

How to Approach a Darkness

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Ani Esther Morgan considers how to begin this latest letter, which she intends to send by electronic mail to the condo committee just before the weekend, when she and Maevis and the dog will be far away in a family campground, cooking up the last of their veggie patties and making up games with Monopoly money.

The committee will send somebody to knock, knock, knock on their door, but nobody will be there to open it and argue about anything. Ani will leave a note on the kitchen table that reads, *Allison, stop using your key for non-emergencies. This is still our home.*

The World Wide Web has only been around for a few short years, but Ani figures she's already made all the electronic mail mistakes a person can ever make, at least once. So she leaves out the recipient addresses until the end, this time, so she won't accidentally hit the send button before the letter has had all of her very worst ideas taken back out, all of its typos thoroughly removed, and the recipient list carefully considered and re-considered. She will do this last part very soberly.

She starts with her subject. It reads:

Regarding our shithead neighbour, Jackson Newhouse

It feels good to finally get *that* off her chest. Her computer now knows how she feels. That's how it feels to her, anyway. A computer has no soul, of course (as far as she can tell), but since her computer is now connected to the World Wide Web, Ani believes some computer elsewhere in the world -

maybe the most powerful one, maybe in Russia - now also knows how she feels today, and will remember, and will understand, in its own way. Maybe many computers around the world will someday understand.

Then she changes the subject line to:

Regarding our neighbour, Jackson Newhouse, the shithead

She tries changing the *the* to an *a*, to see whether that reads better:

Regarding our neighbour, Jackson Newhouse, a shithead

That doesn't seem to make it any better. Then:

Regarding Jackson Newhouse, our shithead neighbour

She shortens the *Regarding* to just *Re*:

Re: Jackson Newhouse, our shithead neighbour

Then Ani recalls that this will make people think that somebody else had the idea of calling out Jackson for being a shithead first, and that she's simply weighing in on the subject afterward, and she certainly doesn't want to leave that impression. *She's* the one who's calling out Jackson for being a shithead, and if other people wanted to include their own thoughts, they're more than welcome to.

The man has been a shithead with a capital S, lately - ever since that family from Korea moved into the building. She changes the *Re*: momentarily to *About* (with and without the colon), and plays with the case:

About: Jackson Newhouse, our Shithead neighbour

About Jackson Newhouse, our Shithead Neighbour

She rests her elbows on the desk, chin on her interlocked hands to keep everything from shaking quite so much. She considers the words looking back at her. Among the intricate tattoos swirling around her wrists and

down and along her arms, a cartoon bear peeks out of some beautiful flowers, and smiles lovingly at the room. The Bear tattoo, whom Maevis calls BearBear, always approves of whatever or whomever Ani chooses to point him at. BearBear is a *He*. Maevis got to choose this, using her pronouns.

Ani's electronic mail program has been helpfully pointing out all this time that *shithead* is not really a proper word. Ani hasn't found the setting yet that will allow her to make it one. BearBear does not seem to care at all - everything's just fine.

Ani concludes that "Regarding" (and *with* a colon) is more professional - and also, first words and proper names are the only things worth capitalizing, in most cases - and so decides to stick with that, and then give things a moment to settle:

Regarding: Jackson Newhouse, our shithead neighbour.

She's not sure about ending electronic mail subject lines with periods, but it feels right, and so she does.

She cracks open a beer, swings herself off her desk chair, and drops onto the old sofa next to the desk, set at a right angle to it - the only way all the furniture could be made to fit down here - and lets the small subject line fume silently in the middle of her monitor, while she sits and drinks.

The afternoon light filtering through the eight-hundred dollar blinds which she doesn't own evenly illuminates the small, sparse living room with the perfectly fake plants and the unnecessarily sunken floor that has barely enough room for its contents: her small, cheap computer desk; the large glass coffee table which isn't hers (and which she isn't allowed to move, and so has covered in an old quilt, for child safety); and their old sofa, which is the only piece of furniture she ever takes with her, when she and Maevis are finally forced to leave wherever they happen to be living at the moment.

It's the sofa Maevis was conceived on. Ani likes to tell visitors this, to make them uncomfortable after they've sat down on it, until she waits a beat, and

then clarifies what she means.

She takes a long one, and tilts her head backward to rest it on the sofa's scratchy plumpness. She imagines repercussions and accusations and escalations and whether there were likely to be any real resolutions in any of this. She wants a resolution.

This has been the first condo she's ever rented, and it will be the last one, as well. She's already decided this. She still doesn't know how condo associations work, with regards to complaints, with regards to neighbours behaving badly. She knows every association is just a bunch of people, after all, and people come in all kinds and sizes. That's all she knows about that.

What Ani means about Maeve's conception on the sofa is this: she had a clear vision one evening, while smoking a big joint alone upon this very sofa. A clear vision of having herself a daughter. She had never had a single notion of being a mother until that very moment, but in that very moment, as high as she was, it all made perfect sense. Of course she was meant to have a daughter. It was *important* that she did. She wasn't sure how, but it was. This vision came to Ani Morgan two years before Maevis was born, almost to the day.

The notion stayed with her long after her pot guy got arrested and she had to go without getting artificially creative for a while. She had been given a vision, and she wasn't giving up on it. There was daughter waiting for her, somewhere. That daughter needed to be *here*. It was Ani's job to let her in.

Finding the father to assist her with realizing the vision was an altogether different story, which occurred somewhat later, and more than somewhat unfortunately.

The sofa feels like sitting on burlap, but it's even tougher and much kinder than leather, and has every possible colour in it - and somehow still looks beautiful despite these qualities, all wrapped up together. To Ani, that improbable beauty - strength and colour and resilience and texture - makes it a *magic* sofa, and not one to ever get left behind. And so Maevis and she never have left it behind. It's part of their family, and always will be.

It always travels with them, strapped to the top of whatever beat-up old vehicle is carrying within its belly all of their clothes, and themselves, and their other personal items - and then whatever animals have signed on to accompany the two Morgans on their here-and-back-again journeys between the Out West, the Down South, and the Back East.

This old, beautiful, magic sofa has seen more states and more provinces combined than any other sofa in the world, in Ani's estimation. Maevis took her first big fall off of a sofa, from this very sofa. Its arms are scratched thin by treasured cats now passed on, or fled for parts unknown, or reluctantly relinquished. Pennies will fall from it with curious timing, when Ani and Maeve think there could be nowhere left inside it for any more pennies to hide. Never dimes, or nickels, or quarters - and only a pair of toonies once, back when those were still sort of new. That was that time when Ani had run out of bus tickets, and would have been fired, had it not been for two toonies fallen from Heaven, straight through their beautiful, magic sofa. There was no scientific explanation for it. None was needed.

Ani starts rubbing the solid, thick sofa cushions on either side of her quickly, to build up some friction in her palms, which warm them up, and help her feel energized, so that she can think straight. She has to get this letter right. The right words will mean getting out of her lease a month early, which she needs to do - and without forfeiting the deposit. She needs all of that to afford a new used car, gas, meds, and just enough food to head Down South again. Her growing daughter and full-grown dog eat like two little horses.

Bull had found her number the other day, and left his usual sort of message on the answering machine, even though the machine's *please-leave-a-message* message is delivered by the voice of an old, former neighbour, who is an army vet, telling the caller in a gravelly, war-hardened tone to call back later - *if they had to* - or leave a message - *if it was damn urgent*.

Still, the voice message left on her machine that Tuesday had known who would really be listening anyway. Bull's voice never sounds urgent. Just pure, dead calm.

Hey there, Princess. You can't stop a father seeing his kid forever. You know that's not right. I have a right to see my son. I'm going to see my son. I just want to talk. I want to see my kid for a while. I'm in your town now. I've got money, I can take him out for a burger. Or a salad, whatever. Your call. I'll call back, soon.

Click.

Ani rubs her palms against the old, colourful cushions, furiously. The next call will be at the door.

Bull thinks Ani eats salads all the time. She almost never eats salads. She just doesn't eat meat. She's no vegan, that's for sure - she just loves fish too much. To eat them, that is. Not as companions - not ironically. Most fish would eat her, given the chance, so she feels that's fair, as fair goes.

Bull thinks anything that doesn't have a cow or a pig in it is a salad. He also thinks their child is a boy. Ani had made sure to lie about that, so he'd at least be looking for a boy, and not Maeve - if he ever managed to find her school, before Ani could manage to have the nightmare that would warn her that he was about to.

Maevis Morgan's official name on her birth certificate is Johnny. Johnny B. Morgan.

Bull is not a man deterred by restraining orders. He has a preternatural way of getting around things like that. He is *connected*, in some way - Ani knows that much. She had sensed that connection about Bull when they first met. At the time, she had felt this meant *they* had a connection, but that wasn't what she had felt at all, as it turned out. She was a bit younger then, and felt things wrongly, a lot more than she does now. She's been growing up fast.

She had been too late to make the right decisions differently, about Maevis and about the kind of guy her father would end up being. She didn't have the heart or the money to hire a hitman, anymore.

She finishes rubbing the sofa and lifts her hands up off it a bit, and closes her eyes, feeling the tingle in her palms from the friction. She loves her warmed-up hands. They never last long, unless she's in the sun, in the Summer. When she's outside, in the open, she's never completely calm.

She wishes she could type with mittens. A car outside revs as it accelerates down the street, and her whole body twitches in a sudden, practiced panic. She hates that about her body.

Maevis can't know that monsters are real, and so, at four years old, she still doesn't. Ani has told Maeve that bad guys just exist in books now, and so that's what Maeve still believes, and why she must like bad guys so much - they're a lot like dinosaurs. What kid doesn't like a dinosaur? It's big and scary and you'll never have to meet a real one, as long as you live.

Maeve is napping in the small bedroom they share, with Dooley curled up around her head, like a dog hat - like he always makes himself into when Maeve finally settles down, and sleeps for a while. The bed they share in this tiny condo is the most comfortable bed in the world. She can hear Maeve snoring lightly. Ani had wept in the bathroom the previous night at the thought of having to leave that bed behind. Maeve almost never sleeps soundly - except, apparently, in beds too perfect for her mother to take with them.

Ani Morgan is so tired of her own sob story. She needs to move on, soon. *Sooner* than soon.

She won't tell Normand this time that she was going, until she had finally gone, and they were already elsewhere. She wouldn't tell him where *that* was either, for at least a few months. The last time she'd moved, her brother had left a good job and burned a better bridge just to help her get the sofa on the car - a favour which turned into him sleeping on it for five months, because he sneakily and stupidly thought he could snap his fingers at any time, and become a warrior if she needed him to be. He hadn't needed to, because she hadn't needed him to - that time. This is why Ani still has a brother. She needs him to just be *around*, somewhere else.

I'll be your meat shield, whatever - just keep me fat with beer and pizza, Norm had said with that *I-don't-know-what-the-hell-I'm-promising* smile that he had sometimes, when he thought he knew what he was promising, to make her feel better. Ani had known then that he hadn't known at all what he was promising. And it hadn't made her feel better either. Normand was only strong when he was happy, and Bull didn't make anybody happy, so that wasn't a thing she was going to let Norm promise, ever again.

Her hands are still tingling from the cushion-rub, and she sits herself upright on the magic sofa, cross-legged, keeping her eyes closed while she imagines what her neighbour down the hall would have to say about being called a shithead in an electronic mail sent to the entire condo association (except for maybe Lynda).

She tries to put herself into Lynda's place again - tries to imagine living with a guy like Jackson. The sound of his tiring self-pity quietly reverberating through the thin concrete wall between their condos is too much for Ani at this point. She already has a far, far worse Jackson of her own, and just has no more room for any more Jacksons right now.

Lynda's current beau, though, is all bark, and no bite. Ani has cornered Lynda a bunch of times in the laundry room to make damn sure, and the woman is never scared or hurt - just pretty disappointed and a bit resigned. And of course, still in denial. Like Jackson is the best Jackson she can ever find. Like she needs a Jackson.

Jackson likes complaining about every person he meets - except himself - and thinks his life is a chore and his neighbours are stealing his mail and only his music is worth hearing through the hallways and cats and dogs are all the devil and the military has given them the Internet so it can spy on everybody, and anybody who doesn't look like him and talk like him is probably up to something, and the police should probably be called.

He calls everybody bad names, mostly under his breath, but not always. Sometimes he wants the person he's talking about to hear him. If you give Jackson a *particular* kind of look, he'll break eye contact pretty damn quick. As tiny as Ani is, she thinks she could probably take Jackson down if she had to. Some days, she really wouldn't mind giving it a go. She's not

worried about Lynda's safety, she's just impatient for Lynda to get on with the rest of her life. She doesn't even know Lynda that well. She just knows Jackson Newhouse is still choosing to be a loser. It's a free country, whatever.

Jackson Newhouse is the scapegoat Ani needs to get out of her lease. He deserves it anyway, she figures. He needs to grow up, and Lynda needs to move on. Somehow, Ani will manage all of their problems at once, in one well-written electronic mail. Somehow. She'll figure it out. She just needs to think a bit more.

But first, she needs to vent. She downs the rest of her beer and gets back to the desk.

She writes a few drafts of the first paragraph, trying to get the tone right.

The first draft starts like this:

Dear Condo Committee,

Regarding the loud argument in the stairwell last Friday, and the false and unkind accusations levelled against me by Mr. Newhouse:

This is enough of being professional. It's just the first draft. Ani has all afternoon. She picks up the new old car at 8pm. They'll take the bus to get it. The camping things are packed.

To be frank, insults and accusations out of Jackson Newhouse's mouth are like so much air out of an asshole - they're a lot of rotten noise, and none of it means shit.

The insult's a bit long and awkward, and poorly placed - Ani's never been as good as she'd like to be with insults - but it does its job for her in the moment. She says it out loud a few times, to the empty beer can she's holding, like she's talking right to a little, empty Jackson Newhouse, and there's lots of people standing behind her to hear her finally say what most of them are probably thinking, and beer-can Jackson can't even look up at Ani in the eye, and he doesn't say anything back:

"Jackson Newhouse, insults out of you - out of your mouth are like - they're like air out of your asshole. You're rotten noise and it doesn't mean shit."

"Words out of your mouth are like accusations, and -"

"Words out of your mouth are like air out of an asshole - they don't mean shit."

"Insults and accusations out of your mouth are like... air out of your asshole - they're just rotten noise, really, and they don't mean shit. You shithead."

Ani puts the empty can down hard on the desk and leans back and closes her eyes.

She changes the background in her mind, running through the scenario where she says those words - then tougher, tighter versions of them - about Jackson Newhouse, and he never looks Ani in the eye while she's saying this, in her scenarios, and he never says *shit* back to her, and never invades her personal space once, or makes her feel afraid at all, and everybody's on Ani's side and backing her up and nodding and a couple are even clapping, and one has just picked up a pitchfork... because Ani's got bigger balls than Jackson Newhouse, and everybody knows it.

She wishes she had a mirror right there, so she could practice looking more bad-ass. She changes the background in her mind, over and over, running through the same scenario where she says those words about Jackson Newhouse. And he never looks Ani in the eye and never says shit back to her - and everybody's on Ani's side.

Because she's got bigger balls than Jackson Newhouse ever will.

She picks up the can and keeps practicing being brave and angry and fed-the-fuck up, slowly crumpling beer-can Jackson.

Her hands are cold again, but at least not shaking any more, and she's picturing all these set-piece scenarios for her stand-off with Jackson Newhouse - hallways, dining room tables, office lunch areas, shopping

malls, restaurants, cruise ships, deserted islands, space stations - where she's telling Jackson Newhouse to go to hell.

Because she can't tell *Bull* to go to hell, any more than she can tell him to just go home, and stay there. She even said *please* once. Bull doesn't know about *please*. He finds the idea of *please* amusing. Ani wishes she could take the *pleases* all back. It was a low moment, but she had to try.

She drops the dented, empty beer can into the little garbage pail under her desk. She knows all this raw anger won't make it into her final draft, of course, so continues typing in this vein, down the Dark Path for several more paragraphs, pouring out her soul at the soulless World Wide Web, intellectually eviscerating poor Jackson Newhouse - the ultimate victim and scapegoat - voicing her own anger sideways at the undeserving father of her child, to a condo committee she needs to part ways with really soon. Sooner than soon.

The modest speed at which she is able to actually type all of this soon makes her bored of watching herself slowly sputter and fume and smoulder and spin and rage at the state of the world around her, backing up occasionally to fix unintentional spelling errors, which she can't stand. They always break her train of thought, and rage.

She stops typing and just listens to the sound of her daughter Johnny lightly snoring in the next room. She gets a kick out of calling her daughter Johnny sometimes, to herself. It helps her get some of the humour back.

Trying to type angry always makes Ani better, eventually, because she's always been a get-yourself-into-trouble-*speaking-before-you-think* sort of person. Letters are a bit safer, really. That's why she's never taken typing lessons. It's just better for her career this way - to type important things, ponderously.

Ani keeps writing a few more paragraphs from the Dark Side until she'd expunged all of her worst feelings about the man she was really typing about, committing them to the unfathomable Internet: pressing Send after addressing the email to jacksonnewhouse @ jacksonnewhousesucks.com.

The email bounces, of course, arriving back politely a moment later, apologizing for not knowing exactly where to deliver itself to, but it makes Ani feel better anyway for having sent it somewhere.

Her feelings went someplace else, for a moment. The Universe knows what she means anyway.

She also prints a copy on her old dot-matrix, fantasizing about dropping it in Jackson's mail slot on their way out, but decides to light it with a candle instead, next to the tiny open kitchen window, hoping the mood she has been in for the last few months might burn off, and snake and curl its way outside and somehow disappear forever, never to be found again.

Olivia didn't say much that whole time we were getting our stuff set up for that night, in the New Old Shed - just the essential stuff, like asking how to light an oil lamp again, and which sleeping bag was bigger. She wasn't sure, even after I showed her that the red one was. Not much else was said.

I'm sort of used to that, with Olive. She's always been pretty quiet. That's OK. When she was younger, she would often sometimes sing for no reason. Not all the time - just at particular times. Olivia would be quiet for long stretches - maybe days - and then out of nowhere, she'd hum this tune, or sing some words in a string, like she'd been thinking about doing it all that time that she had been quietly composing, and then all the sudden, it was time to do it, and then she'd just do it.

You never knew when little Olive would start singing. It didn't matter where she was - she could be in a store, or in the car, or in her bedroom, or at school... there was no telling when she'd stop being really quiet, and suddenly start to sing, and then go back to being quiet again, once she'd got it all out there.

It usually didn't last too long, when she did. A few verses, maybe a whole short tune. She always made them up, they were always kind of pretty. Honestly, I prefer talk radio to listening to music most of the time now, but

I'm always glad to hear any song Olive might want to sing. I just stop what I'm doing and listen. She never sings the same one twice. I haven't heard her sing like that for a year though. She's been sad about something, but everybody's been calling it angry. They've got it wrong.

Pizza would be ready in a couple of hours, back at the house. After we got our stuff all sorted out, I got some lemonade into some cups and we sat out on the porch, right next to each other, because the porch isn't big enough for two people to sit too far apart, and we just sat there, watching as the sun started coming down toward the sea, and watched the sky and the water and the old, elder apple trees swaying real slow. Their leaves would start to shimmer once the wind picked up. That's what I call it - the Wind Shimmers. My leg was feeling a bit better. I might take my cast off soon.

I said to Olive, maybe we'll see the fox. It likes to run around in the apple trees when the wind picks up, near dusk. Sometimes it catches a mouse, and sometimes it chases a Gnome. Olive snuffed at that. Everybody is used to me talking about Gnomes - they all think it's a running joke that I won't let go of. Like I've been practicing being real deadpan, for years. Like I would do that for years and years. Whatever. I remember when Olive believed in Gnomes just like Harry does now. It was Olive who invented the Gnome Gnet, actually. Well, we did it together, in the Shop Shed. It's one of Bently's old fishing nets, with streamers attached. The streamers are supposed to confuse the Gnomes so they're easier to catch. I had said, good idea Olive, and I had meant it. It was.

The fox had never caught a Gnome either, that I Gnew about... but who Gnows, maybe it had. I guess I wouldn't Gnow, would I? You might not Gnow yet how quick Gnomes can be. I've told you already, but like I said, people don't believe me about everything, just some things. Gnomes don't look quick, but they're really quick, when they Gneed to be. I haven't told you many stories about them yet, really - too much other stuff's been going on, I haven't had time yet. I guess I have a full life. Sometimes I forget that.

Now Olive's suddenly too cool to believe in Gnomes anymore. Just like that. Whatever, I've never needed to be cool. I'll keep believing in Gnomes till the cows come home. I don't care about what's cool.

Olivia wasn't saying anything, after snuffing about the Gnomes. That's OK. I was just happy sitting there and imagining she and I someday being old ladies together, sitting just like that, like I knew we would. We were close enough in age, that once we got really old, nobody would probably even know who was the older one. I'm not in a hurry to grow up, exactly, but I also kind of couldn't wait to get old then, all the same.

After a while, Olive said I don't want to go back to school, and I shrugged and said OK, but I wasn't in charge of that. She knew it. She knew that I knew that she didn't want to go back to school. Message received. I didn't ask why. I was trying a thing.

And the fox was there then, all at once, leaping through the grass down in the orchard, all through the elder Apples - Olive made a small sound, oh, and got real still, and I didn't dare say or do anything else at all. Neither of us moved or said anything else.

I just sat still, and let the fox and Olive have their moment, and I let the wind begin to shimmer.

Ani pulls into the condo parking lot with the Morgan's latest wheels - an old, tomato-red station wagon with one orange door, and parks it in the guest spot. It's past 10pm in the evening. She doesn't want to meet anybody or talk to anybody, she's had a hard couple of days camping. Maeve's been a beast. She fled twice into the trees, once toward the highway, three times under the snack bar, once managing to stay there for four hours. Her meds hadn't kicked in, really - she had another growth spurt, Ani supposed. The money ran out too.

Ani puts the car in park, and she leans over the passenger seat to grab her backpack on the floor, for a moment too long.

Maeve launches herself over the driver's seat, hits the child lock and is out the back door, Dooley leaping after her, half-following for the adventure (he can't help it, he's a dog), half-trying to wrangle her before she finds some traffic to run into. Dooley's had a stressful few days; Maevis, his human

daughter, has had a stressful few days. Maevis Morgan doesn't like camping, and now neither does Dooley Morgan.

"MAEVIS!" Ani screams, a reflex from this past year - the girl has almost got herself run over one too many times, charging headlong through parking lots. Ani's out of the car, like a shot, and Dooley's circling around Maeve's legs, sending her sidelong into some bushes near the condo building, trying to turn it into playtime, and barking like crazy. Somebody needs to help his human with their child, pretty quick. He doesn't know who to bark at for that.

"DOOLEY! OFF!" Ani reaches them and grabs Maeve's arm before her daughter climbs up something stupid again. The lights will be coming on in the condos any second, she doesn't want a scene, but of course this is when she'll get a big one.

"OK. LET. ME. GO!" Maeve screams, using her Outdoor Voice. "STOP. HURTING. MEEEE!"

Maeve's new thing is yelling *STOP HURTING ME*, because she's discovered this makes Ani's hand loosen just for a moment, enough for her to slip away. Not this time though. Her mother's a quick learner, just like Maeve.

Ani hisses - trying to somehow make it sound motherly and calm - with the remaining nerve she has left, "*Maevis Beatrice Morgan you stop yelling right -*"

"STOOOOOP OK! NO!"

"*Right now or -*" but Ani has no *or* that works, once the meds run out. She doesn't agree with meds. But they have no life at all without them, these days. They cost so much. A light comes on in Lynda's apartment. Great.

"NO!" Maeve hollers, twisting her arm around in Ani's hand, "OK NO!", grabbing at her mother's fingers, "NONONO!" punching at her mother's bruised forearms. Dooley has decided to try licking Maeve's face everywhere to make it better or go away or something. Ani's hauling Maeve

as gently as a person can do that back toward the car - *fuck it*, she's not doing this here. She'll drive around all night until her daughter burns herself out kicking at the windows, or they run out of gas, she doesn't care anymore. They can't plan anything together. "DOOLEY, get off Maeve, come ON."

"OK NOOOOooooOOOOOooOOoOOooo!!!! STOP! STOP! NO! NOOO!"

Maeve is done with being told where to go and where to sit and when to not talk loud and for how long and she misses her bed and why are they now sleeping in a tent where everybody is loud and why are they going back to the car because she just wants her *home*, she just wants her *home*, she just wants her *home* - where is her *home*, where is it, where.

"*Shut your brat up!*" Jackson's voice yells from the second-floor unit, right next to the one Ani had just wanted to sneak back into without a giant scene, and now can't, and really doesn't want to any more. If the sofa were on the car already, she probably wouldn't have even come back. She just wanted the damn sofa before they slunk away. The quiet man in 302 who never told her his name had said he'd help her with the sofa, because he wouldn't want to live next to Mr. Newhouse either. Now she might have to leave it. This might be the time. Her heart is breaking for too many reasons.

Dooley's running around in front of the car door, trying to figure out how humans open cars, but he's learned his world is made by and for beings with limbs like humans, and not mouths and paws like he has. It's taken him a while to figure out he's an outsider - it helps to see other dogs and cats now and then, and live with a few too. People make most of the world, and it's mostly for them. All he can do is scratch at the car paint and bark. *I'm trying to help! I can't open cars!*

"Dooley! *Enough!*" Ani manages to loud-talk this rather than yell, and she'll save all her crying for later when Maeve is maybe asleep - she doesn't know - and right now she just needs to get the keys in the car door while holding on to a screaming, squirming, Tasmanian Devil and still manage to slink away without waking up and pissing off the *entire* neighbourhood. They'll sleep in the car, their camping trip has been extended. It will be a funny story, in some distant future, when things are better. She's blocking out Jackson's voice, she's blocking out her daughter's screeches, she's

blocking out the dog's yelps and whines, it's all just pounding in her skull. She's detaching. Pretty soon, she might start to float. That will make it hard to drive.

She forcibly helps her protesting, wriggling child into the car and she lets Dooley pile into the back seat on top of the girl, and she closes and locks the back door in a fluid motion - the only features she ever needs in a vehicle is child-locking doors and some storage space - and Maeve kicks in vain at the front seat like a caged demon and Ani has long ago said screw seatbelts, they'll never stay on, and Dooley is trying to play-wrestle Maeve into some kind of submission all over the back of the car, and Ani gets in, screaming *FUCK FUCK FUCK* inside her head, turns the key, revs the engine, and slowly, angrily, *carefully*... does *not* peel out of the parking lot.

She does *not* drive full-tilt back down the street, praying against all hope to see Bull walking up some sidewalk, looking for his son, so she can run the bastard the fuck over, twice.

She *doesn't* do this.

She drives slowly and without looking for any Bulls, and all the noise is nothing at all to her now. She turns on the stereo, pushes an old cassette in, turns it way up, and starts to laugh-cry as she drives away, while a chipper Jeff Lynne sings *Mister Blue Sky*, through all her family's noise, and though one of the darkest nights of her life - screaming, kicking, laughing child and wiggling, slobbering dog behind her - and toward some as-yet-unseen perfect sunrise.