



Bobby Obvious

Malerie Willens

The Missouri Review, Volume 45, Number 4, Winter 2022, pp. 130-146  
(Article)

Published by University of Missouri

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mis.2022.0055>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/873128>

Pablo heard the bird sounds for the first time on a Wednesday night. He was hunched over a plate of baby back ribs, making a mental list of things he might do to improve his situation: learn Spanish, shave head, get a Roku, ultrafirm mattress. He let the barbecue sauce accumulate on his fingers, waiting to rinse them until he'd finished his half rack and two sides. When he finally went to wash his hands and face, he heard a sound in the bathroom, really more of an echo that seemed to be transmitting through a vent. It sounded like *Ooh . . . Ooh*, like seagulls at the beach, windblown and trebly. Pablo would forget about his life-improving bullet points—listing them was a way of experiencing them—but the *Ooh . . . Ooh* would take up residence in his newly quiet days and nights.

# Bobby Obvious

Malerie Willens



*Photo by Andrey*

---

Masha had left him at the equinox after the worst East Coast winter in a decade. She was a few years older, and she wanted kids, but not with the current Pablo. She wanted kids with some future edition, a better, braver Pablo who might emerge if he lived more deliberately. “Just focus,” she’d say. “Set an intention. Inhabit the now.” He had never understood what this meant. He thought he might get it if he were more focused. Maybe he was too unfocused to fully embrace the importance of focusing. When Masha started in about focusing, Pablo would focus on the word itself, the noise of it, its presence in the room. The look and sound of the word, the *fō-kās*, had an Anglo-Saxon pith and force that appealed to him. His focus on the word obfuscated whatever larger message may have existed. He suspected that Masha’s paeans to the virtues of focusing and lamentations on his failure to do so had more to do with her own anxieties—biological, financial—than with his inability to inhabit the now. He didn’t blame her; time and money haunt us all.

She’d gone back to school for a low-residency master’s in clinical psychology and had begun to diagnose everyone with everything. In the days leading up to the breakup, she repeatedly called him “dysthymic.” A mild but persistent form of depression, dysthymia stole joy from the sufferer. Low energy, suboptimal self-esteem, and difficulty sleeping and concentrating were characteristic. She’d mete out her diagnoses, looking radically unbothered as she twisted the ends of her black curls, legs tucked beneath her on the velvet chair by the window. If you saw her with the volume off, you’d think she was choosing between Thai and Italian, Pilates and barre, Netflix and Hulu.

The breakup bore no resemblance to the civilized uncouplings that were trendy among youngish people of means. Theirs had been protracted and sour, charged with adrenal buzz. A new relationship was birthed in the final weeks, enthralled by its own dissolution, coiling in and observing itself with flat, milky eyes. And yet Pablo missed her. He missed her in a Masha-specific way, but mostly he ached for the shape and sound of another being in his space. He liked to bump up against a person—with a body, with thoughts—who wasn’t him. His new solitude in the apartment felt static and raw. A subliminal “Now what?” lengthened minutes, stalled time. He’d dust-bust the corners of his floor, return an email, do sit-ups until he felt the burn. He’d read a Kindle sample and eat some nuts, but the “Now what?” hung heavy in his chest, behind his eyes, on the unadorned walls.

---

Sleep was an escape, until the gut punch of waking up alone. He was grateful for the distraction of work, despite feeling little allegiance to his job as managing editor of *WallCreeper*, a free but ad-heavy newsletter roundup of paywall newsletters. He also fact-checked at a bimonthly review of innovative gadgets (digital tandoori ovens, golf clubs infused with mood-boosting scents) for aspirational but relatable lifestyles. His work demanded focus. He knew it wasn't the sort of focus Masha had in mind. It was vaguely demeaning to proofread and fact-check other people's work, to clean up writers' messes and turn press kits into content, claiming no byline or fingerprint. But it was easy, and the fact-checking forced him to learn things, mostly trivia, that Masha had initially found interesting. Sleep, work, sleep, work. Take a walk. Have a wank. Force yourself to see a friend. This couldn't continue. He needed a new reprieve from the old reprieves.

The next time he heard the birdlike sounds, he'd settled in for the night with cheap lager and two cans of ravioli. Nine raviolis per can, eighteen bites of dinner. He was flipping between a documentary about Canadian serial killers and one on homosexuality in the Mafia. He ate the eighteen bites and drank his beer, periodically traversing the long, narrow railroad apartment to empty his bladder. It was like the old saying: *You don't buy beer; you rent it.*

He stood at the toilet, taut with beer, and decided not to let himself release it until he heard the *Ooh . . . Ooh*. He and Masha had lived in the apartment for two years and had never heard the sounds. Thoughts of her, one of their final rows. It had involved his name. She thought it was the only romantic thing about him. Pablo's parents were center-left civil servants in the lower Midwest with a family membership to the art museum across the state line. They drank Chianti from straw-sheathed bottles, unlike their more athletic and patriotic Blue Nun-loving neighbors. Masha told him he was too soft for his name. He lacked the fire, the verve, to do it justice. Pablo was the name of a genius, an artist, a paradigm-shifting Spanish lothario, but Pablo was none of these things, not even close. He pointed out that Picasso was no oil painting and by most accounts an arrogant prick and probably a hypochondriac, but Masha was not swayed.

He peed when he finally heard the *Ooh . . . Ooh*, then zipped up and caught his reflection in the medicine cabinet. "I am not unromantic," he said out loud, punctuated by another *Ooh . . . Ooh*.

---

He peed when he finally heard the *Ooh . . . Ooh*, then zipped up and caught his reflection in the medicine cabinet. “I am not unromantic,” he said out loud, punctuated by another *Ooh . . . Ooh*.

---

Late afternoon on Saturday, he walked downtown to Kiki and Wendell’s. He passed people in restaurants and bars, chatting on sidewalks, wheeling children in strollers, and buying incense and jewelry from voluble Nigerians and dreadlocked Swedes. Grazing the business of other people’s lives gave him a taste of the business. He could dip in, quickly and without strings, to the happy toasts on the other sides of windows, the sullen-euphoric chaos of teens at street corners, the shrunken couples strolling arm in arm, married since Vietnam.

“You’re early.” Kiki answered the door in purple medical-grade rubber gloves. She palmed the air—“Scotch-bonnet hands,” she said—and kissed Pablo on the cheek, directing him to Wendell on the roof. In the divvying-up of friendships, Wendell and Kiki were his. He’d known Wendell for years before there was a Masha. Wendell had just met Kiki when Pablo met Masha. The couples had materialized roughly in tandem.

Deep twilight on the rooftop. Wendell looking clerical, tongs like a scepter in the chicken smoke. “Kiki’s mom’s jerk,” he said. “You look good. I mean, you don’t look bad.”

“It’s honestly a relief.” Pablo took a brush, helped paint the chicken. The panoramic view gave him the spins until he adjusted. “Did I tell you she said I lack passion?”

“Passion? That woman’s crazy.”

“Something about being passionless, but not in a sexual way.”

“Pablito. We’ve been through this. Decoding Masha’s a fool’s errand. Let it be.”

They drank beer beneath the last blues of daytime sky. Pigeons perched and flew away. Pablo noticed their sounds, more *Eep* than *Ooh*

---

... *Ooh*. Kiki materialized with a bowl of rice and peas and another with slaw. They sat down to eat at the rickety card table.

"How's work?" Pablo asked Kiki, who wrote children's books.

"Work's great. It's always great."

Kiki was someone who enjoyed her job and enjoyed the fact that she enjoyed it and didn't hesitate to let others know how lucky she felt to enjoy her job in a world of job haters and tolerators. Pablo had real affection for Kiki, who was talented, but he could do without the job-love performance.

"I'm tossing around this idea," she said. "Two little boys: Bobby Obvious and Oliver Drab—"

"Sounds English," said Wendell.

"They're outcasts. They play alone, just the two of them, in their own little world. So they dream up these adventures, but none of the other kids can see them."

Pablo's mind wandered. He heard the rise and fall of her voice but absorbed little, encouraging her with wide eyes and a bobbing head until she finished.

"It's brilliant," said Wendell.

"I like it," said Pablo. "Bobby Obvious and Oliver Drab are great names."

"My wife's mad talented," Wendell said, leaning in to kiss her.

The three began to have at the chicken, eyes occasionally meeting, communicating through the sloppy tug and chew of meat from bone. Pablo felt like an actor in a commercial for credit cards or SUVs—or chicken—things signifying gusto. Kiki's mom's jerk had once been described by heat-tolerant Wendell as "rigorous." Pablo felt the capsaicin pulsing in the sides of his neck as his forehead beaded with sweat and his nose ran.

"Masha told Pablo he's passionless," said Wendell, daubing his damp forehead.

"Passionless?" Kiki looked puzzled. "*Passion* like passionate, or a *passion* like a hobby?"

"She said I lack desire," said Pablo, surveying the nest of bones on his plate.

"But not in a sexual way," said Wendell.

"Obviously, I can't comment on *that*," Kiki said, "but you do have passions. Things you care about. Like Masha's the authority on passion. Psychotherapy classes on the Internet and a hatred of dogs."

---

"She doesn't hate dogs," Pablo said as he unfolded the Wet-Nap Kiki had given him. "She just doesn't like them. And it's low residency, not online. But I get your point."

"You realize we're seeing her?" Kiki said. "In a month."

Of course Pablo realized it. In fact, he'd been imagining scenarios, none of them pleasant, that might play out at Dev and Alex's wedding. Each scenario ended the same way, with Masha all dressed up, champagne coupe poised elegantly, feeling surer than ever that she was better off without him.

The walk home from Kiki and Wendell's was windy and tedious. The human bounty that had earlier lit his way was now gone. Bouncers in long leather jackets stood watch in front of nightclubs, seeming to simultaneously ignore and judge him as he passed. Panhandlers ambled toward him while would-be lovers corkscrewed around him on the route from bar to different bar to wherever they'd land. Metal gratings slammed shut with a hulking finality, shielding shops against the night air that was chilling Pablo in his T-shirt, until he was back on his couch as though he hadn't ever left.

One in the morning, time to open a beer and stretch out in front of a multiepisode documentary about PTSD in nonhuman primates in the space program. Pablo was surprised to learn that they'd been launching monkeys into space with varying degrees of success since the late 1940s. He let the beer build up inside him before seeking relief. Finally, in the bathroom, he unzipped and stood still, deciding not to pee until he heard the birds. It was superstitious, an arbitrary zeal for order that you see in people who live and sleep alone, with nobody there to regulate them. He waited, aware that the *Ooh . . . Ooh* might have stopped forever now that his own action hinged on it. It was the worry in a doctor's waiting room, that the ache for which you're there, the one that's bothered you for weeks, has suddenly disappeared.

The pressure was building. Its soundtrack: the trucks rumbling down the avenue outside. Still no bird sounds. Pablo bent in toward the throb, trying to fully inhabit it, as Masha might've suggested. He pictured her turning up to the wedding with a handsy rent-a-dude who'd feed her wedding cake from his finger. The finger was either completely hairless or covered with coarse black fuzz. The finger of a sissy or a savage, it either belonged to a dupe with a bad job—an accountant's soft finger, fresh off the calculator or whatever they used—or to a power-leveling vulgarian who'd gotten ahead by thrusting it in betas' faces and prod-

---

The pressure was building. Its soundtrack: the trucks rumbling down the avenue outside. Still no bird sounds. Pablo bent in toward the throb, trying to fully inhabit it, as Masha might've suggested. He pictured her turning up to the wedding with a handsy rent-a-dude who'd feed her wedding cake from his finger.

---

ding the G-spots of gold-digging dates who pretended to like it. It was a bad finger, tipped in buttercream, poised to enter Masha's mouth.

Pablo thought he heard the *Ooh . . . Ooh*, but he'd gotten good at producing the sound in his head on demand. He was startled when the real *Ooh . . . Ooh* came. Just as he began to pee, a motor seemed to rev behind his face, like a tickle at first, then a tight, silent cry, wildly internal until it broke, got voluptuous, and throttled his body.

In the morning, he was hollowed out. It felt like a hangover but less punitive. He buzzed with the muted current—post-unrest, soft depletion—that came on mornings after hard nights. He bought a coffee at the more expensive of the nearby places and walked to the subway with a half-step more velocity than usual, like the guys in commercials who wake up in pristine loft spaces, the morning sun angling in just right, bike on the wall, one healthy plant, impossibly smooth shave. The people who only move forward. An instinct for progress.

Women walked to work; they were everywhere, emerging from subway stations, commandeering the streets. The younger ones, who must've worked at start-ups or in media or at media start-ups, wore short, high-waisted white pants with sexy karate vibes. Other women wore lightweight coats over shortish skirts. The breeze blew enough to reveal a knee here, an ankle there. Lotioned calves strode shiny alongside him. What would he have made of Masha had he seen her for the first time on his morning commute? Good posture. Smart eyes. Ballerina neck. Her appeal didn't scream from a distance. It found you, attached itself like a rhizome, sent shoots from its nodes and stitched you in.

---

---

Truism: newly single men tend to nurse wounds predictably. They often fall in with women whose physical and inner qualities are antithetical to the former partner's. *She* is not *her*, and that's the point. Pablo knows this, and yet he goes. Not only does he *not* circumvent the puddle in front of him; he stomps in it until he's wet to the knee. He is owning his loneliness, inhabiting it, which must count for something.

He met her at the cranky old soup place, an empty seat between them at the counter. She chose chicken noodle, her hair the deep straw color of the broth. Masha would've ordered borscht or mulligatawny and judged Pablo's prosaic split pea, possibly using the word "prosaic." Chicken Noodle Nikki had big Nordic calves and merry eyes that crinkled at the sides. She did the bulk of the asking—of questions and, finally, for Pablo's number.

Nikki managed a vintage clothing store, took tickets Friday nights at a diner that hosted burlesque shows, and occasionally filled in around town as a bartender. She was a party girl with a throaty laugh and a tendency to drink a little too much, a little too fast. Her down-for-anything spirit felt like *joie de vivre* in the darkened rooms that tended to have her. The first couple of weeks were criminally easy for Pablo. Nikki was good company. He liked the tattoo on the small of her back—a Cambodian butterfly—although, or maybe because, he'd snickered at their omnipresence more than a decade earlier, blooming up from the waistbands of poetry-slamming baristas, sociology students who'd gotten on the pole to pay for books, and old sculptors' young girlfriends. Nikki had had the tattoo for years, and it embarrassed her, but it didn't seem worth the pain and expense to have it removed. She was short and a good thirty pounds heavier than Masha, much of it likely muscle. Her waist-to-hip ratio was 1:1, a world away from the precipitous slope Masha claimed to have shared with Kate Moss *and* Marilyn Monroe. Pablo found that he was excited by Nikki's uniformly thick, boyish shape. It felt new to him. New was everything. New was the only thing.

Nikki liked him, and it was good to be liked. He gave her orgasms and bought the beer. He was contributing. He favored doggy-style for its sightlines to the Cambodian butterfly, which he'd privately named Jessa, and because it turned him away from those merry, trusting eyes. The network of tiny fissures webbing out to her temples and the hopeful look in the eyes themselves made the whole thing seem arbitrary: his life, her life, them together. But Wendell, a Buddhist since college, would've said

---

that everything was as it should be. There's your *life*, and there are your *thoughts about your life*: these are two separate things. The thoughts are not real. Your life is perfect just as it is.

"Do you hear birds?" Nikki came out of the bathroom, toweling herself off after a shower. They'd just had afternoon sex, and Pablo sensed that she was trying to extend it into a night date. He didn't want to explain the bird sounds to Nikki, not that he could've if he'd wanted to. He wasn't even sure the bird sounds were bird sounds.

"I don't know what it is," he said, naked in the kitchen, slicing limes for his beer. The late-day ritual was high tea to him. Nonnegotiable, stabilizing, essential. "It's pretty new."

"How often do you hear it?"

"Constantly, sometimes. Then it stops for a few days."

"Maybe it's trapped." Nikki entered the kitchen in a fuchsia bra and matching G-string, stout and benign as a Botero. She took a lime slice, sucking it without seeming to mind the acid. "Let's find it!"

"Why?"

"I don't know. It might need help. Or what if it dies and starts rotting?" She leaned against the counter, took a long pull of beer. "Aren't you curious?"

Pablo regretted his nakedness. He felt exposed in his small kitchen near the big window, the no-wave skronk of traffic blaring up from the street. How could he explain that *yes*, he was curious, but *no*, he didn't want to chase the sound? He changed the subject by kissing Nikki longer and more aggressively than felt natural.

They drank their beers in front of a news show, bodies sweating into the pleather sofa, ankles interwoven on the coffee table. She commented on the fact that the newsreader was practically screaming. She said she'd noticed that public-facing people—podcasters, YouTube pundits—had remodulated in the last four or five years. Even the anodyne human-interest stuff had been dialed up a turn. It was a louder world. The observation struck Pablo as not dumb. He considered asking her to be his date for the wedding. He still had a week to think about it.

Dev and Alex were close friends, but their insistence on a black-tie wedding irked Pablo. The aspirational razzmatazz of tuxedos seemed goofily retrograde. But he would play by their rules. His current emotional tightrope allowed no wiggle room for sartorial rumination.

---

"The way I see it, you've got two options," said the fastidious tux clerk.

He was sallow and snaky, with clipped diction that verged on truculent. *Like Stephen Miller without the Santa Monica charm*, Pablo laughed to himself. The salesman had recommended he pay extra for mother-of-pearl studs and a Windsor paisley vest. He liked embellishment, as evidenced by his secret-society lapel pin and the signet ring on his thumb, of all places. "Why not show up looking like a million bucks?"

"You're joking," said Pablo.

"I don't joke about style," the clerk said. His tight, ashen face got tighter and more ashen. "Some people have religion. Or drugs. I have personal style."

"Some people have none of those things."

"Hundred percent. I feel for them. My philosophy is, you've got a big night, why not look like somebody?"

"Like somebody?"

"Like somebody."

Pablo felt his face prickle with heat. He tried to formulate an impactful comeback about landfill, minimalism, the culture-rot of fashion and celebrity. Who is somebody? Who is nobody? Who decides? His mind seized up. He rented the tuxedo but not the accessories or shiny shoes and thanked the salesman with phony effusion, as though his retail experience had been edifying.

Late afternoon on the wedding day, Pablo shaved slowly, down to the tuft at the top of his chest, which he trimmed with small scissors despite the fact that it would be covered by his clothes. He'd know he was well groomed underneath, like the tweedy career women in his mom's old catalogs, whose slutty lingerie gave them a secret edge. He had an hour to kill before leaving, so he rolled himself with a lint roller, slowly from ankles to thighs, wrists to shoulders, and finally his chest and as much of his back as he could reach. In the bathroom, he fixed his hair with a dime-sized squirt of product, just enough to give it shape without committing to the studied-unstudied faux-dishevelment that ruled the zeitgeist of men's hair.

*Ooh . . . Ooh.* He lingered over his reflection in the mirror. The tuxedo made his shoulders look broad. Would Masha still be attracted to him? He knew he'd be attracted to her. He was ready for the jolt. He summoned the powdery scent at the base of her neck. Maybe, he thought, he

---

should back out. Just not go. He could return the tux early and tell Stephen Miller to go fuck himself. Or he'd call her. *Ooh . . . Ooh*. He'd talk to her, know what to expect. If it went badly or if she was bitchy, he could always opt out, say he'd caught a bug. And if people knew the real reason, so what? He decided to call before he could change his mind, positioning himself squarely on the middle couch cushion, his favorite. He thought of her powerful quadriceps, agile hips, the tilting and torquing in bed.

"Hello?" she said. "Hello? Huh-low?"

He hung up, glad he'd blocked his number. Masha sounded human, like any other woman. He looked out at the apartment windows facing his, his neighbors' weekend shadows ballooning and contracting in the late-day light. He needed more.

"Hello?" she said. "Hello? Goddamn it, Leo, I know this is you."

Pablo hung up.

Leo? Who the hell was Leo? Pablo was stunned, his disbelief inflamed by the orange riot of sun at his window. How was there already a Leo? He was upset, obviously, but glad that Masha was mad at Leo, and glad he had such a bad name. Leo was not the name of a man with something you wanted. Maybe he hadn't even been her boyfriend, but something about the word "Leo" activated Pablo. It sounded more ridiculous as he repeated it out loud. It was vague in his mind but potent in his belly. He hurled the lint roller against the wall with enough force to break it.

"Motherfucking Leo."

Pablo heaved himself up off the couch with a sense of purpose that felt foreign. He lurched out into the gloomy hallway, then up the stairwell to the impossibly heavy door that opened onto the roof, a place he hadn't seen since the summer he'd moved in. With the exception of one quadrant, it looked like any other roof: ambiguous antennas, criss-crossing wires, plastic chairs encrusted with years of life and weather. Pablo gravitated toward the far-right quadrant. Sheets were strung up like curtains, the perimeter marked by milk crates. His steps creaked loudly enough to elicit a young, bearded face from behind a sheet. The face popped out and disappeared.

"Who's there?" asked the guy's disembodied voice.

Pablo didn't know how to respond. The face reappeared. He got a better look at Pablo, then slid open the sheet. He was sitting cross-legged in a sleeping bag, flanked by pillows and comic books. Marijuana smoke hung heavy.

---

“I thought I heard birds. I live downstairs.”

“Birds?” asked the kid, who couldn’t have been more than twenty. “You hear birds? From your apartment?”

He bit into a protein bar and stared off, chewing thoughtfully. “Birds just land and fly away. They don’t really hang out.” He straightened up, moved his neck from side to side, popping his vertebrae, and flashed open his weed-dimmed eyes. “Dude! I might know what you think is birds.”

---

“Cool tux!”

“Thanks,” said Pablo, whose ambivalence about tuxedos was at an all-time high. “I thought I heard birds. I live downstairs.”

“Birds?” asked the kid, who couldn’t have been more than twenty. “You hear birds? From your apartment?”

He bit into a protein bar and stared off, chewing thoughtfully. “Birds just land and fly away. They don’t really hang out.” He straightened up, moved his neck from side to side, popping his vertebrae, and flashed open his weed-dimmed eyes. “Dude! I might know what you think is birds.”

Pablo saw what he must have looked like. It was as if he’d dressed in black tie for the occasion, the bird sounds’ big reveal. He imagined himself two hours later, dragging a prawn through *rémoulade*, having mostly forgotten about the birds and the boy, who introduced himself as Zak.

“Zak with a k, not short for Zachary. Just Zak. Squatting for now. I teach tennis in Amagansett in the summer.”

---

---

“Bobby Obvious,” said Pablo, extending a hand down toward Zak. Pablo had no idea why he gave the kid an assumed name, let alone the name of Kiki’s precious creation.

“Check it out, Bob,” said Zak, who shimmied out from his sleeping bag and led Pablo to an air duct. “This could be what you’re hearing.”

A decrepit media console held an object that looked like an old answering machine, with the word “Enviro-ments™” written in loopy script.

“I play ‘Ocean Sounds,’ but there’s other ones. ‘Tropical Rainforest’ is broken. ‘Heartbeat’ makes me anxious. It must be ‘Ocean Sounds’ that you’re hearing.”

Zak pressed a button, and there was the *Ooh . . . Ooh. Ooh . . . Ooh*, incrementally spaced, set against a backdrop of crashing waves.

“Relaxing, right?” said Zak.

“Where’d you get it?” Pablo asked, although he didn’t care.

“I traded a girl. Gave her a beret. And a third-generation iPod Nano from a dumpster, in perfect condition.”

Pablo checked his watch. He still had half an hour. “Want a beer?” he asked.

“Seriously? You come up out of the blue, dressed all fancy, and offer me a beer? You’re like my guardian angel.”

Pablo went downstairs for the beer. He needed to call Nikki.

“You’re shitting me,” she said. Her audible exhalation meant that she was smoking. Though he was not a smoker himself, Pablo stole a calm when his friends smoked.

“A machine?” she said. “It sounded so real!”

“I know. This kid’s kind of hilarious.”

“How come you’re Mr. Detective all of a sudden and before you didn’t care?”

“I guess the timing felt right. Speaking of, what are you doing tonight?”

“Working. Beth asked. I need the money.”

“When are you off?”

“Late. Four, at least.”

“That sucks.”

“It’s a bar, baby. Saturday night.”

“I know. I thought maybe you could come to this wedding.”

“Tonight?”

---

"Yeah. We could leave in half an hour."

"You want me to get ready for a wedding in half an hour?"

"How's forty-five minutes?"

"You can't just do that to someone, Pablo. Is it formal?"

"Pretty much."

"What are *you* wearing?"

"I rented a tux, but you can wear whatever. As long as it's, you know, tasteful."

There was a long pause. The sound of exhaled smoke sounded less friendly.

"Pablo. With women, it's different. I've noticed before, the way you ignore certain details."

"What details?"

"Not details. It's hard to explain. Put it this way: just because *you* don't care about something doesn't mean someone else won't. It's like you can't put yourself in other people's shoes. I think that's the definition of empathy, by the way. Or lack of."

"So you're saying I'm not empathetic? Or is it empathic?"

"Women like to dry-clean things. Or buy something new. Plan how they're going to look. Not just women. *People*. Why are you even inviting me?"

"What do you mean? I thought it would be fun."

"If you really wanted me there, you wouldn't have told me an hour before."

Pablo had no comeback.

"Hello?" she said. "Anybody home?"

"I'm here," said Pablo, who was beginning to feel like Masha's Pablo, underdeveloped or malformed in some way. He was the boy who ate the nuts off the cake before the guests arrived, the boy who got caught with pink cheeks and a skittering heartbeat under his duvet when he should've been outside, playing. He sensed that he was in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing. Sensing was good. It was a start. But where was the right place? What was the right thing?

"I don't know what to say. I feel bad."

And he did. He'd been alive for thirty-four years and had had girlfriends, but it wasn't until this moment on the phone with Nikki that he felt deficient in something fundamental, some basic ingredient that women, or maybe love, required. And yet he thought he'd been decent at relationships. Was he, Pablo Macdougall, a self-involved bastard?

---

He'd been alive for thirty-four years and had had girlfriends, but it wasn't until this moment on the phone with Nikki that he felt deficient in something fundamental, some basic ingredient that women, or maybe love, required. And yet he thought he'd been decent at relationships.

---

He couldn't be, because self-involved bastards don't know they're self-involved bastards. He had the feeling that something was amiss, but how do you fix a feeling?

"Do you even like me, Pablo?"

He couldn't say, "Of course I like you." Even *he* knew that.

"Of course I like you."

"Thanks. Very convincing."

"I like you. I do. What else can I say?"

"Nothing. You know why? Because you don't. Because I'm literally just the one who came after Sasha."

"Masha."

"Sasha, Masha. I want to be someone's Masha."

"No, you don't. Masha hates dogs."

"And you're still obsessed with her. I don't need you to be obsessed with me, but I'm a good person and I deserve a good person. I'm not sure that's you."

"Wait. What are you saying? You're not . . . ending it, are you?"

"I guess I am. Call me if you decide you want this. Want *me*. Otherwise, you should lose my number."

Zak had positioned two chairs so that they faced the sunset. It was a searing, wind-streaked sky, the kind that makes people seem sensitive just for being there. Pablo was embarrassed by the epic light, its rapturous implications. It felt the opposite of casual, and what he needed after that phone call and before the wedding was casual.

---

---

“Cheers, beers, hope God hears,” said Zak, clinking bottles with Pablo, who sat down on the white plastic chair, which had grayed with dust, the animal-vegetable-mineral detritus of a nineteenth-century rooftop. He felt his body strain against the flimsy chair. The coating of dust, he assumed, was burrowing into the porous weave of his tuxedo. Calling it a monkey suit was an affront to monkeys. He’d watched enough quality nonfiction television to know that monkeys are emotionally complex and they tend to form strong social bonds. They’re highly skilled problem solvers with exceptional cognitive flexibility. Brutal only when provoked, most monkeys are aware of their peers’ well-being, and they often make decisions driven by a desire for social affiliation. They enjoy performing charitable acts and can generate great empathy, both within and beyond their social networks.



### Malerie Willens

Malerie Willens’s short fiction has appeared in the Pushcart Prize anthology, *Tin House*, *AGNI*, *Granta* online, *Sewanee Review*, Electric Literature’s Recommended Reading, and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. An American Society of Magazine Editors finalist in fiction for 2022, she recently finished work on her first novel.