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The Man in the Banana Trees

1. Twelve Weeks

We lost the twins at the twelve week appointment. The doctor was two hours late. Poor Dr. P, we were meeting her for the first time and she had to pretend for a moment that the ultrasound was ambiguous. We were all three looking at it: me (neck twisted awkwardly to look back over my shoulder, into the lo-fi screen, inside myself), Russ and she both staring head on. The absence of life was as evident as the life had been, the appointment before. They didn't have any names; they tell you not to do that so early. Still, we had a shared Google Doc going, just breaching into page 2.

The day of the D&C the weather was lyrically cooperative, from a story-structure standpoint. Just before I was knocked out the rain starting pelting, thunder echoing down the tiled halls of the surgery center. The nurses went to move their cars out of flood zones. They all had some glamour on for Mardi Gras around their scrubs and face masks: purple, green and gold bandanas or fringe earrings, buttons or beads. The parades were canceled the rest of the week—they already had been for months because of the virus, but it was so cold that the city's collective bitterness dimmed and it all felt of a piece.

It would have been a rotten week for marching anyway. All the banana trees died in the freeze, or partially died and had to be cut back to nubby glistening bare stems. Brown, wilted strands faltered at the sidewalks.

The doctor was two hours late once more, so while waiting to be wheeled into surgery I played word scramble games on my phone, gowned up like the circus-tent of a house being fumigated.

My dogs believe that it is less intimate, less threatening to lick bloodied scabs off each other's eyeballs than to look each other right in the eyes. In the rolling hospital bed of the ambulatory surgery clinic I felt very animal like that. It was daunting to look the nurses in the eyes while they hovered above me, saying "sorry for your loss," but easy to offer up my forearms for the IV, finger to the pulsometer, to scooch my butt around so they could access all of me more easily.

2. What I should have paid more attention to before

There had been a man in the banana trees—a regular illusion that never stops tricking me, the way the banana leaves flail like arms, waving to warn you. He couldn't have been taller than four feet tall, to retreat back into their fronds as quickly as I turned around.

3. Unsubscribe, Pt. I.

On the day we learned the twins were not alive we were escorted out of the exam room into Dr. P's office where we closed the door. I curled over my phone and began deleting and unsubscribing. *The app where they tell you what size the baby is in fruit (two limes). The newsletter about reckoning with and preparing for a future taken over by twins.* So facile—done and gone. I felt protective of my future self. Selected “no longer relevant to me.”

The next few weeks the white dog would not leave my side. She followed me into the bathroom and rested her pit bull chin on my knee. She stood one cool paw on the flat of my bare foot. I tripped on her often. The brown dog was more reserved. This, his patient posture said, is not so unusual. He knows the stats. We are not so special.



4. A foul note in the taste of grief:

It makes you self-centered. People were dying in Texas from the same freeze, but I interpreted every curling browned tropical leaf as a response to my presence, in accordance with me. If I'd lived in a medieval village, I might have been cast out: a woman who stillbore twins and brought on a hard freeze.

If someone said they needed to sacrifice my cursed body on the highest hill to make the weather better I might protest but I would think *that sounds about right, that might work.* I would understand.

5. The Weather Again

What was once tropical is wilting, bent underfoot, browning and bowed. What's that word for what they do to skin? *Flayed.*

Everywhere in place of the green and turgid there is limp pale straw. The man in the banana trees must now be exposed—or has left for someplace else.

6. On Crying

There is crying, but that will be boring to keep repeating; the crying was boring and infuriating to live through, to keep crying and getting headaches and congealed noses and having to mouth-breathe. So you'll have to just imagine it inscribed, overlaid over everything else: at first a lot of crying, and then less. You eventually run empty and have to eat or sleep or just take a break. You get

bored and exhausted by your own grief. Here is a list of things that made us cry:

- Following the pre-surgery instructions: taking my wedding ring off, leaving it on the bedside table
- Making grilled cheese
- Making risotto, (Russ) because he wanted to make more, increase the portions, feed a whole crowd, a full house
- Russ's dream they were born and were "really fucking mouthy." At first this made us laugh, but then we imagined the laughing we'd be missing out on. It was still funny, but we cried.
- Anyone being nice to us
- The thought "this is really coming together" as I am writing this (heartless)
- Sitting on the floor strewn with cardboard boxes and packing foam, putting together a hall tree bought on Wayfair. I read the instructions wrong and drive a 2-inch screw through a 1-inch piece of wood and it bursts out the other end, punching through the veneer. Russ makes fun of me—this is not the first time I have done something like this, but today our normal ribbing is too true: *I'm always fucking things up, I am overconfident, I don't double check before reaching for the drill.* Russ quickly says it is no big deal and we find the wood glue and he watches patiently as I glop it over the ragged hole.

7. You'll just have to trust that they were kind.

I don't want to tell you the things Russ and I said to each other. Or at least I will be choosy about it.

8. The Man in the Banana Trees

The man in the banana trees is shorter than normal and he is physically disabled, the Dark Ages's signifier of wickedness. He is wicked smart; he will wickedly outplay you. He cashes in on how you underestimate him, belittle him, breeze right past him. His smile is twisted and lopsided. He stumble-walks, one foot larger and heavier than the other.

He was listening when you were foolish and flush with hope, perhaps laughing behind a hand to keep the sound from carrying.

He took our first born children, before they were named, and left me here with all this straw:

Baby books, pregnancy pillow that makes a cage around me as I sleep, ephemera, conversations with my boss about handing off my research projects, joy with no house, pills and needles and the red containers you collect spent needles in, well-wishes and excited texts, appointment

reminders, unusable calendars, the month of July, the entire rest of time after that

We've been outplayed. I take to the spindle.

9. Sight Unseen

The first days after, I wanted to pay someone to sneak into our house, clear out all the uneaten food and replace it with new—full, fresh and still in its packaging.

A friend had told me stories of how she was a shabbos goy for an orthodox synagogue when she was in college. Easy money; the simple role of pushing elevator buttons and closing electric circuits for people who found the act unsacred. I could have used one of those, clearing the path for me, touching the hard to touch spots, darting ahead of me to sweep the way. To do all the daily tasks that suddenly felt inconceivable. I stashed the little onesies the fertility clinic had given us in the liquor cabinet to deal with later.

10. Before

He could have been under the floorboards, or in the ceiling, or even crouched behind the ultrasound machine on the day in January when we found out it was going to be twins. There aren't many places for imps to hide in the examination room, but he is immensely talented, and we were not looking. The doctor and I called Russ in from the parking lot to see, breaking the clinic's Covid protocols because it was such a sight. I think I swore, delighted. I was flush the rest of the day, with mystery and chance and the inexplicability of everything to come. Somehow it was less stressful, twins, easier to surrender—we would surely be overwhelmed by two, so had to go ahead and give up our urges to control everything. Russ grinned and grabbed my foot which was still in the stirrups.

"What are twins?" I asked his brothers later—they are identical twins themselves.

"Best friends," Doug responded.

My grandma swore she had known it all along.

11. The right names for things

On fertility message boards some women call this a *delivery*, as in "I delivered at twelve weeks." The medical test reports are indecisive, going with the euphemistic "product of conception," one page and the rather harsh "habitual aborter" on another. In text messages I avoid the word "miscarriage" because I never technically *had* one. The image it conjures in people's minds—of women bent over in pain, probably alone, in a bloody bathroom—that did not actually happen to me. I don't want anyone to worry. I fall back on "lost."

12. King Cakes

People dropped off cards, quarts of soup, flowers, and king cakes: kind friends. They snuck to our front door unseen, except one we caught descending our porch just as we were coming back from a dog walk. Russ and I were in pajamas, unbathed, we plastered on thin smiles and said yes, we will call soon. The smile I gave was a grim grimace smile, corners tucked in, no teeth, polite and muted. It was the exact one from that “white people smiling” meme. That thought made me laugh, smile a real one.

The king cakes had little plastic babies in them, almost exactly the size, and my first thought was to pocket this detail away for writing this. *Will it read too dark?* I wondered. *Too on the nose?* Got to spin the straw into gold.

12. Sightings

Where had he been hiding? Every place we were joyful. In plain sight. He'd folded his small self into the footbeds of the backseat of our car, listening in as we called family on speakerphone: “no I feel fine, the tiredness makes more sense, high risk but normal.”

In the very phone lines whipping in the wind, the waves of them. Him pointy-shoed, the shoes we should have seen around corners but we did not catch.

Though he is lithe, the jingle bells on his shoes should have rung his presence. He is not subtle, but he goes after the blissful and blind. It is not because we cannot see him, but because we cannot name him that we lose them.

14. The question of the remains

I didn't think till afterwards that maybe I should have asked for the remains. Is this a thing more feeling, more spiritual people do? What are the protocols for that? Because I didn't even imagine this with enough time to spare, I didn't have the weight of choosing. I get to just wonder. I get to be stuck-between, not knowing what kind of person I actually am. Forgetful, uncaring, maybe. The kind of person who doesn't even think to ask. The genetic testing fails, but I get a brutally biological summary of the biopsy: measured in inches, weight, color and composition.

15. How the house seems different (in the weeks after)

The bedroom and shower become repurposed as places to go to cry: to meet the boat of feelings that waits on the horizon. To welcome the boat of sadness. We don't know what will disembark, but we go faithfully to meet it at the docks.

16. No big deal

If I don't get it down now, I might try to deny it later. *No big deal. We were wrecked but now we are not.* I'd desperately like to skip to the end, sometimes, to be the wiser versions of us with this perspective, but I also feel a lot of tender love for the us still in the mire of it, still in the muck, wading out, clutching to each other each step. I know this would be a different story if I were writing it a room over from a baby just whinnying itself awake—but I only know this one.

17. The Boot

I start running again furiously two days after the surgery. I have startlingly few symptoms; people online complain about far more. My tits hurt, that's it. I feel guiltily *less* impaired than when I was pregnant; I immediately have more energy and stamina and self-discipline. Just: there is a bandaid on my left thigh that I have no memory of receiving.

I run so hard after not running at all for 3 months that I re-break a metatarsal I thought had healed in my right foot. I pull the medical boot down from a high closet shelf and for a few days I clunk up and down the front stairs and the neighborhood heavy-footed. I move slowly. The boot steadily re-forms my foot when the foot lacks internal structure and fortitude. It makes my foot mimic and re-learn the shape of a functional foot.



18. Unsubscribe Pt II.

Right when we think we've got that crying issue under control and are returning to some rhythms of previous life, someone who loves me texts me and tells me wisely that I don't have to be ok, that it is ok to feel what I'm feeling. To let myself.

I don't reply right away but I complain to Russ out loud: "But I'd really *rather* be ok. I don't *want* to feel what I'm feeling." I use a bratty voice; I know I am being fickle. He gets it, he nods. *I'd very much like to be excluded from this narrative.*

We make a lot of risotto. It's good because you have to keep stirring it. And because it is so fucking cold outside. Russ says he's glad we only gave fake names to the twins.

19. The sideways smile

Another day in the afterward I go to the dentist for the first time in a year and a half. More straw: I'd made the appointment because I'd read that pregnant women should do this, that they are more susceptible to gum disease. I have two cavities; I have a mysterious piece of metal lodged in my gums. After the excavation and the filling there is the familiar soreness and the way half my mouth lags behind the other, off-kilter. Water dribbles out when I sip. My

smile, on Zoom, is lopsided.

20. *What's a goon to a goblin?*

—*mind so sharp I fuck around and cut my head off*—I prick my finger on the spinning wheel of my thoughts, the same device I'm leaning on to parcel out and spin up all this fucking straw: to spin it into this story, give it a glint, offer it up as something worthwhile: an artifact, a thing that is buryable because it is at least written down, more or less corporeal.

21. *Another foul note in the taste of grief:*

It makes you feel stupid for having been happy and hopeful, like you could have avoided it if you had been more careful, prudent, measured. *If we had been less confident, had less hubris, maybe we would have been less appealing targets for him.* I hate the thought that the happiness was an illusion, a trick we fell for. Russ insists it was not: that it was real, even if gone. He saw it too.

22. *The Big Meeting*

I lay out the pieces of this narrative on a big empty conference table at my Covid-vacant co-working space. I move around the pieces of straw around till—even if they don't make sense—they at least *resonate*. I relish looking at them. I lean back at the head of the conference table in my swivel chair like some kind of CEO, waiting to see what they have to tell me. I might accept their pitch, I might not.

23. *On the eighth night after:*

We play hide and seek with the dogs, interrupting our normal paces to try to cheer everyone up. I hide as part of the coat rack. I turn into the wall so that no human parts of myself are showing, hiding my hands from their adept noses. I drape a coat over the back of my head and put a winter hat over that. It takes them two minutes to find me, a record. Russ hides in a dark bathroom, curled up in the tub. Even I can't see him, though I can guess where he might be.

24. *Bird's Eye View*

It is greedy of me and perhaps unwise to write this now but I think if I wait I might lose track. It might be as if nothing ever happened at all. I can already feel it slipping away a bit; there are now days where I hardly think about it at all. I move through the house in old reverted patterns; I diet; I lift weights; I shove stretchy pants into the back corners of drawers. If you could have a view from above you'd think nothing happened at all: a couple who makes dinner, eats it in front of the television with their phones out, sharing

the things that make them laugh, leaning into each other. Maybe they sit a bit closer, maybe they are more forgiving about the phones and the need to go to bed early and lie sleepless in the dark for a little bit, maybe they are a bit more gentle with each other, asking each other how they feel with more regularity and really wondering at what the answer will be.

25. Let me tell you a silly thing I imagine

He must have thought he won the lottery, the man in the banana trees—such sweet targets, such marks, and two children to boot. He must have been sharing in our delight. Maybe it is here I begin to empathize with him. Because to steal something you have to treasure it, right? Maybe this is why I am so insistent on conjuring him up. He saw it too. He treasured what we treasured, saw value in what most people didn't even see at all, don't realize is now gone.

I've decided I can't be mad at the man in the banana trees, the guardian of the children who were once ours. I think maybe he has retreated underground, his time here done. I hope it is warmer there. Perhaps he is raising them to be like him: to walk stealthily but assuredly and with secret names. We only get to guess at them.