

Procrastination Notes

by Matt Gillick

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I

To Avoid Procrastination, Never Have a Romantic Relationship

My girlfriend Flo just left our first-floor apartment at 15 Móinéar Street to clock in at her job as the manager of a boutique fashion retailer in downtown Boston. She does not have a license, so she hailed a car through a rideshare app. While I have a car of my own, I simply do not have the fifteen minutes it would take to drop her off, pick her up, and then drive back home, not with all the work I have to do like finishing this article, and finding time to schedule an ENT appointment for this sinus infection. But let me first explain why my darling girlfriend is such a distraction, where even the thought of her causes me to drift away, particularly thoughts of her leaving me.

She has an angular face. A slight-of-frame look similar to an aspiring model. Today, she's wearing denim overalls—one strap deliberately falling off the shoulder—over a t-shirt promoting an indie rock group: a kind of working-class chic with sexy nonchalance. The type of woman a slick talent agent approaches at the cash register of a high-end retailer while purchasing a kimono for his mistress, telling the cashier he pictures her face plastered across Times Square billboards: a long-winded *I'll make you a star* sales pitch.

Her taking advantage of this hypothetical opportunity would put a strain on our already unstable relationship. Our morning kisses feel obligatory these days, routine. A source for our tension—romantically speaking—is her severely unromantic behavior. It baffles me, crumples my mind to picture a germaphobe like herself working in retail. After every card swipe, every

hanging, every refolding, every touch of the doorknob, my girlfriend lubricates herself with a generous glob of hand sanitizer. I'm not disparaging hygiene, but does Flo need to disinfect herself after every instance of external contact? I want everyone to be healthy, but love has this inherent dirtiness. It's something shared—but this is something I can address during my end-of-day meditation. I have so much work left to do, and with it being 9:45 already, the article takes precedence over Flo, her hygiene habits, or my feelings about them. Now, it's 9:48, and I'm not even past the first 100 words. To make matters worse, I can't remember the title, so I must start all over.

II

To Avoid Procrastination, Remain on the Task at Hand

I call myself a freelancer, but truthfully, I don't care for the label. There's too much of a whimsical quality to it, an air of dalliance implying that anyone could do what I do instead of having a *real* job. Freelancing is anything but free. It's for those who neither like face-to-face corporate interactions nor fare well in collaborative environments. I, for one, am allergic to constructive criticism. I get one email of benign feedback about some copy I wrote, and my arms get covered in sweating hives. Working remotely from a laptop is just fine by me. An office environment presents its own litany of distractions and potential for procrastination.

Corporate offices have this constant undertone of discomfort: right-angled cubicles, how the carpets always smell old, even the way the AC or heat gets turned up too high (how does no one ever find a middle ground?), and don't get me started on what people leave in the communal kitchen—although I'm not one to talk. No thank you to any of that. I would rather have my own inconsistent thermostat in my own apartment, my own lavender-scented air fresheners to cover up the smell of a rotten squash in my own refrigerator. Flo complains about that stench, though

cannot pinpoint where it's coming from, but I can. It's behind the Brita filter in a sour cream container, which she will never go near because of her self-diagnosed acerophobia: the fear of everything sour.

The biggest perk of working from home is not needing to wear pants, although remote work does have its pitfalls that strip away the jolting sensation of a cool breeze between my legs. It allows complacency, a lethargy of staying confined to these four walls on Móinéar Street. Because there is no supervisor standing over me, I tend to get pulled away from whatever I'm doing like ghost-writing this promotional article for a Silicon Valley startup. Currently, the piece begins in one co-founder's Cal-Tech dorm room, where he *consciously actualizes* his dream of building software tailor-made for low-grade beauty spas, or as they are more commonly labeled: rub-and-tugs. The article is tricky in that I need to write from the perspective of someone I've never met in person, who has the arrogance to call me *bro* or *my guy* whenever we chat on Zoom. I don't think he knows my name.

This co-founder shall remain nameless for the sake of maintaining journalistic integrity. I do not have the convenience of hiding behind broadcast or editorial banners. But, let me summarize his watershed moment. Shortly after moving to the Valley, he walked into a coffee shop and asked the barista if there was any place in the area where he could get a decent massage, which was code because he'd told me in confidence that he was fiending for a happy ending. A habit borne out of rush week at his Cal-Tech fraternity, Lambda Lambda Lambda. The barista said that there was one around the corner, but people needed to call ahead because they were always so backed up. The co-founder lamented how awkward that could be. The barista agreed.

After getting his chai latte, wearing a Vineyard Vines vest over a light pink J-Crew button-down with form-fitting khakis, he raised his arms and declared, Bro...we should totally, and I mean totally, make our own software where people book these appointments online! As luck would have it, the barista was interning part-time at a startup and had a background in coding. He quit his coffee job—and internship—on the spot. After several drinks at a spiked kombucha bar, they got *massages* at Lilypad Happy Spa. In the sauna, robed, satisfied, and sweaty, they discussed their future and declared that their app (Tugogram) would permit people to book appointments online, even allowing businesses to keep a record of emails. For what reason, I'm not sure. Maybe hack into folks' Brazzers accounts so they could get ideas about certain handjob packages? A superhero special? Get yanked off by the Flash for an extra \$29.99?

Being only 100 words into this article, along with being so easily distracted, I am at a loss for how to use this anecdote as an opener. Two guys meet at a coffee joint, get wasted on kombucha, and covenant their startup in a less-than-conventional way. The subject matter doesn't move the needle, in my opinion. Massages relax; they don't excite. I'm unsure how their pitch landed them a \$16 million angel investor, but I'm getting paid to write about it from the comfort of my living room couch, so who am I to complain?

These opening sentences don't pop. Maybe if I masturbate, I'll strike an inspirational chord, get on the same wavelength as the Tugogram co-founders basking in a dingy San Jose sauna.

III

To Avoid Procrastination, Never Get Sick

I'm looking at myself in the mirror—breathing heavily through my mouth—naked and ashamed. I can hear my laptop pinging me email after email from my editor asking me if the

draft is ready to go. Hives form on the back of my hand. I suck in my stomach. Try to, at least. I feel no pride in my love handles, these handlebars of protruding fat, nor my cheeks losing their angularity. Flo used to run her fingers across this formerly chiseled face with awe, passion, and tranquility throughout our first year living together, which involved frequent and various positions of passionate fucking followed by high-heat showers of sterilization, where we emerged from the steam content and tomato red. If my uncomely appearance isn't enough, my mouth-breathing—thanks to this sinus infection—makes me doubly repulsive, so I really should be more motivated to collect the \$1,000 for this article as soon as possible. But first, I must wipe my cock.

Sinus infections are no fun when you don't have health insurance to get amoxicillin. Such is the freelancer's plight. The worst part of this condition, however, is waking up. Every morning, I have to pull out these Bugle-sized clumps of red mucus from each nostril. I need a box of tissues at the ready because the post-nasal drip runs down my face and onto my chest. Needless to say, Flo finds this horrific, often squealing to the bathroom as I leak.

As a result, this problem has ruined our sex life. Stymied it, put it to a screeching halt, thus thrusting me into an infatuation with porn. When you're not having sex and you're alone most of the day and you work remotely, trying to make entrepreneurs appear like they're articulate Renaissance men who use phrases like *actualization*, *work ethic*, and *grind now, shine later*, you can bridge the devastating loneliness with a quick, two-minute viewing of a woman with an alliterative stage name getting bent over a kitchen table, screaming how surprised she was to get her hand stuck in the sink. Anyway, I walk out, cock fully wiped, and look through my window to see what Móinéar will bring me today, forgetting about the article and all the emails that continue to ping away.

IV

To Avoid Procrastination, Draw Your Blinds

Móinéar Street is a brick-laid corridor about a quarter-mile from the highway that travels like a vein, following the Charles River, into the heart of the city. Rows of apartments connected on either side, overgrown with vegetation. Weed trees, various roots, and ivy sprouting from unknown origins. Wrapped around fences, up brick walls, choking gutter pipes. Corkscrewing around fire escapes, vines going from balcony to balcony, connecting neighbors who never so much as say hello to each other. When Flo moved in three years ago, I remember her saying it all looked like the Secret Garden. The observation immediately aroused me.

I remember my body around hers, kissing the sweaty nape of her neck. Her buttocks adjusted against my notion of a hard-on, and we made love on an uncovered mattress amidst her luggage and moving boxes and various fashion mannequins. We spent hours on the bed, watching the vines glide up the brick and onto the chipped metal banisters flirting with our neighbor's balcony houseplants. She, of course, sprayed everything down once the afterglow wore off. The only thing that gets us hot and bothered these days is arguing about the *mystery* smell behind the Brita in the sour cream container.

We were so happy. We're not unhappy now, per se. We're more in a holding pattern. It's 10:43 and I've droned about sex for far too long. Well, at least not having sex means no unplanned pregnancies.

V

To Avoid Procrastination, Do Not Have Children or Speak About Them

Don't get me wrong, we want to have kids eventually, only now is not the right time. We're both nearly 30, so there's no rush. However, babies are a constant occupation in Flo's psyche, and I'm

worried she'll start asking about when that right time may be. We watch a diaper commercial, she blurts out, Baby! An empty stroller on the street: Where's the baby? God knows what she's been saying to appease her mother, who calls at the strangest times from her cottage in Marseilles—that's in the south of France.

Clover, her mother, always prefaces these icy conversations by asking if she is on speaker, if I'm in the room, and then proceeds to speak in French as if I am. I can make out words like *baby*, *fatherhood*, and *not-cut-out-for-it*. Their conversations have grown less tactful. They border on screaming with venom resting at the back of their throats. Full-mouthed French accents frothing with passive aggression. I half-expect a string section to begin playing during these phone calls. At every point of Flo's resistance to her mother's constant inquiries of whether I have the gumption (or *jugeote*) for fatherhood, she laments how her daughter decided not to follow in her bohemian footsteps. But does she know that Flo is not fit to be a mother yet? I would know; I've covered every aspect of her potential parenthood through several rigorous pro/con lists.

Flo is not a morning person: Con #10. Who's going to be awake for 2:00 a.m. feedings? With me being a homebody, I would be the one tasked with all the domestic chores—Con #22—not that I have the time as it is. It would be a nightmare. Barely a second to myself. My work would suffer: Con #48. I can, however, understand Flo's restlessness. She wants to outdo Clover, put an end to her badgering condescension. Their dynamic is more older-sister-younger-sister than maternal. She never wanted to end up like her mother: a twice-divorced drop-out left with an infant on a commune after the professor baby-daddy got tired of the lifestyle. Flo sees *me* as the ultimate answer to her mother's \$64,000 question of whether she made the right choice in life. And, certainly, if she had the opportunity to bring a half-me, half-her into this world, this

quirky suburban universe outside Beantown, she would answer: Yes, she was happy and couldn't be happier. But first, she needs to stop with this hand sanitizer business. How could she even change a diaper: Con #52.

11:25 on the dot, and I cannot get past word-225. I skipped around my outline and attempted to describe the general market ecosystem of seedy metropolitan Chinatowns, and the various platitudes I am attributing to this co-founder make him sound xenophobic and, worse, boring. There is just nothing exciting about rub-and-tugs unless you're the one getting the rub-and-tug.

VI

To Avoid Procrastination, Just Write the Damn Article

Finally, I circle back to the article. I need to buckle down. Go over the notes. Deep breath. Pause. Reassess, and answer this question: What does this company do well? Not much, to be honest.

I remember this co-founder describing Tugogram's *business model* in such a nicely rehearsed manner: how upper-echelon massage parlors didn't fall within their customer framework. When I asked *why*, he said—so preparedly—because mom-n-pop shops required more handholding for this level of tech and that's what separates them from similar software. A good non-answer. In reality, they created such a bad product with so many bugs they had to aim lower, for the type of day spas synonymous with shoddy air conditioning and fritzzy POS systems. The barista's background in coding evidently went as far as a 1995 edition of *HTML for Dummies*. But his father is a hedge fund manager, so I can see why he was kept on. I suppose they thought every spa offered happy endings. How wrong they were. The Massage Envy's of the world laughed them out the door during their pitch tour. So, they pivoted to

the *accessibility* and *empowerment* approach for smaller, independent rub-and-tugs. But no one cares about tracking the consumer habits of someone frequenting such places. It's a much simpler customer acquisition process than people expect. The handjob habit is developed depending on the quality of the handjob or the impotence of the relationship that spurred the motivation for receiving said handjob. I wonder if I will ever get to that point, having a forty-year-old stroke away, looking off until completion, my nose snorting red mucus.

I hear my upstairs neighbors Kyle and Bhintuna walking outside, whistling in a howdy-doody fashion. Craning my neck, looking through the window, I notice Bhintuna's eyes are droopy—probably from the afterglow of their weekly Saturday morning fuck sessions.

VII

To Avoid Procrastination, Do Not Imagine Your Neighbors Having Sex

Kyle and Bhintuna are a couple who have lived above us for quite some time. Flo works mostly on weekends, so she does not have the pleasure of hearing their weekly lovemaking every Saturday morning from 9:45 to 10:15, which is rather early in my opinion. They were especially emphatic this morning.

From my estimation, their bedroom is right above our living room. I don't hear any loud grunts or cries of ejaculative ecstasy. What I do hear is the consistent bang-banging of a bedpost. Upon first noticing said banging, an inexperienced layman might assume they were moving furniture. I put two and two together by week six. No one moves around furniture that often. But it wasn't always this way. They didn't always have this Saturday morning routine.

When two people have been together for a long time, the spontaneity involving each other's bodies tapers off after the first year, even quicker if you jump the gun and start living together early. Relationships, at that point, normally come to a symbolic fork in the road, where

they have to decide if a lack of fiery, earnest desire to rip each other's clothes off is a deal-breaker. I would know. I had to go through the same inner conflict when it came to Flo and her constantly disinfecting herself, ridding any trace of me. I concluded that our relationship was more important after one particularly unpleasant experience. When we were having sex, I pulled out and came on her face as a surprise, but immediately felt guilty afterward, and banged my cock on the doorframe as I ran to the linen closet to grab her a towel. We did not have sex for at least a month after that, but I knew my guilt superseded my sexual eagerness to get her all dirty, to be spontaneously disgusting, prompting this sinking feeling that I may lose her because of my selfishness. That has to be love, right? I'm sure she went through the same with my nasal condition, among other things.

Kyle and Bhintuna went through something I like to call the silent period. Months without any bang-banging. No laughter. No smiles on their faces as Flo and I passed them on the street. I imagined them waking up every morning, one looking at the other across the kitchen table over coffee while one paid more attention to their cat than to the partner who brewed the coffee. This silence went on for months. I thought about knocking on their door to ask if everything was okay, except I had a deadline and—anyway, I can only imagine how much porn each of them was watching. But then, the dynamic shifted, which I can only assume came from a conversation, an honest discourse serving as a tipping point or (as my supervisor always says) a *teachable moment*. One day, a Saturday morning, in particular, I heard the percussion and it's been like that ever since.

I feel glad, elated to hear their relationship still going strong. I find myself vicariously channeling their passion. They were able to come out on the other side of their issue, whilst Flo and I continue to mire in this sexless back-and-forth of repulsion and debate about where that

fucking smell is coming from. I'm prone to believe that our relational energy was to blame for Kyle and Bhintuna's dry spell. That in some supranatural, metaphysical way, the negative vibes emanating from Flo and I's passionless nights manifested itself and somehow crept through the bathroom fan, through the pipes, and leaked into their apartment like a reverse rainstorm. I applaud their fortitude—envy it.

While most would find this noise a nuisance, I do not. These last few months, I've grown to appreciate it. At least someone in this building is getting laid. I do wish I had more opportunities to see their love up close so I could get a more reasonable illustration of their dynamic outside the copulative. Maybe I would learn something. Except that would only present another distraction from writing this article—but this does, in a way, bring me to the squash I keep mentioning ad nauseum, so I'll keep going before returning to my task at hand. What's another five minutes?

VIII

To Avoid Procrastination, Do Not Mistake Gifted Produce for Innuendo

I've only spoken to Bhintuna once. He rang my doorbell, had on a striped collared shirt with a pair of beat-up Sperry's and thigh-high shorts, full head of black hair, and thin-rimmed glasses ready to slide off his nose. He introduced himself and we exchanged a soft handshake where I tried to mimic his grip so as not to appear aggressive or domineering or—heaven forbid—territorial. My efforts backfired since I provided a limp hand, palm down, similar to how debutantes greet their suitors. Out of self-preservation, I puffed my chest out. I fear that gave off the wrong impression too.

With a breathy and agreeable voice, Bhintuna mentioned he and his partner, Kyle, had a little vegetable garden upstairs. He thought he would run down and gift us a neighborly squash.

Veggie for you! he said. It was pink-orange and had a slick, practically wet texture, implying a moist, seedy interior. Its most distinguishing feature was how phallic it was. Bhintuna left after I thanked him excessively, saluting him with my newly acquired squash, which might have given off the wrong impression as well.

I have no inkling as to the motivations of why in the world they would grant me such suggestive produce, but it did not stop me from imagining, twisting and turning on my mental pommel horse. Then, a fluttering idea came about. What if they'd overheard me and Flo arguing, as we often do, about our lack of sexual chemistry, her mother, my inability to remain focused, how whenever we do have sex it's nothing except bodies fitting parts? Maybe they presumed Flo was my darling little beard, tired of pretending, bristling with reality. And with their sex life perhaps about to reach another plateau, Kyle and Bhintuna had a discussion over a bottle of sherry and determined neither would feel jealous nor uncomfortable with including someone else in the bedroom. Thus, the squash. I hear their car drive off, bobbling over the potholes.

My occupation compels me to be frequently alone in one place, which might be why I let my mind wander. Isolation can bring about delusion. We freelancers become masters of a solar system we mentally construct and believe everyone—and everything—revolves around us. I do this, at least. So, for all I know, Bhintuna simply gave me a squash.

I had no idea whether to cook it, fry it, roast it, bake it, mince it, marinate it, flambee it, tenderize it, toss it, trash it, mash it, bash it, flatten it, or matten it. After several failed experiments, I was finally able to get some pieces to roast. I saved what was left in an empty sour cream container. I know I should throw it away, but I don't want to.

IX

To Avoid Procrastination, Do Not Write Letters to the Mayor

I cannot besmirch Flo when it comes to her general repugnance of Móinéar St. It *is* dirty. Rats scratching along the gravel pathways. Potholes every few yards. It makes Friday garbage collection a rather unpleasant experience. Not even industrial-grade axels can maintain an even keel. Before crushing the waste in the compactor, they move onto the next bin, allowing milk cartons, plastic bags, beer bottles, banana peels, condom wrappers (not mine, of course), sandwich crusts, single-use hair dye bottles, mail coupons, newspapers, and so on to spill over and leave a trail. I've seen these garbagemen do a garbage job of collecting garbage, prompting not only my darling Flo a great deal of distress, but this also bleeds into my workflow, causing a great deal of distraction. So much so, that over the past several weeks, I am drafting a letter to the mayor.

Dear Mayor—,

I write you in regard to the abhorrent performance of this city's employees, more specifically the garbagemen, or, as it reads on their W-2 forms: waste collectors, though I find garbage men to be more fitting. Mr. Mayor, the concept of having a hygienic, sanitary city is not only incumbent upon citizens washing their hands and cleaning up after themselves. It is also the responsibility of the city to make sure systems are in place to assure that standard is met. That cannot be accomplished if these trashy trashmen are not effectively emptying the trash bins into the trash compactors...

I could continue, but it's already 2:15 in the afternoon and I've lost my appetite, what with all this trash talk. And now I see my neighbor from four doors down walking by my window—alas, yet another roadblock to finishing this article.

X

To Avoid Procrastination, Mind Your Business

I hear his Timberland boots shuffling on the broken asphalt, his voice speaking on the phone. He's a man of possibly Guatemalan descent wearing a dark brown hoodie to shield him from the gusts of wind that periodically barrel into Móinéar. He glances through my window, seeing me seated and pantsless. I do not break eye contact as he walks by with a cell phone pressed to his ear. I do not know his name, nor do I know if he is actually Guatemalan, but I decided to assign him that nationality in my imagination. What I do know about him is that he does not leave the house, except to take phone calls and buy liquor.

When it comes to whom he is speaking with, I am unsure. But, if I were in this presumed Guatemalan's position, and I had something to hide from my family, I'd be sure to take it outside as well. I do not know if he has a girlfriend or sidepiece or baby mama, but he's hiding something. Perhaps another woman across town who's younger, more passionate. At times, I feel for this presumed Guatemalan because it must be exhausting living two separate lives, where he has to verbally manifest his presence. The pressure involved with filling an absence just through the sound of your voice is sure to cause anyone to relieve stress in a toxic fashion. His remedy: frequent inebriation. Had I a secret of equal gravity (unlike the sour cream squash), you bet I would dive deeper into the catacombs of kink-play videos on Pornhub, possibly crack open a morning beer.

The alcohol presumably prevents this presumed Guatemalan from driving over to this presumed woman's home and grabbing her by the shoulders, screaming, *Madre de Dios. Tranquilo por favor! Necesitas dejar de llamarme todo el tiempo.* One day, I heard this presumed mistress on speaker, screaming at him about not being around and how daycare might be overcharging. I heard him stumbling, mumbling to himself just outside my window. Then he

tried to get into my apartment, thinking it was his! After several knocks, he gave up—puffing out a few heavy breaths—and fell asleep on my front porch.

At first, I thought the knocking was Kyle or Bhintuna getting a quick one in. When I opened the front door, I found this presumed Guatemalan splayed out on my steps, liquor spilled all over his Dickies T-shirt. He was unconscious, but his eyes were open, so I suspected the worst until I saw his chest move up and down. He groaned in his sleep, reacting to the voice coming from the phone a few feet away. It was on speaker, and the voice said something to the effect of *¡Madre puta! ¿Quién crees que eres para colgarme? ¡Sé que estás ahí, hijo de puta! ¡A la mierda! Me tienes afuera en bata para no despertar a los niños. ¿Dónde está el maldito dinero? ... ¿Miel? ¿A dónde fuiste? Prometiste que estarías con nosotros...* Of course, this caused a great deal of stress and delayed my work by a whole week. I thought that article about eco-friendly vape pens would never get done.

Eventually, I woke him up and told him that he had the wrong apartment, to which he slurringly, yet profusely, apologized. He even left a bottle of rosé (*para su niña y tu*) as a show of contrition. Before today, he hadn't come outside for two weeks, so it's a delight to see him on the phone again. It shows there's still a chance for them. For Flo. For me.

I'm standing up now, looking directly out my window—sweat droplets running down my bare legs—observing his gait. Limping, but steady, he plods down the street. Then, a gust of wind sends a plastic bag flying into his face. He spins around, muffling curses, miraculously keeping hold of his phone as he trips and falls into a large pothole. I should get back to this article, but he hasn't moved yet and what kind of neighbor would I be if I didn't make sure he got back up?

He lies there a few moments, bag over his face, and says to whomever he was talking with that he'll call them back. He peels off the bag and it soars through the air. I hear a screen door open and it's my neighbor, Jerry. He takes a while to get down the steps because of a bad hip and generally salty attitude. Some form of gout, maybe arthritis. When he makes it down the steps, he notices the presumed Guatemalan in the pothole. The old man gyrates over, each step accompanied by an expletive. Jerry is a fellow mouth breather but accentuates his breaths with these guttural Bostonian moans as if he's exasperated to be alive. He stands over the presumed Guatemalan and asks (at a volume impossible not to hear), You alright? As the presumed Guatemalan gets to his feet, Jerry does the admirable thing of dusting off his jacket.

He thanks Jerry and tries to explain how he fell, but the geriatric scratches confusedly at the ever-widening bald spot on the crown of his head. He does seem, however, to understand the word *basura*. Jerry replies, Oh, these fucking garbagemen. I know. Idiots don't know how to do their job. I've got to call 411 and get the city over here because this is ridiculous.

The presumed Guatemalan gives a smile that does not imply affirmation to Jerry's point but more indicates he just wants to move along. They stare at each other before the silence is interrupted by another voice coming from a window in the apartment below Jerry's. A shaky, fearfully confused voice. Like bottled-up frailty. A voice unmistakably belonging to Jerry's sister, Camille, whom I have never seen. Listening closely, I hear: Jerry! Jerry! I need to go to the hospital! Jerry! Jerry! I need to go—

XI

To Avoid Procrastination, Do Not Assume Your Neighbor is a Witch

The old man turns around, and with his arms outstretched like he is calling upon the heavens, says, Ah, Jesus Christ can you give me one moment's peace? For the love of God and

all that is holy! Camille, you don't need to go to the hospital! I'll be back later tonight. I'm going to The Encore.

Camille then pontificates about her blue pills. That if she does not find them, she could go into shock and die, and Jerry wouldn't want that to happen, would he? Because she's found a way to live forever and—Jerry interrupts her by screaming, Goddammit, Camille! Those are vitamins.

Camille's yelling graduates to full-blown screaming about how we are all going to die. Jerry waves her off. He limps to the cab parked at the end of the street, and the presumed Guatemalan shuffles away.

Why in Gahhd's name did Jesus have to take our sister, Ethel, and leave me with this one? says Jerry, voice fading as he gets further away. Is this your idea of punishment? For when I cheated on Geraldine...oh, gahhd, we were so happy—Jerry and Geraldine—didn't you have your fun when you took her too...

All the while, Camille declares, once again, her need to go to the hospital. Of course, my sympathies rest with her, but I cannot help but feel empathy for Jerry as well. If he wanted to, he could move. Have the state put her in a ward or nursing home, but maybe she has some kind of hold on her brother. A spell maybe. A hex. She could be a witch. Her voice echoes even in whispers. She sounds ancient, unbound by time, and claims to have the key to eternal life. Hell, I should write a book about this. Make it a bestseller, so I don't have to languish in puff pieces anymore. Imagine: a witch on Móinéar Street.

To repeat, I have never seen Camille. I don't go outside whenever I hear her voice so as not to get pulled into any situation, let alone a spell from a curmudgeonly sorceress like herself. Right after the cab pulls away, her voice carries to fill the emptiness. She says her bit about the

hospital, how Jerry needs to find the boline, that Ethel must accept her apology because she's sorry, but only one of them could make it through the ritual, that she's going to die when we are all going to die. She continues this rant for twenty minutes. Twenty minutes lost—diverted from corporate jargon and smoothing over the problematic nature of handjob spas.

I imagine Camille looking rather haggard with goaty chin hairs and the pubescent shadow of a mustache. Sagging muscles, any tautness lost decades ago. Hairy liver spots, wrinkles growing on top of wrinkles, where whiskers seem to curl into further layers of wrinkles, shading a pair of black, beady eyes giving every unfortunate pedestrian a cold, trembling, blank stare that portrays confusion as well as malice. A malicious intent Camille may have forgotten; not enough space in her head to establish new memories, and even established memories don't have veracity anymore. Given her rants, I am grateful that I do not live in another time, another epoch of human history where superstition led to death, where one mistake on a piece of parchment forced Christian monks to redo their illuminated manuscripts. The horror of starting all over.

Three hundred years ago, maybe, Camille's calling out into the void of Móinéar Street would be considered a prophetic invocation of supernatural forces. Villagers would walk by her hut and listen to her nonsense, and without taking any assessment of grief or the mental anguish of a poor, lonely woman who, by this point, would be a widow of advanced age, villagers would come and return in the night—flaming torches and pitchforks—and drag her to the bishop. The clergyman would then conclude that her jumbled speech and lack of attentiveness while being observed by a representative of Lord Jesus Almighty (Only Son of the Father) is not because of senility. No, the bishop would argue this was evidence of her subservience to the Devil because she had outlived her husband, even her own children, and turned her back on God. Camille would then be taken to the town square, placed upon a bundle of sticks, tied to a pillar atop that

heap, and burned at the stake. But thankfully, times change. These days, someone like Camille is left to babble on her front porch alone.

Her proclamations adopt this primordial rhythm. Her breathy screeches come out consistently, yet they always surprise. Every outburst is followed by a long pause as if she was waiting for an answer, and in that pause, the mind is tricked into thinking she is finished and gone back inside. Right when that thought occurs, she mentions Jerry, then Ethel's soul, her hungry soul. Come to think of it, Jerry asking why he's stuck with *this* sister sounds more like someone bemoaning the outcome of a hex. What did he have to do with it?

Ethel passed away not long ago to the surprise of everyone on Móinéar. We were sure—absolutely sure—Camille would be the first to go. Maybe her speaking to Ethel is a projection of guilt for concocting the satanic alchemy that led to her sibling's sudden demise. No heart failure or hidden disease; she simply dropped dead, collapsed into a pothole. A witch on Móinéar. Wouldn't that be something. It's 4:45 already and Flo's shift is about to end. I only have the bones of an article. 250 words. It's a lost cause, and I have to begin meditating to mentally prepare for my girlfriend's reentrance, what with her germaphobia, acrophobia, and how she barely touches me.

XII

To Avoid Procrastination, Do Not Meditate

Flo's impending reentrance after a day at the fashion retailer also means a reentrance of her hang-ups. To prepare, I take an hour to reflect on the state of our relationship.

I am now seated on my living room floor in a stiff, Buddha-like position. I close my eyes and breathe in and out. Breathe in and breathe out. This used to be so much easier. Instead of in through the nose, and out through the mouth, I have to borderline hyperventilate because of my

nasal condition. After a few false starts, I get myself into the metronomic pattern of breathing, focusing on my breathing, and being conscious that I am not trying to focus on the perfection of my breathing, but simply... breathing. All the troubles of the day begin to wash away—the article, my boss’s constant emails about the article, of Kyle and Bhintuna’s relationship, the presumed Guatemalan resolving his domestic affairs, Jerry getting back from The Encore safely, hoping he won’t fall into a pothole or trip over a piece of garbage because of those good-for-nothing waste collectors, only to deal with his witch of a sister—and I finally bring myself to Flo. My meditation is also a method of roleplaying, where I am both Flo and myself.

In this scenario, I hear the door open. I greet her, ready for her embrace. But in the hallway, she gives me a quick smile, maneuvers around me to the bathroom, where she turns on the faucet and washes her hands, exclaiming under her breath how everything, and I mean everything, is dirty. Following that exchange, she comes out of the bathroom, takes two deep sniffs, and shudders in disgust. She asks if I called the landlord about the smell yet as she opens the fridge, declaring that it has to be coming from there. You really need to call the landlord, babe. Promise me you’ll do it tomorrow.

Although I know the smell has to exist and is not a symptom of her phobias, I swear I don’t smell anything of the kind. Even if she did find it, her acrophobia would cause her to recoil, run under the table, cup her ears, whispering it’s sour... it’s all so sour. Please make the sour stop!

In my meditation, she then says, I’ve cleaned the stove twice, scrubbed the inside of the oven with steel wool, even cleaned out the shelves in our fridge, and this damn thing keeps persisting. In her stress, she reverts to French: *Je ne peux plus faire ça*. I then hold her tight, almost forcefully, and say that everything is going to be alright, and I will be sure to let the

landlord know. Shortly thereafter, she goes back to the bathroom to wash her hands, chest, arms, and legs because I touched her. Tomorrow, I'll lie and say he's just too busy with the renovations on another unit. Scenario: ended. For some reason, I'm even more stressed.

Now prepared for the likely sequence of events, I move on to the next phase of my meditation: Expressing desire in the hope it manifests. I know where the smell comes from. I know of her condition. I know how to get rid of the smell. I know she wants that smell gone. But I continue to say to myself that, one day, Flo won't mention the smell, she won't stay up until an ungodly hour to deep clean the apartment, that after months of being exposed to a torturous, invisible element inducing so much disgust and anguish, that eventually the gland in her brain not allowing her to be open to any degree of dirtiness will crumble and resign itself. Furthermore, she will subsequently realize that everything, including a romantic partnership, needs an acceptable level of grossness in order for it to thrive, and we will be a happy couple once again (as soon as I get this sinus infection under control). Furthermore, this article will be finished tomorrow!

I hear the screen door screech open. I stand up and wait. Upon her entrance, she sees me, smiles a little more brightly than normal. But she does not move in to kiss me, and ducks under my outstretched arms, closing the bathroom door. Raising her voice over the running water, she tells me that she just saw Camille looking out her window.