

LARRY FRANCIS

Night Light, 2018
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JESSICA BREHENY

Forget Me Not

“Smells good,” I say.

The apartment smells like onions and meat. My mom hands me a folded piece of lined paper.

“I—I mean *she*—put a brisket on early this morning. How long do you think it needs?”

I shrug. I usually eat frozen food or takeout. So did my mom until she started sleep cooking.

My mom’s apartment is filthy. The yellow carpet—what I can see of it through her online purchases—is worn to the padding in places. The sunlight that comes in through the floor-to-ceiling window near the kitchenette disappears between the boxes and Bubble Wrap and mail and medicines and supplements and clothes on the tables and the floors, all the clutter from her sleep shopping.

“Is everything okay?” I ask as a way of reminding her that she told me it was urgent. I was on my way to Trader Joe’s when she called, and I still need to do laundry, and get groceries and gas, and go to bed early so I can be up by five thirty tomorrow for my classroom aide job at the Poppy School for the Autistic. It is all I do since I dropped out of my philosophy program—work, think about working, get ready to go to work. It is like I am a workaholic, only without a workaholic’s success or desire to ever go to work.

My mom’s puffy cheeks and rosacea give her the youthful look of a flushed girl. Her hair is a blurry henna halo around her head. She is tiny and plump, a round button

of a person. I am her opposite—too skinny and serious, more like a bobby pin. She calls me her “dear Prudence,” though she named me Pilar, no doubt with plans for me to grow up to be a more interesting kind of woman than I am, a grand piano of a woman who pins roses in her hair rather than keeping it cropped so she never has to think about it, a woman who might wear skirts or interesting shoes and travel.

“Look.” She points to the paper. “I—*she*—made up more riddles.”

In this game, my mom—or *whoever* she is—sleep hides my mom’s important papers and then writes riddles for my mom to find them the next day. Today it is her Medicare card that is hidden.

“What if you have an emergency?”

My mom smacks the air with a flick of her hand. “Don’t be silly. I’m in the system.”

“I don’t know. I think you need your card.”

“There are records. I’m in the *system*.” She goes to the kitchen and returns with a plate of chocolate éclairs. “Help me with the first clue.”

The first riddle is, “Behind the green today / I’ll help you on your way.”

I bite into an éclair. The filling is cloying, almost manipulatively sweet. I don’t understand who this is who is doing all this cooking and shopping and hiding. Last week my mom woke up to a beef bourguignon simmering on the stove top.

I scan the clutter in the room for something green. There is a green-and-blue abstract painting painted by my grandfather over the record player, a baggie of pot on the coffee table next to my mom’s favorite purple bong, and a shimmery green scarf on a bookshelf. I pick my way across the room toward the scarf. I have to step around my mom’s night buys, unopened deliveries that landscape the living room like boulders.

“Fuck!” I am stunned by the metallic pain of stubbing the tip of my big toe on an insufficiently Bubble-Wrapped Le Creuset pot.

“You okay, babe?” My mom mumbles through an éclair in her mouth. I lean against a tall box that looks like it could hold a small appliance and rub my toe over my sock. “Be careful.” With my toe or with her purchases, I am not sure.

"You be careful!" I retort, though I don't know exactly what I mean by that.

I put the sticky éclair on a box, wipe the chocolate and crème filling off my mouth with my forearm, and pick up the green scarf. There is no clue underneath, just a few volumes from my mom's favorite series of mystery novels set among fin de siècle Egyptologists.

"Nice scarf," I say.

"Yes!" she says. "I don't know how I found that one—maybe Etsy?—but I love it. Last night, I bought a pair of purple stiletto shoes. Can you imagine it? Like I'm twenty. I don't know what I'll do with them when they arrive."

Whatever she will do with them she will do while asleep. I wrap the scarf around my neck. It is slithery and reptilian and immediately unwraps itself and hangs off my neck. I look around for more green things.

"You need to stop doing this." I wave my arm over the mess in her apartment. "At least send some of this shit back."

My mom sandwiches herself between boxes and a stack of sealed plastic shipping bags on the couch. "I tried. I just bought the same things again. I mean, *she* did."

"You could stop taking Sommierene," I say. I know she will not. My mom has been "finding herself" while on Sommierene.

"Don't you want to try it?" she asks me. "Don't you get tired of your same old self?" The leaves on the yucca outside the window rattle in the spring breeze. A car goes by with a base that vibrates the insides of my ears. "You've never been very adventurous."

"I know, I know. I'm so boring." I take my grandfather's green-and-blue painting off the wall and lean it against a box. My mom claps with excitement. Taped to the yellow wall behind the painting is another clue on a green Post-it note. I hold the paper out to my mom and shrug. She is bouncing on her heels.

"Almost there!"

"You said to just solve the first one. I need to go home. I have a job."

"Just do one more. I'm too tired to figure these out. I'm exhausted all day. What if I need my Medicare card?"

"I thought you were in the *system*."

"Don't be sarcastic," she says.

On the Post-it is written, "Between the living and the dead / Are all the things that must be said." The

handwriting is neat and elegant, the expert script of a Victorian letter writer.

I go to the bedroom. The window is blocked by wall-high piles of boxes. "This is a fire hazard!" I call across the apartment. "Your whole apartment! It's a fire hazard!" She does not respond.

My mom's bedroom still has the remnants of her young life. A carved sandalwood box sits on the bedside table. It smells of a musk she used to wear when I was a kid. A stained-glass lamp in the shape of a butterfly glows on the dresser. My mom's old black felt hat hangs on a hook next to the closet door. There is a photo of her in that hat holding me as a baby. In the picture, I look surprised to be there. My mom's acoustic guitar leans against a corner by the bathroom. The room smells like perfume and decaying cardboard.

My mom's cat, Stanley, is asleep on the unmade bed. I sit down and pet him. He purrs and rubs his black muzzle into my palm. His nose is cool and vaguely damp. I rub along his jawline and press into the sharp tips of his canines with my thumb. He takes a deep breath and sinks deeper into the poof of blankets. I worry about Stanley with my mom's Sommierene personality. I don't know how well she can be trusted with animals.

I search the bathroom. A nearly dead spider plant sits on the back of the toilet. "Between the living and the dead." I lift up the plant, its brown tendrils breaking off and falling to the floor. Underneath is another Post-it note: "Everybody knows / All that glitters is gold / Can you dig the sound / Of the round and round?"

"I found a new clue! This one's easy."

I hear tinkling plates from the kitchenette. My mom is yawning over the stove. She is tired all the time since she started taking Sommierene. And she makes less and less sense. She will start talking about a problem she is having with her apartment manager and then segue into the time her brother convinced her to jump off the roof of their one-story house. "He made me think I could fly," she would say. "My brother could make anyone think anything." My mom is fraying, with once-woven threads of herself disentangling and hanging loose and unconnected. In all the news articles about it, they say Sommierene and the other drugs in the new dreamant class are safe if taken as directed, but those statements are always made in conjunction with bizarre stories of people who do not take it as directed.

I put the Post-it on the wall next to the paper towel rack. "It's in your records or around your turntable. You can take it from there. My work here is done."

She pulls a brisket from a yellow dutch oven and puts it on a cutting board. "Stay for dinner. It smells so good."

We eat at the coffee table. I sit on a stool-height box. The meat is melting and rich. Like the éclair, it is suspiciously eager to please. But I eat quickly and take seconds. My mom takes a hit from her bong and hands it to me. I do the dishes and check the smoke alarm in the hallway before I go. A few weeks ago, my mom confessed she had taken the batteries out. The alarm beeps.

"Ow!" my mom yells. "My ears!"

"You're gonna burn the apartment down one of these days!" I yell back. "At least have working smoke alarms."

I leave stoned on my mom's strong pot and run my errands. I drive past strip malls and around cul-de-sac neighborhoods. Everything is so clear in the spring evening sun. That night I can't fall asleep. I have an itch that moves around my body from one hard-to-reach spot to another—my shoulder blade, the exact middle of my back, the side of my right foot. I turn my pillow over and then over again. The moon is full. Through the sliding glass doors in my room, I watch a family of raccoons bumble around the tiny yard I share with my landlady, like old vaudevillians playing thieves in a play. At four fifteen I get out of bed and make coffee. I call my mom's number to see if her sleep self might answer.

"Hello?" Her voice sounds so young.

"Hello."

"Who is this?" A frenetic polka is playing in the background.

"Your daughter!" I yell over the music, then remember the time and my landlady's bedroom on the other side of the wall.

"Well that's far out!" I hear chopping and sizzling.

"What are you doing?"

"Just a little cooking. No one cooks around here. I have to do it all myself."

"You're a good cook," I say.

"I should teach you. I heard you can't even boil water."

The voice is my mom's pitch and tone but with an overly energetic inflection that alarms me.

"There's a lot I need to teach you," she says.

"About what?" I open the blinds in the kitchen and look out at the simmering streetlights.

"About yourself. Children think they know everything. Not true. Not true at all."

"What's your name?" I hear Stanley mewling in the background.

"I can't hear you."

"Your name!"

"That's a good question."

"Is Stanley okay?"

"What, the cat? He can take care of himself. He's a cat for fuck's sake."

"What if I want to talk to my mom?! Can I talk to her?!"

"She's sleeping," she laughs long and breathily like a stoned teenager. "You know that."

"Can you wake her up if you want?"

"I don't want. I'm a little busy here with this pie crust."

* * *

At the Poppy School, we have a webinar in the break room during lunch. The webinar is projected onto a large pull-down screen, but the video isn't working. The sound is not much better. We have to strain to hear the facilitator. I can barely keep my eyes open. I hear him say something about sleep as I drift in and out over the cold cheese sandwich provided by the school administration. The whole-wheat bread is damp and mushy. The facilitator is saying that there is research about sleep and autism, something about anxiety and "behavioral outcomes." Then I hear him mention Sommierene as a treatment for autistic children. *Sommierene*, my sleepy mind muses. The word is so dreamy. Clever of them to come up with it. It is soft and serene as moonlight, a dreamant, the pharmaceutical companies call it, to make you find yourself, wherever you left it, however many years . . .

My boss, Clare, is tapping my arm with the eraser-end of a pencil. "Uh, Pilar?" I drifted off. My sandwich is in mustardy pieces on the floor by my chair. "I ask that you stay awake for the workday, okay? Being awake is a basic professional responsibility?"

"Sorry." The other teachers and aides have already gone back into the classroom. George, the special education teacher I work with, will be by himself with twenty-two severely autistic kids. I rush into the classroom. Kids are

yelling, which always sets off a chain reaction as the noise of yelling agitates the kids and makes them all yell, which agitates them further and makes them yell louder.

George visibly sighs when he sees me walk in. He is a solid, responsible, large-shouldered sort of man. I take the three most severe yellers outside to the playground to let the other kids calm down. Jonah, who is seven, tells me about the number of great white shark sightings near different beaches in California. He is verbal and always has something interesting to say. Monica—nonverbal—kicks a tetherball angrily, and Justo, who can talk when he wants to, just stares daggers at the recycled-rubber ground.

When I get home, I eat a frozen lasagna on a plastic chair in the yard and think about the kids at the school. It must be awful to never have anyone understand what you are trying to say. The foxtails in the yard are crowding out the other plants. They can get into the lungs and eyes of the raccoons and the neighborhood cats. I make a mental note to do some weeding when I have the energy.

My mom texts me. “Are you home?”

“Why?”

“She is planning to kill me.”

I call. “What do you mean, planning to kill you?”

“So, okay, I still can’t find my Medicare card. And today I saw that someone was rifling through my life insurance policy. And there’s another riddle. ‘What turns and turns and then goes quiet?’ Life and death—that’s what!”

“It’s your music. Remember the other clues? Did you check the records for your Medicare card?”

“Yep.”

“The Led Zeppelin? All of it?”

“Yep.”

“Leonard Cohen?”

“I checked everything. It’s not there.”

“But your sleep self is not going to murder you for your insurance policy. It’s you. *Yourself*. She can’t kill you for money.” I pause to give her a chance to agree with my reasonable statement, but she doesn’t respond. I clarify: “She would *also* be dead, so she wouldn’t get any money. Right?”

“I guess so.”

“Just stop taking Somnierene. That’s the easiest solution to this whole problem. I mean at this point you’re going broke with the shopping anyway. How long can you keep this up?”

I throw away the frozen lasagna package and get in the car. I start driving to my mom’s place.

“Yeah . . . it’s just, you know, these things have addictive qualities.” It’s true. The news is full of stories of boomers breaking into houses and pharmacies looking for more Somnierene. They say drug-seeking behavior is a rare side effect, but it seems that most of my friend’s parents are now addicted and behaving strangely.

“Email your doctor.”

“I don’t know where my Medicare card is!”

“You’re in the *system*,” I remind her.

“Oh yeah.” She laughs. “I just don’t want her to kill me.”

“I’m on my way. Just sit tight until I get there.”

But the traffic is awful, and it takes nearly an hour to go a few miles across town.

When I arrive, my mom is wearing an acid-green mini-dress and purple stilettoes. She is dancing around the living room to Bootsy Collins.

“Mom?” I ask.

“*Tsst*,” she hisses and she boogies past me. Her wide hips and shoulders jiggle. I don’t know how she is balancing all that weight on those shoes.

I sit down on the sofa and watch her. She looks like a chrysalis of an old lady, bloated and hoary, with a young butterfly stirring inside and ready to eat its way out. Maybe my mom is right. Maybe her other self might kill her.

I go into the bedroom and look for Stanley. He is hiding in a fold of the open folding closet door. On the bedside table is my mom’s Somnierene. I read the label. “Take one tablet as needed at bedtime.” The prescription is dated just three days ago. The bottle is nearly empty. I open the drawer. There is a sleep mask, old earplugs, and a bottle of Norco. Full and enough—I imagine—to kill my mom. I put the Norco and the Somnierene in the pocket of my hoodie.

I hear Earth, Wind, and Fire’s “Boogie Wonderland” blast from the living room.

“You really like disco!” I yell at her over the music.

“Yeah, your mom missed all that fun because she had you. Just making up for it.”

“I didn’t know.” I feel apologetic, but I don’t know why. When I was a kid, my mom made maerámé and homemade brown bread. She cooked incessantly bland food from *Laurel’s Kitchen*. Probably why she stopped

cooking after a while. I don’t think she ever longed to go out to a disco.

She sways and twirls her way into the kitchen. “I made some cake.”

“No thanks,” I say. “Who are you?”

“Who is anyone?” She shrugs.

“Fair enough,” I say.

She hands me a piece of the cake. “Just try a taste.”

I take a bite. It tastes like ashes and cardboard. I spit it out into a paper towel.

“I need to talk to my mom.”

“She’s sleeping.”

“Wake her up.”

“Did you take it? Did you take the Somnierene?”

“No.”

She goes into the bedroom, yells, “Give it back!”

“I don’t have it.”

Back in the living room, she is barefoot. She reaches at my pocket. “What’s that?”

I push her hand away.

“Mom! Wake up!”

She sings along to the music—I *find romance when I start to dance in Boogie Wonderland*. She pushes me. I lose my balance, fall onto a box, and tumble over.

She kneels on the ground and snatches at my pocket. I grab her by the shoulders. “Wake up!”

“*All the need to be loved can’t be wrong*.”

“Mom. Please. Wake up.”

I shake her, then I see her arms. They are covered in deep-red bruises as though she is wounded just below the surface of her skin. I realize also that my fingers on her shoulders have left marks. I let go of her. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. I edge away from her.

“You can’t leave with my medication.”

I climb over boxes and make my way to the door.

I hear her say, “Don’t.”

I turn around. She is holding a kitchen knife.

“Mom?”

Something sugary is burning in the oven. I remember the smoke alarm on the ceiling. I reach up and press the button. It beeps, and my mom’s face changes. I press it again. She looks at me like a scared toddler. “Ow, my ears.”

“Put the knife down,” I say, and she drops it between some boxes.

I take my mom to my place to stay for a few days. She agrees to see her doctor, but it turns out she does need her Medicare card, which she still can’t find. While I am at work, my mom tears apart my place looking for her bottle of Somnierene, but it is locked up in my filing cabinet behind drafts of my abandoned thesis project on Spinoza and personal freedom. The key is in a patch of foxtails.

I stop sleeping at night, and, all day at work, I am exhausted. The Poppy School kids are like characters in a dream. I am sure Clare will fire me soon. In the middle of the sleepless night, I can feel the Somnierene pulling me to it. I am so tired from not sleeping and so tired of always being myself. I am curious who might come out at night, who might visit if I opened the door just a crack.

Jessica Breheny's work has appeared in *Santa Cruz Noir* (Akashic Books, 2018), *Avery Anthology*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Eleven Eleven*, *elimaé*, *Fugue*, *LIT*, *otoliths*, *Other Voices*, and *Santa Monica Review*, among other publications. Her story “The Art of Disappearing” was produced as an audiobook by Audible in 2016. Her short story collection *Broken City* was selected as a finalist for the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction. She is the author of the chapbooks *Some Mythology* (Naissance Press) and *Ephemerides* (Dusie Kollektiv and Embusan Press).