

The dossier on my love life is a collection of outsets. A definitively unfinished landscape that stretches over flooded excavations, bare foundations, and ruined structures; an internal necropolis that has been in the early stages of construction for as long as my memory goes back. When you become a collector of beginnings, you can also corroborate, with almost scientific precision, how little variability there is in the endings. I seem to be condemned to renunciation. Although, in fact, there are only minor differences; all the stories end pretty much alike. The sets overlap in more or less the same way, and the only thing that changes is the point you happen to see them from: consensus is the least common option, renunciation is voluntary, but desertion is an imposition.

I have a talent for beginnings. I like that part. The emergency exit, however, is always at hand, so it's also relatively easy for me to leap into the void when something doesn't feel right. To take flight toward nothingness at the least provocation. And that's why this time I don't want

any preambles, my collection of outsets is already too large. I'm tired of preludes, and the only moment it's possible to return to with a modicum of confidence is that finale, the breakup that changed everything in the first place, that turned me into a deserter, a compiler of hopelessly truncated stories.

One fine day, without warning, I woke up at the ending. Hadn't even gotten up when, from the bedroom door, about to leave for one of his classes, Tordo(τ) said:

You're not like you used to be.

Spent the rest of the day trying to understand what he meant by that, unable to slip from between the sheets. Just when did I stop being like I used to be?

It all sounded strange, even suspicious.

Thought maybe it had something to do with his midlife crisis. But no. Not long afterwards, it became clear that when someone says, "You're not like you used to be," they actually mean, "I'm in love with someone else."

I broke down. Tordo(τ) broke me down.

Almost overnight, I had to pack all my clothes into a suitcase, pick out a few books, write a good-bye letter no one asked me for, call a cab, and return to the only place left for me: Mom(M)'s apartment.

I'd attempted to forget that third floor. Its blocked pipes, disposable plates and cups, the communal sinks on the roof where we sometimes rinsed off the pots and pans, the beat-up domestic appliances, and the cowboy hip tub my Brother(B) and I were so accustomed to, you'd think we lived in another century. I'd stopped thinking about

the apartment's unavoidable resemblance to a paleontology lab: the honeycombs of dust; the collection of plant skeletons mounted on pots; the balls of fluff huddled together to form strange, plush baseboards in the corners; the encrusted grime patterning the walls and ceiling of the kitchen; the gray patina on the window panes, produced by infinite layers of dried rain; and the series of strange microorganisms growing in the bottles left standing in the refrigerator.

Even though we could have asked Dad for help, we never got a plumber, never hired anyone to do the cleaning or did it ourselves, because we were sure she'd leave some trace.

We didn't do anything.

The apartment was left suspended in time. Just as it was the day we last saw Mom(M).

In my bedroom, under my old, faithful Humpty Dumpty duvet, it soon became clear that the abruptness of the ending had brought things back to the beginning, to some beginning, or at least to the place where they were before Tordo(T). I knew this because, on opening my eyes in the early morning, I heard Mom(M) crossing the hall, speaking aloud in that strange, irascible language I was never able to decipher. My body got up automatically, looked out the bedroom door: the only thing my eyes saw was the bluish light of the computer screen illuminating the hall. She wasn't there.

Late at night, my Brother(B) could always be found in the study. He suffered from insomnia, and it seems to

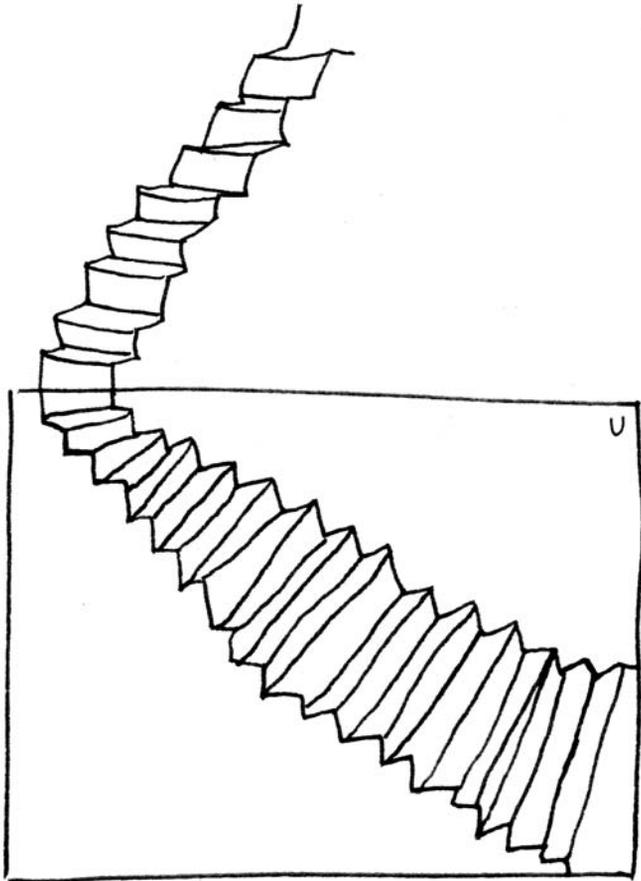
me standing guard was his way of waiting for Mom(M) to reappear. He'd improvised an internet connection from a telephone cable and the passwords the university had given Dad; he was afraid someone would discover that he was duplicating the username, so he only logged on in the small hours. I used to sleep very lightly—it wasn't a matter of waiting up for her, but I'd jump out of bed at the slightest noise. Never asked him, but it seems very likely that my Brother(B) used to hear her too. I followed the light and found him sitting at the computer, surfing the net; it was as if I'd never left, never lived with Tordo(T). Everything was just the same.

You're back, said my Brother(B).

An explanation was unnecessary. Defeat is wordless.

RANGMEBOO

Empty Set 5



How did we get here, to this point? It all goes back to two days before my fifteenth birthday. Winter 1995. At that time, I was still fourteen and my Brother(B) was seventeen, almost eighteen. It was early in the morning, we were about to leave for school, and Mom(M) said no, said it would be better to stay home. She told us not to turn on the TV, not to turn anything on. She said we had to be silent.

I never had a fifteenth birthday. We'd ordered a bitter chocolate cake for a party that didn't happen. Mom(M)'s interminable absence took away all our birthdays, raveled the passage of time.

There's no recognizable cause, only effects. Correction: only a frontier in space-time, turbulent flows, interrupted. Inter ruptured.

Only a series of scattered, meaningless clues. A set emptying out little by little. Disordered fragments. Correction: shards.

Repetition: winter, 1995.

Mom(M) starts talking about the trees in the park. She says you can see faces in the bark. Says all those faces are looking toward the house. All those faces are looking at us.

She orders us to stop watering the plants.

If anything should happen to me, she says.

What? my Brother(B) and I respond in unison.

...

After that, we aren't able to understand what she says.

Or is it that she can't hear us?

What did you say, Mom?

That's how she began to vanish.

And in the end, we couldn't see her anymore.

August 8, 1976

Marisa,

I've decided to change your name. In my diaries, you're called Lina.

The words I've written to you, I've never written to anyone else. They all designate out-of-reach things, except for the reference to your green shoes—which is probably not true—although I haven't forgotten the stomp.

If this was just a word game, I'd go on playing to the end.

Y love you (I wrote "I love you," but added an arm to the I, no matter),

S.

We christened Mom(M)'s apartment “the bunker.”

A time capsule where everything is in a state of permanent neglect.

A perfectly closed system Mom(M) constructed before rubbing herself out, one that managed to produce some kind of gravitational singularity.

My Brother(B) started university not long after, and I went to high school. It took Dad years to realize Mom(M) wasn't there—they hadn't spoken since the divorce. At times I'm not completely certain he did realize (or maybe he's much better than us at acting like nothing is wrong). Dad is a methodical man, unlikely to perceive anything outside his routine. He used to phone us once a week—on Thursdays at 2:45 p.m., because that was when he had a few spare moments—and we went to his house for dinner every Sunday. But I guess he must have suspected something, because he always had a manila envelope ready to cover the household expenses and never, ever asked about Mom(M); in part because they'd stopped talking, and in part because

the girlfriend of the moment was always there, frowning, wishing Mom(M), my Brother(B), and I didn't exist.

It's not as if we were magicians, we hadn't even agreed upon it; the disappearing act just developed naturally. Not saying anything was enough. It's easy to let others fill the gaps. A sufficiently ambiguous expression can convert someone else's monologue into an imaginary conversation. Silence is a variable that constantly mutates, so it's the other who decides if it's a yes, a no, or any other response.

And anyway: how do you hide something when you don't know where it is?

It's surprising how little it takes to make the whole world believe your life is like everyone else's. In the beginning they asked us the occasional question, but the fact is no one wanted to know the answers. Then they simply stopped caring, and even if they had asked, we no longer had any answers. No one remembered they hadn't seen Mom(M) for a long time. Oblivion is remorseless; it's memory that settles the accounts, the only evidence of the omission. More than a pair of magicians, we were like those two swindlers in Andersen's tale who pretended to be weavers and designed an invisible outfit for the emperor. We made them believe Mom(M) was there—despite the fact that not even we could see her. She'd crossed a frontier neither my Brother(B) nor I knew how to pass over. We made them believe our daily life was just like that of any other divorced family. The bunker, luckily, never caused any suspicion. It was, in any case, a

place no one entered for many years. The space Mom(M) should have occupied was empty; she'd left us part of a hole, and all the rest was outside the visible Universe(U), in an unknown location.

