

CAITLIN MCGILL

Uncertainty

On a night when I'm sleeping beside David I dream I'm in his kitchen, washing dishes and counting calories in my head, peering out the window at the snow and feeling someone's presence beside me. I'm in *David's* apartment, washing *his* dishes, but when I look over my shoulder it's not David I see.

Carlos.

This is all wrong.

Suddenly I'm fully aware that I'm not with David, the man I met more than two years ago, a few months after leaving Carlos, leaving Florida. Instead I'm with Carlos again—or, as ever. *All wrong.* I gasp, my helium balloon lungs commandeering the space in my chest and I realize what will follow me into consciousness as fear—*How did I get stuck here again, how did he persuade me to let him back in?*

In the dream, the idea that I have been with Carlos for some time and have not, until this moment, been able to perceive that I should run is more startling than the image of Carlos hovering over my shoulder. More startling, perhaps, than the memory of his fist punching a perfect hole in the wall and then disappearing.

I wake and press my hand against my belly. Feel for fullness. Hope for emptiness. For proof that I am in control. I pull David's

navy comforter to my chin, lace my naked foot into his, and watch gray clouds swallow the moon outside his third-floor window.

Some dreams wake you suddenly and frequently throughout the night, but others are subtler, quieter, harder to recall when you've woken yet impossible to forget. Frustrating, they are, because though you can't quite remember why they feel so absolutely important, they do, and because, though you can't determine if it's even wise to pursue them, to chase them down the trails of your memory, it seems you have no choice. Some dreams overpower you.

Lately, since I began speaking about Carlos in therapy, these sorts of dreams harass my waking life more than the ones that appear suddenly, vividly, coherently.

One week after the kitchen dream I lie beside David again, my head nestled against his shoulder, his arm resting on my lower back. Outside his window, beneath the streetlamp's glow, golden snowflakes flutter in the wind like fireflies. Again, I dream. This time the confusion, the panic, does not hit me so quickly. My life appears as it should, for the most part: In the dream I'm in Boston; I'm still a graduate student at Emerson College; I'm in a building I seem to recognize—at Emerson; I'm moving into an apartment that shows no signs of Carlos.

But, where is David?

In six months we're moving in together but here I am in this dream showing a friend my new apartment, an on-campus unit in this familiar structure—which makes this part of the dream inaccurate; this building is all classrooms and offices and library. Something's off. Here I am showing my friend that the apartment's so spacious it fits three, but since I'm completing my final semester of graduate school and since I teach here, too, I get the whole thing.

My living room is dark blue walls and dim lighting and emptiness. Red and yellow diamonds pattern the carpet floors. The bathroom's still missing everything—toilet paper, toothpaste, even a toothbrush. It seems it's morning and I haven't even brushed my teeth yet.

Perhaps reality is sneaking its way into my sleep.

In another room: a glass, floor-to-ceiling wall. Beyond that: what appears to be an aquarium. This is my living space. *How wonderful*, I think, but don't truly feel it because: Where is David? Where are those blue eyes and those nail-bitten fingers pointing to his favorite buildings and the growing moon?

I take my friend back into the barren living room and run my hands along the carpet floor.

"All this space," I say, excited at the thought of spreading two hundred pages of my writing around the room and shuffling, finding order.

When we leave we are on a bus and a new girl stands beside me. She is a silhouette. No discernible face. I tell her it's okay that she doesn't know who she is, but not to go around wasting time without a passion, a drive, an idea of what she's living for, and then David is beside me, holding on as the bus barrels down an expressway, sunlight streaming in. There is David telling this aimless girl she needs a plan, needs to get it together, giving her a hard time really. It's not like him, the architect who almost always smiles. I tell her *it's okay*.

And then David and the bus are gone.

The girl—let's call her Cate—and I are walking backward on the side of that expressway, grass brushing our ankles, cars speeding toward our backs though we can't see them until they pass. I haven't seen green grass and sunny skies like this in so long that I'm not so bothered by those approaching cars or the enigmatic reason we are walking backwards. I should be.

The grassy hill beside us slopes toward a canal and there is Carlos, this time in a small car that he lets roll toward the water. I'm certain the car is going to sink and be lost for good, but when its nose grazes the surface, it stops. Carlos and a small chestnut dog emerge from the vehicle. The dog starts to pee and I start to scold Carlos and then the dog stops and I tell her no, no, go ahead, you need to go, and she runs off and there we are, wading in the green grass beneath sunny skies, and I am wondering, somewhere between sleep and awake, *Is this what would have been? Me in a graduate apartment in another school, perhaps not Emerson after all, chasing him and our sweet dog down*

expressways, who I was or who I might have been a shadow chasing him—chasing me?

I am relieved that in this scene Carlos is not yelling or crying or violent. Still: he is there. Cate is gone.

I wake and wrap my arms around David, trace my fingers across his broad back until he pulls me closer. I look to the window across the room and watch snow dance around in the real world outside. I try to forget about green grass and sunny skies.

During my weekly meeting with my psychologist, the one who's helping me realize that Carlos might still be hidden inside me, that trauma is trying to claw its way out, that my powerlessness to fully recall and understand our history might be complicit in my need for control—might've awakened my eating disorder—I tell her about the dream I had last week.

"I was standing in the kitchen," I say, "washing dishes, but Carlos was in David's place and the scene was all wrong."

Finally she asks, "Do you think there's anything to that—that he was in the *kitchen* with you?"

That night I dream of Emerson students jumping from the seventh floor of residential buildings. They're jumping because apparently that's a *thing* right now—jumping into piles of snow that, during this record-breaking winter, stand three and four feet high on Boston's sidewalks. In the dream they jump and I urge them not to, and my family is there, and my friends are there, and the only person who seems to think this absurd is me. And then I'm sitting on the sidewalk with my head in my hands, angry and frustrated and unsure how to stop this insanity, and there is Carlos—again—and I'm more angry and frustrated than I was moments earlier because I'm certain, very certain, that I never wanted him here. That is clear.

I wake up and know what happened and know I don't want him beside my body, in a dream or in waking life. I write it down. Seal it shut. Begin my day. Try not to count calories.

But then another dream arrives two nights after I meet with my psychologist, a dream in which I am telling Carlos, *Look, I cannot be with you anymore; I have been miserable for months—years—and I do not want to stay.* I am, temporarily, sure of my words. I am shaking with the need to say this, with the fleeting certainty of my belief. So, what's unclear?

Soon Carlos is crying and convincing me, somehow, that this isn't exactly true—that my feelings, my desires, are actually *not correct*. I'm listening to him persuade me against what I believed were my own deep beliefs, persuade me that maybe my feelings *are* truly wrong, that maybe I've forgotten the magic behind *us* that means we should be together, want to be together, *must* be together. That I should hold on just a little longer, even when his knuckles bruise my car fenders and steering wheel. Suddenly I am acquiescing to his words, looking down at my toes and running a hand through my hair; suddenly my beliefs are no longer mine, at least I don't think they are though I'm not quite sure anymore, and I have lost all control of my own true desires and am beginning to think he's right, that I do want him after all.

I don't leave.

When I wake I begin to wonder if therapy—speaking of Carlos aloud, willingly recalling those memories instead of repressing them or waiting for them to harass me—might be healing my body but further assaulting my mind. My brain a set of long dormant volcanoes suddenly poked and prodded and shaken to life. Carlos erupting from them in my dreams.

The next day I'm irritable, withdrawn, unable to free my mind of him in my waking life, and though I've tried to take him out of dreams and write him into words, I still can't shake the fright that's quivering inside my skull. How has he made me question my decision to leave him in waking life, if he's only speaking to me in dreams? What more can I do to erase him from me?

That night as I roll side to side and envy David's soundless sleep, as his tangible body grazes my belly, I begin to count what I can actually see. There's the window. *One.* And there's the streetlamp, the

snowy fireflies. *Two, three.* No clouds tonight. A single star punctures the sky's curtain, the moon slashing the black sheet. *Three four five.*

David inhales.

Silence.

And then finally he exhales, air gliding out of that palpable body like water streaming down a creek. *I might not sleep tonight, I think, but at least I will not dream.*



CAITLIN MCGILL is a 2016 St. Botolph Emerging Artist Award winner and Bread Loaf Writers' conference scholarship recipient. She was also the 2014 winner of the Rafael Torch Nonfiction Literary Award. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *Consequence*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Gravel*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Vox*, and several other magazines. Currently, she is working on a memoir about her family's hidden past, intergenerational trauma, inherited survival mechanisms, immigration, race, class, addiction, and the cost of ignoring our histories. One essay from her book was named a Notable Essay in *The Best American Essays 2016*.