

the HARLEQUIN

April Pierce

Au Pair

Mrs. Catastrophe Radicchio¹ asked the summer au pair where the keys were, what her zip code was, and how much her husband made per annum, before wandering towards the grocery store entrance in search of lilies. It was her way of checking in — a little ritual between them.

Ms. Gazelle Petit, who prided herself on being a sharp-witted and curious young woman,² knew the answer to all three questions: in Gazelle's pocket (and they were staying there), 904023,³ and \$3,950,000.00. Gazelle kept track of things — from little things like pacifiers and wet wipes, to big things like extra marital affairs and psychological complexes. It was her job to keep track of things. She sometimes reinvented herself in her own mind as a master of the mundane — out of necessity (to cope).

Mrs. Radicchio ascribed to her own distinct interpretation of the Detached Parenting Technique, as outlined by the book *Detached Parenting: Helping Your Kids Help Themselves* by Dr. Robert Higglesnitpick.⁴ This had repercussions for Gazelle. She sometimes resented Mrs. Radicchio for the enormity of the absence she created.

Safeway was flooded in a clean, electric-white glow. Neon labels reflected in the glossy enamel of the linoleum floors. The morning rush was over. Crossing the threshold of the store, the two women were greeted by a cool, incandescent landscape. Alien-looking overhead fixtures emitted harsh, almost radioactive light. There was a deathlike stillness to it, punctuated intermittently by Lady GaGa, who reverberated in the weary store sound system: *I want your ugly, I want your disease/I want your everything as long as it's free/I want your love/Love, love, love/I want your love.*

Maybe Lady Gaga was calling to Mrs. Radicchio, tinily, somewhere from the Great Hollywood Beyond. Traces of tennis shoe scuds were being removed by a flat yellow sponge which resembled a lasagna noodle.

The baby inhaled three times, sharply, to signal acute distress. Nobody noticed.

Mrs. Radicchio always bought the flowers herself. It was the only activity she could be counted on to do properly, being a simple woman — almost entirely motivated, Gazelle thought, by the polar gravities of fear or hedonism on any given occasion. Gazelle would leave Lavinia alone in the grocery store for the next 20 minutes or so, nursing the necessary illusion of self sufficiency. Lavinia would wander, dopy and drugged, until she had plundered a basket or

two of shiny plastic objects from the store's supply. This was the principle of free market capitalism at its finest: nothing Lavinia purchased would go even a short way towards her survival in the event of a major crisis — all of her choices would be superfluous. Gazelle would scavenge for the basics: milk, baby-food, and lubricant. Everything depended on the delicate fictional balance of power the two women entertained.

Lavinia would need to change clothes and makeup in the car. She would want her hair to be spritzed and suitably tossed with three or four new hair products (a moisturizer, a hairspray, a glitter, and possibly perfume). After the shopping, she would be left to her own devices with a group of friends at Chevys Fresh Mex, then she might or might not be counted on to return home of her own accord, but in either case there would be a number of inebriated text messages vaguely pertaining to Mrs. Radicchio's three young parasites.⁵ Lavinia was an absurd creature. Sometimes Gazelle felt sorry for her.

There had been a period of five weeks when Gazelle was obliged to meticulously register the complete range of Mrs. Catastrophe Radicchio's morning and evening medications, from Lyriana to Lithium, including the anti-depressive triad of Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors, Tricycles, and Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitors (each of which, Lavinia had insisted at the time, was equally necessary to one's overall health and wellbeing). *Whatever*,⁶ had crossed the French Canadian babysitter's mind. Dutifully, she ticked off boxes at intervals throughout the day. Later, when Lavinia discovered Dr. Cara Ventura's book, *Detox Divas*, she went off the medications and existed for several more weeks on sprouts and watermelon juice. *Dieu merci*, she was eventually hospitalized and put on a much simpler medication regime. Maybe, Gazelle mused, simpler days lay ahead. She heaved the baby onto her hip and picked up a grocery basket.

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The baby was awake. The baby did not like Lady Gaga. The baby's face was a round and placid moon, floating weightlessly across the landscape of branded beverages, each competing for her rapt attention. Her face was expressionless, but not because she felt too little. She felt too much.

Inside the baby, whizzing around in miniature hurricanes, there were warring seeds of possible worlds, colliding in supersonic explosions. Everything was important to the baby. From time to time, out of the nameless tempest of black energies spinning around at breathtaking speeds, she found a sense of direction from the warmth between her knees. The baby felt the comforting heat of Gazelle's waist radiate outwards — something steady in an unpredictable world. The blur of Gazelle's face was the single compass of significance in the baby's overabundant universe.

When Gazelle moved, the baby shuddered with expectation, flailing her limbs to grasp onto anything of import, like a small frog searching for a branch. Her limbs moved in opposition to her will. Each jolt was articulated — mechanical.

The baby thought, for a minute

MMMabamblambluggleuggsnugggugagamblegrambammammadadamamama ma.⁷

As her thoughts broke through to the surface of speech, they bubbled and slapped against her lips in goblets of spittle. Reality was a huge blanket, shaken at the corners, flapping mercilessly in random undulating colors and forms, beaten about by the sharp screams of machinery.

Life was terrible for the baby. Nothing could be avoided or planned. She barely knew her own reflection. She clung to Gazelle's side, conveying awed confusion with the occasional intake of breath or an imperceptible whimper.

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At least Tuesdays were easy. Wednesdays were a nightmare — hair and makeup, spray tan, kids from school, clean house, pick up Lavinia from salon, Lavinia to pole dancing lessons, kids to violin lessons, another round of pick ups, dinner, bed, possible dinner guests. So much fabricated, unnecessary buzzing. Then the dinner guests would be using the personal translator they always hired to “help out” the guests — *Comowt sah vat?*⁸ and all that crap. Only two more months, and she would be free, with a few “K” saved up. Maybe she would move to Paris.

Gazelle jiggled the fat baby on her hip vigorously, and meandered towards the cleaning supplies. The child's shallow breathing made her a little nervous. *Il est sans doute encore trop tôt en saison pour la grippe?*⁹ The baby's big black eyes were wide and animal; they roved around listlessly. Caring for the children made Gazelle nervous, although she did not resent them for it. They slowed her down — made her look at life and death squarely in the eye. At least this sort of anxiety was honest. Choke on a bottle cap, die. Allergic reaction, die. Death was everywhere, and everywhere it was found, Gazelle recognized that it was outside her control. No use playing God. Why was the human race so intent on keeping itself alive long after its expiration date? On either side of middle age, everybody was reduced to being either a ghost or a zombie anyway. Then too even in the world of the busy middle aged, she reasoned — even in the world of the petty consumerist — anxiety was still there, it was only sleeping.¹⁰

In any case, her present occupation weighed on her, and annihilated whatever faint desire she once had to reproduce. Procreation created need, need created demand, demand created exploitation in the form of overpopulation, exploitation and overpopulation created injustice and violence, and she was

determined to promote justice and annihilate violence wherever possible. Hers, she was certain, was an age of idolatry — the human race gazing stupidly at its own navel, desiring to represent itself infinitely. A child, to this American generation, was simply another form of wish fulfillment. *L'enfant a mes yeux, l'enfant a son nez. L'enfant a mon coeur.*¹¹ What person in their right mind could unquestioningly worship a being whose sole creative contribution involved turning flora to feces? It was idolatrous. Disgusting. Gazelle selected a generic brand of laundry detergent, and some cheap HEINZ blended veggies baby food. Lavinia wouldn't notice. Sometimes Gazelle wondered if she should have studied Theology. She was pretty good at it, she thought.

The baby kicked Gazelle's hipbone and whined, signaling a shift in position.

Mrs. Radicchio was wearing a tightly fitted, low cut pink t-shirt, with rhinestones shaping the word "JUICY" on her dramatically oversized breasts. The breasts had been surgically enhanced — that was one of Lavinia's favorite expressions.

Lady Gaga was moaning *Rah, rah, ah, ah, ah/Roma, roma, ma/Gaga, ooh la la/Want your bad romance*. Lavinia's eyes had been lined this morning with an iridescent liquid blue. The color reminded Gazelle of gasoline rainbows refracting in asphalt after a hard rain. It would fit in with the colors worn by Lavinia's Wednesday reading club, which might mean that there was some confusion concerning what day it was.

Are these alright, Gazelle? I mean, do you think the ladies will like them? They're not too gaudy? They're seasonal enough? I just don't know. It was between these and the fuchsia ones. Look at little Emily. So cute. Do you think it's too early to pierce her ears? Now — what do you think?

*It is only in our decisions that we are important.*¹²

Heh- what? OK so it was a tough choice. I think these are just perfect, though. Don't you? They're OK? They're the most expensive, that must mean something.

Not Wednesday, remember? Wednesday is reading group. Today it's Tuesday.

Hehehehe OK sweetie go ahead and run through the checkout. Oh my GOD, I'm thirsty. Can you pick up a Starbucks on the way out? Single half-calf, iced, no foam, two pumps sugar-free vanilla? Do you mind? I'll be in the car.

*Yes.*¹³

Thanks darling. I LOVE you, angel.

The last expression was Lavinia's favorite. It was nearly sensual, but it betrayed a thick, poisonous sense of need. Catastrophe's sensuality was a

sensuality of distilled essences — a sensuality-concentrate, composed of the blood of broken spirits and the sweat of the less fortunate. It was a sensuality that was altogether greedy in character. Lavinia’s sensuality fueled an infinite hunger — she crushed all true desire beneath her perfectly manicured fingernails. A bourgeois sensuality. Sensual nicknames were the cheapest form of intimacy, mused Gazelle, and Lavinia was indiscriminate in her nicknaming. Lavinia was a terrifying spectacle. She was too perfect. She gave one the feeling of being overpowered and lulled into a complacent and irreversible sleep at the same time. Also, she had an ungodly amount of energy. The pet names helped, though. They definitely helped.

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All along this stretch of Highway 134, palm trees were swaying like nauseous seamen. They threatened trouble. The sky was threatening to fall into a hot pink mood.

When Gazelle pulled into the cul-de-sac she was exhausted. In their very few hours of freedom, the parasites were expected to sustain a pleasant, unproblematic passivity — a state not unlike deep coma. This they undertook willingly, of course, having been raised from a very young age with an enviable range of electronic devices.

There were coffee ring stains in the cup holders. The car needed to be washed. Gazelle held her heavy head in open hands, resting the weight of the family on the dashboard, for a moment.

A few hours of peace were available, before she would be inundated with semi-urgent texts. By and large, the texts functioned as a way of making Lavinia feel busy and important when one or another of her friends was ignoring her. Sometimes they were just strings of illegible syllables. Gazelle saved the more poetic texts and deleted the rest. She entertained the fantasy of keeping a secret electronic diary of foreign code, imagining herself as a captured journalist, imprisoned in an enemy internment camp.

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There was sour-smelling baby spit up on her sweater. The kids were in bed, and Gazelle was peeling the saran wrap off a platter of miniature pigs-in-a-blanket. *This little piggy cried WEE WEE WEE*¹⁴ went through her mind. She always had a hard time getting the bedtime stories out of her head, especially when she was cooking. Usually it was Dr. Seuss: *Oh me! Oh my! Oh me! Oh my! What a lot of funny things go by. Today is gone. Today was fun. Tomorrow is another one...* Then there was ... *If you’d never been born, well then what would you do? If you’d never been born, well then what would you be? You might be a fish! Or a toad in a tree! You might be a doorknob! Or three baked potatoes! You might be a bag full of hard green tomatoes!*¹⁵

*Quelles choses étranges apprennent les enfants lorsqu'on leur lit des histoires au coucher.*¹⁶

None of the guests were there yet. An echoing chime sounded. Gazelle opened the door. It was the translator.

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The baby was falling asleep. She was thinking BUZZ BUZZthppbl. BUZZ FIZZLElpple SNAPapapap BOOM! BOOM BUZZIE WUZZIE DADADADA DUM! DUMBLE BUMBLEbobobobo WEEEEEEWEEEEEEWEEEEEEEEEEeEEEE¹⁷

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They always hired translators for evening parties, because *Gaz you're just a bit hard to understand. I'm sure your English will improve. It just makes everything go much faster. You understand, don't you, Angel?*¹⁸ This one was younger than previous hires.

*Bonjour.*¹⁹

*Bonjour. Vous devez être Gazelle. Je suis votre traducteur.*²⁰
*Oui. Bonjour. Je vous attendais. S'il vous plaît entrer.*²¹

Gazelle smiled. It was less awkward than it usually was. It didn't hurt that he was handsome, with cold, clear eyes, and a gently deliberate handshake. Gazelle regretted her underdressed denim and plain cardigan, as usual. He smiled. A single hair dropped from Gazelle's neat sock bun and onto the nape of her neck. She let him in. For a moment, she wondered whether the YouTube sock bun tutorial had been flawed. After all, the instructor was only fourteen. When he moved past her through the intimidating double doors, there was a hint of spruce, masking the unmistakable leftover whispers of cigarette smoke. Gazelle imagined that he had a wildly romantic personality, based on this precise combination of smells. She liked to think her olfactory sense was as finely tuned as, at the very least, the sous chef in a high-end restaurant. She inhaled secretly, ignoring the peppery residue of the baby's spittle. It took quite a bit of imagination — the spittle reeked.

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Gazelle felt that she was blessed with a vivid imagination. It allowed her to escape — to forget the things she had seen in the house. In her spare time, before the parties started, when the appetizers were set out and the playlists were cued, Gazelle liked to tuck away with a cup of coffee, a thinly rolled joint, and a rare volume of legends concerning the Algonquian people, as recorded by Pierre Rousseau, the lesser known Rousseau, a European anthropologist who wrote extensively in the early 70s. The book had surfaced during her recent deep-cleaning of the office closet. Her favorite legend was

the story of the Wendigo. The Wendigo was a cannibalistic monster that grew in proportion to the size of its meal, so that it was never full. Wendigos were simultaneously gorging and starved. They evoked winter and famine. It always was so hot in the garage.

POPZOUT L8TER L~GAP!

Gazelle liked to imagine that the Wendigo was also unavoidably seductive. Gazelle had a very active mind. It helped her manage, really, or at the very least escape into silence, if there even was such a thing anymore. She liked to think of herself, in those moments, as a saint.

AKIT! WONDER!?! **TONIGHT#OH I KNOW SHE IS

There would be minor disasters and a number of tantrums, all of which had to be managed with dignity and precision. It was still early.

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Lavinia emerged from the bathroom wearing very little, as usual. Gazelle swept the remaining dust into the robotic mouths under the floorboards, and then zipped Lavinia up and tossed another dose of glitter spray into her blonde hair.

The whirring noise of the vacuum system was answered immediately by the muffled sigh of a car fan, announcing that Mr. Radicchio had arrived home. His engine was being cooled. He had parked in the indoor garage, which was a sign of openness towards the family. Almost at the same moment, a tiny cotton-candy colored toe appeared in the hall, followed by the pudgy bulk of one of Mr. Radicchio's least favorite parasites (the older one) dressed in a onesie, dragging an oversized plush toy by the leg. In one hand, the parasite stubbornly gripped the toy's appendage in his chubby fist, while the other hand's two middle fingers were jammed gracelessly into his mouth. He quickly retracted them when he saw his father.

DADDY! DADDY DADDY DADDY!

Mr. Radicchio's eyes found Gazelle, and rolled.

Can you get this thing off me? GOD kid what time is it? Why aren't you in bed? Don't wrinkle my pants. Fuck. Seriously. SERIOUSLY? Gazelle?

*Sorry Mr. Radicchio. I help.*²²

THANK you. What are we drinking? Hi, Honey.

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The parasite's head began to throb. Helpless and terrified, he felt a thick darkness enclosing him. Soon he would be alone, and then the silence would come for him. Silence always knew when they stopped paying attention.

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Gazelle picked up the offending child. He was getting heavy. She wondered if she was overfeeding him. She moved her hands in circles across his back, trying to soothe him.

I don't wanna go! I don't wannooooooooo! I want DADDY! DADDY DADDY DADDY please please put me down put me down!

The hallway was long and dark, but as Gazelle moved forwards the motion sensitive lights were activated, casting a ghostly light over the child's curly hair and damp red face. Her tired shoulder was quickly soaked in a fresh cocktail of tears and snot. Each of the three children slept alone in their own room, and each room was on a different floor of the house. Mr. Radicchio joked that this prevented conspiracy.

*Daddy later. Bedtime.*²³

No NOW NOW. DADDYYYY. I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU.

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LOL FRACKING IN THE DESERT! OMG I KNOW.

Gazelle looked up from her position behind the second dining room bar. She quickly scanned the enormous tiled entryway, sending out the visual fishing line, past half eaten hors d'oeuvres and yawning CEOs. Lavinia was texting in the corner of the third living room, while conducting a languid conversation with Craig Cumbersome²⁴, the ad executive. Her eyelids were beginning to flutter heavily, and her makeup was smudged, but the situation seemed benign. It was only 11:24.

The walls in all the rooms of the Radicchio household were white as bone, and at least two stories tall. Mr. Radicchio believed in minimalist modern aesthetics. He liked the look of the Taj Mahal. Boisterous chuckling bounded up and down the hollow hallways, meeting little resistance.

There were empty glasses to fill, but even more glasses to be cleared away. It was going to be a hell of a time getting it all in order once the chaos had passed over the house. Mr. Radicchio was happily ensconced in conversation, dwindling daiquiri in hand. He was the top priority. On her way to the bar, however, she was waylaid by a sweaty plastic surgeon in khakis.

I have come to appreciate the value of well-defined elbows he was saying to the translator. I've performed surgery on hundreds of women. Really, it's impossible to tell nowadays when somebody's gone under the knife. Just between you and me, and I mean this, your boss' been under more times than I care to count, you know? And, I mean look at her. Completely fuckable. But seriously, elbows. They're the only part of the body nobody thinks about. If you want to know how old a woman is, just look at her elbows. Let me see your elbows.

Gazelle looked to the translator.

Dude, can you tell her what I said? I don't think she gets it.

The translator's face flinched above the left eyebrow.

Il aime les poulets. CC'est un fétiche. Il aime le l'aspect des ailes de poulet. Il veut inspecter votre "aile" comme si vous étiez un poulet. Laissez-le faire, ce mec est complètement fou. Autant lui faire plaisir. Pauvre fou.²⁵

Gazelle showed the surgeon her arm.

Cute. Tell her I think it's cute.

Il dit qu'il est désolé d'avoir été un tel connard.²⁶

Gazelle smiled at the translator.

Nous sommes, après tout, unis vous et moi. Ensemble, nous souffrons, ensemble nous existons, et pour toujours nous serons en train de nous recréer l'un l'autre.²⁷

The translator's clear eyes sparked alive, like the battery of a fatigued car at the precise moment a pair of decent jumper cables get the engine going again.

She says thank you.

Ask her if she's ever gone under. You have to admit she has a seriously banging set of tits, right? I mean CHRIST if I wasn't so fucking professional I would ask her out. Ask her.

Il dit qu'il est arrivé à la conclusion que sa misogynie manifeste est le résultat tragique de une insécurité profonde due à une lutte permanente avec son hygiène personnelle. Si seulement sa mère lui avait fappris à porter de déodorant en proportion avec sa production de sueur, peut-être les choses auraient-elles mieux tournées pour lui. Il vous supplie de faire preuve de compassion envers lui, car il vous tient en haute estime.²⁸

Gazelle nodded sympathetically. The surgeon winked and licked his lips. The translator smiled.

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Mrs. Radicchio was tired. She was very very tired. Tired. She looked at herself in the mirror. So tired. She was old and ugly, too. Or getting there. Ugly and unwanted. Ugly and unwanted and tired. Sleepy.

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Sex on the beach was easy. One part orange juice one part cranberry one part vodka, dash of schnapps. Mr. Alfonso Deficit²⁹, the political pundit, liked his very strong. Gazelle remembered. She kept track of things.

You know, overall it's been a real low season. What we need is a blockbuster. Nine Eleven was great for us. We're still milking that, believe it or not, but it was so hard to come back from it. The stock market crash was great for us. We're looking forward, though. Some of the industry heads are yapping about Iran, but that's not a sealed deal.

BEaROOM 4+ NOW BEDROM

This time Gazelle responded.

Gaz OH MY GOD I'm dying. I'm dying I'm dying.

Mrs. Radicchio lay sprawled, supine, on the king sized bed. Her sequined pants were halfway down her ankles, and there was a dark puddle on the lush purple satin, framing the lower half of her body. Her eyes were roaming back and forth under heavy charcoal-lined lids, as if she was reading an invisible script suspended in midair. Two Alka-Seltzers were dissolved in water, the door was shut and locked, and the lights lowered. It was clear there would be trouble.

*Not dying. Drink this. OK?*³⁰

Maybe it's the Paxil. GOD. I don't know. HeheheHAh I look retarded. Fucking Christina had to show up. I wouldn't have cared so much ... You know, she is THE WORST. You know what she used to call me when we were Alpha Delta Gamma? "Lavie Nob Knees". Because I was skinnier than her. Stupid bitch. STUPID BITCH. Hawhahehehe. Richard³¹ likes her, I can tell. Do I look OK? I mean, besides the makeup. I can fix that. GOD-UGH! Look at me. Like a drowned rat. Pathetic.

Lavinia turned towards one of the four mounted mirrors, exposing a single perfect buttock to Gazelle. There was a sad blue bruise, about the size of a quarter. Somehow, it reminded her of the Warren Buffett aphorism Mr.

Radicchio had once posted on the fridge: *it takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it*. Gazelle fancied herself something of a novice philosopher.

What is pathetic?

Me.

What?

I'm pathetic?

What does this mean?

I don't know. Just feeling sorry for myself, I guess. Sorry darling.

Of course, it was not as if Lavinia hadn't done her best to destroy her own reputation over the course of Gazelle's employment. It took finessing of the value system and a rearranging of relations to govern the wreckage that followed Catastrophe like college loan officers follow recent graduates. Gazelle sighed exasperatedly.

*Luxury ruins republics.*³²

What? You say the weirdest things. Hehe. Ugh. Look at me. GOD. What are we going to do?

*I explain.*³³

Sometimes Gazelle felt really, genuinely sorry for Lavinia. Her identity was 90% mimetic, anyway. Sometimes she loved her — foibles and everything.

Thank you, angel. Can you bring me some of those little sausage thingies? I LOVE those. I'm going to take a nap, OK? Don't let anybody come in here.

*OK. Good.*³⁴

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One of the parasites was dreaming. In the dream, there was a long white tunnel, quickly filling with water. At the end of the tunnel was an oversized shoe, made of the finest Italian leather. The parasite needed to escape. There was a dense, oily slime in his mouth and ears. He heard a malevolent laughter through the thick fog of sleep. Warped giggling crept in through the cracks of his consciousness and filled his head, until he couldn't think. The giggling went Ehhhehahahaknowitstoptimeforhahaha. He clawed at the walls of the tunnel, but the water was rising. Growing. It began to cover the opening. He wanted to call for help, but his mouth was full of the taste of water and fur. Like sour milk. Liquid was making his body heavy. Wet fingers attached themselves to his thighs, pulling downwards, steadily. Then a cold tongue was in his ears and throat, moving into him. Licking into his nose and eyeballs.

When the parasite awoke, the bed was wet. In his heart was a feeling of doom. He didn't know why, but he was ashamed, and remained silent.

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Mr. Radicchio had consumed two and a half daiquiris, and wanted sex on the beach.

Gaz can you make sex on the beach? You know how I like it.

There was a chuckle of appreciative laughter. Gazelle turned to her translator.

Dites-lui que je voudrais lui parler. En privé.

They went into the alcove. Mr. Radicchio removed his dinner jacket. His hair was slicked to one side, as if frozen in time. Mr. Radicchio was a timeless man — a prototype of men everywhere. Mr. Radicchio kept his feelings to himself; he always got what he wanted.

What's up, honey?

*She feels tired. She is going to take sleep. You tell them?*³⁵

No problem, baby. How about that sex later then?

Mr. Radicchio smiled, exposing a row of immaculate white teeth, and squeezed her arm. A cold liquid drizzle of familiarity trickled from the tips of Mr. Radicchio's porcelain white fingers into the core of Gazelle's stomach, and pulsed two times, hard.

In the second living room, Gazelle could hear the translator laughing with the surgeon. Then Mr. Radicchio's voice joined them. The translator laughed louder. She couldn't make out what was being said. The translator had a high, whiney laugh, like the hyenas in *The Lion King*. At that precise moment, Gazelle knew she had been betrayed.

She unfolded and readjusted her hair in the hallway.

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Do you think he still loves me? I mean, do you think he still finds me attractive? We don't really advertise anymore. It's like they say hehaHah. You know what they say. If it's not advertised, it doesn't happen. Look at me. What a piece of shit. Maybe hehehahhah maybe if he'll come say hi-hiahah. Maybe I just need...

*No more drinks.*³⁶

Lavinia's eyes fluttered open and stared vacantly at Gazelle. Almost ghoulish, Gazelle thought. There was a flash of consciousness and something like despair, then she shut them again. Gazelle pulled Lavinia's sequined pants to the floor, and found a soft pair of sweats. Rolling the slight body to one side, she managed to pull the sheets out and replace them with blankets. Then she rolled Lavinia back to the center of the bed, filled another glass with water and Alka-Seltzer, and tucked the blankets around her body in a cocoon. Gently, she massaged the corners of Lavinia's temples.

Why did such a beautiful body suffer so much harm? What was it about beauty that begged suffering to follow? Beauty attracted hate, hate attracted violence, and violence led to Catastrophe. The makeup would dry. It would make her skin breakout. It would make her insecure in the morning, and the delicate balance of harmony in the house would be upset again. Lavinia would look in the mirror and tremble like an abandoned feline huddled under a freeway overpass.

Gazelle found liquid makeup remover and awkwardly positioned Lavinia's head in her lap. She gently padded the taut face, until a spotted, veiny surface was uncovered. Removing makeup was an art. It was like clearing an empty lot of garbage, only to discover that the ground beneath was irrevocably scarred and stained. Some kind of foul beauty to it. There were rivulets of greenish blue splaying over the eyelids in tiny branching patterns like wintering trees, and dark brown age spots that reminded Gazelle of the sort of stain one might expect to find leftover by an oil spill on virgin sands in the Caribbean archipelago. Stepping back, Gazelle surveyed her work. Lavinia was the picture of repose — a mummified vision of unconsciousness. Gazelle liked to consider herself a gifted artist.

When everything was finished, the lights were turned off.

I love you, Lavinia Radicchio. *Je t'aime.*

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The party was over, but the baby was still awake. She listened to the electric silence of the house in terror, knees locked and bent, breathing shallow snot-clotted breaths. There was comfort in the cold humming of the baby monitor; she affixed her attention to it. She felt the fingers of the voicelessness roll over her. Electric silence buzzed furiously inside her mind like a trapped insect. In rapt horror, the baby awaited morning, and a little heat.

1 Sobriquet

2 Once asked by a political pollster for a description of herself, Gazelle had replied that she was *Sérieux, l'expectative, avec l'espoir, sexuellement vivace, et attentif à une faute, de taille moyenne, quelque peu sceptique, stratégique, mais pas au cœur dur. Douce humeur mais pas sacrine, idéaliste, mais pragmatique dans l'analyse finale.* The political pollster had then checked the boxes marked "18-25", "college education" and "psychological descriptors: narcissistic personality disorder" before thanking her for taking the time to answer his questions.

3 Santa Monica, Los Angeles

4 Sobriquet

5 Children, according to Mr. Radicchio.

6 *Qu'importe? Personne ne le remarquera en tout cas. Vos humeurs changent comme les images éphémères du générique d'un film.*

7 Too bright. How long now? Where's Mom?

8 *Comment allez-vous, prononcé par des abrutis maladroits.*

9 Surely this is still too early for flu season?

10 -Martin Heidegger

11 The baby has my eyes, the baby has his nose. The baby has my heart.

12 -Jean-Paul Sartre

13 Oui, mais ne m'en demandez pas plus, je suis déjà d'une humeur massacranche.

14 Ce petit cochon grouina trois fois.

15 *Oh là là là là là! Quelles drôles de choses nous avons vues! La journée est finie, elle a eacute;teacute; amusante. Demain sera un autre jour... Si tu n'avais jamais vu le jour, alors que ferais-tu? Si tu n'avais jamais vu le jour, alors que serais-tu? Un poisson, peut-être! Ou un crapaud perché dans un arbre! Peut-être même une poignée de porte! Ou encore trois pommes de terre au four! Ou même un grand sac de tomates vertes et dures!*

16 *What bizarre things children learn from bedtime stories.*

17 *You might be a fish! Or a toad in a tree! You might be a doorknob! Or three baked potatoes! You might be a bag full of hard green tomatoes! Weeeee weee weee.*

18 *Douce idiote étrangère. Laissez-nous vous aider.*

19 Hello.

20 *You must be Gazelle. I'm your translator.*

21 *Yes. Hello.*

22 *Quelle sorte de monstre renie sa propre progéniture?*

23 *Tais-toi, s'il te plaît. Je ne sais pas quoi faire. Je ne suis pas ta mère.*

24 *Sobriquet*

25 *He likes chickens. It's a fetish. He likes the look of a chicken's wings. He wants to inspect your "wing" like a chicken. Just do it, this guy is completely insane. Might as well indulge him. Poor lunatic.*

26 *He says he is sorry for being such an outrageous cunt.*

27 *We are one, after all, you and I, together we suffer, together exist and forever will recreate each other. -Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*

28 *He says he's come to the conclusion that his overt misogyny is the tragic result of deep insecurities due to a lifelong struggle with personal hygiene. If only his mother had trained him to wear deodorant in proper proportion to his sweat output, perhaps things would have turned out better for him. He begs your understanding.*

29 *Sobriquet*

30 *Pas encore.*

31 *Mr. Radicchio*

32 *-Charles de Montesquieu*

33 *Je vais vous l'expliquer. Par pitié, pas par amour. Je ne peux pas vous aimer, parce que quelque chose S'y oppose.*

34 *Bon. Reposez-vous bien, et ne vous inquiétez pas.*

35 *Nous avons besoin de notre espace personnel. Un espace qui nous permette d'être humain. Où l'on peut être seul. Pour respirer — votre femme et moi.*

36 *Ne buvez plus. Vous allez vous tuer.*

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