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DEVICES

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ONCE THERE WERE AN ARTIST AND AN INVENTOR.

The artist and the inventor live together in the first floor of a building that used to be a saloon in the 1800s and now has been painted dark blue with purple and red trim so it looks like a saloon in a traveling carnival. They are right up next to the sidewalk, and the inventor is always drawing the curtains shut and the artist is always opening them. The artist needs light. The inventor needs privacy. In other words, they are deeply in love. But both of them are a little bit more in love with the artist.

The screensaver on the artist's computer is a black and white picture of herself, taken by herself. She has many self-portraits in her files, and most are similar to this one: she favors a pose with lips parted, mouth partly open, eyes looking to the side, eyebrows raised, a look of assured surprise, a look somewhere between caught-off-guard and ready-for-my-close-up. The artist's home-bleached hair looks perpetually as if she has just woken up. So do her clothes, although she does not sleep in them. She will wear the same shirt several days in a row. She just wakes up, sniffs it, and puts it on. Once the artist made a skirt out of a canvas tent. Another time she sewed herself a pair of pants out of buckskin. "How do you wash those?" the inventor asked. She said, "I don't."

The artist paints pictures that cover half a wall, paintings of abstract rodeos and landscapes and dogs, and hangs them all over the walls of the saloon-house, and hangs little tags next to them with prices at ten thousand dollars each, even though no art buyers are coming over. The artist is like a colt, a yearling, long-legged and galloping in and out of love. Right now it is with the inventor. And the inventor, slightly sick with love, intends to keep it that way.

The inventor has a glint in her eye. She has messy hair that she pushes around all the time while she's thinking, and since she usually hasn't washed it for a few days it sticks up and out in formations like a collapsed pompadour or crooked wings. She wears a lab coat open over her T-shirts when she works; it puts her in the right frame of mind.

She started small with the artist, constructing a simple light-up sign to prop up in the rear window of her car which, with the press of a button on the steering wheel, would flash THANK YOU or FUCK YOU to the person behind, depending.

The artist really likes this and uses it all the time. It causes her Gremlin hatchback to get lightly rear-ended a couple of times, but she says the satisfaction outweighs the damage.

A gear shifts in the inventor's brain. She starts to take note of what the artist complains about or despairs of and she sets to work, ideas tumbling over each other.

At first, falling in love turns the artist's eyes into lenses, with super-vivid filters, as if just moving around through the world she is taking it in, capturing it, recording it. Every act seems scriptworthy, documentable—And then I lay down and wrapped the sheet around my fist. The world around her goes figurative; everything she sees is an analogy for love. She has never experienced the world like this. She feels drunk with the pleasure of just being in it.

So she goes into her studio to try to capture it all.

She throws open the windows and stands there in the warm bath of light, and she can't bring herself to do anything. Everything already looks fucking great.

She goes and finds the inventor, who is standing in her workshop detangling a heap of wiring, and slides her hands under the lab coat.

The artist is not getting enough work done, which makes her irritable, and she tries to make up the difference by advancing her career socially. The inventor is obligated to come along to many openings, parties, and awkward couple-hangouts. Pulling the artist outside for a cigarette during a painfully slow "salon" a local curator is attempting to convene—and neither of them really smokes, they just keep a pack handy for this kind of situation—the inventor says, "You can say no, you know. You don't have to come to everything."

"But anything could lead to something better," the artist says, giving a little shiver as the night air hits her bare arms. The inventor lights the cigarette and hands it to her. "Each time, I'm like, 'What if this is the time?'" She inhales.

"The time when what?"

She passes the cigarette back. "The time when I meet someone who changes my life."

The inventor takes a drag, coughs, and looks at her.

The artist shifts on her feet. "A connection. Those matter. You know."

The next morning, the inventor sets to work creating an automatic responder. Whenever an invitation is posed or a request made, the automatic responder immediately says, in your own voice, "Let me get back to you on that," and then enforces a mandatory two-hour waiting period. After this time, you may choose from a selection of responses, ranging from I'm Sorry, I Can't; to I Already Have Plans, Perhaps Another Time; I'm Really Booked For The Next Few Weeks; I Must Decline, But Thank You For The Offer; to I'm Not Interested In That, Ever, But I Wish You A Happy Life.

You can also get modules that perform advanced tasks like asking people out, requesting a raise, or talking dirty when you're at a loss for words or not in the mood.

The artist uses it sometimes but not nearly as often as the inventor had hoped. She always opts for the I'd Like To Try To Do That, Let Me Text You In A Little While response.

Eventually they come to the point in their relationship where their straight friends would have to pop the question, so they unite behind a dog. They adopt a scarred brown thing with skinny legs and a bent tail from the humane society. Every day the dog digs a hole in the saloon's back yard and lies in it, and they sigh and fill it in, and

then he digs a new hole. Every day he will dig a new hole, regardless of whether the old one still stands. And every day they fill it in. And this, the artist notes, is what their relationship starts to feel like: a new hole opening, the two of them struggling to patch it before the next one gets dug.

The artist curls her body around the dog and strokes his crumply triangle ears. She checks out a book from the library called Animal Communication and begins to study his eyes deeply. At night the artist invites the dog into the bed and he settles between the two of them. As you can imagine, sex ceases.

"Can the dog sleep on the floor?" the inventor asks.

The artist looks into the dog's round, black eyes. "He says he used to be abused on the floor," she says. "He needs to be here to feel safe."

"Are you sure that's what he's saying?" asks the inventor.

"Yes," says the artist, and she lifts the covers to usher the dog underneath.

The inventor calls up her animal behaviorist friend and, with his input, invents a translator for dog language. Tiny sensors are planted at the dog's ears, tail, hackles, vocal cords, and heart to monitor changes in movement and pulse. Each sensor transmits the meaning of the part's activity to a tiny computer on the collar, which synthesizes the information and translates it into a simple statement that appears on a tiny digital LCD feed on the collar, as well as on a remote device that can be strapped to a wrist, like a watch.

When they put it on the dog, the dog, it turns out, is saying things like, "I want your cheese" and "Who is that other dog I don't like him " and "I own you."

The artist removes the device and puts it in a drawer and shuts the door of her room to paint.

She tries to draw a bucking bronco but he looks as if he's kicking up his heels for joy. She tries to draw the dog, but he looks flat.

If everything becomes *like* love, the artist starts to wonder, what is love? Analogies emerge everywhere, but she realizes she has no idea what the thing itself is. It is the negative space of a drawing, its form determined only by what interrupts it.

For the inventor, on the other hand, ideas multiply, shooting new ones off each other. Every observation the artist makes, every fear or anxiety or worry or weakness she betrays, the inventor problem-solves like mad. She can create a device to fix anything.

Almost anything.

The couples therapist has a gray beard and a jocular laugh like the guys from Car Talk. He sprawls back in a wicker chair and puts on a pair of large wire-rim glasses, and his preferred term for sex is "lovemaking."

"I hate that word," the artist says as they close the door on their third session. "I never want to hear it again."

The inventor sets to work on making a device that silences annoying words and phrases. You can program in up to one hundred words and phrases—they start with "gal pal," "making love," "journal" as a verb, and the unbearably cloying "whimsy"—and clip it to a minuscule headset with an earpiece. Whenever someone says one of

these words or phrases, the headset recognizes it the moment before it reaches the wearer's ear and translates it into a substitute word.

This sort of works, but the earpiece is too sensitive and picks up other sounds that it then faultily translates. (This too: like love.) Another problem is that with the ability to filter annoying words, the artist and the inventor want to filter more and more of what the therapist is saying, so that they start to spend much of the sessions shooting meaningful glances to each other that mean Add that to the list.

Finally, they stop going.

The main difference from when they started is that their problems are now very clearly articulated.

The animal translator catches on. It is the subject of the most e-mailed article on the New York Times website for six days straight. The inventor is going to make a lot of money on it. She is invited to a special conference in Amsterdam in a month.

"Please come to Amsterdam with me," says the inventor to the artist, pausing at the door of the studio. She envisions them walking along the canals, flipping through racks of Dutch T-shirts and jeans, renting bicycles, a week in a hotel room with zero negative associations and a huge bed with a smooth comforter, white and clean as a blank sheet of paper.

The artist looks down at her empty sketchbook. "I have to watch the dog," she says.

"He can stay with our friends."

"He doesn't want to stay with our friends."

"Really?" The inventor holds up the translator prototype. "Want me to ask him?"

The artist opens her mouth, deflates with a sigh. "Look, I'm deathly afraid of flying," she says. "I could make it to New York, but no way am I capable of crossing an ocean."

The inventor narrows her eyes.

The artist slowly runs her pen down the paper and back up again, and the line turns into a rift splitting the earth beneath a saloon-shaped house.

Over the next three days the inventor creates a device that you install in airplane windows, a small screen that fills it and turns the view from vertiginous clouds into a rolling landscape. On the ascent you go up a hill, past mountain pastures with goats and scenically ramshackle barns; turbulence becomes a gravel road in a calming deep forest; the descent is a gentle downward slope toward a town nestled in the base of a valley. Once she gets the technology down, the inventor is able to quickly adapt it to other versions: an aquatic one, winding through the Great Barrier Reef, one that looks like space, one that uses Virtual Earth to simulate the actual landscape you're traveling above.

The inventor brings it back to the artist's studio and props it up in the window. The artist turns her easel away to face the wall.

"Look," says the inventor, pressing a button. The trees come into view, the vast sunny meadows. "You don't have to be afraid anymore."

"I need to be afraid of something," says the artist.

"What do you mean?" asks the inventor. "You don't have to live with fear. Think of the art you could make if you were fearless."

The artist shakes her head. "You want to put me above the rest of the world. I don't just mean the airplane. But I don't want to be above the world. I need to be in it."

"You don't have to fight it all the time."

"I want to fight it. That's what I do."

"Please, just come," says the inventor.

The artist reaches down to her belt and presses the button on the auto-responder.

Try as she might, the inventor cannot invent a device to prevent love from breaking down. People have invented spells for this, practiced witchcraft, drafted poems, placed desperate pleas and daily telephone calls, they have made sculptures and paintings and built buildings trying to win back love, but none of this will work, and she knows it.

And she can conjure nothing to invent. No one to invent for.

The absence of love is terrifying. It turns out to be not an emptiness, but a frightening solidity. Love was a sort of oxygen, and as it escapes, the space it filled in her turns to pure carbon, solid, dull and dark—evidence of life prior, with no life in and of itself. This attempt at science brings her no solace.

The only logic to the universe is that all matter will change form at some point—it will cease to exist as one thing, disperse, and go on to exist as parts of other things. And we will, too.

But that doesn't mean we won't fight it.

The artist, on the other hand, is starting to draw again. She draws tractors tipping over precipices, hang gliders caught in power lines, buildings imploding, a plane crashing into a town, a whole island sinking into the sea.

The dog rests his head on her foot as she works and works.

The inventor sits awake all night on her overseas flight. She presses her hot forehead to the cold, black window. A new thought comes to mind: How much does the inventor love the artist, and how much does she love the invention of the artist? She starts to consider: Love itself might be an invention, a device they created together.

Or did they each invent their own? And was it a device for the other person, or each for herself?

Were their devices incompatible?

She thinks: That was stupid.

And then she thinks: If I am ever going to invent again, I am going to have to invent love itself.

The inventor lands in Amsterdam and changes a small amount of her money for euros. She drops her suitcase in the hotel. The screen on the television says WELCOME and her name. The bed is crisp and smooth; a single bed, narrow as youth.

In Amsterdam she walks around the center for a while. The tourists are amazed by everything, bombed out on decadence, devouring pot cakes and tea and joints,

wandering around and splayed out in the grass in happy stupors. The tilting narrow buildings jammed up against the canal look like they'll topple forward or sideways, and the tourists photograph this. They gawk at the blunt sexual promise in the red-light district. The locals just live in it. They walk right through.

Sitting on a low stone canal wall, watching people blissed out on dope and novelty, the inventor, gets her last, best idea. The next day she changes all of her money into euros and transfers her bank account. She sets to work with her blood and vials and beakers. And she figures it out. It takes longer than anything else she's done, but she figures it out.

So now, out beyond the train station full of backpackers and scammers and hustlers; beyond the cafes where everyone is stoned and no one is Dutch; beyond the red-light district where the women stand in doorways and windows, black light making their white bras and panties glow alien-bright; out at the outer edge of it, on a side street by a canal, down slanted steps, there's a narrow black-painted wood door with a small square window cloaked in a tiny red velvet curtain, but no sign.

The inside is just wide enough for a bar and a row of stools. The bar is old wood, polished smooth by years of sweating hands gripping its edge and palming its surface. The stools are cushioned in red leather, with a low back for lumbar support. Support is important here. Behind the bar stands a woman in her early or mid-thirties, young enough to sustain hope yet mature enough to seem comforting, her hair pushed around and sticking out in haphazard tufts and waves, her eyes bright and calm.

You order the patch, and with it, a drink—just one drink. It thins your blood to speed the effect. Also, it will take the edge off and calm you down, so you don't freak out and lose all sense of self and judgment like you did, undoubtedly, when the feeling first hit you in real life.

Before you can drink the bartender asks you to push up your own sleeve. There's a risk in being a woman with kind eyes in this work, so she won't touch you like that. The needle goes in and the blood rises out, too quickly it seems, as if it's relieved to leave your body. In a second it's done, and she takes it to the back room to figure out what stage of withdrawal from love you're suffering—three months into the marriage, after the breakup, the untimely death, or the deadly cold feeling of looking in your lover's eyes and feeling nothing at all—to see if there's still some left in you, or, if you're a repeater, what tolerance you might have built up.

She'll ask you to lift your shirt; her fingers are warm and light, like rain, on your ribs as she affixes a soft small triangle of fabric to you. She smoothes the patch with her thumbs and steps away. You let your shirt fall.

And it starts. It starts all over again, is what it feels like. The caudate nucleus of your brain revs its engines; dopamine surges from your ventral tegmental area. That chronic sweet itch comes to life in your gut. Your senses brighten. Every limb and joint becomes aware of the motion it is miraculously capable of making. All the best parts of yourself—every trait, every part of you ever worth loving—they rouse and rise to the surface, tender and visible.

The patch is supposed to be a bridge back to a normal life; you're supposed to slowly phase it out, get used to being without love, and go find it for real again—but of

course, some never do. One of these is the person behind the bar. The inventor, whose fingers migrate absently to the patch on her ribs the way others twirl a lock of hair or chew a lip or drum fingers. She knows deep down it isn't exactly love, but it is exactly like love.

Open your eyes now, look: the bar glows. Each slumping, twitchy patron has turned into a portrait of humanity, more complex and beautiful than the sum of her flaws. That's you, too.

Everyone in this place is totally in love.

And they're all totally alone.