape of this woman whom he has longed for throughout the duration of his sojourn—this woman he intends to chase after, to get back, to be with, to reunite with—this woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with—now being taken away from him by this stranger, this strange, nameless jerk.

Like mad he dashes to the elevator, but the closer he gets the smaller the gap between the closing frames becomes. By the time he pushes the Down button, the door wouldn't open anymore. He is too late. The lift has begun its dreary descent, but his hope, like his resolve, continues to rise all the more.

ROMANCE REHEATED

Where am I? Cristiano wakes with a startle.

His neck feels stiff from lying on the couch—must be the strange weather settling on his muscles. He reaches up to massage its firm curve, made firmer by tension, sweat sliding down its slope. As he turns to his side, his cheek feels the velvety arm of the sofa—soaked, like the white undershirt that clings to his torso like a second skin.

Wait—a white undershirt? I don't remember changing into this.

He looks around, a bit groggy, then recognizes the apartment surrounding him: it's his. He sits up, wipes the sweat off his brow, then reaches over his shoulder to ease a knot of numbness on his back. All he remembers is jetlag knocking him out. He receives a text message; it's from Pocholo, the college buddy who had crashed at his place while he was away. See you at the party, the message says. What party, he asks himself. To ease his disorientation his instincts bring him to the kitchen. His steps are light, tentative. He inspects the counter, the dining table; he peers into the sink—nothing. Weird, he thinks, I thought I made myself a meal last night. Then, like a baseball bat to the head, realization: *Isabel was here!*

He looks around, looking for evidence to confirm his suspicion—was she, really? And find it he does; the answer comes in a big black garbage bag. It lies quiet by the bathroom doorway, visible only once you close the door, its opening neatly tied with straw. Burgeoning with mystery, the bag looks heavy, like it kept a corpse.

And it might as well have been a corpse—for upon opening it, Cristiano finds the remains of an old relationship: a pile of love letters, yellowed mildly by the years, held together by thin rope; a teddy bear the size of a toddler, patches of it now going bald; a 24-inch toy replica of the human anatomy, male, with felt-tip scribbling on the thigh, “hug this if you miss me,” barely legible; some shirts, all his; a variety of books, a few novels, some comics, mostly cookbooks; a small desk fan, of which he has fond memories, once providing what little breeze it could muster, aimed

at the heated ministrations taking place in the room; even a graying snowglobe which they bought some Christmases ago, whose snowflakes would drizzle on the reindeer below when it shook on the bedside in the rhythm of the shaking of the bed.

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Isabel: Two years and counting, love.

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sauce, layers of lasagna noodles, another cup of meat sauce, a third of the cheese mixture coming together. Then more layers of noodles, more layers of meat sauce, more layers of Perfect Italiano cheese. More layers of fighting. Then after covering it with buttered foil, he let it bake for an hour in the heat of their fight.

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Six pm, he knocks on his friend's door. A heart hangs on the knob, a reminder that on Valentine's he isn't with Isabel. But at least I'll be seeing you tonight, he consoles himself. He knocks; the door opens. We've missed you, everyone exclaims as they see him. And you're late, Pocholo chides him. The usual ceremony takes place every time a homecoming takes place: pats on the back, embraces exchanged, conversations of varying levels of ease and awkwardness.

As anticipated, she is there. At the far end of the dining table sits Isabel, her figure lithe, her silhouette lissome against the light of the lamp behind her. Despite this distance he catches her fragrance—the scent of vanilla escaping from her chest and neck, slipping out of the underside of her dress, then finally reaching his nostrils, every pore of him now rapt with attention. Hello there, Isabel, he greets her. She gives him a tenta-

tive smile. Her body motions to him like it wants to approach, but she holds back, and immediately looks away, refusing to even acknowledge his presence, leaving his greeting unanswered a couple of meters from the door.

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Throughout the duration of the meal he steals glances at Isabel, taking in her scent mingling with the scent of wine, and once in a while catches her glancing back. Glancing back! And by the time she finishes her spaghetti pie, she takes another glance at him, smiles, then gets up. Excuse me, she tells everyone, and Cristiano takes this for a sign, a signal to take a chance. She goes; he follows. He waits a minute before getting up, careful nobody notices.

Leaning on the wall by the door of the toilet, he waits for her to come out. He hears the echo of flushing. And when she steps out—Hey, she says. Hey, he says back. You can go right in, I'm done, she informs him. That's not what I've come here for, he replies. Then what did you come here for, she asks, her lips curling into a snicker. I'm here to tell you something, he declares. Tell me what, she asks. Tell you that I'm—Cristiano gulps—ready. Her brow furls, forehead wrinkling. And what might you be ready for, Isabel asks.

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she prods him again. But all he does is stand there, his hands shaking from sudden fear. A voice in his head materializes—*At least something around here is ready*—chanting a familiar sentence—*At least something around here is ready*—over and over—*At least something around here is ready*—making him nervous—*At least something around here is ready*—turning him into a wreck—*At least something around here is ready*—paralyzing him. He sweats profusely, clueless about what to say next, sensing the wine taking hold of his body.

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REHEATING HOPES

Where am I? Cristiano wakes with a startle.

His neck feels stiff from lying on the couch—must be the strange weather settling on his muscles. He reaches up to massage its firm curve, made firmer by tension, sweat sliding down its slope. As he turns to his side, his cheek feels the velvety arm of the sofa—soaked, like the white undershirt that clings to his torso like a second skin.

Wait—a white undershirt? I don't remember changing into this.

He looks around, a bit groggy, then recognizes the apartment surrounding him: it's his. He sits up, wipes the sweat off his brow. All he remembers is jetlag knocking him out. He receives a text message; it's from Pocholo, the college buddy who had crashed at his place while he was away. "See you at the party", the message says. What party, he asks himself. To ease his disorientation his instincts bring him to the kitchen. His steps are light, tentative. He inspects the counter, the dining table; he peers into the sink—nothing. Weird, he thinks, I thought I made myself a meal last night. Then, like a baseball bat to the head, realization: *Isabel was here!*

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BAKING SUMMER LOVING

Scattered guffaws, intermittent giggles, malicious whispers—all of it borne of entertainment, at least curiosity. A crowd has begun to gather around Cristiano this warm Sunday, standing on a sidewalk hot enough to fry bacon on. He wields a guitar, strumming as he looks up toward a window, wincing in the brilliant blaze of sun. A melody escapes his lips, Tagalog lyrics contorting to an Italian accent reinforced by years of study abroad.

Kamukha mo si Paraluman, he sings to no one in his line of sight, *noong tayo ay bata pa*. His voice shakes, but his resolve remains firm. *At ang galing-galing mong sumayaw*, beads of sweat form on his neck, like glaze of oil on meat in frying-pan heat, gliding down his neck, *mapa-boogie man o chacha*.

The top buttons of his shirt are open, revealing a thin fuzz of brown European heritage on his chest made moist by the afternoon. *Ngunit ang paborito*, he continues, *ay pagsayaw mo ng El Bimbo*. The crowd around him grows larger; some take selfies with him in the background, others take videos of him singing, each one of them arrested by *kilig*. He keeps going, *Nakakaindak, nakakaaliw*, his concentration is challenged by the mix of appreciation and suspicion in the crowd, but remains steadfast. *Nakakatindig-balabibo*.

It's *balabibo!* comes a shout from above. Isabel has opened the third-floor apartment window Cristiano's been gazing at in his serenade. The bystanders cheer like idiots, like children, over her appearance.. Can you please not ruin the Eraserheads for me? she pleads with a snicker. Why, what did I just say, he asks, putting his guitar down in disbelief. You just combined "*bala*" and "*bibo*," a bullet that's alert. Unless that's what you really meant, she laughs, *at nakatindig pa talaga*, and I can interpret that in so many ways. She winks.

She comes down. The crowd watches as she opens the gate, like they're watching a scene from a telenovela. So, what did you come here for, she asks. The people hush in anticipation of his response. I came to ask you, he pauses a while, to have *halohalo* with me, pointing to the small eatery

around the corner, al fresco. And to mispronounce words as well, she teases.

As they walk toward where they used to spend summer afternoons fending off the heat with crushed ice, as they are about to do now, their arms brush against each other, a shy bolt of electricity alerting them to sudden closeness. They look at each other, and she bites her lip.

Ten am the next day, Cristiano's kitchen bustles with bravura. As he moves about by the counter he whistles the Eraserheads melody from the previous day—“*Ang Huling El Bimbo*”—reminding himself that in no way have the two of them had their last dance. Today is his chance—and so takes the salmon fillets he had brought out of the fridge earlier for preparation this morning. He recalls his arm brushing against Isabel's, and proceeds to brush the flesh side of the fish with oil. He presses a cheese mixture onto the salmon—a combination of Perfect Italiano Romano, thyme, paprika, and seasoning—the way he had wished he could press his body against hers once again.

He pauses for a few minutes, relishing he has a new jab at romance. Shaking his head, smiling, he places capsicum, chickpeas, garlic, spring onions, parsley and Perfect Italiano Shaved Romano in a large bowl, mixing oil and lemon juice he then drizzles over the salad. When he tosses it to coat with dressing, he might as well be tossing his heart in a rumble of excitement and trepidation. What remains of his oil, he heats in a frying pan, cooking his delicately flavored salmon fillets.

Lunch break at Isabel's office, and everyone begins to bolt out its doors to forage for food in the urban jungle that is the central business district. But right by the exit at the lobby stands a small makeshift table flanked by two seats, a candle in the middle, a plate on either side. Employees on their way out, their stomachs rumbling, check out what on the table's been served—Romano crusted salmon with red capsicum chickpea salad. Knowing it's not theirs, they assume they can have none of it, and against their curiosity listen to their hunger and stumble out of the workplace for lunch.

And when finally Isabel emerges, so too does Cristiano from the door-

way of the utility room he's been hiding at. Surprise! he lunges forward, his r's rolling clumsily off his tongue, his legs almost tripping on the cord that connects a decorative lamp at the lobby to a socket. Is the lunch the surprise, she asks in jest, or you losing your balance. Because if it's the latter, I'm not much surprised, you never were very nimble, she laughs.

That's true, he replies with a sparkle in his eye, I've always been rather fragile around you. He leans forward, closer to her face—your beauty makes me nervous, he continues. Startled by the cheese-ball response, Isabel looks around, looks for anybody having a hearty laugh over it, and notices her lunch has quickly detoured into an awkward spectacle for all her officemates to witness. She snaps into defense mode, to shield herself from public embarrassment—Well, she says, you have reason to be nervous—she looks around again, making sure everybody can hear what she's about to say—you might have come all the way here for nothing.

Not for nothing, he retorts sprightly. Not for nothing, but for lunch! In a gentlemanly gesture, he pulls out one of the chairs, sways his hand toward it as an invitation for Isabel to sit, and readies in his hand a cloth for her to put on her lap.

No, she remarks, shaking her head while looking down, this is silly, this is silly, then decides to leave the lobby, leaving Cristiano wordlessly in shame in the process among people he doesn't know and a dish with no one to eat it.

The next morning, however, Cristiano bustles around again in the kitchen, unfazed. Her cheap rejection of him he won't allow to become a chip on his shoulder, no dent on his resolve the previous day's bent for humiliation. To cool off her head she needs a kind of meal that helps her simmer down this summer, he thinks, and fishes from the fridge and cupboard the ingredients for reassembling their lunch date, for assembling his delightful spinach ricotta and pea pie.

As if to melt the ice of the cold shoulder she's given him, he melts butter in a medium-heat frying pan. Then sautés bacon, spring onions, peas, spinach and herbs till they're softened and fragrant and crisp—just the way he wants her to be in front of him, the touch and scent of her soft-

ened and fragrant, the image of her crisp—and cools them in a bowl. Then he brings out from his fridge two of his most prized in the arsenal for her surrender—bags of Perfect Italiano Ricotta and Perfect Italian Pizza Plus with Feta Shred—which he mixes into the bowl with eggs.

He readies his pastry sheets with more melted butter into a baking pan, and spoons in the spinach filling. He spoons with much generosity, every spoonful brimming; he spoons with much love, every spoonful flowing. In his mind he spoons with Isabel on the kitchen counter in the afternoon swelter, as they had been wont to do as well when they felt like being naughty but didn't feel like anything more than a clothed snuggle. He folds in the edges of pastry, tucks in the edges of another sheet he folds and presses on top, sealing the romance within. As he waits for it to bake, he hopes to pull out of the oven not just food but a key to her acceptance of him. This pie was key: this was her key pie, awaiting a mouth to savor it—nibble by moist nibble, chomp by sticky chomp.

When he sets up the table once again at the lobby of Isabel's office at lunchtime, however, an officemate tips her off: He's there again, that sweet Italian man, aren't you going to heed him, the curious coworker asks. Shit, is he really there again, Isabel asks in disbelief, surprised by his persistence. With the surprise ruined, there is effectively no more surprise—so what's the point, Isabel asks herself again, what's the point. As if to sabotage completely Cristiano's attempts at wooing her at work, she foils his plan completely: She sneaks out the back door, passing instead thru the fire exit away from the lobby, away from Cristiano's fiery Italian eyes.

Cristiano waits at the lobby, sweating in the dark utility room, with a pie on the table he's set up, knowing nothing about the fact that she's making him wait for nothing.

Wednesday lunch Cristiano comes to Isabel's office, bearing parmesan risotto with garlic butter prawns; Isabel doesn't come to him. Thursday lunch Cristiano comes to Isabel's office, bearing orange and ricotta fritelle with Italian hot chocolate; Isabel doesn't come to him. Friday lunch Cristiano comes to Isabel's office, bearing cauliflower, pancetta and pangratto macaroni bake; Isabel doesn't come to him—

that is, till she sees him being escorted out by the security guard. Having caught Cristiano at the office setting up the daily lunchtime obstruction that is his makeshift luncheon table for no reason, hiding as he does every single day inside the utility room, security has thought it best to let him out and never let him in again.

About to depart, abandoned by guards who have now gone the other way after escorting him, he gets ready to saunter out of the office, determination still intact. Cristiano! Wait, a voice from behind him hollers—Isabel's. I feel like a jerk, leaving you out here cold day after day, she says to him. He lights up, Nah, you're at the office, you must be too busy for lunch. But I'm not too busy for dessert after dinner, she responds. And the beam on Cristiano's bearded face becomes so wide with glee it's visible from outer space.

Where dessert is going to be is meant as another trick up Cristiano's passionate Italian sleeve. And of course the dessert itself as well—raspberry and coconut cheesecake tartlets. They're fairly easy to make—to be baked according to straightforward directions, with Perfect Italiano ricotta combined with sugar, cream, and egg to be divided between pastry cases, each topped with raspberries and coconut.

But the real challenge to be made is the mood, which he hopes the place—loaded as it is with memory and sentiment—will create for him. From her doorstep at the apartment where she took an hour to freshen up off work, he leads her, holding her hand. They cross the street, cross another street, and cross another. At the next corner they turn—a dimly lit alleyway littered with stray cats—and are met with foliage in the dark at the onset of unoccupied territory gated by a makeshift corrugated fence. An empty lot, waiting to be filled with love.

He brings her to the center of it where a table awaits. A surreal scene this: sparse thicket around, gravel on ground, abandoned land playing host to a tryst between exes. He lights a candle on the table. Do you remember this place, he asks. She looks around, and nods. This was where we were first kissed, she told him. This was where we first held hands, he replied. Well, she said, the first time you took my hands into yours it was

so you could kiss me.

And indeed it is like a first kiss once again—her lips now pressing against his, like in his dreams night after night after night. Frightened someone might catch them intruding into territory not theirs, they blow out the light, and carry on kissing. Nevertheless her mouth is familiar territory to him, as his mouth is familiar to hers, every crook and cranny of it—each slide of gum, groove of tooth, slip of tongue.

Isabel pushes him away playfully, then pulls him again toward her to whisper in his ear—What do you say we have our dessert elsewhere instead? Cristiano nods. Carrying the bag of tartlets under his arm, he slips out of the darkness of the empty lot, Isabel clutching at his other arm. They exit the alley, turn the corner, cross a street, then another, then another. Once again they are at Isabel's apartment's doorstep.

Once again the door to the kitchen of their love has opened.

BAKING SUMMER LOVING

Scattered laughter, intermittent giggles, malicious whispers—all of it borne of entertainment, at least curiosity. Joggers pause, taking off their headsets, amused by what they see; afternoon dog-walkers pull their pups off their paths and lead them in the direction of the commotion; security guards from neighboring condominiums and cafes step out of their posts if only to take a peek. A crowd has begun to gather around Cristiano this warm Sunday, standing on a sidewalk hot enough to fry bacon on. Facing a residential tower in a quiet neighborhood in Makati he wields a guitar, strumming as he looks up toward a window, wincing in the brilliant blaze of sun. He knows he looks ridiculous, but acknowledges to win Isabel back he needs to take drastic measures—and nothing spells drastic the way a serenade can, especially one performed by a half-Italian in the middle of a condominium complex.

A melody escapes his lips, Tagalog lyrics contorting to an accent reinforced by years of study abroad. *Kamukha mo si Paraluman*, he sings to no one in his line of sight, *noong tayo ay bata pa*. His voice shakes, but his resolve remains firm. *At ang galing-galing mong sumayaw*, beads of sweat form on his neck, like glaze of oil on meat in frying-pan heat, gliding down his neck, *mapa-boogie man o chacha*.

The top buttons of his shirt are open, revealing a thin fuzz of brown European heritage. *Ngunit ang paborito*, he continues, *ay pagsayaw mo ng El Bimbo*. The crowd around him grows larger; nannies carrying their bosses' babies on prams take selfies with him in the background; passers-by making their way to the organic market nearby stop to take videos of him singing. He keeps going, *Nakakaindak, nakakaaliw*, his concentration is challenged by the mix of appreciation and suspicion in the crowd, but remains steadfast. *Nakakatindig-balabibo*.

It's *balabibo!* comes a shout from above. Isabel has opened the third-floor window Cristiano's been gazing at in his serenade. The bystanders cheer like children over her appearance. Can you please not ruin the song for me? she pleads with a snicker. Why, what did I just say, he asks, putting his guitar down in disbelief. You just combined "*bala*" and "*bibo*," a bullet that's alert. Unless that's what you really meant, she laughs, at *nakatindig pa talaga*, and I can interpret that in so many ways. She winks.

She comes down. How could she not, for this man who despite wronging her in the past now comes suffering the embarrassment of a public serenade? A split-second of hesitation slows down her turning of the knob, but opens the gate nevertheless. The crowd keeps watching. So, what did you come here for, she asks. The people hush in anticipation of his response. I came to ask you, he pauses a while, to have gelato with me, pointing to the cafe around the corner that has a creamery. And to mispronounce lyrics as well, she teases. And to dupe me again, she thinks without saying out loud, and I'm all too willing to be duped.

As they walk toward where they used to spend summer afternoons fending off the heat, each melting in the other's mouth like so much cream back then, their arms brush against each other now—and a shy bolt of electricity alerts them to sudden closeness. They look at each other, and she bites her lip in the sun, their love ablaze.

Ten am the next day, Cristiano's kitchen comes alive with excitement. As he moves about by the counter he whistles the Eraserheads melody from the previous day. Today is his chance—and so takes the Italian sausages he had brought out of the fridge earlier for preparation this morning. Melting butter in a pan as he browns the sausages, he recalls himself melting in Isabel's gaze at the cafe.

He pauses for a few minutes, relishing the fact he has a new jab at romance. Shaking his head, smiling, he adds in the remaining butter in the pan, sautés garlic, onions and bell peppers. He arranges the sausages in a baking dish, tops them with the salty sweet of cheese from a bag Perfect Italiano Pizza Plus, then sprinkles bell peppers all over, the way he wants to sprinkle Isabel all over with his desire. When the cheese melts—savory yellow goodness oozing off the dish—he brings it out of the oven. Smoke wafts from the creamy puddle of cheese to his nose as he rummages for an old lunchbox Isabel had left in his flat once.

An hour later, it is lunch break at her office, and everyone begins to bolt out its doors to forage for food in the urban jungle that is the central business district. Everyone's raring to escape the workplace on a Monday, if only for lunch. He sits at the lobby, her lunchbox in his hand, waiting for her to come out. In his other hand he holds a bouquet of

flowers—an assortment of mums and roses. His feet tap on the office tiles in a mix of joy and trepidation.

But come out she doesn't. She catches him with her eyes from the doorway, not knowing how to respond to his gesture. Her feelings seesaw between warm and cold, off and on, her love for him vacillating between here and there, teetering on the brink of yes. She wants him but remains hurt; how badly she wants to embrace him, but just as badly wants to push him away. She looks at Cristiano for a couple of minutes, without him knowing he's being watched by the woman he has come to the office for.

Her eyes widen upon seeing her old lunchbox, which tempts her to come forward—but No, she tells herself, I won't give you a chance this time.

Not this time, not today.

She turns back, leaving Cristiano to wait another hour for nothing.

The next morning, however, and much earlier, Cristiano bustles around again in the kitchen, unfazed. Her rejection of him he won't allow to become a chip on his shoulder, no dent on his resolve the previous day's bent for pointless waiting. To cool off her head she needs a kind of meal that helps her simmer down this summer—something refreshing but with a dash of spice. He decides to step up his game—She can't ignore me this time, he whispers to himself with a smile. As he prepares his culinary surprise for her delectation, he imagines a lunch date at her office lobby—a table he'll set himself, candlelit for romance. Sure, it's over the top, but how else to grab her attention? he convinces himself.

Into a bowl he releases from a bag some grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese, the grains of it inviting him for a quick poke and lick. His finger dives into the bowl, the tip of it catching a clump of cheese, which he brings swiftly to his lips. With satisfaction, he mixes in all the other ingredients—mustard, parsley, pimiento, salt and pepper—and stirs with the rest of it all the yearning he feels for Isabel. The resultant mixture he rolls into a log, and in along with it he rolls chopped walnuts. He wraps his offering in aluminum foil, chills it till set.

By lunch time he finds himself again in the area of Isabel's office, but this time with a grander gesture than a mere lunchbox carrying a surprise. At the park across her building stands a small makeshift table flanked by two seats, a candle in the middle, a plate on either side. Employees exiting the office, with their stomachs rumbling, check out what on the table's been served—a refreshing Herb and Cheese Log waiting to be dug into. Knowing it's not theirs, they assume they can have none of it, and against their curiosity listen to their hunger and amble thru the park and toward the promenade's array of restaurants.

And when finally Isabel emerges, she sees him seated by one end of the table. Surprise! he yells to her from the other side of the road, cars between them, a beam on his face from ear to ear. Caught by surprise, she can't help but cross, approach. Well, isn't this awkward, she says, unsure of how to conduct herself around him. That's true, he replies with a sparkle in his eye, since the first day we met I've always felt a little awkward around you. He leans forward, closer to her face—it's because your beauty makes me nervous, he continues.

Startled by the response, Isabel looks around, looks for anybody watching, and notices her lunch break has quickly detoured into a spectacle for yuppies and her office to witness. She snaps into defense mode, to shield herself from public embarrassment—Well, she says, you have reason to be nervous—she looks around again, making sure everybody can hear what she's about to say—you might have come all the way here for nothing.

Not for nothing, he retorts sprightly. Not for nothing, but for lunch! In a gentlemanly gesture, he gets up, pulls out one of the chairs, sways his hand toward it as an invitation for Isabel to sit, and readies in his hand a cloth for her to put on her lap.

No, she remarks, shaking her head while looking down, this is silly, this is silly, then decides to leave the park, leaving Cristiano wordlessly in shame in the process among people he doesn't know and a dish with no one to eat it.

Cristiano suspects it's a show of resolve she needs to see—and show her this he does with love and immeasurable patience. He forges on, morning after morning waking up, planning, scheming, and most importantly cooking. He carries on, day after day preparing for her a heady meal for lunch, taking it to the park across her office, setting up a table for everyone to see his gesture of love, fortified by fortitude.

And unlike the day previous, Isabel no longer comes out, choosing to observe quietly instead. She watches him from a distance, put up meal after extravagant meal on the grass, his moves over-the-top yet heartfelt. He comes with heartbreaking diligence, sets up the table at the start of lunch break, then packs up at the end of lunch break, meal not so much unconsumed but unconsummated.

With every watching of him she catches herself becoming fonder and fonder of Cristiano, her heart melting just as he had anticipated. Such is his foresight after all: As a chef he anticipates what comes out of the oven, and similarly anticipates what comes out of the oven of their romance, baked in the heat of his persistence. She sees his efforts, and consequently sees herself falling again for him, and longs not so much to have a taste of the food he brings but to have a taste of him. A taste she has long missed—

a taste that is being offered to her again, and which she has been denying herself.

And so it comes as no surprise that when she sees park security personnel approach him for an overdue reprimand, she finally runs to him. Wait! he hears her voice rise from behind him Wait! she hollers a second time. The guards move away, seeing that Isabel is now here to meet him. So I guess you're not some weird psycho stalker after all, one guard tells him as he walks away. I feel like a jerk, Isabel tells Cristiano, for leaving you out here cold day after day. He lights up, Nah, you're at work, you must be too busy for lunch.

But I'm not too busy for dessert after dinner, she responds.

Of course the dessert is going to be another trick up Cristiano's passionate Italian sleeve, on which he wears his heart. But the real challenge to be made is the mood, which he hopes the place—loaded as it is with memory and sentiment—will create for him. He has a plan, and the plan is mostly where they'll be.

From her doorstep at the condo where she took an hour to freshen up off work, he leads her, holding her hand. They cross the street, cross another street, and cross another. At the next corner they turn—a dimly lit alleyway littered with stray cats rummaging thru bags of food thrown out by restaurants in proximity—and are met with foliage in the dark at the onset of unoccupied territory gated by a makeshift corrugated fence. An empty lot, waiting to be filled with love.

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Scattered laughter, intermittent giggles, malicious whispers—all of it borne of amusement, or at least of curiosity. Joggers pause and take off their headsets, amused by what they see; afternoon dog-walkers pull their pups off their paths and lead them in the direction of the commotion; security guards from neighboring condominiums and cafes step out of their posts if only to take a peek. A crowd has begun to gather around Cristiano this warm Sunday, standing on a sidewalk hot enough to fry bacon on. Facing a residential tower in a quiet neighborhood in Makati he wields a guitar, strumming as he looks up toward a window. He winces in the brilliant blaze of sun. He knows he looks ridiculous, but to win Isabel back he knows he needs to take drastic measures—and nothing spells drastic the way a serenade can, especially one performed by a half-Italian in the middle of a condominium complex.

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"It's *balahibo*!" comes a shout from above. Isabel has opened the third-floor window that Cristiano had been gazing at as he serenaded. The bystanders cheer like children over her appearance. "Can you please not ruin the song for me?" she pleads with a snicker. "Why, what did I just say," he asks, putting his guitar down in disbelief. "You just combined 'bala' and 'bibo,' a bullet that's alert. Unless that's what you really meant,

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She comes down. How could she not, for this man who, despite wronging her in the past, now comes suffering the embarrassment of a public serenade? She hesitates for a split second during her descent, and her hand freezes on the doorknob. But the moment of doubt passes and she opens the gate. The crowd keeps watching. “So, what did you come here for?” she asks. Those gathered hush in anticipation of his response. “I came to ask you,” he pauses a while, “to have gelato with me.” He points to the cafe around the corner that has a creamery. “And to mispronounce lyrics as well,” she teases. *Or to dupe me again*, she thinks without saying out loud, wondering whether she is making a mistake in trusting him again.

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Startled by the response, Isabel looks around to see if anybody is watching, and notices that her lunch break has quickly detoured into a spectacle for yuppies and her office to witness. She snaps into defense mode, to shield herself from public embarrassment—"Well," she says, "you have reason to be nervous"—she looks around again, making sure everybody can hear what she's about to say—"you might have come all the way here for nothing."

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"No," she remarks, shaking her head and looking down, "This is silly, this is silly." She decides to leave the park, in the process leaving Cristiano wordless and ashamed among people he doesn't know. All he has is a meal for two with no one to share it with.

Cristiano suspects it's a show of resolve she needs to see—and show her this he does, with love and immeasurable patience. He forges on, morning after morning waking up, planning, scheming, and most importantly cooking. He carries on, day after day preparing for her a heady meal for lunch, taking it to the park across her office, setting up a table for everyone to see his gesture of love, fortified by fortitude.

And unlike the previous day, Isabel no longer comes out, choosing to observe quietly instead. She watches him from a distance, as he puts up meal after extravagant meal on the grass. Every day, he comes with heartbreaking diligence, sets up the table at the start of lunch break, then packs up at the end of lunch break, meal not so much unconsumed but unconsummated.

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And so it comes as no surprise that when she sees park security personnel approach him for an overdue reprimand, she finally runs to him. "Wait!" He hears her voice rise from behind him "Wait!" she hollers a second time. The guards move away, seeing that Isabel is now here to meet him. "So I guess you're not some weird psycho stalker after all," one guard tells him as he walks away. "I feel like a jerk," Isabel tells Cristiano, "for leaving you out here cold day after day". He lights up, "Nah, you're at work, you must be too busy for lunch."

"But I'm not too busy for dessert after dinner," she responds.

Of course the dessert is going to be another trick up Cristiano's passionate Italian sleeve, on which he wears his heart. But the real challenge to be made is the mood, which he hopes the place—loaded as it is with memory and sentiment—will create for him. He has a plan, and the plan is mostly where they'll be. From her doorstep, at the condo where she took an hour to freshen up off work, he leads her by the hand. They cross the street, cross another street, and cross another. At the next corner they

turn—a dimly lit alleyway littered with stray cats rummaging thru bags of food thrown out by restaurants in proximity—and are met with foliage in the dark at the onset of unoccupied territory gated by a makeshift corrugated fence. An empty lot, waiting to be filled with love.

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And indeed it is like a first kiss once again—her lips now pressing against his, like in his dreams night after night after night after night after night after night after night. Frightened someone might catch them intruding into territory not theirs, they blow out the light, and carry on kissing. Nevertheless her mouth is familiar territory to him, as his mouth is familiar to hers, every crook and cranny of it, each slide of gum, groove of tooth, slip of tongue.

Isabel pushes him away playfully, then pulls him again toward her to whisper in his ear—“What do you say we have our dessert elsewhere instead?” Cristiano nods. Carrying the bag of tartlets under his arm, he slips out of the darkness of the empty lot, Isabel clutching at his other arm. They exit the alley, turn the corner, cross a street, then another, then another. Once again they are at Isabel’s doorstep.

Once again the door to the kitchen of their love has opened.

A SECOND SERVING OF LOVE

A moist cool rustles the leaves and wafts into the room, nudging Cristiano awake. He smells the departure of morning rain, enjoys the breeze for a while. Then awareness grips him; his body rises with a startle. Breakfast! he shouts inside his head, his torso upright and attentive. Isabel! he shouts inside his head again, but this time mouthing silently the syllables of her name. He turns to his side to look at the woman he intends to cook for this morning—with whom he has spent the night—but she isn't there. Not again, not this time, he mumbles to himself. In a panic he gets off the bed, jumps onto the floor, stumbles on his own shoes, and runs to the bedroom door.

Hey there handsome, Isabel greets him from a few meters away, by the kitchen counter, holding a hand mixer. Hey, you're up early, Cristiano greets her back, relieved, surprised by his own unwarranted worry. No, you're the one who's up early, she replies—if you know what I mean, she continues, pointing toward his navel with the mixer, winking. Cristiano looks down and discovers he hasn't put any clothes on. His movement swift he stoops to pick up the rug he's been standing on by the doorway, and uses it to cover himself. That's dirty, she chides him.

You were the dirty one last night, he chortles and begins to approach, his hand on the rug covering him. What are you cooking? he asks. Thought the day deserved some frittata Italiana, she responds. He wraps the rug around his waist, making Isabel chuckle, and comes forward. She has already emptied half a cup of grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan into a bowl—mixed with chopped basil, marjoram, and rosemary, then salt, pepper, and eggs—when he comes from behind her, engulfing her body, his arms on her arms as his hands glide their way to her hands. His chest pressed against her back she pokes the mixer into the bowl, and beats the ingredients. His grip on her tightens; she beats more and more vigorously. The clutch of her fingers around the smooth length of the handle hardens.

He sets the bowl aside and carries her, lays her on the counter. I'll show you some frittata Italiana, he jokes, unwrapping the rug, baring himself to her. He climbs over her as she laughs on her back. On his knees

atop the counter, he sandwiches Isabel between his thighs, creamy as cheese, as the scent of morning still thick on his skin. Both of them burst giggling inside the kitchen. He gives her a peck on the neck then turns to the stove, throws into a non-stick skillet some butter. Ever the multitasker, she snickers. Again he turns to her, and their lips reach each other: in the skillet of her mouth his tongue melts like so much butter.

The morning is tender as the onions Cristiano cooks and pours the egg-and-cheese mixture over. And after covering it, which he'll cook till the edges have browned—more of Monday morning's magical ministrations.

The sun shrouds them in sweat, but the couple couldn't care any less. Isabel and Cristiano stroll thru the streets, hand in hand, and as seconds roll into minutes and minutes into hours, so do affection roll into romance and romance into love. Sure you don't have to go to work today? he asks her. It's not every day you're sweet like this, she replies, how can I not take advantage of it?

They enter a park and walk on a path flanked by greens. For a minute Isabel daydreams: the rows of grass become pews, the pathway transforms into an aisle. Today the park is a church, sweltering with the heat of love, and she is the bride whose veil is hope and faith and forgiveness. She closes her eyes and imagines bells, a bouquet, tin cans tied to the back of a car, people throwing rice.

But when she opens her eyes the bells in her mind resound a different tune—the deafening clang of fear. She daydreams of forever—but outside of that daydream, what nightmare of loss is she reliving? I have you now just as I used to have you, she tells him. And just as I lost you once, she continues, I could lose you again. Isabel pushes Cristiano away, wipes a tear off her cheek, and runs. Cristiano stands speechless, stunned, looking at the image of her becoming smaller and smaller as she disappears in the distance. Even those at the park wonder about what may have happened—one minute they see a couple happily strolling this afternoon, the next minute she pushes him away and dashes off.

Cristiano is frozen by frustration. I deserve this, the sentence runs over

and over in his head, I deserve this. Now she flakes on me like I used to flake on her. I deserve this—but she deserves so much more than my mere acceptance that this is how it ends.

Shapely contours bulge out of Cristiano's arms as he carries his groceries up his condo. He has swung by the wet market as well, arriving at the perfect hour when snails are dropped off at the stall he counts on for the freshest catch. For he intends to cook no less than the freshest for his most beloved, whom by tonight he intends to be his catch forever.

To soothe his nerves he uncaps a bottle of beer, to keep him company as he does his work in the kitchen with delicacy. The sun has ceased battering on his windows with its fistfuls of heat, and a breeze has begun to creep past the awning and thru the slight opening. He unpacks and cleans a kilo of snails, then carefully sets them aside in a metallic bowl. Some of them manage to crawl up and fall off, and when Cristiano catches sight of them he wonders to himself, How can something so gross be so generous with flavor? Then he thinks about his relationship with Isabel, how it once took a turn for the worse—raw material for a scrumptious meal—only for it to be cooked now into a story of renewal. He picks them up one by one, some off the counter and a few off the floor, and puts them back into the bowl. I am a snail, he wonders to himself, hoping to be picked up by Isabel.

As he heats up oil in a large pan, he sautés onions, garlic, carrots, celery, and leeks, and once they are translucent he adds tomato paste, letting it roast till dark. He takes a bottle of white wine and takes a big swig—Not bad, he tells himself—then deglazes with it before adding the snails. As he lets everything simmer for 10 minutes, he heads back to his room to bring something out—a small box, squarish, about an inch and a half on each side, a deep velvety blue on the surface. He examines it on his palm for a minute before his fingers drape over the package. Then very carefully he pockets it, a grin adorning his face from ear to excited ear—a look of triumph bordered by nerves.

Back by the kitchen counter, he sprinkles red pepper flakes and grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese generously over the dish. And as he lets it simmer for another 10 minutes, he slips into the shower to freshen

up, try and look and smell his best for the woman he believes brings out the best in him, makes him the best man he can ever aspire to be—for he knows there is no better version of himself than himself when he is with Isabel.

Necktied and fresh, his hair waxed to a side and split neatly with a comb, he feels his pocket for the small box, faces the door and ready to head out. But as his right hand grips the doorknob—his left carrying the dinner of lumache he prepared minutes ago—he hears a knock on the door. He peers thru the peephole and finds out who his guest is.

Isabel in jeans and a white tank top. Isabel whose knee peeks out thru a rip. Isabel wrapped in her personal atmosphere of vanilla and song. Isabel from whose clavicles leap angels of light. Isabel whose waist is a cliff, whose shoulder is a bird, whose thigh is a river and a prayer and the cycle of seasons.

I—I—I w-was just about to go to you, Cristiano mumbles. And I'm glad I caught you here first, Isabel replies. Isabel whose mouth is a portal to paradise. Isabel whose shadow is the night. I'm sorry, you caught me by surprise, Cristiano replies. I didn't mean to leave you there like that, Isabel says back. Isabel whose neck is a pillar of earth. Isabel whose tongue is a village under the ocean, guarded by terracotta teeth.

Cristiano begins to feel light. A thousand images swirling in my head, he confesses to Isabel. Images of what? she asks. Images of you, he tells her back. Are the images anything like this? she asks him again—but without giving him a split-second to reply she presses her mouth against his. He closes his eyes as she does, and his mind quivers, quickens, quiets, and quits. On her shoulder his head calms down; in her arms the rest of him finds relief.

Thank you for coming back, he whispers into her ear. It wasn't me who came back, she says, but you. Then why did you leave this afternoon? he inquires. Cold feet, she answers. Cristiano gets up, unpacks the special meal of snails he has prepared for her. I know exactly what can warm you up, he remarks.

Snails? she asks, bewildered. No, he tells her, this: He pulls out of his pocket the small velvety box, and when he opens it, her eyes widen. You don't have to say yes or say no, he assures her, at least not right now.

As he turns his back to get some plates she shifts her gaze from the ring and toward him, his every movement crisp and cool and smooth, like he's at home. And she's at home here now, too, with him in this same space, this kitchen, where desire is brought into the oven raw and comes out glistening with love—a turkey of an affair stuffed with heartache and romance and so much cheese. So much cheese. He puts on a toque, then approaches the dining table, a plate in each hand.

And Isabel looks at him, smiling, refusing to worry about the future. All she looks forward to is what's in front of her—the dinner she is about to take a bite of, the night she will sink her teeth into, and most important of all, the man she can't wait to devour—Cristiano, her perfect Italiano.

A SECOND SERVING OF LOVE

A moist cool rustles the leaves and wafts into the room, nudging Cristiano awake. He smells the departure of morning rain, enjoys the breeze for a while. Then awareness grips him; his body rises with a startle. Breakfast! he shouts inside his head, his torso upright and attentive. Isabel! he shouts inside his head again, but this time mouthing silently the syllables of her name. He turns to his side to look at the woman he intends to cook for this morning—with whom he has spent the night—but she isn't there. Not again, not this time, he mumbles to himself. In a panic he gets off the bed, jumps onto the floor, stumbles on his own shoes, and runs to the bedroom door.

Hey there bedhead, Isabel greets him from a few meters away, by the kitchen counter, holding a hand mixer. Hey, you're up early, Cristiano greets her back, relieved, surprised by his own unwarranted worry. No, you're the one who's up early, she replies—if you know what I mean, she continues, winking. Cristiano looks down and discovers he hasn't put any clothes on. Blushing, he stoops to pick up the rug he's been standing on by the doorway, and uses it to cover himself.

I was hoping I'd beat you to the kitchen, he tells her. What are you cooking? Thought the day deserved some frittata Italiana, she responds, and you're not the only cook around here, y'know. He wraps the rug around his waist, like a towel, making Isabel chuckle, and comes forward. She has already emptied half a cup of grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan into a bowl—mixed with chopped basil, marjoram, and rosemary, then salt, pepper, and eggs—when he comes from behind her, engulfing her body, his arms on her arms as his hands glide their way to her hands. His chest pressed against her back she pokes the mixer into the bowl, and beats the ingredients.

Together they make breakfast, their bodies leaning on the counter. In such intimate proximity, she could smell the scent of morning still thick on his skin. In his hand he takes her hand, and with her fingers throws into a non-stick skillet some butter. Ever the multitasker, she snickers. Again he turns to her, and their lips reach each other: in the skillet of her mouth his tongue melts like so much butter.

The morning is tender as the onions Cristiano cooks and pours the egg-and-cheese mixture over. And after covering it, which he'll cook till the edges have browned—more of Monday morning's magical ministrations.

The sun shrouds them in sweat, but the couple couldn't care any less. Isabel and Cristiano stroll thru the streets, hand in hand, and as seconds roll into minutes and minutes into hours, so do affection roll into romance and romance into love. Sure you don't have to go to work today? he asks her. It's not every day you're sweet like this, she replies, how can I not take advantage of it?

They enter a park and walk on a path flanked by greens. For a minute Isabel daydreams: the rows of grass become pews, the pathway transforms into an aisle. Today the park is a church, sweltering with the heat of love, and she is the bride whose veil is hope and faith and forgiveness. She closes her eyes and imagines bells, a bouquet, tin cans tied to the back of a car, people throwing rice.

But when she opens her eyes the bells in her imagining resound a different tune—the deafening clang of fear. She daydreams of forever—but outside of that daydream, what nightmare of loss is she reliving? I have you now just as I used to have you, she tells him. But just as I lost you once, she continues, I could lose you again. Isabel pushes Cristiano away, wipes a tear off her cheek. Have I said something wrong, Cristiano asks. Not at all, she tells him, not at all. And that's the problem, Cristiano, this is all too perfect, just like things used to be too perfect. Then what's wrong, he prods her. What's wrong is nothing's wrong, she replies—and we both know what that means: it means something wrong is bound to happen.

Paranoia rears its head. And as thoughts race inside of hers she also races away, uncertainty clouding her judgment, doubt shrouding her mind like a mushroom cloud over a site of devastation.

Cristiano stands speechless. Stunned, he can do no more than look at her, the image of her becoming smaller and smaller as she disappears in the distance. Here we go again, he thinks, but also knows he cannot blame her. Even those at the park wonder about what may have hap-

pened—one minute they see a couple happily strolling this afternoon, the next minute she pushes him away and dashes off.

Cristiano is frozen by frustration. I deserve this, the sentence runs over and over in his head, I deserve this. Now she flakes on me like I used to flake on her. I deserve this—but she deserves so much more than my mere acceptance that this is how it ends.

Late afternoon, Cristiano carries his groceries up his condo. He has swung by the wet market as well, arriving at the perfect hour when snails are dropped off at the stall he counts on for the freshest catch. For he intends to cook no less than the freshest for his most beloved, whom by tonight he intends to be his catch forever.

To soothe his nerves he uncaps a bottle of beer, to keep him company as he does his work in the kitchen with delicacy. The sun has ceased battering on his windows with its fistfuls of heat, and a breeze has begun to creep past the awning and thru the slight opening. He unpacks and cleans a kilo of snails, then carefully sets them aside in a metallic bowl. Some of them manage to crawl up and fall off, and when Cristiano catches sight of them he wonders to himself, How can something so gross be so generous with flavor? Then he thinks about his relationship with Isabel, how it once took a turn for the worse—raw material for a scrumptious meal—only for it to be cooked now into a story of renewal. He picks them up one by one, some off the counter and a few off the floor, and puts them back into the bowl. I am a snail, he wonders to himself, hoping to be picked up by Isabel.

As he heats up oil in a large pan, he sautés onions, garlic, carrots, celery, and leeks, and once they are translucent he adds tomato paste, letting it roast till dark. He takes a bottle of white wine and takes a big swig—Not bad, he tells himself—then deglazes with it before adding the snails. As he lets everything simmer for 10 minutes, he heads back to his room to bring something out—a small box, squarish, about an inch and a half on each side, a deep velvety blue on the surface. He examines it on his palm for a minute before his fingers drape over the package. Then very carefully he pockets it, a grin adorning his face from ear to excited ear—a look of triumph bordered by nerves.

Back by the kitchen counter, he sprinkles red pepper flakes and grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese generously over the dish. And as he lets it simmer for another 10 minutes, he slips into the shower to freshen up, try and look and smell his best for the woman he believes brings out the best in him, makes him the best man he can ever aspire to be—for he knows there is no better version of himself than himself when he is with Isabel.

Necktied and fresh, his hair waxed to a side and split neatly with a comb, he feels his pocket for the small box, faces the door and ready to head out. But as his right hand grips the doorknob—his left carrying the dinner of lumache he prepared minutes ago—he hears a knock on the door. He peers thru the peephole and finds out who his guest is.

Isabel in jeans and a white tank top. Isabel whose knee peeks out thru a rip. Isabel wrapped in her personal atmosphere of vanilla and song. Isabel whose clavicles leap like angels of light, protruding as they do with elemental grace. Isabel whose waist is a cliff, with curves as sensual as they are sharp. Isabel whose shoulder is a bird, light and lithe and lissome in its movement. Whose legs are a river in their length and refreshing curvature. Whose smile is a prayer and the cycle of seasons, bearing the promise of replenishment.

I—I—I w-was just about to go to you, Cristiano mumbles. And I'm glad I caught you here first, Isabel replies. Isabel whose mouth is a portal to paradise. Isabel whose shadow is the night. I'm sorry, you caught me by surprise, Cristiano replies. I didn't mean to leave you there like that, Isabel says back. Isabel whose neck is a pillar of white earth—bountiful and ethereal. Isabel whose tongue is a village under the ocean—mysterious and unsettling.

Cristiano begins to feel light. A thousand images swirling in my head, he confesses to Isabel. Images of what? she asks. Images of you, he tells her back. Are the images anything like this? she asks him again—but without giving him a split-second to reply she presses her mouth against his. He closes his eyes as she does, and his mind quivers, quickens, quiets, and quits. On her shoulder his head calms down; in her arms the rest of him finds relief.

Thank you for coming back, he whispers into her ear. It wasn't me who came back, she says, but you. Then why did you leave this afternoon? he inquires. Cold feet, she answers. Cristiano gets up, unpacks the special meal of snails he has prepared for her. I know exactly what can warm you up, he remarks.

Snails? she asks, bewildered. No, he tells her, this: He pulls out of his pocket the small velvety box, and when he opens it, her eyes widen in recognition: it's a ring, but not just any kind of ring. I haven't seen this in years, she tells him. Where did you find it? Well, he responds, you sent it back to me. It was in the bag of mementoes you left here.

And from the box she takes it—a ring made of hair, thin and sheer and fragile, a ring like no other. Instantly how the ring came about comes to her mind: it was from their first meal together. Her munching had been interrupted by a disturbance, a strand of hair that made its way into her mouth. She remembers pulling it out from between her teeth, she remembers Cristiano snatching it from her, she remembers him making a joke out of turning it into a ring. And at the time he did make a ring of it—but who knew he would make a ring of it now?

I can't believe you still have this, she tells him. I just thought it would be fitting, he replies, to give it to you again. Because of its fragility, because of how easily we could have lost it. Now look at us—we're still here, we still have it, and we've lost nothing. She repeats his words: we've lost nothing. Despite how fragile our relationship is, he continues. We've lost nothing, she says again. You don't have to say yes or say no, he assures her, at least not right now.

As he turns his back to get some plates she shifts her gaze from the ring and toward him, his every movement crisp and cool and smooth, like he's at home. And she's at home here now, too, with him in this same space, this kitchen, where desire is brought into the oven raw and comes out glistening with love—a turkey of an affair stuffed with heartache and romance and so much cheese. So much cheese. He puts on a toque, then approaches the dining table, a plate in each hand. His every step firm—a firmness that signals his persistence to get her back, a firmness demonstrated by every meal he has made for her with nothing but the best ingredients, a firmness as consistent as the flavors of their favorite brand of cheese. A firmness as steadfast as their love for each other has become.

And Isabel looks at him, smiling, refusing to worry about the future. All she looks forward to is what's in front of her—the dinner she is about to take a bite of, the night she will sink her teeth into, and most important of all, the man she can't wait to devour—Cristiano, her perfect Italiano.

A SECOND SERVING OF LOVE

A moist cool rustles the leaves and wafts into the room, nudging Cristiano awake. He smells the departure of morning rain, enjoys the breeze for a while. Then awareness grips him; his body rises with a startle. Breakfast! he shouts inside his head, his torso upright and attentive. Isabel! he shouts inside his head again, but this time mouthing silently the syllables of her name. He turns to his side to look at the woman he intends to cook for this morning—with whom he has spent the night—but she isn't there. Not again, not this time, he mumbles to himself. In a panic he gets off the bed, jumps onto the floor, stumbles on his own shoes, and runs to the bedroom door.

Hey there handsome, Isabel greets him from a few meters away, by the kitchen counter, holding a hand mixer. Hey, you're up early, Cristiano greets her back, relieved, surprised by his own unwarranted worry. No, you're the one who's up early, she replies—if you know what I mean, she continues, pointing toward his navel with the mixer, winking. Cristiano looks down and discovers he hasn't put any clothes on. His movement swift he stoops to pick up the rug he's been standing on by the doorway, and uses it to cover himself. That's dirty, she chides him.

You were the dirty one last night, he chortles and begins to approach, his hand on the rug covering him. What are you cooking? he asks. Thought the day deserved some frittata Italiana, she responds. He wraps the rug around his waist, making Isabel chuckle, and comes forward. She has already emptied half a cup of grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan into a bowl—mixed with chopped basil, marjoram, and rosemary, then salt, pepper, and eggs—when he comes from behind her, engulfing her body, his arms on her arms as his hands glide their way to her hands. His chest pressed against her back she pokes the mixer into the bowl, and beats the ingredients. His grip on her tightens; she beats more and more vigorously. The clutch of her fingers around the smooth length of the handle hardens.

He sets the bowl aside and carries her, lays her on the counter. I'll show you some frittata Italiana, he jokes, unwrapping the rug, baring himself to her. He climbs over her as she laughs on her back. On his knees atop

the counter, he sandwiches Isabel between his thighs, creamy as cheese, as the scent of morning still thick on his skin. Both of them burst giggling inside the kitchen. He gives her a peck on the neck then turns to the stove, throws into a non-stick skillet some butter. Ever the multitasker, she snickers. Again he turns to her, and their lips reach each other: in the skillet of her mouth his tongue melts like so much butter.

The morning is tender as the onions Cristiano cooks and pours the egg-and-cheese mixture over. And after covering it, which he'll cook till the edges have browned—more of Monday morning's magical ministrations.

The sun shrouds them in sweat, but the couple couldn't care any less. Isabel and Cristiano stroll thru the streets, hand in hand, and as seconds roll into minutes and minutes into hours, so do affection roll into romance and romance into love. Sure you don't have to go to work today? he asks her. It's not every day you're sweet like this, she replies, how can I not take advantage of it?

They enter a park and walk on a path flanked by greens. For a minute Isabel daydreams: the rows of grass become pews, the pathway transforms into an aisle. Today the park is a church, sweltering with the heat of love, and she is the bride whose veil is hope and faith and forgiveness. She closes her eyes and imagines bells, a bouquet, tin cans tied to the back of a car, people throwing rice.

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"I was hoping I'd beat you to the kitchen," he tells her. "What are you cooking?" "Thought the day deserved some Frittata Italiana," she responds. "You're not the only cook around here, y'know". He slings the bag over his shoulder to keep his cover in place, making Isabel chuckle, and comes forward. She has already emptied half a cup of grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan into a bowl—mixed with chopped basil, marjoram, and rosemary, then salt, pepper, and eggs—when he comes from behind her, engulfing her body, his arms on her arms as his hands glide their way to her hands. His chest pressed against her back she pokes the mixer into the bowl, and beats the ingredients.

Together they make breakfast, their bodies leaning on the counter. In such intimate proximity, she could smell the scent of morning still thick on his skin. In his hand he takes her hand, and with her fingers throws some butter into a non-stick skillet. "Ever the multitasker," she snickers. Again he turns to her, and their lips reach each other: in the skillet of her mouth his tongue melts like so much butter.

The morning is tender as the onions Cristiano cooks and pours the egg-and-cheese mixture over. And after he covers it, more of Monday morning's magical ministrations ensue.

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Paranoia rears its head. And as thoughts race inside of hers she also races away, uncertainty clouding her judgment, doubt shrouding her mind like a mushroom cloud over a site of devastation.

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the next minute she pushes him away and dashes off.

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Late that afternoon, Cristiano carries his groceries up his condo. He has swung by the wet market as well, arriving at the perfect hour when snails are dropped off at the stall he counts on for the freshest catch. For he intends to cook no less than the freshest for his most beloved, whom by tonight he intends to be his catch forever.

To soothe his nerves he uncaps a bottle of beer, to keep him company as he does his work in the kitchen with delicacy. The sun has ceased battering on his windows with its fistfuls of heat, and a breeze has begun to creep past the awning and thru the slight opening. He unpacks and cleans a kilo of snails, then carefully sets them aside in a metallic bowl. Some of them manage to crawl up and fall off, and when Cristiano catches sight of them he wonders to himself, *How can something so gross be so generous with flavor?* Then he thinks about his relationship with Isabel, how it once took a turn for the worse—raw material for a scrumptious meal—only for it to be cooked now into a story of renewal. He picks them up one by one, some off the counter and a few off the floor, and puts them back into the bowl. *I am a snail*, he wonders to himself, *hoping to be picked up by Isabel.*

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Back by the kitchen counter, he sprinkles red pepper flakes and grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan cheese generously over the dish. And as he lets

it simmer for another 10 minutes, he slips into the shower to freshen up, try and look and smell his best for the woman he believes brings out the best in him, makes him the best man he can ever aspire to be—for he knows there is no better version of himself than when he is with Isabel.

Necktied and fresh, his hair waxed to a side and split neatly with a comb, he feels his pocket for the small box, faces the door and ready to head out. But as his right hand grips the doorknob—his left carrying the dinner of lumache he prepared minutes ago—he hears a knock on the door. He peers thru the peephole and finds out who his guest is.

Isabel in jeans and a white tank top. Isabel whose knee peeks out thru a rip.

Isabel whose aura is vanilla.

Isabel whose neck is the flesh of ripe honeydews.

Isabel whose cheeks are halves of the same mango in season.

Isabel whose lips are berries begging to be bitten.

Isabel whose mouth is cheese, whose tongue is cheese, whose words are sweet and salty and smooth like cheese.

Isabel who now tells him, Hey there. To whom Cristiano mumbles back, I—I—I w—was just about to go to you. And I'm glad I caught you here first, Isabel replies. I'm sorry, you caught me by surprise, Cristiano replies. I didn't mean to leave you there like that, Isabel says back.

Cristiano begins to feel light. A thousand images swirling in my head, he confesses to Isabel. Images of what? she asks. Images of you, he tells her back. Are the images anything like this? she asks him again—but without giving him a split-second to reply she presses her mouth against his. He closes his eyes as she does, and his mind quivers, quickens, quiets, and quits. On her shoulder his head calms down; in her arms the rest of him finds relief.

Thank you for coming back, he whispers into her ear. It wasn't me who came back, she says, but you. Then why did you leave this afternoon? he

inquires. Cold feet, she answers. Cristiano gets up, unpacks the special meal of snails he has prepared for her. I know exactly what can warm you up, he remarks.

Snails? she asks, bewildered. No, he tells her, this: He pulls out of his pocket the small velvety box, and when he opens it, her eyes widen in recognition: it's a ring, but not just any kind of ring. I haven't seen this in years, she tells him. Where did you find it? Well, he responds, you sent it back to me. It was in the bag of mementoes you left here.

And from the box she takes it—a ring made of paper, thin and sheer and fragile, a ring made of tissue. And where a face or stone would normally be is a stain. Instantly how the ring came about comes to her mind: it was from their first meal together. She had been enjoying it so much, Cristiano's cooking, that she had so carelessly smeared sauce across her lower lip, making a curve toward her cheek. And it was Cristiano who wiped it off her face, with a napkin he had grabbed out of the tissue holder. She remembers freezing as he did it, she remembers him making a joke out of turning the napkin into a ring. And at the time he did make a ring of it—but who knew he would make a ring of it now?

I can't believe you still have this, she tells him. I just thought it would be fitting, he replies, to give it to you again. Because of its fragility, because of how easily we could have lost it. Because of how we could have thrown it away, but didn't. Now look at us—we're still here, we still have it, and we've lost nothing. She repeats his words: we've lost nothing. Despite how fragile our relationship is, he continues. We've lost nothing, she says again. You don't have to say yes or say no, he assures her, at least not right now.

As he turns his back to get some plates she shifts her gaze from the ring and toward him, his every movement crisp and cool and smooth, like he's at home. And she's at home here now, too, with him in this same space, this kitchen, where desire is brought into the oven raw and comes out glistening with love—a turkey of an affair stuffed with heartache and romance and so much cheese. He puts on a toque, then approaches the dining table, a plate in each hand. His every step firm—a firmness that signals his persistence to get her back, a firmness demonstrated by every meal he has made for her with nothing but the best ingredients, a firmness as consistent as the flavors of their favorite brand of cheese. A

firmness as steadfast as their love for each other has become.

And Isabel looks at him, smiling, refusing to worry about the future. All she looks forward to is what's in front of her—the dinner she is about to take a bite of, the night she will sink her teeth into, and most important of all, the man she can't wait to devour—Cristiano, her perfect Italiano.

A SECOND SERVING OF LOVE

A moist cool rustles the leaves and wa3s into the room, nudging Cristiano awake. He smells the departure of morning rain, enjoys the breeze for a while. Then awareness grips him; his body rises with a startle. Breakfast! he shouts inside his head, his torso upright and attentive. Isabel! he shouts inside his head again, but this timme mouthing silently the syllables of her name. He turns to his side to look at the woman he intends to cook for this morning—with whom he has spent the night—but she isn't there. Not again, not this time, he mumbles to himself. In a panic he gets off the bed, jumps onto the floor, stumbles on his own shoes, and runs to the bedroom door.

"Hey there, bedhead," Isabel greets him from a few meters away, by the kitchen counter, holding a hand mixer. "Hey, you're up early," Cristiano greets her back, relieved, surprised by his own unwarranted worry. "No, you're the one who's up early," she replies—"if you know what I mean," she continues, winking. Cristiano looks down and discovers he hasn't put any clothes on. Blushing, he stoops to pick up the bag lying by the doorway, and holds it to cover himself.

"I was hoping I'd beat you to the kitchen," he tells her. "What are you cooking?" "Thought the day deserved some Fritata Italiana," she responds. "You're not the only cook around here, y'know". He slings the bag over his shoulder to keep his cover in place, making Isabel chuckle, and comes forward. She has already emptied half a cup of grated Perfect Italiano Parmesan into a bowl—mixed with chopped basil, marjoram, and rosemary, then salt, pepper, and eggs—when he comes from behind her, engulfing her body, his arms on her arms as his hands glide their way to her hands. His chest pressed against her back she pokes the mixer into the bowl, and beats the ingredients.

Together they make breakfast, their bodies leaning on the counter. In such intimate proximity, she could smell the scent of morning still thick on his skin. In his hand he takes her hand, and with her fingers throws some butter into a non-stick skillet. "Ever the multitasker," she snickers. Again he turns to her, and their lips reach each other: in the skillet of her mouth his tongue melts like so much butter.

The morning is tender as the onions Cristiano cooks and pours the egg-and-cheese mixture over. And after he covers it, more of Monday morning's magical ministrations ensue.

The sun shrouds them in sweat, but the couple couldn't care any less. Isabel and Cristiano stroll thru the streets, hand in hand, and as seconds roll into minutes and minutes into hours, so do affection roll into romance and romance into love. "Sure you don't have to go to work today?" he asks her. "It's not every day you're sweet like this," she replies. "How can I not take advantage of it?"

They enter a park and walk on a path flanked by greens. For a minute Isabel daydreams: the rows of grass become pews, the pathway transforms into an aisle. Today the park is a church, sweltering with the heat of love, and she is the bride whose veil is hope and faith and forgiveness. She closes her eyes and imagines bells, a bouquet, tin cans tied to the back of a car, people throwing rice.

But when she opens her eyes, the bells in her imagining resound a different tune—the deafening clang of fear. She daydreams of forever—but outside of that daydream, what nightmare of loss is she reliving? "I have you now just as I used to have you," she tells him. "But just as I lost you once," she continues, "I could lose you again." Isabel pushes Cristiano away, wipes a tear off her cheek. "Have I said something wrong?" Cristiano asks. "Not at all," she tells him, "not at all. And that's the problem, Cristiano, this is all too perfect, just like things used to be too perfect." "Then what's wrong?" he prods her. "We've gone up the hill again. I'm afraid everything will go downhill at some point. Everything will go wrong again."

Paranoia rears its head. And as thoughts race inside of hers she also races away, uncertainty clouding her judgment, doubt shrouding her mind like a mushroom cloud over a site of devastation.

Cristiano stands speechless. Stunned, he can do no more than look at her, the image of her becoming smaller and smaller as she disappears in the distance. Here we go again, he thinks, but also knows he cannot blame her. Even those at the park wonder about what may have happened—one minute they see a couple happily strolling this afternoon,

the next minute she pushes him away and dashes off.

Cristiano is frozen by frustration. I deserve this, the sentence runs over and over in his head, I deserve this. Now she flakes on me like I used to flake on her. I deserve this—but she deserves so much more than my mere acceptance that this is how it ends.

Late that afternoon, Cristiano carries his groceries up his condo. He has swung by the wet market as well, arriving at the perfect hour when snails are dropped off at the stall he counts on for the freshest catch. For he intends to cook no less than the freshest for his most beloved, whom by tonight he intends to be his catch forever.

To soothe his nerves he uncaps a bottle of beer, to keep him company as he does his work in the kitchen with delicacy. The sun has ceased battering on his windows with its fistfuls of heat, and a breeze has begun to creep past the awning and thru the slight opening. He unpacks and cleans a kilo of snails, then carefully sets them aside in a metallic bowl. Some of them manage to crawl up and fall off, and when Cristiano catches sight of them he wonders to himself, How can something so gross be so generous with flavor? Then he thinks about his relationship with Isabel, how it once took a turn for the worse—raw material for a scrumptious meal—only for it to be cooked now into a story of renewal. He picks them up one by one, some off the counter and a few off the floor, and puts them back into the bowl. I am a snail, he wonders to himself, hoping to be picked up by Isabel.

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