

Sick in Detroit

There are four things I've never told you, four things I've kept hidden. Of course, there are many more than that—countless things I've kept hidden from you over the years, obscured through omission or hidden by lies, but there are four things I've never told you about that day I'm sure you remember, the day we got sick.

The first: I didn't go to the park after dropping you off. Those late November winds were bitter, yes, but that wasn't what stopped me. If I wanted, I could have braved the river's chill and waited patiently in my favorite parking spot, the one that looks toward Detroit's tiny skyline, and read my book while you took photos with Julia. But I did not want that. I wanted to visit the museum. I wanted to see a painting.

Shortly after buying a ticket, my gut squelched for the thousandth time that morning. Both our stomachs made noises on our drive down to the city, the sounds of liquid chyme passing through the tightening sieve of our intestines. You blamed the food of the day before—the Taco Bell customary to our road trips—whereas I rued the breakfast my father served: frozen French Toast Sticks with hot, plastic syrup cups; unrefrigerated, microwaved bacon; hot chocolate from the Keurig.

If we knew then what we knew now, we never would have left home, let alone drive to Detroit. We'd have stayed cooped up in Illinois, with our own bed and bathroom. However, since we knew nothing, we visited my parents, we drove to Detroit. This is why I'm glad I visited the museum that day, all things considered, even if going without you felt like a small betrayal.

Unlike the steel, unventilated toilets of the park or the guarded lavatories of city stores and skyscrapers, the museum had bathrooms aplenty.

I thought visiting the museum alone would be useful. With a clear, dispassionate eye, I'd see the paintings for what they were: pieces of art. Without a companion, I'd be free to ruminate in complex thought and ready my soul for epiphany. If you were with me, we'd walk the halls spending more time reminiscing than looking at paintings. We'd relive our memories and joke about the cartoonish proportions—the pieta in which Mary's agony looks animated, for example; when we see it together, we laugh, but alone, it touches me deep within my heart, sliding a finger into the wound of my ventricle. I needed to be alone. The week ahead at my parents predicted night after night of bad television. The months behind us in rural Illinois were little better. I needed to feel like an intellectual, if only for an afternoon.

An art-deco mirror dashed these hopes. It was the first thing I saw after buying a ticket, moved to an incongruent hallway beside African Art by some incompetent curator. Its old home was on the ghostly third floor, tucked deep in the back, hardly seen by anyone. We took a photo in front of the mirror the first week you visited. The unexpected sight of the mirror stopped me, maybe even scared me. I scanned through my phone, scrolling far back in its memory until I found that photo: me and you, young and bashful. Your head twisted to the side, your face blurred, your skin a swirl of miscellaneous shades. I stared straight ahead, like a colossus, my hand swallowing the phone so only the lens remained.

This was the same mirror. Whether or not I was the same person was harder to say. I was much skinnier, then, in that photo. I wore slim-fitting, fashionable clothes, far removed from

what I wear now: things loose and comfortable, not bought from boutiques, but from stores that sold things other than shirts and pants, such as food.

You, for your part, looked like an early version of who you would become, showing the burgeoning traces of grace, modesty, and elegance I would learn to love about you. Your dress of crushed black velvet, while not something you would wear now, looks good. A thin necklace hung across your chest, the pendant small and silver. A heart. Or was it a cross? I couldn't remember. Even zooming in, I couldn't see. It became a muddled, metal brand.

Had things been different, I thought as I walked away from that misplaced mirror, past the African Art, past the courtyard, past the small cafeteria, onward and upward, climbing the steps, finding the unnecessarily convoluted hallway that led to European: Medieval and Renaissance, would I still be with you? Had you, say, met me after my metabolism bested me, had you seen me now in this museum, on this cold November day, years past our first meeting, had you become the person you are without me, would you have taken interest?

Impossible to say, though the answer is likely no, despite what you would protest, despite your belief in love and its strength. I was no longer a catch. I looked like a slob, a man who came in from the streets because it was warm, undeserving of a second glance, let alone a hello, a disclosure of confidence, a risk of conversation.

And, at that, I felt sentimental, my dreams of objectivity gone. Sentimental, melancholy, and lucky, but lucky in a roue's way, where my fortune came at another's miss. I had tricked you.

Thus, when I arrived in the first room of European: Medieval and Renaissance, the wood-paneled one, with a tapestry covering an entire wall, I no longer desired to see the painting I had most wanted to see that day: *The Wedding Dance* by Bruegel the Elder. I loved this chaotic scene. Nothing explicit is shown, yet it reeks of vulgarity, not least on account of the faces worn by the revelers. Eyes tilt out of heads, their blank gazes animalistic and greedy.

I ignored *The Wedding Dance*, instead admiring the tapestry, an altarpiece, a triptych, and a forgettable Golgotha before seeing the final two paintings in the room outside the Bruegel, both small and arranged vertically.

Portraits, one of a man, one of a woman. The woman was young, presumedly in her thirties, but for all I knew, she could have been as small as sixteen. Her skin was flawless, her features dainty, her eyes and nose looked collected and purposeful. She wore an encumbered headdress that looked crossed between a turban and brassiere. Most beautiful, though, was the background of her portrait—deep cobalt, impossibly vibrant for the age of the painting, yet too veined to suggest major restoration. I was stunned.

Above her was the man. He must have been wealthy, draped in dark and regal furs as he was. In his hand, a small, unreadable piece of paper. On his head, a black cap, flat like a pancake. He looked dignified, uninterested in what was happening before him, as if sitting for a portrait was an obligation he respected but did not understand. The background was a clammy grey. His chin extended onto chest and spilled over his collar. Even in a mode as flattering as portraiture, he was fat and unsightly.

I tugged at my sweater, pinching the front and pulling it forward, taking it as far away from my body as possible before it lethargically snapped back to its form, hoping that with each pinch it'd cling to my body less. This is a habit I always notice in children, especially when they are on fieldtrips and there is a chubby one among the group. They are always the ones stretching their Nike tees, they are the ones that think no one notices, that think a looser fit will solve the problem, just as they think wearing a shirt into the pool will convince their classmates that they, too, are skinny. I notice this because I was once that child. During the brief time between decades that I was skinny, I thought I had left that shame behind. Standing in front of those two miniature Dutch portraits, it was clear I had returned.

I walked out of the room, away from *The Wedding Dance* with a sigh. My mood had not improved or even leveled off. I felt myself sinking lower into despair, wishing you were done seeing your friend so we could be together, eat lunch and reminisce.

Suddenly, my gut spoke against me. I doubled over, a small dagger in my waistband turned downward in betrayal. A siren of gurgling erupted from my stomach. Something was happening. I tightened every muscle I could and stalked away, sweating in my heavy coat. The bathroom, blissfully, was empty. Out my body flowed water, and I braced myself against the metal of the stall. It was a pattern of relief and pain. Relief while I emptied, but pain when it was over, and the next wave had not yet begun. Aches radiated from a stone in my torso. When the movement finally felt complete, I delicately lifted the thin, bristled toilet paper to my underside. Merely touching it to skin left the paper wet and brown.



The end of a bowel movement signals the rare true conclusion. Unlike the dissolution of an affair, for example, there are no frayed knots preserved in the porcelain bowl. Likewise, there's not much to ponder in the way we do after closing a book or walking away from a painting. It's rare to think back on our voiding, lest one saw something notable in there, like the dark red taint of blood. I relished this feeling, and it always has me buoyant.

My emergency took me away from the medieval wing and, in this happy daze, I found myself deposited amongst the Impressionists. It would do good to spend time here, I thought, in a better mood, bathing in the unique post-defecation euphoria, thinking the worst was over. The impossible colors and thick, sloppy brushstrokes would act as a reset, a cleansing of the pallet.

But this was not to be. I caught only a glimpse of pigment: a robin's egg blue, a midnight shade, a blonde swirl, before my stomach took umbrage. Again, I ran back to the bathroom, and again, I agonized on the toilet, sweating, squinting my eyes, pressurizing my molars into diamonds, nearly pounding the stall walls, praying with the veracity of the foxholed, cautiously verifying the supply of toilet paper. After fifteen minutes, seven of which were spent with my forehead embracing the boned caps of my knees, I left the bathroom with renewed determination, until I was once again called back.

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I spent an hour in this waltz between gallery and bathroom. It was amazing how much fluid my body held, how much solid had been converted to liquid, how much food to trash. Dehydration was a danger, and I knew I needed water, far more water than I could pucker from those limp public fountains. More pressing, however, was the burning between my cheeks, the stinging bite

as I sat and walked, even as I stood in a sad failure of appreciation before a Van Gogh. Instead of intaking the art, instead of having an experience, all I could concentrate on was the itch of my sphincter, the ominous ripple in my colon.

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The second thing I haven't told you is about a painting. The other, third thing I've hidden from you is also about a painting. These two situations happened years apart—the first I'll tell you about is the second that happened, whereas the second I'll tell you about is the first that happened. If this is confusing to you, I understand. Just remember these things are nestled together like Russian Dolls in my mind. They are part of the same experience, even if they are separate.

Before we moved away, I visited the museum alone for the first time.

Of the paintings I saw that day, two stood out. One was a Kirchner: *Winter Landscape in Moonlight*. It stood out because it did not. The other, a Van Gogh: *Portrait of the Postman Joseph Roulin*. First, the Van Gogh.

My father has regularly taken us to the museum, always after our gigantic lunches, where he'd treat us to multiple courses with bottles of wine before suggesting we walk off our bulging stomachs amongst the art. I know how he embarrasses you, especially in that hallway where the museum keeps the most well-knowns: those sex-addicted melancholiacs of the continent whose works are known to everyone—their paintings on coffee cups, posters, iPhone cases. These were Dad's favorites. He had points of reference for them. They were situated in context. In that famous hallway, he'd lean over to one of us (usually me) and, the smell of whatever we had

eaten still on his breath, be it sauerkraut or mole sauce or fish oil or crusty bread, whisper the first name of the artist with the closeness of an embrace: Pablo. Vince. Claude.

Because of Dad and people like him, we always rebelled against the cultural jewels. Whether it was this museum or any other, those familiar paintings were the ones we'd give the least attention to, instead searching for some dusty, cracked still life tucked into a corner, some contemporary installation that made no sense, least of all to us. We disdained anything popular, anything known. We wrote it off with a young zeal as untrue.

I was shocked, then, when I saw the portrait of the postman, done so lovingly and flightily by Van Gogh, and realized I was wrong. The painting held me, and I stood there. I saw the curlicues of his gold jacket buttons set against swaths of midnight, the prolific spaces of raw canvas that existed impossibly amidst the thick, lacquered baby paint of the brush, and, in the postman's eyes, a sadness that matched my own. The seed of a relationship sprouted in my stomach. Me and the postman knew each other. I stepped closer to the painting, as close as I could before the alarm went off. My nose practically touched the non-reflective glass. I clasped my hands behind my back, almost in a pastiche of an art-goer, and minutes passed, or what felt like minutes, and tears came to my eyes—how had I ignored something so beautiful, so colorful, how had I refused to see anew what I had seen so many times before, how had I scoffed at the effort?

Vince, I whispered.

I know. So like my father. So like the people we did not like. But this is what happened to me. I was moved. This must be strange for you to read, as you so often accuse me of having no

emotion. I am moved by nothing—death, art, sex, love. You never see me cry. However, as you can see, it sometimes happens. Tears do come. But, like so many other things, I have no idea why.

I cried more often when I was younger, before we met. I was more emotional then. I've never told you this because I never thought you'd believe me, easy as it is for one to slander the past. There isn't an easier target for blame or ridicule than the person you used to be, their open back turned to you, the knife of time in your hand. I'll give you an example. The third thing I haven't told you. The Kirchner painting, the littlest doll in this stack of memories.

The first time I saw *Winter Landscape in Moonlight* was years ago, before we met, before we dreamed of meeting. I was at the museum with an old roommate, and I was entrapped in a miasmic anhedonia, a blooming pillar of fear and despair opened within me. I felt terrible. The true cause, however, was simple: I no longer loved the girl I was seeing, though I was too paralyzed to admit this at the time.

Kirchner's painting snapped me out of this funk when I saw it. It gave my world color again, made me feel capable of love, of loving. The moon in his painting, with a press of horsehair in yellow and burgundy, is a setting sun. The trees purple, the mountains blue. It looks out of time and place, an almost textbook definition of transcendence. The placard beside it said Kirchner painted the scene on the tail end of a mental despondency, and the painting was to signal his emotional and spiritual rebirth. Yes, I thought then, looking both at the painting and the placard. It's a sign of rebirth for me, too. I felt happy, calm, and excited all at once.

Years later, when I went to the museum alone again before we moved, I expected a return to breathlessness and joy at *Winter Landscape in Moonlight*, a similar exiting of the wet canal.



Instead, there was nothing.

This painting which had so moved me became one among many canvases, another of the unlucky labors that are given only seconds of our time. It's descent into normalcy inspired in me both a cold dismissal of juvenilia and warm smile of condescension. I wondered if it was the placard that had transposed me that day, if I had been under the thumb of its influence, or if my reaction was genuine.

This happened shortly before I saw *Portrait of the Postman Joseph Roulin*, before I nearly cried seeing dried oils. The thought strikes me now that perhaps my reaction to the Van Gogh was nothing more than a delayed reaction to the Kirchner—that my tears for one were actually for another, that my emotion needed time to ferment. If this is true, you may one day see another delay. If, in the future, I am crying over something ridiculous, or furious over something trivial, it may just be our current years finally catching up with me.

Why didn't I tell you these things as they happened? Because I couldn't explain them. I was afraid of what they might say about me.

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You were going through your own gauntlet as I was going through mine. Whereas I passed from bathroom to gallery, gallery to bathroom, spending seconds in front of a painting before going back again (seconds in front of Van Gogh and Kirchner—not thinking about the effect those paintings had on me, or had had on me, but thinking of how much longer I could be away from the toilet, my anus burning from the rough toilet paper, my legs shaking from weakness), you were downtown, in that impossible bastion of skyscrapers, their toilets guarded by uniformed

men, and the occasional portable, always filthy and ransacked. You were taking a photo when your stomach rebelled, that infinite space between a finger's pressure and a shutter's click; you braced yourself, as if shot by an arrow (that photo, we would later see, came out blurry, Julia's face blurred like yours in that old photo on my phone).

You managed to charm your way into an upscale restaurant and use their bathroom—the lights were dim, you told me, and white-shirted waiters sat neatly in a row as they rolled weighty silverware into wine-red napkins. You texted me from the bathroom. I needed to pick you up. Now.

I couldn't leave the museum. Like the paintings I came for, the exit door was unknowable, denied to me. I'd get a bit closer each time, but ultimately have to run back to the bathroom while you, across town, were in yours, one undoubtedly private with a jar full of cinnamon sticks sunk in vanilla oil, plush hand towels instead of rough brown paper. With each minute that passed, I'm sure those gracious waiters and maître d's glanced sidelong at each other, wondering what on earth you were doing in that bathroom, whether it was an emergency or whether you might be doing drugs, whether you were someone standup, or one of the dreadful vagrants their bathroom policy was meant to restrict.

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This leads to the fourth thing I never told you. Unlike the second and third, I know exactly what this says about me, and I haven't told you because it makes me ashamed.

It happened the exact night before we left Detroit. Back then, I thought it served as the city's good riddance to my presence. My friends took me to Donovan's, that empty bar with a

generous parking lot off the freeway marooned between two neighborhoods, a veritable no-man's land. Four of us held a table near the door, lukewarm bottles of Hamm's in three of our hands, a sickly-sweet glass of syrupy Coke in the paw of the one who was then sober. The weather, as I'm sure you remember, was unseasonably cold. We all wore jackets, even inside.

The door burst open, and in walked a man, long spirals of hair dangled from his skull, his hairline receded into a negative widow's peak, and his dishwater beard hung well below his chin. He, too, wore a coat, but it was unzipped, and underneath was what could only be a little girl's outfit—a pink, bedazzled tank top with SpongeBob on the front, his yellow hands lay flat where buds of breasts would usually be. The stranger's legs were bare from the knee down. Around his waist, he wore a skimpy tutu patterned with stars and rainbows, though the prevailing color was also pale coral, like the top. I need to use your bathroom, the man shouted, like an alien, eyes dead ahead.

Go ahead, take a piss, man, I don't give a shit, said the bartender. The stranger peg-walked into the blue walled bathroom, the door swinging shut behind him as if a saloon. My friends and I were silent, as were the rest of the few patrons. An uneasiness fell, a stillness to which only the bartender's dog, a milky Pitbull, was immune, or perhaps was most sensitive, as the dog immediately rose from its grounded spot in the corner and cased the entrance to the bathrooms, like a bomb sniffer.

Slowly, we resumed our beers and Coke, and the minutes passed. The bartender muttered under his breath.

I was scared. Our table was the closest to the bathroom, closest to the door; I was the first to see the stranger when he walked in, throwing the door out from the cold. Thus, I'd be the first person they'd see exiting the bathroom. Paranoia dictated they had a gun, and I'd be in their line of sight, dead to rights. Tightness gripped my chest. I was sure I was going to die. The only comfort I had was in the dueled form of the friends sitting across from me. If the stranger did decide to open fire, it's possible that my friends, not me, would be the first to go, and in the commotion, I'd be able to take cover, or, better yet, leave the bar altogether.

Eventually, the stranger left the bathroom the same way they came—oddly and in a hurry.

What isn't there to be ashamed about this? Using my friends as human shields? Suspecting a strange, bearded man because he dressed like a little girl? How cowardly of me. How ignorant. I didn't want to tell you, despite how fantastic the incident was, because I knew how it'd come off.

I tell you now because I felt myself a palimpsest of that bearded man during my dreadful day in the museum. I can imagine what the guards thought of me, what the manicured servers thought of you: two people bursting into an establishment making demands (even if my demands were unspoken). Luckily, they bothered neither of us, just as the bartender didn't bother the bearded man. They preserved our dignity.

I was, bothered, though. During my last trip to the bathroom. This is the fifth thing I didn't tell you, though it may just be an extension of the first.

I had almost made it to the door, almost to my car—I had made it far enough that I could use the bathrooms closest to the lobby, the busiest with the most stalls. I sat in despair, wondering how any more could be rung out of me.

I walked a group of boys. I had seen school busses idly purring along the street early that morning, and the activity rooms were full of screaming children, busy making collages out of torn bits of papier-mâché and patterned cutouts of construction paper. At first, the boys kept to themselves. One slapped the sink counter in a rhythm, another sang along to it.

Then they needed more. They pounded on the stall doors, all empty except mine. I heard them as they came down the line, each thump sending the brushed stainless door flying back into the wall, its compatriot, increasing the noise, increasing their pleasure.

When they got to my stall (it was clear I was the only one in the bathroom), the door did not fly loose from its weak lock like the others but stayed in place. They pounded again. I said nothing, but the group of boys laughed. The pounder kept at it. How I longed to yell at them, to threaten them, to swear! But I was powerless. If I had said anything, this would have inspired them to even more mischief. And, what's more, I was stuck where I was. I, or should I say my body, still wasn't done. I still cradled my belly and rubbed it in an attempt to sooth. While the one was still thumping my door, another boy crumbled toilet paper into a ball and threw it into my stall, where it landed at my feet. I tilted back my neck, ready for the next humiliation.

As it began, it was over. The boys left, presumedly under the gun of a chaperone unafraid to twist their ears. The bathroom door swung on its silent swivel, and I was alone and grateful.

A second later, however, it opened again, and I heard, from an injected head: I know you taking a doo-doo, but your butt stank.

Well, then. So it did. And there was nothing I could do.

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You waited for me outside the restaurant that had been your refuge, your face a grimace of pain, clutching your torso as I had mine. On the hour's drive back to my parent's, we stopped multiple times—not for me (I was graciously empty), but for you.

I idled in fast food parking lots as you headed her body's calls. Back at home, we took to bed straight away, both of us sweating and feverish, and we spent a restless afternoon kicking the heavy blankets off our legs, until a chill had us grasping for them once again. A day later, I got sick again, a cold virus the culprit this time. My throat swelled, my nose stuffed, my limbs ached. You were struck not long after, and during our remaining days in Michigan, we waged a battle on two fronts: the stomach bug, and the horrible, unyielding flu.

Not much happened during our twined illnesses. Sleep came according to its own timetable, but even then, was interrupted—I'd wake up coughing, or I'd jolt to the bathroom. While we were awake, we didn't attempt to read, instead opting for my parent's cable package and all the shows we had yet to watch, the commercials we needed to catch up on.

These few sentences describe the little I actually did while I was sick, the sickest I have ever been, but fail to encapsulate how I felt. Like dying. Drained of all fluids, my throat too thick to drink water, I languished about like a dog. If I were to die right now, I thought then, if the

various bugs attacking my body were to coalesce into sepsis and shut down my organs, I would leave this plane in a state of apathy, too weak to fight. I had no energy for final goodbyes, for reflections, for an awareness of death.

This is how things seemed. Thoughts floated through my mind like vitreous bits. Perhaps this is how death is, it occurred to me one afternoon on the cold leather couch in the basement, some movie or another on the television, slipping in and out of sleep, just as I slipped in and out of the bathroom between naps, one time even falling asleep on the toilet, tired as I was of waiting for my system to flush; there is nothing literary, cinematic, or artistic about death; it strikes most in the state I was in: unawares, pathetic, and longing for peace. Death happens only for a witness, it is a spectacle, a corpse bathed in silken moonlight, a young man among many on a slaughtered field, a martyrdom. Flashes of the paintings I passed in the museum rushed through my mind.