
FICTION | SPRING 2017

GALAXY

By Lizzie Martin

Two weeks after I turned 25, after a year of 80-hour work weeks and checking an actual pager and apologizing to the people in accounting for things my boss did and then to my boss for things people in accounting hadn't done, my left eyelid started to twitch. I had stress dreams: I woke up pulling at my shirt, convinced that my heart had become an organ outside my body, burbling with frothy liquid, attached by cords of tendon and muscle to my collarbone. You didn't exist for me yet, then.

My dad asked me where the new job would be. I said Colombia. He said, Maryland? I thought, things are really gaping at the seams, here. I didn't know you, yet. You didn't hold it all together. There was no gravity.

Then, I was running away. I had that tiresome self-directed ache of anticipatory disappointment. I remember buying the plane ticket, thinking, this is better.

On the tarmac, the air smelled defiant. I could sense the mountains nearby, I thought; I could feel the way the earth had moved once and might move again, worlds ending and beginning. Nothing I overheard was in English, and my mind closed around itself, quiet.

When I say I don't know what to do without you, that's not what I mean.

I'm 26. I speak enough Spanish. I can order in restaurants and give directions to cab drivers and tell you you're handsome when we meet at a bar popular with expats in the area. We dance. We eat with our hands. We can't tell the coins apart; we get ripped off in taxis; we take photos with locals who offer again and again to teach us to salsa. We teach English, language of unnoticed constellations of tenses: I should have, I might have, I could have, I will have. We buy bananas. We make bilingual jokes. We are barefoot; there is salt and citrus, laughter. Our skin holds the sun under breezes and stars.

We sweat under ceiling fans and run out of money. We go back to a new home, we meet each other in what feels like real life, as if for the first time. We unpack the experience, put it on our resumes. We only buy fair trade coffee.

Four years of new jobs. Peanut butter, scrambled eggs, Yuengling. A new city, a two-bedroom, taxes, insurance claims. I'm washing the dishes and you stand behind me, arms around my waist. Ultrasounds, chicken pox, finger painting. I miss a soccer game; you miss the talent show; we both call in sick on Colonial Day. I get promoted; you quit; we have it all. Volleyball tournaments, college visits, standardized tests. Extra-long twin size sheets, shower shoes. Two golden retrievers, an herb garden. Cancer, once, your mother. Heart attack, mine. Three book clubs. We are a galaxy.

When it starts, you don't forget me. You don't lose your keys or misplace the remote or leave the lights on. You forget you. Things you hear places, you think you thought them. I don't recognize you, porous, oozing things that don't belong, not as gentle anymore. You talk about buying a gun, for protection. The dreams come back: my heart, foreign, external, throbbing black tar into my hands. Ropes of bare muscle tie it to my neck.

You sign the divorce papers in a moment of clarity; I'm not leaving, you understand, briefly. It's for your own good, your doctor confirms. This is to protect you from the thing that has hold of your mind. This is part of the treatment. The disease is more than a disease; it's a constellation, too. Your body, your mind, our lives: they all stretch across the sky, stars that are really just the light leftover from stars that have already died, blinking out as soon as we spot them. I won't think about the way it ended, your teeth falling out when the nurse brushed your gums with a sponge on a stick. The curl of your fingers, your hands curving into claws. You weren't there; you wouldn't remember; I won't remind you.

In the beginning, you didn't like me to know that you smoked, once in a while; we were still worried, then, about impressions, each revelation a referendum. But I went to high school down the street from a tobacco factory. It smelled like home but tasted different on your breath. You quit, eventually.

Now, another plane. The same air, the same street. The apartment building is a hotel with free cocktails at sunset. I meet a missionary, a novelist, a diplomat on vacation: everyone I could have been, otherwise.

There's a house for sale down the street; there's a visa job for a copy-editor, ten hours a week, advertised on the telephone pole out front.

My hair is white, now, but they recognize me anyway. They miss you. They tell me how you used to take me to work on the back of your bike, how I'd laugh and wave, how my hair blew back from my face.

It's just one kid, at first, in a Spurs t-shirt, saying, Auntie, I need to learn to read, I think, how hard can it be. The next day, he brings a friend in a baseball cap. They bring four more, braids and yellow flip flops and matching school uniforms. I start combing for lice after class.

At night, when the kids are gone and the house shifts, empty, and the breeze moves shadows across the floor, I walk to the cigarette stand you didn't know I knew you knew about and buy two.

Your husband lets you smoke, the vendor asks. I don't have a husband, I say, and regret it, and the lie hangs in the air, and I want to unzip my skin and shrug it off, step out of it and become something else. Something that doesn't remember being in orbit, something that always free fell.

Lizzie Martin is a writer living in Washington, DC, whose work has appeared in *The Adroit Journal*, *plain china*, and *District Lines*; has been recognized by Princeton University's Lewis Center for the Arts; and was named Notable Nonrequired Reading in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2014*.