

chapter one

introduces us to esther, a broke woman who just needs eight hours in a real bed.

nobody's sure where the snakes came from, though one is lime-green and

"has a Latin-American tongue," says the broad-shouldered man through a phone call cradled in a rolled dress-shirt sleeve and stainless watch.

"But are we sure she isn't British, then?"—checkout lady, scanning his green juice. She's hoop earrings, friendship bracelet, and her mascara is acne underneath a pair of grey, oceanic eyes. It's fall, she whispers as an overcast Wednesday festers in the parking lot. Tomorrow is her thirtieth birthday, and her tenth-floor double bed in a germantown apartment building will be empty as her alarm sounds. Her landlord will call her a bitch through her voicemail, and then on a letter through her door; he litters her phone with messages until her bike is discovered beside the boardwalk.

The headline on Friday's *Times* will reveal to the businessmen, night-shifters and nursing-home regulars that the snakes were discovered among the apples and pears. A spokesman for *Manitoba Shipping* stuck his index finger to God during a press conference and decried that as the little guy, lowly middlemen, etc... *how could they have known?* Panama and the Caribbean deny custody, and the cellular signal throughout Central America is speckled like measles as the financially-afflicted call their lawyers, accountants and buddies. The brother and sister disappear without cause by eight-o'clock a.m. on a humid morning, and Monday's *Times* tile germantown bus-stops as the work-struck gag on smog, exhaust and heart-burn, and grasp at 10pt letter-type.

Esther slides a ten-dollar bill to the checkout lady, and smiles yellow, twice-brushed teeth as she asks for a receipt.

"How about those snakes, huh," checkout sighs, catches Esther's raised eyebrow, chuckles that "they found a pair of snakes in the fruit, a boy and a girl—couldn't get 'em apart, or get 'em even, so they slipped under a refrigerator—"

"Which one," Esther, in a breath—

"Meat, I guess, but it was a half-hour ago, they'll be in South America, by now."

"Fuck," as Esther swipes the vacuum-sealed frankfurters from checkout and screams out the door in recycled sneakers and printer-paper cap. The stall is chained to the bike-rack, as she left her, and the umbrella cat-calls her as a gust sweeps across the asphalt.

The parking lot is crickets, forty-two spaces and a manager's Honda. His name is Lassie (red-headed complexion, sleepy eyelids) and is fitted with pleather diarrhoea and a dashcam nose-piercing which overhears

i've lost romeo and juliet in the supermarket no i don't know where a fucking refrigerator it's your fault stupid fucking names of course they ran off together oh go and fuck yourself drop off the thing halfway across town and pay my fucking subway fare maybe yeah i'll leave the franks on the stall with the keys too and a big arrow with three dollar signs and why not my address too you can mail me a severance check and turn off the stupid fucking voice changer i know you sound like snot-nosed orson fucking welles

and loses Esther to the sidewalk. She is a free-loader, less than pond scum of the earth, sleeps four hours each night on a yoga mat, sleeps with a guy whose name she doesn't know but her high school friend once did, on his closet kitchen floor. The guy naps six hours (two-through-eight a.m.), then dissolves into a storm drain and street lights the other eighteen. His hair, eyes and skin are grey (she believes) but he doesn't pay his bills, so he might be only a trick of a dim September light, a phantom swept through the apartment's window in a plume of small-hour rain.

She weighs self-care and medication as she seethes over concrete, leaps over boiling dribbling sewer-grate. A crosswalk traffic light slams into her, wakes her up with a ticklish throat and unemployment. Epiphany soaks through her goosebumps, nails and bones like ice-water. She understands that she is worse than slinging hot-dogs to the homeless and melancholic, that she is worse than her boss, a twenty-something landlord of a fast-food cart, amateur ... and soul-patched wretch. She resolves to nap for seven hours and drink. She recognises that Esther Jones dies for twelve hours, and who gives a damn about tomorrow; that the dead live, even as their eyes spill into a gutter, dry and rot.

A pale hand waves her over the zebra stripes. Esther skips across them, a ballet atop stepping stones as she hums a hopscotch tune.