

Margie

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I'm standing in line at a Shopper's Drug Mart waiting to buy a box of granola bars, and "Here Comes Santa Claus" is playing, and the woman in front of me grumbles to no one in particular: "Does anyone actually like this shit?"

"Obviously someone does," I half-think. I'm rallying my internal troops, preparing for a verbal siege that will heroically excoriate her elitism, before I realize that I neither like this shit nor associate with anyone who does. So, I hold my tongue and get back to fishing out exact change for my granola bars. I nearly get there but end up short a dime.

Except that I don't really have to hold my tongue because I only imagined her grumbling "Does anyone actually like this shit?" in my head. In reality, she just stood there silently cradling her two Lindt chocolate bars. Then I take the streetcar home. The guy in front of me is *really* smelly but that doesn't stop me from eating one of the granola bars. OK, more than one.

I struggle with the big, dented lock in my front door. Inside, I notice there's a man lying on my couch. He's staring vacantly at the place where my TV used to be before we traded it for two ukuleles and a lot of dried beans. It's my boyfriend, I realize, and he did something to his hair, and oh god, that's right, he's growing a beard again.

He wears an expression that makes me want to throw a granola bar at his face. So, I throw a granola bar at

his face. But my aim isn't very good, so it sails over the couch. "What the hell was that?" he exclaims with a tone that sounds like genuine surprise but might also be tinged with mockery. I tell him to "get off your butt and let me in next time, fat ass," and before he can respond, I append: "also, you're going bald," just for good measure. "Jesus!" he exclaims and starts laughing. I drop my granola bars and tackle him before he can fully extricate himself from the couch.

Still laughing, he effortlessly resists my attempts to headlock him. Now pressed between his considerable weight and the couch cushions, I push my mouth against his ear and declare "I want your cock." Then, instead, we eat frozen pizza and watch Netflix for the rest of the night, because what I said stopped being true when I said it. In the seconds before I fall asleep, I stare up at the dim white of the ceiling and form my mouth into an elliptical O like the thing in Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*, which I remember is actually a series of paintings as my alarm clock wakes me with the dulcet tones of "Jingle Bell Rock."

At work I'm a clothes-folding machine. I can do it blindfolded. I do it while staring customers in the face with a dead-eyed expression like I'm the fucking Terminator. I actually like this job, although it's kind of embarrassing to admit it. It's definitely not what I went to school for. But I can appreciate the opportunity to click off all higher cognitive functions until I clock out. And I like feeling my fingers' intelligence, watching them scuttle like feisty alien spiders attached to my arms.

I don't really like my job today though because something happens while I'm elbow deep in half-folded sweaters. A jolt runs through me, from the top of my head to my toes, a sort of dazzling pain, and for a second I suspect I'm dying in the comfortable corner of fast fashion hell I've carved out for myself. I think: "Wow, really?" Then I sink down to

the floor, and the pain subsides. My co-worker Steph walks in. He looks at me as if to ask, "Why are you sitting on the floor?" and I say, "I'm OK," which is true at this point, then add "Something weird just happened." He looks at me some more, so I fill him in: "I just felt, like, almost an electric shock run through me? But I'm pretty sure I didn't get electrocuted." He mulls this over, then offers his wisdom: "Woah. You might want to see a doctor or something."

Do I have to see a doctor? I don't want to see a doctor. But I call my doctor's office on my break, and they give me an appointment for about a week from now. All in all, it could be much worse. I could live somewhere where it's way harder to get a doctor's appointment, for example. I return to my clothes-folding station and terrorize some customers with my dead fish-eyes, but my heart's not really in it.

When I get home, I tell my boyfriend: "Something weird happened to me at work." He looks at me. "Like, what kind of weird?" he says. "Did that guy with the sneaker fetish come in again?"

"No, and also ew," I reply. "I had like, a weird electric shock kind of feeling out of nowhere. It really hurt. Anyway, I called my doctor about it and I'm fine now." Then we go out to a bar to see his stupid friends.

We meet two of the stupid friends in front of the bar. One of them is named Timothy and has curly blond hair that hangs over one of his eyes. "Hey bro," he says as we approach, then turns to me. "Margie. What's up."

My name is Margaret, three syllables. Anyone who calls me Margie is, as the idiom goes, cruising for a bruising.

"What's up," I say.

Inside the bar, the music is loud enough to drown out all but the most rudimentary shouted conversation. This is fine

with me, because I do not want to hear what any of these idiots have to say about politics or pop-punk or whatever else pseudo-intellectual dude-bros like to circle-jerk about. The exception to this is Juan. Juan is short and slouchy with eyes too big for his head, and he definitely knows arcane secrets. But he never talks much anyway.

When I close my eyes, I hear the music and laughter and strained voices blend into one indistinguishable roar. I let it wash over me, filling the corners of my mind. Pulsing in time with my heartbeat. High tide reclaiming a sea cove, one wave at a time. I only open my mouth to tell the group that I need to piss or get a drink.

Later, outside the bar, we see a fight from across the street. It's more of a brief flash of violence than a fight per se, but it's the closest thing to a real physical one-on-one I've seen in a long time. Maybe since I was a teenager. It starts with two dudes (of course) shouting at each other. They're both tall and kind of scrawny looking. One, whose open coat exposes a white V-neck, starts to get up in the other's face. The other guy pushes him back. Mr. V-neck responds with a haymaker that knocks his interlocutor off his feet. The fighters' friends intervene quickly and separate the two. I see blood drip from the downed guy's lip. It forms a ruby rivulet, gathering at the bottom of his chin.

Juan removes a piece of white chewing gum from his mouth, rolls it into a ball between his fingers, and gently places it in a pocket inside his coat while we watch the proceedings.

Things go fine at work the next day. The guy with the sneaker fetish actually does come in again, but he doesn't do anything weird. He just paces around near the shoe section, looking vaguely ashamed.

Juan comes in too. I see him across the store, shuffling between aisles, but he doesn't see me. I wonder if he knows

that I work here. I don't think I ever told him. I've seen a lot of people I know here, but they usually don't see me. I'm pretty well-hidden.

Something unusual happens near the end of my shift. I'm typically tucked away far enough from a speaker to register only a muted reverberation of the store's eternally looping seasonal playlist. But today, one song starts playing so loudly that even I can hear it from my hermitage near the changerooms. Not only that, it gets stuck on repeat, playing over and over, the ends blending with the beginnings. It's a folk cover of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Nothing like this has ever happened before. I imagine our manager tearing his hair out somewhere in the depths behind the store, slamming his pudgy fingers into an unresponsive keyboard. Poor guy. I don't hate it.

On my trip home from work, I decide to walk instead of waiting for a bus. I find myself singing under my breath as I trudge through the snow-whitened residential streets. "O come, o come." It's quiet and dark once I move beyond the rumble of the main roads. "You key of David, come." My lungs expand with cool air. "Rejoice, rejoice." It leaves me in white plumes. "And bar the way."

I stop before a huge, twisted old oak tree sprouting from the white plane of someone's lawn. Snow dusts the tops of its branches, which weave their jagged way into night. Reaching outward. They remind me of an illustration of dendrites in a biology textbook. Nerve ends stretching toward a stimulus.

I feel the snow's cold gripping my hands before I really know what's happening. Then, suddenly, I'm on my knees sobbing into the snow. Teardrops making tiny indents where they fall. I kneel there, dazed, for a moment, until the frigid pain in my hands intensifies. I get up and dust

the snow from my pants, which are wet now. I walk the rest of the way home.

Later as I'm lying in bed, about to fall asleep, I catch a burst of movement in the window to my left. I look over. There's something there. It looks almost like a house cat, except that it has wings on its back. It hovers in front of the pane, staring inside. I think it sees me. When I blink, it's gone.