

## chapter two

is tuneful, hopeful, and shamelessly unoriginal

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*rats camp out underneath the cooker, so she doesn't own an alarm clock and occasionally, she can't drift off without a nightlight, but greyscale's closet doesn't possess a single unoccupied outlet, so she doesn't own a nightlight, though she gets by with the broiler and his frozen pizzas*

Esther's text-tone is a barbed pillow and smothers her awake. Bed-head spits all-American crumbs and dairy product onto her phone screen as she skims Lewis' text asking her out to *sharps and flats* in a half hour. *She'll be there* and tosses her phone into the kitchen sink.

A cloud weeps over her as she descends to the sidewalk. Her Amber Leaf pouch is in her fleece, her lighter is in her leather jacket. *Does it even matter?* A raindrop tears across her cheek. *sharps and flats* is three blocks down 1st ave; by then, she'll be a wet dog, piss-stained, yapping and spreading pneumonia. Big-brother cloud yells at her as she splits 1st ave along the diagonal, and vomits onto her hair. Rain screeches against tenement block and fire-escape until she's carded by the bouncer and flees the claustrophobic outdoor air.

Lewis is a faggot, as usual, nursing a pinot and a thimble of olives on a stool at the bar. The bouncer scratches her state ID

*no she doesn't own a car no she can't afford one no she can't drive*

and Esther's eyes pour through the window and drift onto him, strumming his incisors with a toothpick.

"I've left the green olives for you" he grins. She orders a strong vodka diet soda water and climbs onto the bar stool, crosses her denim legs,

"and here's a toothpick" up his knotted sweater sleeve, "and here's a lighter" from a corduroy slack pocket "like a white rabbit with trapped gas" *ha ha ha*, he laughs, sighs "you looked like you needed one."

"Thank you, Lewis," she sips, breathes "I mean it, and do you believe in back-rests, by the way?"

"I couldn't get a reservation, for a table, I mean, but the big guy Chuck is a college friend's roommate, so—"

"—so the bar, I get it, sure," pops an olive, then a garlic clove

(Newsprint footnote a week yesterday in a quarter-dollar dishrag informed germantowners that a bespoke knife shop slept in an alley just aside 1st ave and had frozen to death last winter. *sharps and flats* was his name, ran an eight-bar radio jingle in the eighties—first four bars in B flat, last four in B sharp. Chuck Manson is a pair of aviators with grey streamers and starved toothbrush moustache who bought the

place from a limping tombstone and retrofitted the room into a jazz bar and let him keep his old name. Chuck is the owner, manager and *curator*. The piece inflicted a weekday pandemic of mass hysteria upon germantown, symptoms being: shortness of breath and hiccups, brought on by a sudden gasp; dehydration, theorised to originate from an unceasing teary eye; nostalgia, and regret. Esther and the million-dollar babies are the only survivors.)

as she orders herself a strong vodka diet soda water, a top-knotted bartender is saucer-eyed and draws the emptied thimble beneath the bar-top.

“What’s wrong, bud?” Lewis is a spotlight with pale teeth and a steaming pink sheet-metal hand, but *her stomach moans her armhairs and ears burn she counts her heart’s steps divides by sixty and* sips, breathes, catches “are the rats hogging the bedsheets, or is the yoga mat all lumps?”

“Fuck off, Lewis.”

“Hey, hey, look” as he extracts a crumpled receipt-paper, unfolds, sips a rioja, “I wrote you a poem.”

“Oh, Christ—”

Lewis clears his throat, whispers into his wine glass, and the bartender overhears

*dear esther,*

*here you are in polaroids:*

*we couldn’t do a thing for her*

*she doesn’t believe in conditioner*

*her curls and nosering live alone—*

“So kind,” she chuckles, “is this romance?”

“If there’s a compliment in it, then it’s romance. If I’m tearing you down, it’s love, and it’s real.”

“Yeah, by the way, how’s hallmark? Or are you showrunning the new Dickens anthology show on PBS?”

*ha ha ha* Lewis and Esther wheezing *ha ha ha* coals leaking sparks in a blocked fireplace

Lewis Gina Davis, in full, breathless and “will he publish a poetry collection” and “will it be called Panasonic?” and “how about tales from the colour television? for your anthology?” *ha ha ha*

finger-snaps puncture their costume box conversation as across the room a quartet floats onto a half-moon, a double bass splashes a drummer’s cheeks with sweat, an alto and pianist slap the bargoers’ white mulled-wine faces and tear asunder the *ambience* with a thumping So What drill bit. They’re prodding the bass into a cardiac arrest, a ex-teen scanning the maroon bricks and halogen bulbs for the changes. The head

is drawn out and frayed as the horn cannonballs into a solo, resolves in his first six bars to resurrect Miles with a cattle prod. Lewis and Esther swivel to ponder bottle labels and the bar-back's Flintstone forearms.

"Tell you what, I'll buy you a drink" (Lewis, his lasso fingers draw a bartender short) "any drink, and" (top-knot is a war-time portrait here, but his nostrils froth and his pupils are thin) "you aren't allowed a vodka diet soda."

Esther is in her fleece pocket, fishing for a big one and casting a net onto Lewis' lighter. She looks to him, to their silhouettes in the bar's mirror: an angel in wool and corduroy, and words, heartburn and a headache in a fleece. She breathes onto him, grins and orders "a mulled ginger, please."

"and make that two!" Lewis cries as his fingers make peace with top-knot.

The pair live in a lukewarm silence as they nurse their drinks, gazing onto the quartet. So What is replaced with If I Were A Bell, which gifts the room to Milestones and then Dear Old Stockholm. A loose, patchwork murmur of Pharaoh's Dance leaks into the crowd, falls apart, is stitched back together, and Esther whispers

"I think I've gotten the idea."

"Yuh-huh," Lewis nods, drains his glass mug and nibbles a toothpick. Esther matches him, asks him to a movie at the Beaumont.

"What the fuck is screening at eleven on a Tuesday?"

"A dollar-two-for double feature."

"Will either be any good?"

"Who cares?"

THE DEAD LIVE on a tea-stained silver screen a block south. Screen 3 is the little sister of the Beaumont duplex, a converted garage with two-dozen carpeted economy seat-backs and a black-out curtain fringe. Lewis and Esther splurge each on a Budweiser and resolve to share an x-rated popcorn. Concession stand bustle and clamour drowns their negotiations

*salted not sweet and she will die upon this but how about half and half only then no-one wins do you even know what that means Lewis non-zero-sum game since when game theory deciding on theatre snacks you're insane you need institutionalised Lewis sweet popcorn is a mental aptitude test and you're failing*

until Esther concedes and compromises upon a large half-and-half sack of popcorn and a Whopper pouch. Their seats are front-row, mid-twenties; their sneakers sweep glass underneath aisle seats as they crawl into the purple-red carpeting and slouch.

THE DEAD LIVE on a nameless Greek island a stone's throw thin. We crash onto two Norwegian sailors circumnavigating the globe in the wrong direction. Fitte and Sprekk live in montage, shoreside binoculars and English-language captioning, as their anchors are torn from an Oslo harbour bed, and sleep in Svalbard, McMurdo, South Africa, a seaside tendril of the Sahara, and Morocco. The pair mistake the northern and southern fingers of the strait of Gibraltar as England and France and pour through into the 'English Channel', throbbing with testosterone, Moroccan hashish and a migraine. Their boat aimlessly runs onto a crystalline Greek shore, upon which Fitte and Sprekk lounge, slow-roast and think. Their bohemian lifestyles are shattered as, a week (and forty-five minutes) on, the two finally ponder seeking an escape from their classical, moonshine paradise. Six days' drunk on inexplicably alcoholic home-brewed grape cider, and emulating Dali with beach-crabs and the tide, rather than a wooden spoon, Fitte and Sprekk nap on the sand, slipping into REM and white-noise nightmares and a ten-second dream

*as we pan onto the shoreline blurry-eyed she struggles to glimpse the undead walking out onto the rocks slipping as their feet touch sand Fitte moans licks Sprekk's armpit with eyelids creased Sprekk's lips shudder with his eyelashes fluttering clamped over his eyes their groaning swims amongst a synth wave coke-downbeat score dissolves into an undead moan as zombies collapse onto the pair wrestle with their forearms undead are male she whispers to Lewis women never die because they go to the gym and eat their veggies is that the film is this the film is this it undead have untied their ribcages and each fucks one wishbone cavern with a bubo-spotted dick and snap their bones apart and write out THE DEAD LIVE on the beach as the screen cuts and a helicopter shouts behind the canvas*

the screen's bulb blinks awake. Esther mutters "Fuck, I need a piss" and climbs over Lewis into hail, scaffolding and exhaust. Screen 1 lets slip a dribble of husbands and wives; Screen 2 is chained shut at the wrists. At the concession stand, she treats Lewis and herself to another two Budweisers and ducks into the screen as Coneheads trickles out the projection booth. A stained-glass Dan Ackroyd looks down onto her, reclined and almost sleeping, her Budweiser bottle half-empty and Lewis' half-full.