

Catie Disabato

U Up?

a novel

"The Eve Babitz of the Instagram age.
U Up? is a delight." —Maris Kreizman,
author of *Slaughterhouse 90210*



U Up?

Catie Disabato

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The intense desire—
and the fulfillment of that desire—
experienced through looking.

—SCOPOPHILIA, AS DEFINED
BY THE ARTIST NAN GOLDIN

In the land of gods and monsters
I was an angel
Lookin' to get fucked hard.

—LANA DEL REY

U Up?

Friday, 12:03 a.m.

u up?

My phone blared with the incoming text, a noisy alert I was as relieved to hear as an almost-murder victim is by the wail of police sirens. For hours my phone had laid inert, as useless as a lone brick, while I watched endless Netflix lying on my back and poked at my barely concave belly button.

How glorious it was to hear my phone, to see it light up again, at a late enough hour that it was a true surprise to hear it wake.

u up?

Oh yes, sweet phone and glorious late-night texter, yes I'm up.

EzralsTexting

Thursday 6:55 PM

u wanna go to that new tiki bar?

can't tonight, i'm knocking off work
tomorrow to go to the desert with noz

like for the day???

she got us a room at two bunch palms
for the weekend

Friday 12:03 AM

u up?

The text was from Ezra Levinson, my best friend. We've known each other forever because we went to the same Jewish summer camps in high school, then to the same college and latched onto each other during orientation, panicked about moving away from our families, hungry for a familiar face. We got really close, we've continued to be really close, and over the years we've become a part of each other, what I imagine having a sibling must feel like—or even a twin. Our hair grows exactly the same, so over the past five years or so we've semi-accidentally maintained the same haircut.

I was surprised to see Ezra's name on my screen, I hadn't expected to hear from him. He was supposed to be on his way to Desert Hot Springs, sitting in his girlfriend's, Nozlee's, passenger seat, Noz steering her ancient Jeep Wrangler with one hand on the wheel and one on the gear shift, one of Ezra's big hands wrapped almost halfway around her thigh, the desert spread in front of them like a landscape painting, cacti growing in dirt along the freeway. I'd expected to spend the weekend watching their Instagram stories from Two Bunch Palms, the chic hot

springs hotel, and liking their rusty, desert-brown pictures, then meeting them in Palm Springs on Sunday night, like we'd been planning for weeks. I'd been so ticked off at both of them when Ezra told me they were going away this weekend, before our night in Palm Springs, and even though Nozlee was supposed to be one of my closest friends, she hadn't seemed dedicated enough to apologizing to me about it. On the other hand, Ezra had apologized profusely and promised me they'd be on time.

Ezra's Texting

she got us a room at two bunch palms
for the weekend

Friday 12:03 AM

u up?

im UP

u wanna come out for a last one at la
cuev?

La Cueva was one of our regular bars, recently renamed from the English (Little Cave) to the Spanish, potentially to make it seem more authentically Mexican. It wasn't authentically anything, really, but it was cave-like to be sure; the ceilings were low and the rooms were dark and what lighting there was was red. I liked red bars. I looked good in pictures in red light.

I jabbed at my keyboard erratically, so Ezra would see that enigmatic ellipsis, *dot dot dot*, appear in our message chain. Then I deleted the random letters I'd typed and closed the app, so the ellipsis would disappear, so he'd know I'd seen it and thought about responding but then didn't, just to give him a little scare. Even though he'd apologized, I couldn't get over being a little miffed with him. It was a bad weekend for both of us, and I had expected to spend every hour in his company, at bright brunch tables or in dark movie theaters, sharing plates of french fries and sitting in companionable silence when we ran out of things to say to each other. I had imagined the moment he would start telling me some story of our shared past, "Do you remember when we drove out to the Rose Bowl and it was suddenly raining . . . ?" trailing off as we both remembered the moment, and who had been with us at the time. Our other best friend, Miguel. One year ago, on this same weekend, he'd hanged himself in a hotel room in Palm Springs. That day at the Rose Bowl, Miguel had pulled us both out of the car and into the rain, expecting a movie-like moment, but all LA rain is actually drizzle and the only thing that happened was that our hair got really frizzy, and that story is actually a story of nothing, and it's only worth telling because I will never see Miggy's hair get frizzy again. On this weekend, of all weekends, Ezra was supposed to spend time with me, and instead he'd agreed to go to the desert with somebody else.

And yes, Nozlee was our other best friend and, yes, she had suffered/was suffering the loss of Miggy alongside us, but she wasn't a twin. Maybe it was racist for me to think that, because she was Iranian and Ezra and I were white (Ezra's grandfather, who had survived a concentration camp with a name I can't pronounce, not Auschwitz, would say that Ezra was "Jewish,

not white” but we knew that wasn’t true because we had always been considered white). But I wasn’t talking about appearance. I was talking about the emotional experience of being linked together. And even though I’d known Nozlee forever and loved her, and even though Ezra had dated Nozlee forever and loved her, she was not linked into us in that nearly biological way.

I put off answering Ezra’s text again and opened my text chain with Miguel:

Miggy

Yesterday

i know it’s harder for him than it is for me

but that doesn’t mean i’m not hurt that
he ran off to the desert

You have to let him deal with his grief in
his own way

i don’t want ot

i want him to deal with his grief in LA
with me

Today 12:07 AM

if u were me, and u were mad at ur only
living best friend for abandoning u, and u
were very snug in your nice bed, would u
get up just to keep ezra company?

I hit send and glanced back at the television screen. In the show, a lady detective who had a very dykey way of dressing was kissing a doctor guy who was so bland in his handsomeness that I'd never recognize the actor in a coffee shop, even though I'd seen every episode of his show. Seen and *loved* every episode of his show. I love the way formulaic cop dramas allow me to blank out, the way people must feel when they're really good at meditating. I know a few people who stopped watching all cop shows around the time Black Lives Matter was really picking up steam, because they don't want to watch anything that casts cops as heroes or glorifies the justice system, and I get that. And it does seem kind of weird and rude to defend the pleasure I take in the inherent emptiness of these shows, which for me separates them so solidly from the real world, so I don't even try.

Because she apparently wasn't hanging out in the desert, I texted Nozlee a semi-joking text about stealing the leather jacket the dyke-dressing lady detective wears during nighttime scenes. I thought we could have a cute little back-and-forth about it, and then she'd have a perfect opportunity to segue into an apology to me for going out of town.

The text was only half a joke because I knew Nozlee actually had access to the jacket in question, one of those strange things about living in Los Angeles, the way that movies and TV shows could accidentally break the fourth wall because I knew so many people who worked in "The Industry." Nozlee worked as an assistant art director on the lady detective show and once set me up with the costume designer; so, the detective dressed like a lesbian because the costume designer on the show is a lesbian. The costume designer and I had eaten brunch on the gardeny back patio at Bowery Bungalow and I'd ordered a pitcher of sangria before she told me she didn't like to drink in the mornings, and I'd resented her and started to hate our date. But then

she didn't make me feel bad about drinking the entire pitcher myself and fed me a bite of her shakshuka, somehow managing to make a spoon thrust across a table both sexy and not-messy, and I'd started to like our date. After, we'd gone shopping in Silver Lake and based on her guidance that day, I now had clothes that would allow me to cosplay as the lady detective. Our banter wasn't enough to overcome the obvious difference in our lifestyles (who doesn't drink at brunch?) and when she texted me, it was both sweet and way too normie, and I couldn't think of anything to say back right away and then got distracted by something and then it was two days later and I hadn't texted her back at all and Nozlee was hearing about it on set. She'd had to prod me to apologize. Suffice it to say, we didn't go on a second date. Even though maybe we could've if I'd wanted to and had composed a more emotionally expressive apology text and had allowed her to verbally process my ghosting.

My phone lit up, I looked away from the hetero kissing.

Miggy

Today 12:07 AM

if u were me, and u were mad at ur only living best friend for abandoning u, and u were very snug in your nice bed, would u get up just to keep ezra company?

You should go

If you're going to be upset with him bc he's leaving, you should at least tell him you're upset.

In death as in life, Miggy was always annoyingly certain he had the right answer for everything; once he had an idea in his head, it was impossible to dissuade him from it. One of the ideas that he'd had for years was: "Eve expresses her anger incorrectly," which was a hugely reductive take on my emotional state. I texted back with two thumbs.

Miggy

Today 12:07 AM

if u were me, and u were mad at ur only living best friend for abandoning u, and u were very snug in your nice bed, would u get up just to keep ezra company?

You should go

If you're going to be upset with him bc he's leaving, you should at least tell him you're upset.

maybe getting laid in the desert is his way of grieving

It would certainly be an effective way to honor my life.

Most of the time when people die, they leave the rest of us behind forever, but occasionally an impression of them remains: a ghost, obviously. Some people, like me, can see and communicate with ghosts. Nozlee, too. From the ghosts we understand that the afterlife is like you're napping most of the time, and when you're awake you're driven by unchecked desires; hungers and thirsts so intense they are all-consuming. In every werewolf movie, they have a scene of the body mid-transformation: a hunched and contorted back sprouting hair, claws growing where fingernails should be, eyes glowing yellow, teeth elongating and sharpening. Ghosts are creatures constantly in that mid-transformation state, their non-corporal bodies sometimes half-formed mist, sometimes a fully defined body, sometimes that body is contorted and growling and almost fully a beast.

Most of my friends know that I "see ghosts" but almost all of them, even Ezra, think I'm being, like, hyperbolic. I've always been into the now-trendy pseudo-witchiness, into candles and moon ceremonies and crystals. They know I grew up in Los Angeles, and they remember New Age-y Topanga from *Boy Meets World*, and they remember when "being Wiccan" was a thing in junior high school, and they also watched *The Craft* on cable in high school and, after, bought a necklace with a Pentagram on it from Hot Topic. When I say, "I see ghosts," they think I mean that sometimes in the corner of my eye, I see a flicker of a shadow that I've decided is a ghost. It's easier to not correct them. It's easier not to insist, *I experience an actual materialization of the dead*. Life is too exhausting not to make the easiest choice when it comes to the kind of thing that used to get my kind burned at the stake.

When Miggy died, he didn't return to me as a physical presence, but as a contact in my phone. We text a lot. Though he had little to report from life after death, it was a pleasure to still get a sense of his voice in my ear. Miggy didn't have a voice anymore, not a throat, not the capacity to suck air into a throat to produce sounds, but I could remember what his voice sounded like. As a ghost, his driving thirst was conversation. He was like that when he was alive, too; when we die, we just become extreme versions of ourselves, our traits and preoccupations amped up so high that it's monstrous. When he was alive, Miggy loved detailed descriptions of my days, gossip (even about people he didn't personally know), and deep conversations about divisive topics like the efficacy of meditation and the future of the Democratic Party and if there is such a thing as a truly selfless act. Miggy still loved all those things after he died. As a ghost, he's devoted himself to texts with me, with Nozlee, and with any other mediums I knew, or who were friends of friends and willing to provide their phone numbers and text with a ghost on those long, lonely, spooky nights.

I keep the texts secret so none of our other friends get jealous, so I don't have to explain to them that I can see ghosts and re-traumatize myself when they don't believe me or have me committed, and also so that if they did believe me, I didn't have to be the conduit when everyone else wanted to say hi to Miggy. Getting to talk to Miggy is my prize for all my early-in-life suffering as the result of seeing ghosts—visits to childhood psychiatrists who asked leading questions trying to determine if I was seeing hallucinations or just had an active fantasy life, social isolation from the other kids who thought I was a “weird

Wiccan bitch,” waking up in the middle of the night to hear my mother crying softly to my father that it was her fault that I was “different” because her mom was manic depressive and her aunt had depression and it was actually so selfish of her to have passed on those genes, and I was lying awake knowing it was because of my strangeness that my parents choose not to have any more children.

The only person I can talk about it with is Nozlee. We met in this sort of witch-skills apprentice program in Brooklyn, back when she tweezed her eyebrows too much and claimed to be a bisexual. We studied under a more experienced witch to hone our otherworld communication and exorcism skills; unfortunately Witch Colleen didn’t offer much in career training, so it was about as useless as our BAs in Comparative Literature in helping us pay our rents. Some of Witch Colleen’s students tried to make witchcraft into a career, but it was harder to make a living than even if we’d been freelance journalists. At Colleen’s suggestion, Noz and I both moved to LA because it was easier here to use our skills to make money on the side. Sometimes, I did exorcisms for rich people. Before her set work picked up, Noz made good money reading tarot cards, which is completely unaffected by her ability to see ghosts. Colleen herself had vanished from New York a little while after we graduated from her program, and was rumored to have moved out to the desert to find work as an exorcist or shaman; Nozlee insists that Colleen reaches out to her sometimes, but since Colleen had never reached out to me, I was sure she was exaggerating, conflating a like on Instagram with an actual reach-out.

I glanced again at my screen, at my thread with Miggy.

Miggy

if u were me, and u were mad at ur only living best friend for abandoning u, and u were very snug in your nice bed, would u get up just to keep ezra company?

You should go

If you're going to be upset with him bc he's leaving, you should at least tell him you're upset.

maybe getting laid in the desert is his way of grieving

It would certainly be an effective way to honor my life.

You should go

You should respond to him

And then go

Though I was pissed at Ezra's decision to semi-abandon me, I appreciated that he'd thought of spending these last few hours before his desert trip with me at a bar we loved. I would try to take Miggy's advice and be direct with Ezra, but it would be better if I could just erase the feelings of being

hurt and have fun with him during the small window of time between now and last call. I could spend the car ride doing a kind of cleansing breathing exercise (in for four, hold for four, out for four) to eject my feelings of abandonment which were probably misplaced aggression and definitely a product of my anxious attachment style (I was sure Therapist Lauren would say as much in our next session, whenever I got around to scheduling it). I could clear all the passive-aggressive bullshit out of my veins and lungs and just be present for Ezra. If I went as is—hair scraggly, bangs damp with night sweat, eyes bloodshot from staring at the computer and internet’s endless scroll—I could get there an hour and a half before closing. And if I was being totally honest with myself, there was little I wouldn’t do for Ezra if he asked.

Ezra's Texting

Today 12:03 AM

u up?

im UP

u wanna come out for a last one at la
cuev?

yeah comin

After hours lying on my back on the left side of my bed, I left it warm and rumped when I got up. The right side was cold; it had been empty all night. And for a few weeks previous.

The wood floor in my bungalow creaked when I walked, haunted-sounding. The bathtub faucet perpetually dripped and the drain in the kitchen sink occasionally made a glugging noise like it was a throat looking for something to swallow. I could hear all of it in the quiet dark. My phone lit up again; maybe Ezra was calling it a night after all. I thumbed the message open.

Ezra's Texting

u wanna come out for a last one at la cuev?

yeah comin

Noz broke up with me this p.m.

The text gave me a sudden anxious energy, my grievance with Ezra immediately insignificant. I scurried around, found my black jeans, and then dropped them in disgust when I remembered that they used to belong to Noz and she'd given them to me when she was done with them. She was giving away Ezra now, as easily as the jeans, without even consulting me or warning me. With Miggy gone, our group had been

reduced to three, and everything was fine as long as Nozlee and Ezra stayed happy together, and I loved Nozlee and she loved me and she loved Ezra and I loved Ezra and he loved both of us in different ways. But maybe Nozlee didn't love Ezra anymore and so I couldn't let Ezra see me in her jeans.

I put on my Levi's and the muscle tee with the blue stripes that I'd stolen from Ezra, and the jean jacket that matched the wash of my Levi's; I put my glasses on. I blew out the blue comfort and protection candles that I'd been burning while I lingered bed-bound, and dug through the crates I kept under my bed and pulled out three candles: one black, one white, one red. I put all three jarred candles into my bathtub and used an eyeliner to write three names on three squares of toilet paper: Nozlee, Ezra, Eve. I thought hard about a general anti-negativity vibe and lit one black candle and burned my name. I thought hard about Ezra's heart healing and imagined him smiling, not caring and lit the white candle and burned his name. I thought about Nozlee's heart pumping hot blood and her mind growing amorous, relit with revived love for Ezra. I left the candles burning in the tub, laced up my Gazelles, and finally ran down the stairs.

Ezra's Texting

Noz broke up with me this p.m.

oh babe oh fuck im sorry IM COMING

Ezra and Noz weren't what you'd call a solid couple. They were both bad communicators to some degree, and stubborn, and both had demonstrated some capacity to kamikaze the best parts of their lives. It was something I could relate to. Therapist Lauren called it my "death instinct," which didn't necessarily mean I was suicidal, just meant that I had the drive in me to self-destruct, but gradually, muting my suffering with "ritualized comfort-seeking behaviors," like drinking or making enemies or paying to soak at the Korean spa with the only money I had left to buy groceries. My death instinct came up often in therapy, even though Therapist Lauren doesn't know I see actual dead people. She thinks I'm holding onto my death instinct out of some kind of fear, but I'm not scared of anything.

In my car, I tossed a bag of Haribo Golden Bears onto the pile of sweaters and empty water bottles that lived on the passenger seat. The gummy bears were another instinct or reflex, born in me by Ezra. Ezra was the kind of friend who would reach his fork into your salad bowl or pick up a taco off your tray to try a bite—but he didn't have a sweet tooth. My gummy bears were mine, and mine alone. I dug my fingers in the small hole I'd ripped into the corner of the bag, I scissored my fingers until the bag split at its seams, I took a handful.

Chewing, finishing a bear, popping another in my mouth, I began the agonizing process of easing my car out of its tight parking spot, accompanied by a vision of spending the rest of my life executing endless, agonizing three-point turns. It was a likely future for me; I planned to live in LA until I died, and then probably for a while longer. As I twisted to make sure I wasn't going to smash my taillight into the corner of the building, the Levi's dug into that part of my side in between my ribs and hips, unprotected by bones and vulnerable. I untwisted, and the Levi's dug into the small swell of my stomach.

I actually introduced Ezra and Noz years ago, when she was in LA to visit me. Noz wears her desire on her face, and I could tell from the moment she saw him that she wanted to suck his fingers into her mouth. Before they made it official, Ezra and Noz were on and off again for more than two years. Noz was an assistant art director and mostly working on indie movies at the time, always traveling to whatever state was giving the best tax incentives and coming back with some story about how Anna Kendrick's eyes crossed when she took shots of tequila or how Walton Goggins remembered everyone's names, even the production assistants and grips. Last fall, she got a job on the pilot of my lady detective show, and it obviously got picked up to series. That meant Noz had been in LA for more than ten months and she and Ezra had been exclusive for most of that time. For years they'd always been texting someone else, or fucking someone else, but given long months in the same city together, they couldn't commit to anything but whatever it was they had; the smell of each other's bodies, the familiar fights. Devotion like that turns a fucked-up thing into a real romantic love affair.

One more boring micro-adjustment in my car's trajectory, one eye on the rearview mirror and one hand on the wheel, I was finally able to drive out of my parking lot and turn onto Sunset Boulevard, heading east. My phone connected to my car's Bluetooth and the car started playing what I'd been listening to before, "leaves" by Miguel—the singer, not my dead friend—an LA song. *"The leaves they don't change here / You know I'm from here, I never saw it coming / Where did the summer go, when you loved me?"* I sang along as I drove, the streets uncommonly empty, my voice mixing with Miguel's in the closed environment of my car; I could trick myself into thinking that I sang well.

Sunset took me almost all the way into Chinatown before I swung north, onto the 110. This stretch of the 110 was like a country road converted to a freeway, twisting and hazardous to speed on, but everyone did it anyway. The mountains bloomed on either side of me, a state park bracketed the freeway. What should've been an uneasy claiming of territory, the roads taking over where mountains were supposed to go, was actually a natural-seeming partnership. The roads looked like they grew out of the earth the same as the mountains, both black at night, both dotted with degrading color, yellow for lane lines, green for the tree plants that clung goat-like to the sloped sides of the mountainous ridges.

I took a sharp right onto the Avenue 60 exit, stopped at an excruciatingly long red light, slid into a parking space in front of La Cuev, nodded at the familiar door guy, went through a gaping doorway that barely kept a boundary between street and building, and was inside.

The bar inside La Cuev is horseshoe-shaped and massive, with rickety uncomfortable chairs that no one sat on except during happy hour when the rest of the place was full. So close to closing, I knew I wouldn't find Ezra there. Nevertheless, it had to be my first stop. The sole bartender left on duty was a woman named Meghan who I know as well as you can know a bartender, from slices of conversations while she mixed margaritas or cut limes. She has a band, she doesn't have a boyfriend anymore. She'd gone home with my friend Georgie, once, but I didn't know Meghan to date girls regularly; Georgie is pretty masc. of center.

Meghan put down her phone when she sensed someone come up to the bar and smiled when she saw me. I tip well.

I ordered: "A beer, whatever is on special please, and a shot

of tequila, Well is fine.” Meghan heard me but took the bottle of Patrón off the shelf; it was late enough, I was enough of a regular, or maybe it was a flirt. I took the shot then ate the sour meat out of the lime, leaving behind a ravaged peel.

“Did you see Ezra?” I asked.

Besides the bar, La Cueva had two areas: a shadowy, red indoors to the right and a narrow outdoor smoking zone to the left.

“He’s outside,” Meghan said, taking my card.

“Will he need another by now?” I asked.

“Probably, he doesn’t look so good,” she said. “He also had a boilermaker.”

“Add it on, and another shot of tequila for me.”

She swiped my card and got to work preparing my order. I glanced into the corners, looking for apparitions. Seeing none—only the normal shadows and cracked stone walls—I closed my eyes to feel for unseen spirits. I’d felt a presence in La Cueva before—most bars are haunted, and I used to spend a little time with this one ghost man, a Mexican dude who’d died sometime in the 1990s, who had never given me his name, spoke only Spanish. I’d been trying to use a translation app on my phone to communicate with him, but after I brought my then-girlfriend in, and he saw us kissing at a dark table, he refused to acknowledge my presence. Now when I come into the bar, he floats on the ceiling, or disappears entirely. I could feel him lurking somewhere, but he wasn’t showing himself.

I somehow picked up the two tallboys and two shots, and made my way outside, past all the rickety tables and chairs, looking for Ezra. I looked for his familiar body; his heap of curly hair, his slender six feet and three inches, the slice of his cheekbones. I almost didn’t see him, because of what he’d done

to himself. He'd cut off his hair, down to the root. It saved me that he was sitting with his back to the door, so that he couldn't see the horror on my face at this mutilation; I took a moment to collect myself.

I'd last seen Ezra in person yesterday morning at Thursday Trash Tennis, wearing white linen pants and a white tank, greeting the day with a tennis racquet in one hand and a Tecate in the other. His curly hair had been intact then, bobbing as he smacked a ball almost to my baseline. (Ezra and I had been a doubles team for years, before things got serious with Noz; last Thursday I'd partnered with Dorothy, who had a good serve but much less charisma on the court.) It looked like he'd buzzed it without being able to see the back of his head, awkward tufts everywhere he couldn't reach. Ezra had a good enough face to basically always look good, but he might've finally found the outer limit of his appeal.

I could tell by the rattle and the angle his neck curved back when he sipped that he was at the bottom of his previous tall-boy. I slid the full one onto the table in front of him.

"Hi honey," he said. I put the rest of the drinks on the table and he got up and wrapped me in a big hug. His eyes were red-rimmed, but pupils were small, his focus sharp; he wasn't drunk yet, or on downers. The skin on his arms prickled in the cold night air, and I had no stretchy sweater to offer him; it was unfair that he was the sad one and I was warm and fine in my jacket. I watched his limbs for the restlessness of coke or Adderall or the Ritalin we got last time we were in Mexico.

"Hi honey," I said. I sat down, put my phone on the table next to his, and rubbed my fingers on his scalp. "It's all gone."

"Yeah, I don't know," he ran his hand over it. "Some Britney Spears shit."

His face was just so there now, without the hair, so unhidden; cheekbones, a forehead, eyebrows arched and expressive and rough like men's eyebrows are. His lips, too.

"It looks good," I lied. "It makes your face look good."

He smiled big. Ezra has one of the world's most beautiful smiles, a magnetic sun-like smile. The single drawback: his eyes squinted into slits when he grinned and I preferred his eyes to his mouth.

We clinked shot glasses, then tapped the bottoms on the table, then took our shots. Drinking with Ezra is always an act of physical nostalgia, a version of "going through the motions" without the negative connotations. Though the emotional circumstances of our lives are as temporary as fast fashion trends and so the conditions of our drinking together are always changing, that shot was an echo of every single shot we've ever taken together, an amassing of our long friendship, an expression of our love for each other. Love, like alcohol, is something the body consumes. Ezra reached across the table to squeeze my upper arm, reminding himself that I was there; then he lit a cigarette.

"So what happened?" I asked on his exhale.

He shrugged like he didn't know, but that was a lie. Ezra had a PhD in Nozlee, the preeminent scholar in all her various forms of glory and bullshit. I sipped on my beer and waited. If he didn't want to tell me, he wouldn't have texted.

"I went over to her house after I finished my work, and she was in the shower," he said, a storyteller setting the scene. Ezra ghostwrites "autobiographies" of aging male celebrities, and young adult novels "written by" young female celebrities, and an upcoming series of novels not unlike *Gossip Girl* about a warring group of Jewish high school students attending pri-

vate school in Los Angeles. He's comfortable telling dramatic stories about emotional melodrama.

"We'd been fighting on text for about like, the previous three hours," he continued, ashing his cigarette on the ground even though there was a perfectly good ashtray on the table in front of him, unnecessary and a little gross, like the way sometimes men insist on peeing outside. "I expected we'd squash the fight sometime during the drive to Joshua Tree, and get In-N-Out, and have our weekend. She came out with her hair up in a towel, and she was really calm and said, 'Let's not fight,' but I'm a fucking idiot, and I still wanted to yell at her about whatever the fuck, about her *mean tone* all the time.

"I mean, goddamn it. What do I care about her tone? If I hadn't said anything we'd be on our way to the desert right now."

"It's not your fault," I said, and instantly regretted it. I knew it wasn't about fault, it was about cause and effect: Ezra had pushed for a fight and it didn't matter whether or not he knew that it would be relationship-ending. He was in desperate disbelief, understanding the reality of his situation, sure, but fixed on his last moment of control, his last action. He was circling some kind of drain.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She was very direct. She said, 'I'm breaking up with you.'

"She said we fight all the time and it was getting too toxic for her and she might get an offer to be an assistant to the art director on a Marvel film and leave LA anyway, so we might as well call this a good try and cut off the cycle of abuse right now. She said she deserves to feel good. She said we needed to start the process of getting over each other."

“That doesn’t sound very generous,” I said, “it’s not like she’s some angel.”

“But whatever, I like a girl who’s mean to me.”

Ezra was drawn to the dynamism of a negative dynamic. Or actually, a dynamic that quickly flips from positive to negative and back again. “What does she want you to do to fix it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, stubbing out his cigarette. “Go choke.”

“She should go choke,” I said, reflexively on his side in that moment, even with one close friend vs. another. “But like,” and I needed to be delicate about the next bit, so Ezra wouldn’t think I was accusing him of melodrama. “Are you sure this is real?”

“I’m sure,” he said. He looked really pitiful, defeated and tattered, the lines of his body a poor container for all that was going on inside.

“Because,” I said, still being careful, “This isn’t the first time.”

“This isn’t anything like the other times she broke up with me,” he said. “She wasn’t screaming at me or freaking out, she was very quiet.”

I could see how that would be a bad sign.

“The other times,” he continued, “she was deciding emotionally in that exact second to break up with me. This was like she’d thought it through and had already made her decision and was just, like, informing me of the new situation.”

I reached over and grabbed his hand, and he squeezed me hard, tight around my lowest knuckles, to anchor my body to his. I tried to squeeze back but there was nothing for me to do in the grip but take it.

“Well fuck her then,” I said.

“Fuck me, I guess,” he said, almost making a joke again.

I remembered a screenshot he’d sent me, it was of sexts he’d sent Noz right after they got back together after one of their screaming breakups; she’d asked him if he would fuck her from behind, and he’d responded in detail exactly how he’d do just that. Reading the exchange had sent a tremor of arousal through my whole torso; I’ve learned that other people’s sexts are the best porn. This was a particular guilty and twisted moment of lust, considering the circumstances.

He backed off, let me go, had a sip of beer. The bar was closing down, emptying out. We were slowly being left alone. Behind the bar, Meghan cleaned glasses with routine disinterest.

“I’ve gotta go to the bathroom,” Ezra said, thumbing his nose. So he did have coke.

I nodded. “I’ll go after you.”

He stood up, and from below his hair looked even more dramatically ruined. I thumbed open Instagram, looking for a few specific old posts. Ezra and I had a series of Instagram pictures from our urban hikes in the hills of Silver Lake and Echo Park and Highland Park. We’d have a stranger, or a third person with us, take a picture of our backs, our boyish brown curly hair, us looking out over a vista, some neighborhood of LA spread out below us. On our hikes, in our pictures, we had been twins, but we wouldn’t be anymore; I’d still have my hair and he’d have some shaved head thing (shaved heads had always been too Nazi-ish to me). We wouldn’t look the same anymore. We looked nothing alike from the front, from the back was our only opportunity to match. Now we were separate, in some new and unsettling way.

When Ezra came back from the bathroom, he passed me the little baggie and a pen cap under the table. From her bar perch, eyes locked to her phone, Meghan shouted last call with all the enthusiasm of someone contractually obligated. I took what remained of my tallboy in a single gulp and Ezra rattled his can, checking its level of fullness. We could both do with another.

“Another round? Close me out?” I asked.

Ezra nodded, and I went to *el baño* while he went to the bar. The *Mujeres* room was cramped, two stalls and a cracked porcelain sink, no graffiti. Someone was in the back stall. I heard her tearing plastic, one last tampon before bedtime. In my stall, I pulled down my jeans and peed a little, gently, while I got a big bump ready on the scooped stem of the pen cap. I flushed to cover the sound of my sharp inhale.

U up?

The door banged, I was alone in the bathroom. I looked at my phone.

I had three new texts. Nozlee had texted me back “lol” and then “hey can we talk?” and I thumbed her away, not ready to hear her side quite yet. Second, some incoherent nonsense from Lydia, who was with a group of our friends at a whiskey bar downtown. Then also a complaint about Lydia from George; they were in some kind of cold war. I scrolled, I opened my text thread with my ex, Bea. I closed my messaging app. I opened Instagram, I closed Instagram, I opened my text thread with Bea. I wanted to, I shouldn’t, I did.