

A Night of Nothing
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Tucumcari, New Mexico sits in the shadow of a lonely mountain. It's arid, almost always under the glare of a relentless sun, and its greenest tree or most turquoise strip mall are still at their core the color of dust. Jay looked out her window at the town, shivered, and pushed down harder on the accelerator.

Her tedious road trip westward along the dry expanse of Interstate 40 was halfway, maybe a third of the way done, and every time she drove between Oklahoma City and Los Angeles she was awestruck, almost offended, by how much nothing she had to get through. The journey this time around was prompted by her decision to quit her job editing spreadsheets at GlobeLife, which, while made suddenly, was a long time coming. Escape from corporate hell and a cathartic return to her family in the green L.A. hills seemed like a perfect combination, and all that stood between Jay and inner peace was the rest of her slog through the desert.

As usual, she planned to knock out the 20-hour drive in two 10-hour days, split by a night spent in her friend Sara's apartment in Albuquerque. Having done this trip before, she actually felt fairly comfortable and familiar with it, though this time around was notable because that particular night Sara was out of town, meaning Jay would have to pick up Sara's keys from her neighbor and spend the night alone. Truth be told, though, Jay was looking forward to it. Her roommate in OKC had been particularly under her skin lately, and she was eager for some quiet, even if it was in someone else's room.

She pulled over after a little while into one of New Mexico's isolated adobe rest stops. It wasn't all that much longer to Albuquerque, but the pale building, standing alone and surrounded on all sides by endless nothing, gave no indication of that. She stepped out of her Saturn and the desert air was like a punch in the face. She expected the heat, of course, but she was struck this time by the humidity. Not only did the air feel thicker than usual, but she was surprised by how quickly her water bottle, once refilled with lukewarm rest stop water, gathered condensation, a phenomenon she rarely noticed in her experience in the American southwest. The inside of her car, however, was out of the sun and pleasantly de-humidified, and once she got back inside she gathered all her focus and did 90 on the shimmering asphalt all the way to Albuquerque.

The city was mostly how Jay remembered it: thin, gently curving roads, strangely aggressive drivers, adobe, and heat. At a red light she rolled down her window to feel the air, and it was just as sticky as it was at the rest stop. The sun was going down, though, eventually, and she knew that the night would bring with it the cooling of the air and of the earth. Someone at the corner of the intersection held a sign that said "GOD IS COMING" and looked Jay in the eye.

The Saturn hummed and shook as it rolled along Coal Avenue, and Jay looked out at the right side of the street until she saw Sara's building, the only one on her block that wasn't the color of sand, or, well, it was the color of sand but it had a beautiful turquoise green copper gutter along the top and a deep red front door. In those ways it stood out.

She pulled into the building's six car parking lot and let out a sigh that had been building up all day. She liked to drive, and was good at it, but that didn't mean it didn't leave her sweaty and tired and crooked. The setting sun and heavy air didn't help her energy, either. Envisioning the bed she was only steps away from falling into, Jay entered Sara's building and knocked on the white door of apartment A, Sara's downstairs neighbor.

As she waited for someone to come to the door, she looked around. The decor in the building wasn't much to speak of, but a beam of orange light from outside filtered through a window at the top of the stairs, and it gave the walls a delicate golden glow that illuminated the dust in the air and the cobwebs in the corners. The door to apartment A opened.

"Hello, you must be Sara's friend. I've been waiting for you. My name is Yuri."

"Hi, yes," Jay cleared her throat. "Excuse me. Yes, I'm Jay, Sara's friend. Thank you again for holding onto those keys."

"Oh, of course, it's not a problem at all." Yuri smiled. She was old, but the sweet-looking type of old, not the scary type. She'd clearly been in Albuquerque for a while, or at least somewhere in the sun: her skin was leathery but soft-looking, and she had clear, kindly wrinkles around her eyes and cheeks, as if she spent her days squinting into the sky and grinning at it.

"Give me one second, let me go grab the keys," Yuri said. As she turned to walk back inside Jay held the door open, and she took in Yuri's apartment, which betrayed the dull exterior and entrance to the building. She had multicolored geometric rugs on the walls and on her table, with healthy-looking cactuses and a piece of blue stained glass sitting on the windowsill. Two black and white cats lay splayed contentedly on the tile of the kitchen floor, and the whole studio bled into the hallway the enticing sounds and aromas of cooking. Yuri, hidden still around a corner, seemed to notice Jay's hungry observation, and amid the sizzling of the pan and the smells of rice and beans and cumin and fat called out "Do you want some food? I've made more than enough."

"Oh, no," Jay said. "I couldn't. Plus, I've got some food of my own already." Yuri returned to the doorway, the keys in her hand glimmering gold and orange.

"Well, alright then. Come back if you change your mind. I've really got plenty here."

"Thank you, really," Jay said. Yuri handed her the keys and with her warm, dark eyes creased up in a smile, closed the door.

Jay went back outside to the Saturn, grabbed her bag off the passenger seat, and brought it back inside. She walked up the stairs in the center of the building and turned left at the top of the landing to face the door to Sara's apartment, apartment C. She twisted the key in the knob and pushed - a little harder than she thought she'd have to - and opened the door.

Sara's apartment was mostly how Jay remembered: adobe, of course, shady, but hot. The small window facing west let in a beam of light that lit up a square of the wood floor, seemingly baking it a bit, too, judging by the smell of the place, which was the familiar scent of a dry sauna. There was a cactus with a sweet yellow bloom sitting on the center of the apartment's only table, and a few pictures of Sara and drawings she had made on the walls, but other than that the place was sparse and couldn't match the energy Yuri had created in her room below the floorboards. Not that Jay minded, or anything - she was too tired to waste energy thinking about Sara's decor.

Hoping to ward off the heat and still air of the room, Jay pulled a chain dangling from the ceiling fan in the center of the studio. The blades began to move, but soon made a hideous grinding

sound that made Jay's toes curl. She went to pull the chain again, but before she could raise her arm the grinding stopped and the blades spun without complaint. Jay, skeptical, unpacked.

Thinking almost lustily about her proximity to sleep, Jay finished pulling out of her bag the few things she'd need for the night: toothbrush, toothpaste, phone charger, water bottle, and unwrapped her dinner, a mango, from the plastic bag she had kept it in. She grabbed a knife from Sara's small kitchen and eagerly slipped it into the fruit's flesh. She had hardly brought the knife down the front of the mango, though, when it collapsed in her hands and fell onto the table with a wet thud, splitting open to reveal a black, furry, rotten inside. Jay dared not smell it. She gathered the pieces of the ill-fated dinner with dismay and deposited them with reverence in the trash bin Sara kept under the sink.

She was quick to remember Yuri's offer. Re-energized by the memory of the warm atmosphere and delicious smells below, Jay opened the door to Sara's apartment, but was caught off-guard by a man standing on the other side of the landing, staring at her.

For a second he stood in silence, as if taking in Jay's surprise, or maybe waiting for her to speak. He was lanky but not tall, dressed in a black tee shirt and cargo pants that matched his thick hair. His eyes darted constantly over Jay and into Sara's apartment, never stopping for a second. Finally, he spoke.

"You're not Sara."

"No, uh, I'm Jay, I'm her friend." Jay spoke carefully. She didn't feel compelled to say too much.

"Oh, okay. I'm Matthew. I heard you coming up the stairs and I wanted to know who you were. I knew Sara would be out and I wanted to make sure nobody was coming in here who shouldn't be." He stretched his thin lips into a closed-mouth smile.

"Okay, um --"

Matthew held out a pale hand to shake, still standing in his doorway, ten feet away from Jay. She looked at his hand and at his smile, maybe with too much revulsion, because he put both away.

"Welcome," he said. "This is a sweet little building." He backed into his room, his nervous eyes still darting over Jay. She noticed his apartment was pitch black - she really couldn't see into it at all. He must have heavy blackout curtains, she thought, or maybe no windows. He closed his door and Jay shuddered in the scarlet of the building's fading light.

She made her way down the stairs toward Yuri's apartment, trying not to feel too paranoid about the broad, round peephole on Matthew's door. She knew he must be watching her, of course, but she closed her eyes and took a breath and pretended not to think about it. At the bottom of the stairs she knocked on Yuri's door. She took a step back, put her hands in her pockets, and waited. After a second she leaned forward and knocked again, this time with more conviction. She waited again, and still the door did not open. Jay leaned her head against the wood, thinking perhaps the sounds of cooking were too loud for Yuri to hear her knocking, but Jay didn't pick up a single sound from inside. Nor did she smell anything tempting creeping out from the cracks between the door and the frame, nothing but the smell of dust and hot wood that permeated the whole building. She stepped back from Yuri's door, looked up the stairs at Matthew's peephole, and left the building with haste.

The Saturn - her car!! - Jay could hardly believe it - the front left tire, it was completely flat. How long had she been inside? When could this have happened? She knelt down next to the car and pushed her fingers into the tire's soft rubber, like she was poking a dead animal with a stick. She was upset, of course, and frustrated and annoyed, but mostly just bewildered. She had no idea how this had happened, or how it could have happened without her, or anyone else, noticing. It wasn't even dark yet. Did someone slash her tire in broad daylight? Or did this happen on its own?

It's not like she was stranded. She knew how to fix a flat and had a spare in the trunk, but as she jacked the car up Jay couldn't help but feel uneasy. Albuquerque felt different this time around. She didn't notice anyone out walking or driving near her, not a single person, and even though the sun was going down the air still felt wet and thick like she'd never experienced it before. All there was to hear was a soft wind blowing lazily through the dust and her own panting as she installed the spare alone in the heat.

After she had put the flat tire in the trunk, she saw a pale hand pull closed a blackout curtain in a window on the second floor of Sara's building. Matthew had been watching.

Jay, trying once again to ignore her discomfort, closed her eyes, wiped the sweat off her forehead, took a breath and got into her car. She knew she'd have to get the spare tire replaced with a real one if she wanted to get to California tomorrow, but the constant reminders from her stomach of how she still hadn't eaten motivated her to find dinner somewhere first.

It wasn't just the neighborhood near Sara's place that was concerningly empty. As Jay meandered across Albuquerque with no direction except food, she scanned everything she saw for life, but saw nothing but gnats. She did eventually catch a glimpse of other people, but the two she saw seemed preoccupied and concerned: one old woman walking alone on the sidewalk, her head down and pace quick, and one young biker pedaling furiously and turning quickly off the street were all the city had to offer. Even the houses along the side of the roads all seemed to be unoccupied, or at least fully locked up, with not an open garage door or a porch sitter to be seen along her entire drive.

Finally, after passing what seemed like a hundred closed restaurants - what time was it, 8:30? Jay couldn't help but wonder. Why was everything closed? - she turned a corner and saw with much relief the flickering neon of an open sign: La Gallina Mexican. Good enough, Jay thought. Seems like today's not the day to be picky. She pulled into the dry dirt lot out front.

Jay was hoping for a place to find some food that didn't remind her of the discomfort of Sara's apartment building, but La Gallina didn't quite hit the mark. The place was cavernous and empty, with all the furniture pushed to the perimeter so that it looked like a giant, dusty, red dance floor for a party that had never happened. It was quiet, and at first all Jay heard were her own footsteps echoing across the tile and the arhythmic tik-tik of two moths that kept flying into the place's one lit fluorescent tube above the register, at which a young woman sat blankly, flipping through a thin book.

"We're closing up in fifteen minutes," she said, not bothering to look up at Jay. "The cooks just went home, all we got left is some burritos we made earlier."

"Oh, um, okay, that's fine," Jay said, approaching the register.

"You want with meat or without?"

"Without, I guess."

"Six dollars." Jay pulled out a five and a one and gave it to the woman, who grabbed a foil cylinder from a box next to the register and gave it to Jay. Finally, they made eye contact.

"You know about the storm, right?" The woman asked. Even though they were looking at each other, Jay couldn't tell for sure if she was human. Her eyes showed no emotions but exhaustion and boredom.

"No, I didn't, what?"

"Yeah, there's supposed to be a whole bunch of rain coming tonight, maybe some hail. Can't you feel it in the air?"

"Oh, no, I didn't know about that."

"Well, I'd get going if I were you. Especially with that donut on your car. I wouldn't try to drive around in the mud with that."

"Damn, well, okay, thanks for warning me," Jay said, trying to sound appreciative. The cashier's gaze went back down to her book, and Jay took her burrito and walked outside, where it had now darkened but was still humid and hot. Maybe she could feel it in the air. She got into the car and rolled down the lot's crunching dirt into the street. Jay pulled away and it occurred to her: how did that cashier know about the spare tire?

She didn't have the energy to dwell for long on the omniscient cashier. Her eyelids drooped and her mind wandered as she floated through Albuquerque's streets yet again, this time in search of someone to replace her tire. The setting sun and the darkness had summoned a tremendously large cloud that crept, far away, over the desert. Jay stopped at a red light and folded her arms onto the steering wheel, leaning her head against her forearms and staring out her windshield at the edge of the cloud and little blips of distant lightning.

A car behind her beeped and sped around her; Jay snapped out of her daydream and reminded herself of what she was doing. Find a place to fix the tire, find a place to fix the tire. She scanned the road ahead of her, and as if by miracle her eyes locked onto the green and red digits of a gas station sign not too far ahead. She pulled closer and read the sign out front: "Mike's Sunoco - Repairs - Oil Change - Tune Ups."

Thank God, Jay thought. Jesus, thank God. She pulled up to the gas station and saw that there was still an attendant inside, seated behind the register flicking a phone screen. She parked out front, closed her eyes and took a deep breath, hoping for a quick resolution and a sweet reunion with Sara's bed. She stepped out of the car and dragged her feet through the glass front door.

If the inside of La Gallina was concerningly empty and dim, Mike's Sunoco was the total opposite. The air inside was bitter cold, the lights overhead absolutely blinding, and the store itself so tightly packed with shelves of merchandise Jay could hardly figure out what direction to walk to get to the cashier. Eventually, her exhausted brain made a connection and she found a path to the register, between the shelf containing motor oil and the one with the wiper fluid. She walked up to the register and leaned her elbows against the counter, holding her head with her hands.

"Hi," she breathed out at the cashier, feeling almost too lethargic to speak. "I just got a flat, is there someone who can patch my tire?"

The man behind the counter wore a light blue Mike's Sunoco button-up shirt with a few sweat stains and holes in it, with no name tag. Maybe he was Mike. He was old, wrinkled, with a few thin gray-black hairs stuck to his forehead, and eyes that darted nervously over Jay just like - just like Matthew's.

"On that Saturn?" He said, peering out the window at Jay's car. "Well, we got someone who can patch it, but he's left for the night. He can probably do it first thing tomorrow, if you leave the car here."

"You can't do it tonight?" Jay asked, feeling desperation creep up among her exhaustion.

"No, I'm afraid not. Those Saturns have all sorts of weird things about them, so we leave all the work on them to Luis, who knows them better than I do. Plus, I can't do much lifting these days anyway."

Jay closed her eyes and let out another sigh. She must have looked upset, or angry, or something, because the cashier immediately said, almost with urgency, "Do you want me to drive you home? Really, leave the keys here and we can fix it tomorrow. You look like you need some sleep."

Jay wasn't sure how to react to that. Drive home? With this guy, whose name she didn't even know? And leave her keys there? How much did she want to trust a gas station cashier alone at night? But as she stood and contemplated her stomach reminded her of her still unsatisfied hunger, and her head reminded her of her complete fatigue, and she gave in.

"Yeah, sure, okay. Thanks."

"Great," he responded, smiling. "Well, just hang out here for another ten or fifteen minutes, and then I'll close up and we can go."

Jay, at this point used to the chaos and lack of control of the night, left the freezing air of the shop and went out to her car to get the burrito she'd left on the passenger seat. She sat down on the curb, unwrapped it, and took a bite, staring out into the hot darkness. Thunder rolled, far away. The burrito was bland, lukewarm, and almost entirely potato. She didn't protest as she watched a hot drop of sweat roll down her nose and fall gracefully into the burrito. Hopefully it would add some flavor.

What was up with this night, anyway? Jay knew Albuquerque was a weird place, that was familiar to her, but never in her experience had the people acted so strangely. What kind of gas station worker offers to drive you home? Earlier in her exhaustion and frustration the thought didn't occur to her that his offer may have been malicious, but the food in her stomach was clearing the clouds in her head and the danger and peculiarity of the whole situation dawned on her all of a sudden. She decided she'd just drive back to Sara's that night, and come back and try her luck in the morning. She stood up and turned around to go back inside to tell the cashier, but the light pouring out of the store was absolutely blinding, and she had to stop and squeeze her eyes shut. When she opened them and started to walk toward the door, there was the cashier, standing in the doorway, looking at her, still smiling. He pushed the door open.

"All set in here," he said. "Ready to go?" Jay closed her eyes, breathed, and changed her mind again. This guy's some old man, she thought. Might as well give him the benefit of the doubt, if it means she'll get the car back sooner. And if he pulled anything, she'd punch his teeth clean out.

"Yeah. Here's the keys to the Saturn." She fished the keys out of her pocket and gave them to him. She followed him around to the back of the shop and got into the passenger seat of his pickup.

The old Chevy shook on the road, and so did Jay. It smelled like old cigarettes and sweat and leather, and there was a crack in the windshield that extended from the top of the passenger side all the way to the bottom left corner, where a pack of Newports and a hula dancing red pepper stood,

quietly oscillating with the rest of the truck. Jay hoped or feared that maybe the truck would hit a bump and the windshield would shatter into nothing and she'd be sucked out into the street and consumed by the desert. No such thing happened.

She was nervous and her fingernails dug into the palms of her balled fists, but her driver didn't seem to notice - in fact, he hardly seemed to be there at all. As soon as she had told him where to drive, his previously eager smile had left his face, yet to return, and he'd done nothing but stare without expression out the windshield. None of Jay's cautious glances over at him had caught his eye, nor had they caused any reaction in him at all. Jay, at once comforted and terrified by this, decided to copy him and face forward, watching the empty city rattle past her as she clenched her fists tighter.

After not too long, and once her heart was beating so fast and loud she was sure the man next to her would hear it, the truck's headlights shone on the copper gutters of Sara's building, and Jay said "right here's good, thanks." She watched the man's hands tenderly move the steering wheel to the right, and the brakes hissed as he brought the truck to a stop. He kept looking forward, in silence.

"Seriously, thanks again," Jay said, looking over at him as she fingered the lever to open the door. He said nothing and didn't move his gaze toward her. A single, heavy raindrop exploded on the windshield, and Jay used the opportunity to push open the door and step out of the truck. She closed the door and it rolled away.

She trudged up to the front of the building, overcome by exhaustion, but she was pleasantly surprised to look up to the second floor and not see Matthew peering out. At least maybe he'd gone to sleep and she'd never have to deal with him again. She pushed open the front door. God, if it was hot and sticky outside, inside the building was a whole different level. Even going up the stairs worked a thin sweat onto Jay's forehead, and she brushed it away, feeling sickened by the dry desert betraying her so cruelly.

Jay twisted her key in the knob and had to really shove to get Sara's door to open - the humidity, or something, made the frame tighten around the door. Jay had had about enough of all the day had thrown at her, and longed for sleep so she could wake up and leave, but when she fell onto Sara's bed, she realized that may not be such an easy goal to reach. The bed was as sticky as the air, and her sweat pooled under her, making it feel less like a bed and more like hot sponge. And the terrible ceiling fan was grinding and complaining again. Jay got up, yanked the fan's chain until it shut off, and kneeled on the bed, cranking open the window and leaning her elbows on the sill, looking out at the storm to the west, now practically right over Albuquerque.

Hot though it was inside, opening the window was pleasant. It had begun to rain heavy, wide drops that Jay swore she could hear as they fell through the air, and the sound of the drops colliding with the muddy puddles that had formed on the ground below felt refreshing, a welcome change from the day's other soundtrack of crunching gravel and dust and wind. Every few seconds the view of adobe and endless desert out her window lit up with purple-white lightning, and as the rain picked up she finally felt safe, or at least secure, or at least grateful to have a roof over her head and a window from which to watch the rain. She almost began to doze off, head in her arms, to the soft plink-plink of rain hitting the copper gutter.

She was awoken, or surprised, or startled, some time later by a knock at her door. Or something like that - she didn't quite get a good listen. She looked over at the door in silence and waited. There it was again! But it wasn't a knock, it was, it was a thud, or some sort of impact happening outside her door. It was steady, rhythmic, like there was someone out out there, tapping a beat on some taut leather drum. Jay sat up on the bed and listened some more. She hoped it might go away like it had just before, but it was persistent now.

Jay, almost at this point just tired of the peculiarities of the evening, conjured up a little bravery and quietly walked toward the door, careful not to cause the floorboards to creak. She looked out the peephole and saw nothing at all, but the sound persisted. She kept looking, staring around the corners of the empty landing, when suddenly she saw it: a quick blur moving downward, then a thud. Again a blur, then a thud.

"Jesus," she said aloud. "It's water." Annoyed by the adrenaline she felt from something so unworthy of adrenaline, Jay walked over to Sara's kitchen, grabbed a pot, and pulled the front door open. The landing was quiet, except for the steady dripping, and illuminated weakly by a single bulb above the top of the stairs. She put the pot under the drip and it stopped thudding and took on a more metallic tone, the same plink-plink she could hear from the gutter.

Satisfied with her solution, Jay turned around to go back to Sara's room, but was caught off-guard and briefly, intensely blinded. The room's lights were on. Why were the lights on? She didn't turn them on before she went into the hallway. What's up with this place? She went back inside and closed the door. But the apartment was different, it had changed. The fan was on again, grinding and alternating between full speed and completely off. Once again she pulled its dangling chain and silenced it. And on the table, that cactus, wasn't it healthy before? Now all that stood in its painted ceramic pot was a withering, faded plant, gray and wrinkled like it had been ignored for months. Jay closed her eyes and shook her head. Just go to sleep. Just go to sleep. She opened her eyes and started over toward the bed, but her jaw dropped and she felt her face go pale. On the windowsill, motionless, eyes pointed at her, stood a tarantula.

It was huge, and hairy, and frozen in place as it looked at her and she looked at it. It was wet, as if it had just crawled in from outside, and the moisture on its back formed tiny drops that shimmered in the room's pale light. Jay contemplated how to deal with this issue, being unfamiliar with both how tarantulas behaved in general as well as how to remove them in a situation like this one. Slowly she crept toward the closet at the foot of the bed, being careful not to move too quickly or to look away from the spider, in case it ran away and she lost track of it. The thought alone of that happening sent a chill through Jay that cut through the heat around her.

She inched toward the closet and felt around its door until she found the knob. Not daring to look away from the spider, still motionless, she opened the closet door and reached around the inside, hoping for anything that might help her. She grabbed something that felt like a broom: a cool, smooth pole leaning against the wall at about her shoulder level. She pulled on it and tugged it out of the closet, causing a collapse of something near the closet's floor, maybe a laundry basket or a bottle of detergent. Jay didn't bother looking; the sound startled the tarantula, which, in an instantaneous, robotic movement, turned its body to face Jay and backed up toward the edge of the windowsill. Jay, frightened by the movement, froze again, broom in hand.

Again she and the spider stood off in silence. The tik-tiking of the drops of water outside the door became faster and louder as Jay's pulse did the same. She picked up the broom and pointed it at the tarantula, staring down the pole like it was the barrel of a gun.

Tik-tik-tiktiktiktik.

Jay moved closer.

Tiktiktiktiktiktik.

She closed her eyes, and with a quick step of her right foot lunged toward the tarantula. She pushed it with the broom - she could feel its weight - and when she opened her eyes she saw it falling out the window at the end of her weapon, two of its small legs grasping at the air in vain for something to hold on to. The tarantula disappeared beneath the window, and Jay dropped the broom and rushed over to it, cranking it shut and pulling down on the lever to lock it. She collapsed on the bed, her heart throwing punches at the inside of her throat.

When she'd calmed herself enough to open her eyes, Jay noticed how much quieter the room was without the open window leaking in the sounds of rain and thunder. And she also could hear that the drops in the pot outside the door had turned to splashes. She sat up on the bed, deciding to pour out the pot and replace it.

Plunk. Plunk. Plunk. Plunk.

She walked over to the door, turned the knob and pulled, but the door wouldn't budge. She tried again, with more force. Still nothing. She took a step back.

Plunk. Plunk. Plunkplunk. Plunk.

Jay looked at the door: maybe there was something she was missing, maybe it was locked or something. But no, no, it wasn't. She cautiously looked through the door's peephole. Was there - Jesus - was there someone holding it closed? But again, she saw nothing, nobody, it was only her and the wet sounds outside the door, each drip chipping away at her sanity.

Plunk.

She got closer to the door, grabbed the knob with both hands, bent her knees, and yanked. The door swung open and Jay stumbled backwards, almost falling to the ground in her force. Jesus, she thought, thank God. She stepped onto the landing, grabbed the pot, already overflowing with dirty ceiling water, poured it out in Sara's sink, and brought it outside again, carefully replacing it under the leak. She smiled as she heard it tink-tink again, the old familiar sound of a freshly emptied pot. As she turned around to go back into the apartment, the door lazily began to swing closed - Jay kicked it open, stepped back inside, pushed it shut, and locked it.

It was loud in the room again: Jay could hear the storm. She turned toward the window, and astonished, bewildered, saw that it was open. She looked around the room, almost panicked, to see if there was someone else in there. Of course there was not. Confused, exhausted, scared, she walked toward the window and reached out to close it, but before she could, a clap of thunder and a gust of wind slammed it shut. Jay pulled her hand back. Had she been off by a half a second that window would have closed on her fingers.

Tink. Tink. Tink. Tink. Tinktinktinktiktiktik.

The storm was picking up. All of a sudden raindrops splattered directly on the window, as if they had been flying sideways. The air in the room had thickened palpably, and the flashes of lightning showed up more and more, and there were rocks hitting the window. Rocks? No, no. Hail. But big, heavy chunks of ice. Jay hoped they wouldn't break the glass.

Once again she fell on the bed and closed her eyes, trying to fall asleep to the heavy sounds of the storm. The drops outside the door hadn't stopped, and in fact seemed to have turned into a duet: a pop played the intervals when the tiks rested. It sounded closer than the tiks. Jay opened her eyes and was filled with dread when she saw the source. A crack in Sara's ceiling had started to precipitate.

Jay got up and dug under the sink for another pot, but there were only small vessels left, none that could catch the drops for any significant amount of time.

Tik pop tikpoptik pop tik poptiktikpoptik.

She went over to the door to decide her course of action. A leak was bad anywhere, but she thought a leak in her own room would be worse for her than a leak separated from her by a door. She assumed her previously successful door-pulling power stance, but this time the door was even less sympathetic to her cause. She yanked: nothing. Again: nothing. The door didn't move at all. The tikpoptikpops laughed at her, helpless, as she used an already sweaty hand to try to wipe moisture from her forehead. She pulled again, one final time, without success.

Trying to not be too concerned with how she was now effectively locked into a leaking apartment, Jay let her hands fall to her side. The pot would have to stay outside. She leaned up to the door and looked through the peephole again, expecting nothing as usual, but no, not this time: ten feet away, standing in his doorway, was pale Matthew, staring right at her. Jay shuddered and recoiled. Maybe being locked in wasn't the worst possible situation.

But the shudder Matthew had started only got stronger when she turned around - there, returned, this time clinging to the outside of the window in an incredible display of leg span, was the tarantula. After she realized that this time the spider was outside the window and her initial shock faded away, Jay found herself not feeling as repulsed by it as she had earlier. It was still jarring, and hairy, and enormous, but Jay noticed it was delicate, too, and almost peaceful. Its feet barely touched the surface of the glass like it had tiptoed up the side of the building, and the undersides of its legs were a wonderful vibrant blue-green, like the gutters outside, and they complemented the alternating white and orange stripes that covered the center of its body.

As the storm continued and the heavy rain kept falling, Jay found herself pitying the arachnid. Their situations weren't too different, she thought. They were both stuck alone in a storm they didn't expect, forced to stay awake through the night in fear and anxiety. She thought - and couldn't believe she was thinking - that maybe she should let it back inside, that maybe they could share some solidarity in the storm. Slowly, still not really sure, she reached out to crank the window open a crack, to see what would happen. At least give it the option to come in and dry off. But instantly, timed perfectly again by the universe, the storm picked up. The rain shifted back to hail and a ball of ice slammed into the window, hitting one of the tarantula's legs, dislodging it from the glass and sending it falling to the ground in a torrent of precipitation and shining turquoise legs.

Jay fell back onto the bed looking up at the cracked ceiling with a furrowed brow and tears in her eyes. She lay there in silence, listening to the thunder and the still-going tik-pop-tik-pop of the leaks, now almost white noise to her. She closed her eyes. Maybe she slept.

A loud knock at her door brought Jay back to consciousness. She rolled over and looked at her phone. It was 3:48. Her phone had 1% battery. There was the knock again. Jay knew better by this point than to trust what sounded like knocks at her door, and she closed her eyes, hoping to

ignore it until it disappeared. But, no, there it was again, and it sounded human, and urgent. This time there was a voice, too:

"Jay, Jay! Hey, Jay, wake up!" It was - it must have been - Matthew's voice. He kept knocking and yelling. Honestly, though, she didn't know what to do. She'd begun to dread the hallway, even her own door, and most of all she dreaded Matthew and his eyes. And, what's more, she told herself, she couldn't open the door anyway, at least until it stopped being so humid. She decided she wasn't there, or that she was a heavy sleeper. She rolled over on the bed and put a pillow over her head.

"Jay!" The knocking continued. Then, abruptly, it stopped.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Some loud sound, a crash or a thud, came from outside her door. Then there was silence. No knock, no tik, no pop. Jay sat up and looked around the room. She felt again like there was someone else there, but of course there was nothing: no Matthew, no tarantula, no leaky ceiling. Just Jay, alone.

She walked over toward the door, heart pounding and breaths quick and short. Clenching her teeth, she slowly moved her head toward the peephole, terrified to look out at whatever may have caused the crash, but she couldn't help herself. She peered outside cautiously, but the landing was empty. Except, on the other side, Matthew's door was open. One of his lights was on in his apartment and it reflected off his floor, which was covered with water. In fact, she noticed a stream leaving his apartment and flowing across the landing, then turning and dripping down the stairs. But there was no Matthew. A drop of water on the floor flickered and winked at her, and she pulled away from the door.

Jay could hear that the storm outside had slowed, and the calm that came with that observation brought with it a drop of pragmatism: she remembered her phone was close to dying, if not dead already, but she had no idea where she'd put her charger earlier. It must still be in her bag. She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her stuff up onto Sara's desk, flipping the switch on a little green library lamp on the corner of the desk as she felt through her things. There it was. She grabbed the little cord coiled up underneath her clothes and pulled on it, but she pulled too hard and knocked over her bag, which in turn caught the edge of a small box Sara had tucked away next to the lamp. The box fell over and Jay suddenly lost interest in the phone charger: Sara's little box had spilled out an astounding pile of jewelry, gold and silver and turquoise and emerald, and it all shone powerfully, almost blindingly, in the light of the desk lamp. She felt the golden reflection dance on the skin of her face.

Jay gathered up the jewelry she'd spilled and was placing it back in its box when a particular piece caught her eye. It was a turquoise and gold necklace, in the shape of the beautiful sun-cross symbol she'd seen all over New Mexico. She put every other piece of jewelry back into the box, and then picked up this piece and held it in her hand. It was heavy but tender, almost just like that tarantula, she realized, turquoise rays shooting out from a shining center. It sat in her palm and it felt warm. She dropped it back into the jewelry box and as it clinked among its peers the desk lamp flicked off on its own. Jay flipped the switch on its neck back and forth, but it produced no more light. She decided to take that as a sign and stretched out on the bed in the dark.

As she lay there Jay felt the mood in the apartment shift once again. The rain was gentle now, and the lamp's mysterious behavior didn't bother her like it would have earlier. In fact, she felt safe, and comfortable, and protected, as if someone had relieved her of her duty to watch over

herself, and she relaxed. She curled up and let her mind wander off as the sounds of thunder moved further away, and as her consciousness finally faded and gave in to sleep, Jay felt someone else get into the bed beside her. But it was someone warm, and safe. She didn't panic. Yes, yes, it was Sara: Jay recognized the smell of her skin and the smoothness of her touch. Sara embraced Jay, and put her head in her hair and took a deep breath, and together in the dark the two of them slept.

Again a knock at the door. Jay opened her eyes. She rolled onto her side and looked out the window. The sun was up and the sky a vast uninterrupted blue. Jay sat up in bed and looked out the window at the street. It was dry, dusty as usual, as if the storm had never happened. The air, too, was thin again and cool with the morning.

Knock knock.

"Jay, your car's out front." It was Matthew's voice. How did he know about the car? What happened to him last night? But she looked outside again and indeed there was the Saturn, flat tire replaced.

Jay gazed around the room, rubbing her eyes, and saw that everything, surprisingly, seemed normal. There was no water on the floor from the night's leaks, and the cactus on the table that she was sure she remembered seeing dead looked absolutely healthy, its yellow flower dancing lightly in the breeze from the ceiling fan spinning above it.

She packed up the few things she had with her and made her way cautiously to the door, unsure how to feel about the day's seeming safe so far. The door would be the real test. She twisted the knob and pulled, and it opened without a single complaint. She stepped out onto the landing, once again smelling of hot, dry wood, and made her way to the stairs. Matthew's door was closed, and there was no stream of water crawling out from his room.

She stepped down the stairs and paused in front of Yuri's room, unsure what to do with the keys and scared of what might have happened to her the night before. She decided not to knock, and instead slid the keys under the door. As soon as they'd crossed into the apartment, something pulled the keys away quickly, and Jay drew her hand back in surprise. But no further noise or indication of anything at all came from Yuri's apartment, and Jay backed away from her door, confused. She turned around, shaking her head, and walked out the front door.

Her Saturn out front was unlocked. The keys were still in the ignition. She dropped her bag in the backseat and peered around, half expecting to see something that would make her jump, but it was just her car, exactly how she'd left it. The spare tire had been put back into the trunk. A little bill from Mike's Sunoco sat folded on the dash.

Jay twisted the keys, started the car, and backed out onto the street. Matthew watched from his window as she pulled away.