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PHANTOM

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PHANTOM

Marc holds back Léa's golden curls or he just loves the filmy, cobwebby feel of them dragging through his fingers again. His phone rings well past last call, her on the line, always; three am in Montréal, and he weeds through dirty light and overturned glasses, asks if she's all right when he knows she's not, and wonders every time if he should have insisted on staying, or if he never should have come back. He walks backwards through her living room because the shadows jog along the walls less that way, when he can follow the murky streetlight glow fuzz in through the windows. Leaves behind something solid.

It's late but he rubs her shoulders through her thin, sweat-soaked shirt until she can sit up from the porcelain, and then he collects her, like a little kid, like a puppy or something you'd lost, and squeezes tighter than he realized he wanted to. He draws tally marks down her pale arms, one for each drink she had until he reaches her elbows, and then he helps her out of her shirt and leaves a kiss between her shoulder blades.

He waits until he's sleep-dizzy and she's calm, or at least still, and then he takes her hands and helps her up, out, into bed where he sits and tangles fingers in her loose damp ringlets, through and out and through again in little familiar patterns. When she speaks, it's chill and clammy like her skin, barely-there French that he pretends he doesn't know the meaning of even though it's native; it's drunken and honest and held suspended on a breath Léa can't expel without a shudder, caught in her ribcage. And she says, because she always says, that *parfois elle est désolé*.

She disappears into the white sheets like arctic wasteland and Marc, desperate, grasps at nothing and cotton and cool skin, raises a rash of red blossom across skin like wax, like unbroken water, to make sure she's still there at all. Léa always asks if he'll come, needs him to, but she never says he'll have to go. He wants to siphon color into her through his fingertips; the way he's drawing on her back, across her shoulders, every few inches he can feel an even, sleeping heartbeat under the dusky impressions his fingers leave. Marc with his eyes closed wishes he could find answers just by touch, ask the ridges of Léa's spine like an Ouija board. He imagines he can picture bones like the alphabet and channel something dead now that he wishes weren't, imagines he can ask it what if they remember this tomorrow, and feel the familiar bumps and curves and contusions say letter by letter *i-t m-i-g-h-t b-e a-l-l r-i-g-h-t*.

She smells like liquor and lost opportunity and he leans in close anyway, to make the best of it or so he doesn't forget, because Léa will forget, and he doesn't ever know how many chances he has. She's anemic, she's spectral, and in the morning with a headache, heavy stomach and the stale taste of beer lingering on her lips she'll dissolve in the sunlight. Marc finger paints questions across the line of her back, and the frosty

half-moons against pale pink of his nails blend in to her colorless skin, the scallop of dark fabric looping over her shoulder the only contrast.

Léa always sleeps on her right side; her long fingers are curled under a pillow and her breathing shallow, but at least now her skin is almost warmer to the touch. Marc wonders if she'd look like this every night, can't remember if she used to.

He presses his forehead against her neck, draws close in a way he swore he wouldn't anymore and asks the Ouija board of what should have been, of Léa's bare skin he still has memorized, ghostly in the early morning, if she ever really meant to leave him. And nothing answers but the dim expanse of night giving way to bleak, white-washed dawn.

Everything stays alabaster still, silent and in the morning she ties her hair back and makes coffee without speaking before Marc starts his car, gasping into the chill, empty air. he picks the oldest, chipped mug in her kitchen in case he doesn't return and watches her behind windowpanes in his rearview mirror, smaller and smaller and fading.

