

Meditations in an Emergency

Lee Ann Roripaugh

The first time they're in NYC she's kidnapped by a taxi driver who doesn't speak English. He doesn't understand when she tells him another passenger's coming. The taxi peels out from the curb. It rocketships toward who-knows-where.

Stop, she keeps saying. We have to go back.

Mami, the driver finally says over his shoulder. No speak English.

Sweetheart? texts The Beloved, who's come out to the curb to find the taxi gone. Where did you go?

Their room in Park Slope's awkward. They notice the two cheesy paintings hung on the walls are *exactly the same*, which makes them laugh and laugh. They eat almond croissants in a Hello-Kitty-pink Asian bakery. The Beloved takes her to the Frick to see *Polish Rider*, because she hasn't been before and they can go for the first time together. They go to St. Marks and The Strand, watch a Harry Potter movie, eat biryani on East 6th Street. The next day, over brunch at The Smith, The Beloved tells her his therapist believes he's about four weeks away from finally leaving his marriage.

Earlier that morning, in the hotel, she overheard him singing in the other room while she brushed her teeth. When he sings this song, thinking she can't hear him, it always makes her cry a little.

*Just a perfect day,
problems all left alone,
weekenders on our own.
It's such fun.*

*Just a perfect day,
you made me forget myself.
I thought I was someone else.
Someone good.*

*Oh, it's such a perfect day,
I'm glad I spent it with you.
Oh, such a perfect day.
You just keep me hanging on.
You just keep me hanging on.*

On the train ride back to Park Slope that night, The Beloved becomes anxious. It's raining. The Beloved doesn't like rain. He says it's because his brain can't figure out the mathematical formula for how the drops are going to fall. As the train levitates on the bridge over the glittering city, he holds her hand and whispers baseball statistics into her ear.

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The second time they're in NYC they haven't seen each other in seven months—not since she broke up with The Beloved on the anniversary of the day they first met. She knows how to make a point, The Beloved says ruefully.

They stay at Hotel 17, and even though it's the day after Thanksgiving, The Beloved cranks the air conditioner up to Arctic Blast.

I'm so happy, he says. Let's stay here forever.

They order pork belly buns at Momofuku. They agree Momofuku's pork belly buns may be the most delicious in the known universe. They go to the *Chaos and Classicism* exhibition at the Guggenheim, where Jean Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet* makes them snicker. At the point in the film where the sculptor shoots himself in the head, then smashes his own statue with a sledgehammer, they're almost beside themselves with laughter. Other museumgoers start to give them stink-eye, so they continue circling the nautilus spiral. On the taxi ride to LaGuardia, the driver asks if they're returning from their honeymoon.

Not this time, says The Beloved.

At the airport, their planes are delayed because of weather. The Beloved becomes nervous. He says he hates airports. He frets about his flight.

What's the worst that could happen? she asks.

There could be a psychopath on the plane who splits my head open with an axe, he says. Then he'll massacre all the other passengers before the plane goes down in an apocalyptic ball of flame, destroying an entire town.

They get coffee, share a chocolate croissant, wave at a cute baby.

I want to have another baby! The Beloved exclaims.

She stares at him. He's caught her off guard.

With *whom*? she asks.

With you, silly! he says, though now he's starting to sound unsure of himself. But you're married to somebody *else*, she says.

I always say the wrong thing, he says. He shuts down and takes a Klonopin. There's an emergency at work. He replies to e-mails on his phone. She hears him humming softly under his breath.

*I'm a loser, baby
so why don't you kill me.*

When he gets called for standby on an alternate flight they hastily say goodbye. Around 9:00 p.m., her delayed flight's cancelled and she's rebooked for the first flight out early the next morning.

It's already late, so she decides to spend the night at La Guardia. She texts all her friends, East Coast to West Coast, until one by one, they go to bed. She asks one of her former lovers in the city to come meet her for coffee, but he's still pissed at her, and hangs up the phone. At 1:00 a.m., TSA employees lock down the gates, herding stranded passengers toward the Au Bon Pain in the main terminal. An airport employee smokes a joint in the shelter while she waits for the shuttle. Homeless people sleep under newspapers on benches just inside the main terminal doors.

After eating some soup, she unpacks her camera. She takes a picture of a young woman in the yellow glare of Au Bon Pain. The woman wears a plaid hat and sleeps with her head on the table, using her black duffel bag as a makeshift pillow. The woman's baby naps by her side in a stroller. A yellow balloon floats up like an unexpected song, tethered to the stroller on the end of a blue ribbon.

She calls this picture "Yellow Balloon."

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The last time they're in NYC they spend the first night walking around the neon fanfare of Times Square. When she gets overstimmed, The Beloved puts her in a cab and takes her to eat tong shu at Just Sweet. The next day they go to St. Mark's and The Strand. They buy comics at Forbidden Planet. At the Kid Robot store, they leave with ridiculous amounts of urban vinyl, then sit on a bench on the median of West Houston, traffic streaming by on either side, opening their blind boxes. She's partial to Tokidoki. He gives her his duplicates.

On their way to lunch at The Smith, they pass a brick building with a brontosaurus painted in a yellow halo on the side, its tail curled below a window. She tells him she wants to live in that apartment, encircled by that brontosaurus.

It's summer, and they're seated at the front of the restaurant, which has been opened up to the street. People walk by with their dogs. It's a cute dog parade! She points out the dogs she likes best to him. He says her best laugh is reserved for animals.

He tells her this is the year he's finally leaving his marriage. He says they should talk about their plans. He says he wants her to come live with him and his daughters the following summer.

She doesn't have the heart to point out that they've had this conversation before. The first time she agreed to live with The Beloved it was a huge fucking deal. He lives in a city she's been known to refer to as Satan's Asshole. It was such a big deal she immediately texted her BFF, to say she'd just agreed to spend the summer in Satan's Asshole. I thought you hated Satan's Asshole, the BFF texted back.

So what do you think? The Beloved asks. Is this something you'd be willing to consider?

Of course! she says, mostly because she loves The Beloved, but also because she feels pretty sure she's not going to have to move to Satan's Asshole anytime soon.

Oh, you make me so happy! he says, and they kiss in the front of the restaurant with the summertime NYC people and summertime NYC dogs streaming by. Their waiter comes by to top off their coffee, tells them they're his favorite customers of the day.

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It's a year since their last visit to NYC. The Beloved calls her on the phone in the middle of the day. He's just returned from a consultation with a divorce attorney.

I feel like I need to immediately repress the last hour of my life, he says.

What's making you anxious? she asks.

I don't want to talk to the other person who lives in the house, he says.

You mean your *wife*? she says.

Yes, he says. What if she stabs me to death in front of our daughters? he asks. Or maybe she'll convince me I'm Satan.

If you're Satan, we'll be the perfect couple, she says. Since I'm the Anti-Christ.

Please don't say that, Angel Egg, he says. Stop saying you're the Anti-Christ.

No one appreciates my Anti-Christ schtick, she says. Even though it's my *thing*.

Because Satan *sucks*, he says.

Huh? she says.

Don't you know the Cub song?

The who song? she asks.

The Cub song, he says. He sings it for her. Slow and soft, over the phone.

*Satan sucks, but you're the best
Holy smokes, you passed the test
When I'm with you, I feel blessed
My chinchilla*

*Satan sucks, but you're okay
Since you came, things go my way
Here tomorrow, here today
My chinchilla*

*One day I woke up and everything was beautiful
My troubles had all fallen out the window*

*Satan sucks, but you're divine
Sitting pretty by my side
My, oh my,
My chinchilla*

Isn't that a good song? he asks.

Best song ever, she says.

Lee Ann Roripaugh is the author of four volumes of poetry: *Dandarians* (Milkweed Editions, 2014), *On the Cusp of a Dangerous Year*, *Year of the Snake*, and *Beyond Heart Mountain*.