

tables. There, by the bar, was a man pouring drinks, looking timeless in his white shirt and old-fashioned haircut. There was an eternal world here in the present moment. It was the hum, the vibration, of the infinite possibilities of the future that were trembling on the verge, swirling, ready to swallow the illusory stability of the present. This terrifying, magic world was one he'd been suddenly thrust into by the upending of his life. For the second time, recently.

She was looking at him. Not with anger, or her customary self-protective opaqueness, but with sorrow—even pity. It was not a way she'd permitted herself to look at him before. He found that in spite of himself, he liked it. It was so much better than the quiet resentment he'd grown so used to. He tried to steel himself. He had to be a man, didn't he? Not even a "man" but a person, with some self-respect. He had to hold her to account.

"You've got your citizenship," he started. Then stopped himself and took a breath. "Did you love me a little? I want to know the truth."

"I used to think I could grow to love you. I told myself I could. I really tried, Kevin." He nodded. Tears were welling up.

"I do care about you," she said. "I think you deserve something real."

He felt very thirsty and took a long drink of water, every gulp ballooning his stomach, filling it out from absolute vacancy. Was it strange that this moment did not hurt as much as he had thought it would—or should? A few tears, wipe them away, and already acceptance was coming. No urge to fight at all.

"I know. It was foolish of me to think I could find a shortcut to a perfect life."

"Well," Vanya said and smiled, giving her face a radiance that took his breath away. "You have a long life ahead of you, Kevin. This is just one chapter."

The waiter reappeared and asked, very quietly, if they were ready to order. He looked from Kevin to Vanya.

"If you need more time, I can come back."

"Nothing for me," Kevin said.

"I'm sorry," Vanya said. "Just the drinks tonight."

The waiter said, "No problem," and took their menus with grace.

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Ever since college Kevin had been an early riser. Thrust into the groundless place that was the world beyond his parents' home and his hometown, he'd embraced wakefulness, vigilance, alertness as his savior. His departure for Texas, to attend his third-choice school (Stanford had rejected him, so had Berkeley) and pursue an engineering degree, happened to coincide with the diagnosis of his mother's breast cancer. He'd almost cancelled his plans, in favor of staying home and attending San Jose State—his mother's vehemence practically forced him to leave California.

He saw little of her before the cancer took her, sooner than anyone expected, within two years.

In the early morning sometimes Kevin looked out to the east—especially now, with Vanya gone and the house empty—at the light crowning the distant clouds, the jagged tree line, the rolling hills. He would feel the wind rushing over the land, and the coming of the day would fill him with an unspeakable dread. The thin edge he'd coaxed out of himself by waking early, by sacrificing his sleep, would in precious moments be lost: the world would inexorably wake and join him, all the masses around him. The sun would come, nothing could halt it, and bring him one day closer to the end.

**Justin J. Allen** was born in California in 1979, studied creative writing at San Francisco State University, and has worked as an editor, designer, and technologist for leading arts, activist, and news organizations. His short fiction has been published in *Crannóg*, *Fiddleblack*, and *Transfer* and is forthcoming in *Spectrum*. His journalistic work has appeared in *Full Stop Quarterly*, *EdSource*, *Sacramento News & Review*, and other publications. He lives in Oakland, California.

## MINERVA ORTIZ

*Cat Food, 2007*

Oil on muslin-coated masonite, 30 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST