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SPIN

The day fell to pieces in the green glare of midnight. Junk mail, voicemail, email. Dates etched on a screen with a tiny inkless pen. I glance at the clock. I can still get about four hours sleep before my plane leaves. I carefully unscrew my head, place it on the nightstand by the electric clock, and settle myself in bed.

The alarm buzzes an empty good morning too soon for satisfaction; I'll sleep on the plane. Shaking off the remains of nebulous dreams I reach to the nightstand as I have for years to replace my head and begin the day. But something is wrong; it's gone.

The head with long black hair, brown eyes and a tiny mark on the edge of the chin where I fell into a rose bush when I was seven is not on the nightstand. Hands carefully scan the small surface of the table, the heavy rectangle of the clock, a glow in the dark pen, a thin notebook with a line or two of dreams, but no head. Not even the yellow scarf I was wearing last night.

Flat on my belly, the edge of my neck tickles the Persian rug in my room as I search the underside of the bed. I try to quell the rising panic, to breathe. This is a brief interjection, an irritation. *Everything passes* cruises back and forth across my mind,

dutifully, as I have trained it to do at the first sign of anxiety. The second alarm rings. Now I should be screwing on my head, turning on the coffee pot, and starting water for a shower. But there is nothing. Not so much as a barrette or an ear next to shoeboxes and spare sheets under my bed.

My feet hit the floor and wobble in uncertain darkness. The gape of my neck aches in this startled vertical, I sit back down. The third alarm rings steadily as I rehearse the night before. What was out of the ordinary? What happened before I came into the bedroom? Did I leave my head by the computer? Was I that tired? I'm going to miss the plane; I can't miss that plane!

Return to the nightstand for a second check. Hands search the pillow. Fingers trace my own empty neck just in case I forgot and left my head on last night. No such luck.

The phone rings and I hear myself answer with a prerecorded message. "Hi, it's me. I'll be out until early August but please leave word here. If it's urgent, call my cell. Thanks and have a great day."

"Hey, it's Marion. Just wanted to wish a great trip!"

My friend's voice ushers in an indulgence I don't have time for, I think of what I might do if she were here to help me. I would lie headless on the bed sobbing. But I don't have the time for that particular luxury.

Hands reach across the short space between bed and dresser for the waiting tickets. Fear rises to the tips of my fingers and shakes them. Where is my head?! This can't be happening.

I think back to the night before. Head unscrewed as usual, placed on the nightstand by the clock. I fell asleep quickly. On hands and knees I traverse every inch of the bed, trying to forget that the clock is ticking off numbers as I resume my search. “It will be solved before you know it,” I whisper to calm myself. No one’s head just disappears in the night. It’s going to be fine. It’s probably right there on the floor by the table, maybe with a little black eye where it fell, nothing that a little make-up won’t cover. At least you’ll have your head and arrive on time. I want to call a taxi. I want to call Marion back. I want this to not be the way this morning is going where is my head!

Enough. Sit down. Be calm. It is here somewhere and you will find it. Not on the bed. Not on the nightstand. Ok, the computer. Feet weave a blind shuffling pattern to the office where I collapse in the chair. Hands on computer screen, the desk. Clean now, ready for departure. Notes answered, bills paid, suitcase open on the floor. No head. Now what?

What happened before bed? I cleaned the desk. Got things ready for the flight. Put my tickets on the dresser. And before that, what? Let’s see, I had drinks with friends to wish me luck. Was there anything out of the ordinary, any encounters with unfamiliar people? No. Nothing. We went to a little, Italian place in Los Feliz. We drank wine and laughed a lot. And then we drove home.

No, wait. We couldn’t drive home. When we came out, the car wouldn’t start. We tried everything, and then decided to leave it until the morning and to call a taxi. We couldn’t find one, so we went back in and the manager called one for us. On the way home, we dropped the others off first before heading into the hills to my apartment.

Everything was fine. But when we arrived at my place, I didn't have enough money left for a tip. The guy got mad.

Oh, what happened after that? I paid the fare and went in and, ok, feel your way back to the bedroom. Lie down. Don't worry, you left extra time. You won't miss the flight. Work this out first then you can rush into the shower and get coffee on the plane.

Did that guy? No, just try to remember. Think of what's real. Lie down. Bed. Back. Legs, arms, hands, feet, headless. Breathe.

The ride was calm enough. The guy came from El Salvador. He had a heavy accent and I remember asking him in Spanish how long he had lived here. It was a bit of a drive and we got into a heavy conversation about his life. I think he was surprised that I spoke Spanish and he started telling me all about himself. He had had a girlfriend back home, Silvia. She was beautiful and, he told me wistfully, she looked kind of like you. I was glad for the screen between the seats in the cab.

He told me they met when they were kids and fell in love at sixteen. He sold drugs for a while to save money to move to the city. When he had almost enough, they got engaged and planned to leave. But the next night, Silvia was disappeared.

There is a thud in the silence that follows this strange conjugation. When I got home—I remember now—I looked it up. I was curious by the way this verb has developed a passive tense. The fourth definition in the Webster's online dictionary: "to make a political opponent disappear by arresting or killing the person without any process of law."

They had called him in for questioning two months before the engagement and disappearance. He said they were looking for someone he didn't know. He had told them

the truth. Before they let him go, he was beaten up pretty badly. On his way home he spent most of the little money he had on a pair of big, gold hoop earrings that were the fashion for girls at the time. He wanted to give Silvia a present for waiting for him. She kissed him and wore them every day.

It comes back in pieces—when we got to my place, I checked my purse and realized I barely had enough money to cover the fare. I asked him to wait while I went up to get it but he got mad. He started screaming at me. I was spooked, gave him the money I had, and ran up the stairs. My heart stopped pounding when I closed the door.

I cleaned my desk, searched the online dictionary. Four definitions for disappear:

1. To cease to be seen, for example, by moving away, or going behind or into something.
2. To be gone from or no longer be seen in a place without any explanation.
3. To no longer exist.
- And that fourth one, that newly minted anomaly born of the politics of pain.

I laid out my tickets on the dresser where I wouldn't forget them. I took a long bubble bath and brushed my teeth. I checked again to be sure I had packed everything.

But what happened when we got to my apartment? Did the guy drive away? What did he say when I left? All that talk about his life and his girlfriend—when will I learn not to talk to strangers?

I get up slowly. If I don't go soon, I will miss the flight. Feet flat, adjusting to upright, I lean over, avoiding the direct glare of overhead light in the hole of my neck. I walk to the front door. Hands pat the floorboards, nothing. Tentatively, I open it and listen. No sounds of neighbors going by. I reach to the floor in one last attempt, padding my hands around the doorstep. There is the scratch of the rug, the morning news, and, to the left, a strand of hair.

Fingers follow it carefully to the base of a familiar cylinder, long hair, pointy chin. I cradle my head in my arms pulling it inside just as the neighbor opens his door and I shut mine with a click.

Head resting gingerly in my arms, stomach fluttering with questions I walk straight to the bathroom, turn on the shower. Carefully, I screw on the head, eyes spinning the perimeter of the room as I tighten my head on my neck. I have perfected this process over the years—only something feels different today.

A quick check reveals my head in place, no time for questions, not even time a shower. I turn off the water. My heart beats irregularly as I check the clock, grab my bag and wrap a sweater around my shoulders just as the van to LAX honks outside. This time I lock the door.

I lie against the seatback with a warm sigh, the swirl of panic replaced by the bliss of relief. I am on the way to the airport and am still on time. I look out the window and brush stray hair behind my ear, but I stop suddenly. Curling around my ear is a thin, metal loop I have never worn or owned.

I hear his voice in my head. *She was wearing a yellow scarf and gold earrings when I saw her last.* What happened last night? *Everything passes* begins its routine across my jittery uncertainty. But somewhere between adjusting my seatback and the success of finding my head, the intimate details of a story I do not remember, and a girl I have never met, untumble themselves through memories behind my eyes and around the gold hoops in my ears.