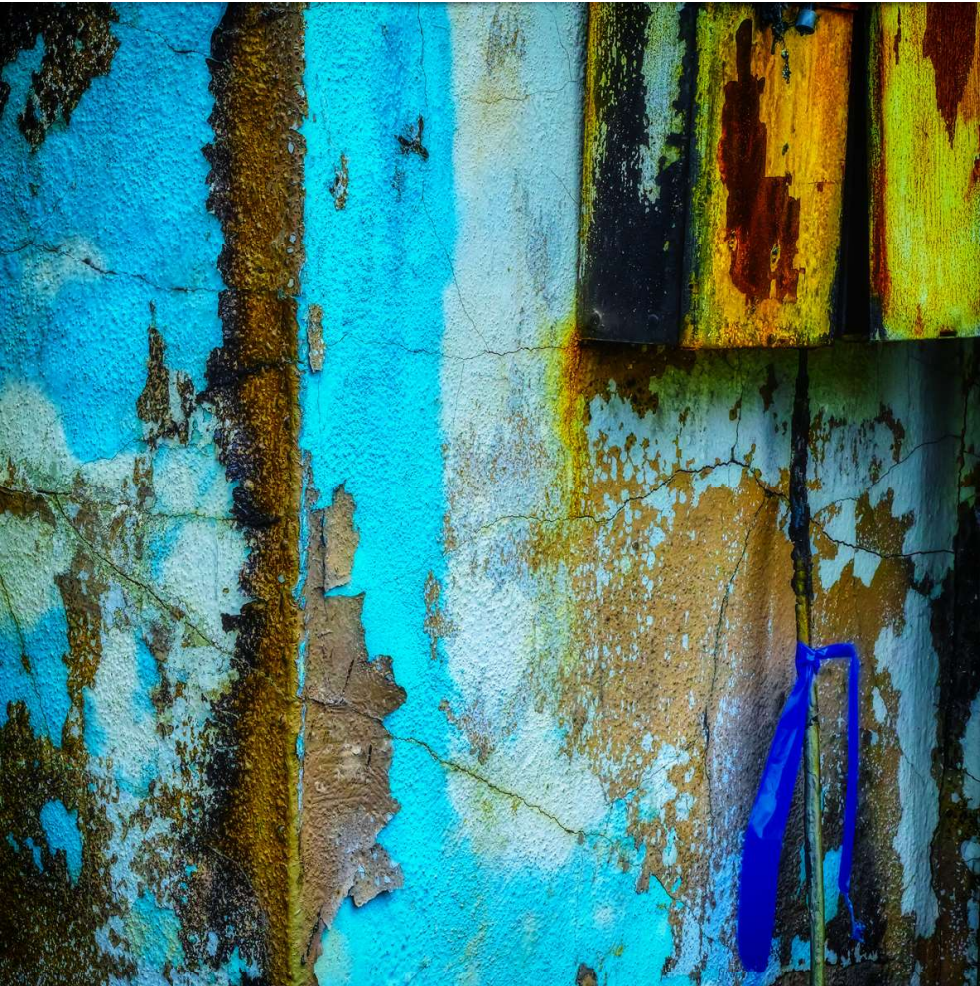


NEAL SNIDOW

Burn Zone 2, 2019
Archival photographic print, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SAMANTHA RAJARAM

Stella by Starlight

Astrid is the leader among the mothers. It's usually an Amy, or a Katie, but here, in Palo Alto, it can be an Astrid. One with retired, septuagenarian hippie parents who lived on a commune in bucolic, self-imposed forest poverty until the scene got old and they moved back to the suburbs.

It's Astrid's late-summer party, an annual tradition, which she and Philippe hold in their backyard under the jasmine-laden gazebo. LED string lights hang from the gazebo's latticed ceiling, blinking above in benediction. Dark-blue bowls of oversized green olives rest on one side of the long serving table, along with a wood plank holding a daub of ash-covered chèvre and softened brie alongside an array of crackers studded with caraway seeds. Next to that, a Heath platter laden with grapes, figs, and pomegranates inspired by a Van Walscapelle still life—though no one will know that. Astrid has an MFA in fine arts and leads all the art projects in the classroom. Even Mrs. Sheehan, the persnickety first grade teacher, approves of her classroom art displays.

She feels satisfied, gazing at the bounty of the appetizer table. All they need are cabbage butterflies flickering over the garden—they would complete the summer theme, but she sees fewer and fewer of them these days.

Jessica and the kids are visiting from Antioch. She and her husband had to move because they can't afford to buy a house here. Who can, anymore? Just tech people like her husband, or real estate folks vampirizing the preposterous housing market.

Jessica spreads a diaphanous film of hummus on her cracker. She's still trying to lose ten pounds of baby weight, though her baby is now five years old. It's a frequent topic of conversation when the topic returns, as it often does, to the myriad injustices of motherhood. The crapshoot that is losing the baby weight the second time around.

"So tell me what happened," Jessica says, nibbling at her cracker.

"It's fucking absurd." Astrid pours herself a third glass of pinot. A 2012 Albert Bichot that Philippe read about on some obscure wine blog. "Nadia saw your photograph of the girls at Monterey on Facebook and then when she didn't hear from either of us about Mara's sleepover party, she assumed the girls couldn't make it. I texted her back and apologized for not getting back to her. And then she

replied that she was hurt because we never invite her to these trips, and that Claire brags to Mara about our vacations and it makes Mara feel bad. And somewhere in there—so randomly—she played the race card, said that these moments of exclusion remind her of being the only brown kid at her school.” Astrid shakes her head in fresh disbelief and takes another sip of wine. “She’s got it so confused. Claire is such a compassionate girl. I can’t imagine she’d do that.”

“Yeah, that’s crazy. This isn’t Wisconsin or Minnesota or wherever she grew up. She’s drawing massive conclusions,” Jessica says, glancing with envy at Astrid’s concave midsection, emphasized by her slightly asymmetrical skin-tight dress. “You’re definitely not racist.”

Astrid fingers the gunmetal pendant resting just below her clavicle, purchased in Tangier while on vacation with Philippe ten years ago, back when they had adventures. It vaguely resembles the Tesla emblem and draws the eye to her protruding breastbone, the capstone of her ectomorphic figure. “I mean, I lead workshops at the school on white privilege.” She wants to forget about the whole thing, but she can’t, annoyingly. But Jessica is safe. She’ll understand.

“Really?” Jessica almost drops her cracker.

“I mean, I don’t *lead* the workshops, but I’m a facilitator for the other teachers. I brought the trainer *in* because I thought it would help our students of color.”

“Plus you just spent a whole month in Ghana,” Jessica says, finishing off her first cracker and starting on a second. This time she’s laid the hummus on thicker, perhaps feeling fatalistic about the baby weight.

“That’s right. And last year when Jo was visiting from Ghana, I had to *explain* to my colleague Mike that it wasn’t okay for him to take Jo around San Mateo at 2:00 a.m., especially after smoking a fat blunt. Jeff didn’t get that an African guy strolling downtown at that hour is asking for trouble.” Astrid rolls her eyes. If something had happened to Jo, the publicity would have spelled incontrovertible disaster for the elite private school where she taught photography. “Hey, didn’t cops shoot a black man in your town just a few months ago? He was in his own backyard. They thought he was holding a gun, but it was just his cell phone.”

Jessica shrugs. “I wouldn’t be surprised. Fucking cops. But I don’t listen to the news anymore. It stresses me out

so much. I don’t even listen to NPR when I drop the girls off at school. I mean, there’s nothing I can do. We’re not the problem. We’re powerless.”

Astrid nods. She feels the same way. She went to the Women’s March after all, even brought Mara with her. Voted for Hillary. She teaches about slavery, uses historical photographs. And then, of course, the trips to Ghana. “Nadia’s difficult. Intense. She still complains about her ex, and she talks about politics all the time. It’s not great for parties. She’s a downer.” She smooths back her freshly bleached hair. The color brings out the icy sharpness of her eyes, makes her feel like Grace Kelly swirling brandy in *Rear Window*. “Oh, and then in that same text she said that during a playdate, Claire bragged about the gym we go to. Told Mara the membership costs \$500 a month.”

“That’s so unfair. The girls are going to say things. They don’t know any better yet.”

“Has she ever said anything like that to you?”

Jessica hesitates. “Once, I think.”

Astrid pours herself another glass of wine. She’ll have to talk to Claire about that one. “It’s not like she would’ve come if we’d invited her. What would her sons do?” Nadia’s boys were teenagers, after all. In truth, they didn’t invite Nadia on their trips because she was a single mother. She threw everything off-balance, the cozy marital symmetry of their excursions.

“She’s just being insecure. She needs to get over herself.”

“Claire should feel free to share the details of her life without being judged for it,” Astrid says with finality, taking another sip of wine, allowing the pinot to slide down her throat. She revels in the melting sensation at the end, the feeling of floating, the release from managing the kids’ camp enrollments, groceries, playdates, prepping for class, and cooking three meals every day. At last year’s Halloween party, she wore a leotard and affixed Velcro balls to the outfit, each labeled with her many maternal and wifely tasks—chauffeur, personal shopper, sex kitten—to demonstrate the balls she juggles. Philippe used to make dinner, but now he camps out in front of his laptop for hours or checks his cell phone every two minutes. She’s stopped complaining about his absenteeism. His Google money bought the house, after all. But his inattention grates on her, and the girls bicker so much lately. They drive her crazy in the summer with their raw, throbbing *need*.

Astrid suddenly remembers the fillets on the grill. “Oh shit. The salmon. Let me get a spatula.” Last time she left Philippe to attend to the grill, he overcooked the salmon. The dry texture of the fish, its white, gluey fat congealed in drops on the pink surface, rendered the last party a failure in her mind.

She hurries indoors to retrieve the long spatula reserved for grilling and the celadon platter she’s selected as the serving dish. Its serene pale green complements the pink flesh of the fish. This time she will not allow an overcooked fillet to ruin her party.

* * *

Nadia wonders if she was wrong. Her stomach hurts. She feels her heart’s angry pulse.

In couple’s counseling back when she and her ex were trying to salvage the dead, flattened thing that was their marriage, their therapist named the sickly, unctuous sensation “flooding”—a release of cortisol and adrenaline in response to trauma. She realizes she feels “flooded” whenever she calls someone out on their racism. It never gets easier. It often feels like a punishment.

The entire argument with Astrid occurred over text. By the last entry, Nadia had blocked Astrid. A final death knell for their friendship—a chasm ripped open, uncrossable. She knows, from past experiences, she’ll be anxious and sick for the next three days.

And now she has to tell Mara.

Nadia’s parents—immigrants—never called out anyone. Nadia’s demand that others acknowledge their narrow-mindedness never grows easier. It feels like parental disobedience. “Adjust,” her mother advised her throughout her childhood. Survival required it. She said nothing when classmates wrinkled their noses at the “weird” odor of the food she brought for lunch, infesting her clothing and hair. She cheerfully explained, for the thousandth time, that no, she did not worship cows, and, yes, she could eat at McDonald’s. In high school, she laughed when boys asked for an assessment of their Apu impersonations. Adjustment means denying wounds, leaving them to thicken into broken scabs that never entirely heal.

She had come to expect the same advice—to adjust—if she were ever to disclose the extent of her loneliness and exclusion, so she didn’t tell her parents. They weren’t parents

* * *

you actually talked to about things. When their medical practice overwhelmed them, they fought over which country to live in. They threatened to move back, and even tried it one summer, taking her on visits to possible parochial schools in Bangalore that required polyester uniforms with skirts and buttoned pinafores, until she launched a full-scale rebellion at the age of twelve, threatening all manner of disobedience.

Since then, Nadia has felt an incessant, desperate need to perfect herself, to justify her parents’ reluctant continued life in the U.S. She lives a razor’s-edge existence.

She studies Mara’s bedroom door, preparing for the conversation. Mara spent an hour decorating the door last week, hanging a colorful sign declaring “No Boys Allowed,” surrounded by smaller rectangles festooned with handwritten assertions: “I am awesome!” “Girl Power!” “Believe!” The poster invokes both pride and wonder in Nadia, at this miraculous creature she birthed, whose un-self-conscious declarative energy remains entirely foreign.

Nadia’s own life demanded pondering and self-questioning and further introspection. And often, silence. And now, regret for past silences.

After so many “adjustments,” Nadia wondered who she was. The girl smiling at someone’s hackneyed impression of a “fobby” Indian? Or the girl who provided them with the term *fobby* to refer to Indians arriving in droves under the guest worker visa program to fulfill America’s sudden need for doctors and engineers?

Nadia raises her fist to knock, but she hesitates, distracted again by memories. A group of white boys back in Texas calling her the N-word at preschool. She asked her father what the word meant. He informed her she was not *that*. She was Indian, as though the boys had simply committed an error of designation. But even then, she felt the saw-toothed sentiment behind the word. That she was dirty, foul. She was the handful of tanbark flung in her face, the greenish glob of spit presented at her feet.

Nadia knocks on the door. “Hey, sweetie, can I come in?” “Sure, Mommy.” Mara’s voice sounds muffled, preoccupied.

Nadia takes a deep breath and erases the word *adjust* from her mind.

Astrid feels triumphant. She salvaged the salmon. None of that white gluey stuff.

She slides the bottom of the spatula between the skin of the fillet and the grill. Jiggles the spatula back and forth to loosen the fish from the grill's charred surface. Philippe should have oiled the grill more. Whatever. Not worth mentioning. Marriage requires constant sublimation.

She lays the first fillet on the platter.

Philippe, oblivious as usual, is busy expounding on the depressing monolingualism of Americans. She agrees with him, of course. But after twelve years of marriage, his French superiority gets on her nerves. They argue about it when they have a hard day at work and need to let off steam. *If you hate it here so much, why did you come?* Her standard opening line. The arguments never go anywhere. He tolerates her inability to understand the struggles of immigrants in the same way she has to tolerate his fucking inattention to the fucking salmon.

She finishes dislodging all the fillets from the grill, arranges them on the plate, and carries it to the long picnic table. The dinner table looks bountiful—heaped with an artistic spiral of organic crackers, fresh tabbouleh in a wooden bowl purchased on her last trip to Ghana, a hand-made hickory wood block stacked with goat cheeses and d'Affinois. Two loaves of baguette from that new French bakery in Menlo Park, which even Philippe cannot criticize. Multiple unopened bottles of white and red wine stand at the center of the table, waiting to be consumed. Class number five will be the 2016 Hall cabernet.

"Well, I'm sorry about how that all went down," Jessica says, rejoining her at the table while Philippe chats with Stasia, and Dana and Stasia's husband, Justin, stand by the door. It's getting chilly, and Stasia pulls a thin Mexican-print wool blanket around her shapely shoulders.

"Yeah, it sucks," Astrid says, sitting next to Jessica. "She's just wrong. When I think of all the times I've invited her over, fed Mara, had Mara sleep over here. It's just so messed up." She recalls reading Mara and the other girls a scary bedtime story. Claire's seventh birthday party, three years ago. She feels an ache that the girls may not celebrate birthday parties again, but she shoos away the loss.

It's Nadia's fault, not hers.

"Seriously. She needs to fight the real battle against actual racists. Not you. I mean, you don't exclude her. Didn't

you invite her over when you got back from Ghana last year, too? I think she mentioned it to me."

"Yes. I had a dinner party because Jo was staying with us and I wanted Nadia to meet him." Astrid doesn't add that she invited Nadia because she didn't want her Ghanaian visitor to be the only nonwhite person at the dinner. Nadia was happy to come. Flattered even.

"Oh, is the salmon ready?" Philippe asks, approaching the table. The LED lights above cast a ghoulish glow over his face and for a moment, Astrid can see the old man in him peeking through his middle-aged mug. She can't help but imagine the two of them years from now. Old, still arguing over the parity of their tasks, the stupidity of Americans, the fact that he's still *here*.

The couples arrange themselves on the bench seating. Stasia brings her blanket to the table, which seems dramatic. It isn't *that* chilly.

See? Stasia is half-Asian, Astrid thinks to herself as Stasia shivers and leans into Justin, still handsome as ever, who kisses the top of her head.

* * *

Nadia sits down on Mara's bed, moving the stacks of pajamas and jeans she folded and asked Mara to put away in their drawers two hours ago.

"You need to put these clothes away, love," she says.

Mara slumps her shoulders down, exhausted by the request. "I *know*, Mommy." She kneads a ball of hot-pink Play-Doh between her hands. She takes party-favor-size containers of Play-Doh everywhere, even uses them during class. Says they help her focus.

Nadia searches for what to say. She has no script for a conversation about pigment and its onslaughts in this so-called melting pot of a country, where she still gets complimented on her English and can't even count how many times people have asked her where she's *really* from. Those memories always return, even when she struggles to recall the name of her son's new favorite band or who Nick Jonas married. Kindergarten, 1978, when Charlotte's mom refused entry to Nadia for a playdate, and Nadia returned home with her Indian Barbie doll in hand. She erased the Barbie's red forehead bindi with nail polish remover that night, the erasure invoking both guilt and pleasure. The social studies teacher who asked, innocently, why Indians

couldn't just stop having babies if they were all starving. The law firm where her supervisors spent their lunch hours extolling the sexiness of Britney Spears, while condemning American Indians as "lazy drunks" and affirmative action as "education welfare."

And then all the moving. After her parents had settled in California, they explained why they had left their previous homes. Texas because of its racism—the neighbors didn't approve of the black nanny her mother had hired to watch her. They left South Dakota because the new hospital administrator began recruiting white doctors to replace her parents, the only pediatricians in their county for eleven years. A decade of night calls and midnight hospital drives during blizzards—all forgotten once her parents earned enough money to purchase a Mercedes Benz that rivaled the administrator's.

School was no help. Teachers taught racism as an artifact. Lunch counters, the Trail of Tears, and "I Have a Dream." Nothing about the in-between space inhabited by people like her—Asians whose cultures told them to be "good immigrants" to make life easier for themselves, even when they felt the shadowy desire for something more than an elite zip code or an Ivy League degree. Something closer to the sort of swagger these white women had—an abiding belief in their own unassailable belonging. She felt that kind of belonging so rarely. Only in her classroom, in her home, and with a small number of friends.

But then she thinks of all the black parents sitting down with their own kids, having different, grimmer conversations. About where to put your hands on the dashboard when the cops pulled you over and reminders to talk slowly so the officers hear you because being pulled over, well, that shit is *life and death*. In her classes, Nadia often shows a video of black parents talking to their children about interactions with the police. The video reassures her black students, builds some necessary trust, and slowly, over the semester, they come to her, one by one, during her office hours or walking her out of class. *Yeah, it's happened to me plenty of times. The cops took my backpack, slammed me down on the sidewalk. No warrant, nothing. No one talks about this stuff in high school.*

What she felt growing up was orders of magnitude less, and still the same pathology. The same feeling of being unwanted. Unseen.

Nadia watches Mara section the ball of Play-Doh into three pieces and roll them into smaller balls, stacking them into a snowman. She recalls making a snowman back in South Dakota. How the Nelson boys across the street pissed hot yellow arcs into her masterpiece once she went back inside the house. She was ten when they did that. She knew because she watched them from the living room window.

Was it racism that compelled them or just the joy of a prank? That was the problem. One never knew.

"So, I wanted to tell you that I decided not to be friends with Astrid anymore," Nadia says, finger-combing Mara's hair as her daughter focuses on her Play-Doh. "And you can of course still be friends with Claire, but you can ask Dad to arrange playdates with her at Dad's house from here on out."

"Why?" Fortunately, Mara seems unperturbed. She has a new slime project in progress on her desk, beckoning.

"Her mom said something that hurt me, and when I was a kid, the same things were said to me and hurt me many times, but I was taught not to say anything." Even as she speaks, her parents' mantra rings in her ears in chastisement. *Adjust. Adjust. Adjust.* "So part of me being a grown-up is about teaching you guys that it is okay to set boundaries, to tell someone when something hurts you. And I did that, but Astrid didn't listen and didn't care." Boundaries, ugh. She sounds like a therapist. Mara won't understand such jargon. Nadia's heart beats hard in her chest, underscoring her inadequacy.

Mara sits still on the bed, holding her hot-pink snowman in one palm.

"Are you okay? How do you feel?" Nadia caresses Mara's plump little arm. Beautiful brown arm. Just like hers. She remembers her childhood neighbor, Tawny Porter, who refused to hold hands with her when they played London Bridge. How Nadia tried to scratch off the brown afterward, leaving a trail of upraised, angry lines underneath her arms.

"I'm okay." Mara looks down. Nadia never knows if such moments mean her daughter is uncomfortable or just bored.

"I want you to know that if people make you feel bad, if they make you feel like you aren't cool enough to be with them, or you're too different to be with them, then they are *not your friends*. You have no obligation to stick around with them. And that's how I feel about Astrid."

“Okay,” Mara says. She squashes the snowman with her fist. *Splat*. “Is that all? Can I work on my slime now?”

Nadia laughs. “Yes, okay.” Maybe she is overreacting. What if Astrid tells all the other mothers that Nadia is unhinged, crazy, or, absurdly—a racist herself? Was it worth losing a friendship and earning the disdain of all of Astrid’s friends who volunteer at the school?

A heaviness fills her, shallows her breaths. Is this what a heart attack feels like? She is forty-six now, death scraping its curled talon against the door of her existence. She’s had a chronic illness for years, and any furtive glimpse in the mirror reveals middle age collecting, wickedly, at her gut, in the deepening vertical crevice between her eyebrows. Sitting with Mara in her untidy bedroom, Nadia marvels that if she were to call out how racial oppression reared and reconstituted itself—the roads and railroads and bridges built by nonwhite people, the policemen profiling children like her own hoodie-wearing brown-skinned sons, the very social markers (music, film, television, hobbies like darts and bowling) that bound her to others and that depended on whiteness even to exist—how could she have any white friends at all?

Survival required performing some level of whiteness at all times.

She imagines herself trapped in a Möbius of racial erasure, where the goal is to eliminate all that makes them different, and all in the name of getting along.

“I love you, sweetheart,” Nadia says, because that is all she *can* say. The only true thing beside all the hurt. She feels her love for her children as a bruise, an emptiness, because grief and love feel interchangeable every time she reads about school shootings and race rallies and right-wing militias and frat boy rapists getting off without jail time. Love like a second wound, one incapable of scabbing over.

“Do you know where the green food coloring is?” Mara asks, moving to her cluttered desk to begin her slime project.

“Yes, honey. I’ll get it for you. Don’t forget to put away your laundry.” Nadia stands up, thinking of the implausible range of questions she must navigate as a single parent, as a brown person, as the daughter of hard-working immigrants who have lived here longer than they have lived back in India, but who still speak longingly of that surrendered country. Spaghetti or roast chicken for dinner? How to affix words to the capricious riddle of it all?

For a moment, the threat of tears, a swell of grief, of self-pity, of rage, of hopelessness presses against her, and she swallows the impulse to cry. Instead, she hugs her daughter one more time, smells her apple-shampoo hair, and leaves her to her slime.

So much of motherhood—single motherhood—requires an impregnable, conjured armor. She heads to the kitchen to make spaghetti. She’s suddenly too tired for roast chicken, but she can open a jar.

She’ll make the chicken tomorrow.

* * *

The couples use the serving spatula to cut up rectangles of moist pinkish salmon sprinkled with dill, garlic, salt, and pepper. They pass around the tabbouleh—Philippe’s most reliable contribution to parties. No cooking required.

They refill their glasses, and Justin mentions the chill in the air.

“We did this last summer, too,” Stasia remarks, shivering in her blanket. “Time really flies by.”

Astrid remembers. The girls played in the backyard until late.

Nadia came for that party. With her kids.

“The salmon is perfect,” Philippe says. He chews like a cow, Astrid thinks, still bitter that he couldn’t just monitor the salmon. Do this *one thing*.

“I love the dill. It really adds something,” Jessica reaches over for the bowl of tabbouleh. “This salad is great, too. The pine nuts especially.”

“It’s my mother’s recipe. Or maybe my grandmother’s,” Philippe says, smiling. “An authentic Algerian recipe.”

“You’ll need to make it again next time,” Stasia says. “Make the men do more of the cooking.” But she smiles. All in good fun.

The couples clink their glasses in a toast to summer and health and friendship. In the background Philippe is playing a Spotify jazz playlist. Astrid recognizes Charles Mingus, Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things.” The girls refuse to eat just yet, focused instead on chasing imaginary fairies around the garden.

I see one! Look! Just by that tree!

The adults tuck into the bounty of the table, passing the fish and tabbouleh around. Philippe pours everyone more wine. They’re all a bit smashed by now and laughing

about nothing. Soon, they’ll open the Hartwell red from 2000—Philippe’s been saving it.

Damn, she forgot the water pitcher and goblets. “Philippe, can you bring out some fresh glasses and the water pitcher?” It’s about time he did something.

“Of course, my darling.” He stands up, affecting the mien of someone more gallant than her husband.

“I can help you.” Stasia stands up, too.

“Thank you, love.” Astrid kisses the air in Stasia’s direction.

“This looks amazing,” Justin says, chewing on the salmon. “Tastes even better.” “You always have the best parties,” Jessica says, smiling.

Astrid chews her tabbouleh. Philippe never adds enough salt.

“I’ll get some salt,” she says, getting up. Miles’s “Stella by Starlight” comes on. The song causes in her a pinprick of sadness, reminding her of her grad school days, when she spent long hours painting on oversized canvases while *Kind of Blue* played in the background. Back then, she had multiple lovers, men and women, names she’s forgotten. A different life.

The house is quiet when she enters. The girls play outside and their voices take on a new, plaintive quality against Miles’s solo.

She stops at the entrance of the kitchen, frozen. Her husband of twelve years and Stasia, embracing, Stasia’s arms encircle his neck. His hands rest on her hips. Possessively.

“I needed to get salt for the tabbouleh.” Astrid’s voice sounds wooden and stiff. Philippe and Stasia startle and disengage.

“It’s right here.” Philippe reaches into the far cupboard as Stasia crosses her arms. “Bring it out, please.” Astrid tries to keep the ice out of her voice, but it escapes, thick on her words.

Stasia follows her out, says nothing, and avoids eye contact. She settles on the bench next to Justin, who wraps his arm around her. Philippe blunders out with the salt, sits next to Astrid. But she is done eating, just pushes the tabbouleh around. Forgets to use the salt. Her stomach lurches.

Maybe it’s nothing. Just two friends sharing a friendly hug.

The mosquitoes start in on their exposed ankles, enjoying their own feast. The clouds turn from pink to a

blotted-out, stupefied gray as the girls start singing an Ariana Grande song as they leap on the grass, pretending to fly. Stasia has always been flirtatious, batting her eyelashes and flipping her hair at tattooed bartenders when they go out for drinks. Astrid pushes away bleaker possibilities. The salmon has lost its fleeting warmth in the surprisingly cool summer air, and the gloaming sky, bereft of birds or butterflies or even moths, despite the glowing LED lights, turns dark, darker, then darker still.

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