

Brittany Ackerman

It Is Understood

It's a good six-minute drive from my place to theirs. I walk up the stairs and look for their door. I remember it being navy blue, but it could have been another color. They answer the door and they are pale skinned; haven't seen sun in weeks. They greet me like happy puppies and lick my face. They hug me tight like it's been years, but it's only been a few days. The couch sinks in when I sit. I'm in the middle and she's on my left smoking a cigarette like a damn movie star. Smoke billows from her plump, pink lips. He's in the kitchen getting me a beer. They don't have water, only Ketel One and Bud Light.

She shows me her new LEGO set. It's a 1940s-style little British town with little people in fancy dresses and smart suits. A man is giving a lady a bouquet. The TV is on; there are two laptops on the table; another one is on the counter; all the electronics are plugged in and downloading and uploading, restarting and hibernating. Data is being transferred from machine to machine. A phone rings, but no one can find it in time. It keeps ringing until it stops.

She goes to the room and comes back with a shoebox and takes out a small hedgehog. She tells me to make a cup with my hands. I hold it for a few seconds, but then it starts to poke me.

She says, "She's so excited."

I give it back.

She takes it and lets it nuzzle between her breasts and I just stare at her and it and wait for him to return with my beer. He comes back and hands me the beer and says he has to step outside. He always seems to be stepping outside. She asks if he needs a lighter, and he says, "No, sweetheart, I got one."

He already has a cigarette in his mouth, or maybe he had one hanging from his lips the whole time. I don't know, and he steps out. The entire apartment is filled with smoke. I want to open a window, but I'm afraid I'd get sucked into a black hole. The air is too heavy. I get a horrible headache, like the ones I always get.

She says, "Come with me, I know what to do."

She has me lie in bed face up and she gets on her knees and rubs my head with her hands. She says she can't do it for too long because the surgery: her wrists, they hurt, but she'll try because she's good. She knows what to do. I drift off into sleep for a minute, into something else, somewhere outside the apartment, but I want to come back, so I do – I tell her to stop. We get up from the bed. I thank her. I feel better now. I think I should be going soon. She's wearing heels, high ones, and I wonder if they've been on the whole time. Knowing her, probably.

He comes back in and asks us what we were doing.

I say, "I've got to go."

He says, "I'll walk you out."

I grab the door handle and it's stuck, almost like I can't leave. Then I ask myself: why would I, if everything I love is here? And I turn around to say "it's stuck," but I see that they're kissing, slow, not slowly. They're kissing in slow motion and I feel good seeing them so in love. So I wait. So I watch. I try not to make a noise. I pretend like I'm not even there.

But then it's done and he sees me and he walks me down the stairs. It's dark outside and getting darker, and he says, "Be safe out there."

I think he wants to tell me something else, but he doesn't. So I say, "I love you more than anything. I would die for you – you're the best brother in the whole fucking world and I love you so much."

And he says, "I love you too, but I already knew all of that when you walked in."