

Water Signs

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I DON'T KNOW HOW TO WRITE A SCATHING BREAK-UP TEXT, SO I ASK RAE TO WRITE it for me. They have always hated the Gemini and are thrilled to help out. They compose a message of such detached cruelty, righteous profanity, and subtle layers of psychological evisceration that I am left breathless. I text it to the Gemini unedited at 11:00 pm because Rae told me that humans are most emotionally vulnerable at night. I'm convinced that after he reads it, the Gemini will never be able to sexually satisfy anyone again.

He needed to be broken up with. He was hot and cold, in and out, Jekyll and Hyde, the kind of guy who pressures you into buying this stupid tiny condo before telling you that he's not moving in because he can't sleep so far above Mother Earth. The kind of guy who finds a way to cheat even when you're in an open relationship, which is actually quite difficult to do and involves a sex party with Stacy his barber, who gives you both chlamydia. In short, as Rae pointed out continuously, *he was such a fucking Gemini.*

I text Rae to confirm the message has been sent. "Doomed from the start" they shoot back, along with a link to a webpage entitled "Gemini Man and Cancer Woman Compatibility." I click the link, close the pop-up ads for healing crystals, and read:

Gemini-Cancer can be a difficult pairing. He likes to be out and about while you prefer the safety of home. You desire emotional connection, while he just wants to have a good time. You are put off by his emotional elusiveness. Beware this match!

My first thought: Yes, I know this is written by a chain-smoking astrologer with too many beaded curtains and a desktop computer, and yes, I know astrology is officially bullshit, *but also this is 100% correct.*

My second thought: Why didn't I read this a year and a half ago and save myself the money he convinced me to loan him for laser eye surgery.

My third thought: What else can the stars teach me about myself? Believing in astrology suddenly seems far easier than actually trying to divine the ground water of my feelings—the only emotion I'm ever able to identify is this vague sense of homesickness that always feels like a sort of dull ache in my chest and stomach, varying only in intensity. And that's what I'm feeling right now, I guess. Homesickness for this man who was also well-read, almost as tall as me, liked visiting my mother, and didn't mind that, at 44, I was beyond child-bearing.

The Gemini doesn't text me back. I sleep poorly and get out of bed in time to watch the sunrise from my stupid tiny condo balcony. The sun is a star. Tell me, Oh Star, tell me what I feel, tell me who to love, tell me how to be. Burn off the rest of this ache like so much fog.

The following afternoon, Rae and I are sitting at the queerest public pool in Toronto, the one with golden 5:00 p.m. sunlight and the tiny dandelions that are always trying to make a break for it between the concrete slabs of the pool deck. The smell of coconut oil and weed hang in the air like childhood best friends, who meet as adults and fall into the same easy rapport of their youth despite their fundamental differences. This pool is the thick ginger moustache, the acid wash jeans, the Shirley Bassey of pools.

I have finished seeing my last client, who was a real crier, which actually made things pretty simple for me. In psychology, sadness is the easiest part. It's the more subtle ones—the ennui, the resentment, the disappointment, or even the *lack* of emotion—that really make me work. My own therapist told me once that she found me exhausting.

Rae has finished applying off-brand zinc oxide against the sun, which feels strong even though we are only in early June. They hand me the bottle and tell me not to forget my scar, which still saws across my chest where my right breast was until just a few months ago. The scar is incompletely hidden by my navy bikini top, and I apply more of the thick white paste than usual because it seems to be looking more angry recently. Rae and I are matching today—both with short dark hair and freckles, both with navy swimsuits, both with scars on our chests, although theirs are smooth, distantly-healed, not cancer-related.

I tell Rae that I'm finally ready to get into astrology. They are psyched.

"Okay first thing's first," Rae says, removing the candy cigarette from their mouth with their thumb and index finger, like they're holding the joint they are trying to quit, "we need to check your birth chart."

With their non-smoking hand, Rae seizes my phone from the fraying orange towel I'm sitting on, and deftly enters my password. I don't ask them what they're doing, preferring to sit in the comfort of this act of brazen familiarity.

I stare into the sun, with my eyes as open as possible, until all I can see is a painful, barren whiteness.

"Okay, I've set you up on an astrology app!" They say this brightly, as if they've found an ingenious solution to the problem. "You just put all your birth info into it and it'll give your moon sign and your rising sign." I tell them that I don't know what any of that means, and they are excited to explain.

"Okay, your sun sign is the one we all know, it's the newspaper horoscope you check. It's the direction you're going in life. The road you're travelling." They dramatically stretch their arm out flat towards the horizon.

"Then, your rising sign is like the car you're driving." They are holding a fake steering wheel. "It's the

image you present to the world, it's how you're perceived by others."

"And then your moon sign"—they reach over and lay their palm flat on my chest in mock solemnity—"is your inner emotional life. It's like the atmosphere inside the car. The music you play, the temperature, the colour of the interior."

I comment on the carbon footprint of this simile and reclaim my phone. They lie on their back. The sun hasn't begun to cast any too-long shadows yet.

Knowing the fundamental nature of my inner emotional life is, obviously, appealing. I start to program my information into the app—date and location of birth—but when it asks for my exact birth time, I realize it's a piece of information I've never even considered, let alone sought. Without it, the app can only tell me I'm a Cancer, but can't calculate anything else.

Rae is now licking their index finger and pressing it to the crumbs at the bottom of a bag of Doritos. I tell them that there is no way my mother will remember my birth time. I love Rae because their eyes don't change when I mention my mother. Their care is always unperformed. My missing moon sign gives me some of that homesickness.

"Don't worry, I can tell your moon is in Capricorn," Rae says dryly, and I tell them that even I know that's code for being a fucking controlling asshole, and they can buy their own Doritos from now on, if that's how they're going to be about it.

"Just kidding." Rae chews the candy cigarette. "You're actually unknowable."

My oncologist is so fucking hot. Yes, I know that I should describe her instead as hypersmart, or uber-competent—or even kind, in her way—but she is also frighteningly attractive. Like an undercover spy, who conceals an elegantly lethal handgun tucked in the back of her pencil skirt, who could puncture your

chest with the talons of her black pumps without getting any blood on her crisp white coat.

I wish she were a spy, instead of an oncologist, because I could use a different mission than the one I'm currently on. As she walks in and seals the door behind her, I briefly regret calling her office to make a follow-up appointment about the angry-looking changes I've noticed in my scar, then going for the urgent CT scan that she demanded. It's hot outside today, I just want to be at the pool, isn't water supposed to be healing?

"Sorry to see you back," she says, maybe to me, or maybe to my cancer. Her diamond hardness is reassuring, like a cool wall to lean against.

She asks me to undress. Then she feels the rippled irregularity of my scar, confirming her suspicion that tumours have come back and spread to the skin.

"Okay, let's go over the CT scan report."

She explains it all in detail, this interior life of mine. She holds her words—lytic osseous lesions, cutaneous metastases, portal vein thrombosis—like a shield against any emotional response to this news, which I appreciate. The chemotherapy drugs will not take away my cancer, only maybe—possibly—unlikely slow it down a bit. She casually lists these drugs as if she were telling me the names of some of her closest acquaintances. My ears are ringing.

She packs her scrawled notes back into my medical file.

"Any questions." This is not actually a question.

I pause for a second. I'd like to say: It feels like we're all walking a tightrope over the chasm of our mortality, but we don't realize we're even walking it until we begin to teeter and look down.

Instead I say: "When's your birthday?"

"November the second." She does not hesitate, but squints warily.

It takes me a moment to mentally scroll through

the Zodiac.

“A Scorpio!” There is, finally, a hard-won smile. “Some of my favourite people are Scorpios. Do you know what exact time you were born?”

She stands up and says no with a cold, gentle condescension, as if she were turning down a vastly inappropriate romantic advance from a teenage boy. Which I suppose I deserve.

On my way out, I realize that I haven’t thought about the Gemini all day, and the sensation of homesickness is not for him.

When the road narrows to two lanes and begins to pass through the rock cuts, I know I’ve passed onto the hostile geology of the Canadian shield, and my mother’s nursing home is only another half hour away.

It is not a good nursing home, but, in relative terms, it’s also not a bad nursing home. It was certainly less jaundiced and claustrophobic than the other places I toured, and was the best I could afford with my mother’s meagre government assistance. So we tell ourselves it is Not Bad! And at least I could finally stop picturing the forgotten flames of her gas stove igniting the tiny clapboard house of my childhood, fueled by the stacks of old TV guides and the polyester safari of her closet.

Indeed, the cardigan she is wearing today is leopard print. I enter her room slowly, as if she truly were a wild animal—gingerly, no sudden movements. But fortunately, she doesn’t bite. Nor, for that matter, does she eat, at least not in the last few weeks. Today I notice how gaunt she has become, which I know would thrill her, as a life-long yo-yo dieter. If I thought she might laugh—or say anything at all—I would tell her that, at 64, she is not only the youngest babe in this joint, but also the thinnest! Fuck all those fat bitches sitting vacantly in their Geri-Chairs, mindlessly eating their pudding, right Mum?

But instead I say, “Hey Mum,” with the slow sing-song inflection that we reserve for the very young and the very demented. I hug at her, not with her.

Her hair is deflated. The matte grey roots have long replaced her preferred platinum blonde. I’ve forgotten that her nurse told me she had run out of lipstick and eyebrow pencil. She would be furious to be without eyebrows. Without them, she is somehow blank and passive, with an innocence that makes the complex webs of emotional intrigue, which she used to spin with relish, now seem quaint and distant.

I was ten years old when she taught me how to paint on an exquisite eyebrow. I was watching her in the mirror one evening, before she left to bartend. The trick was to get your whole arm into the movement. “Babe,” she said, still gripping a bobby-pin in her mouth, “if you leave it for just the fingers, or the wrist, it just *will not* look smooth.”

Now, I try to zhuzh up her hair a bit, but it is too dry and thin, and falls limply back in place.

“That’s better!”

I look in the top drawer of her bedside table and only find a tin of cold cream and a long-forgotten pack of cigarettes. There are no used-up nubs of cosmetics, which is perhaps for the best—the last time I did her make-up, the nurses didn’t wipe it off and when I came back five days later, she looked like one of those smeary, sad-eyed rabbits they test cosmetics on.

She sits on the side of her bed, and I sit on the blue vinyl chair, which is for guests, or rather guest. She watches me and says nothing.

“Do you—do you remember what time I was born, Mum?” I ask her, and she begins to look confused. I’m not sure what her brow is knitting—certainly not anything that will be useful to me.

I let the silence sit, because I don’t know what to say next.

Eventually, I go with: “I’m sick again, Mum.” Her

face maintains its blankness.

It is clear that I have said this only to myself. A performance artist with an audience of zero.

We keep sitting. I ask for her help with the crossword clues on my phone, reading each one aloud. After twenty minutes, she is asleep, and I just press the button that reveals all the answers. The crossword app gives me a congratulatory star, even though I do not deserve one.

When I leave her, I drive ten minutes to the hospital where I was born. The twelve-foot tall, hand-painted wooden thermometer, propped up on the yellowing lawn, tells me that the fundraising efforts for a planned renovation have stalled. The hospital will remain squat, with a brown brick facade and narrow windows. It looks just as unfriendly now as it must have looked to my young, single mother in the 1970s.

The overhead lights of the low-ceilinged lobby have been turned off against the heat, but it is still oppressively humid. I approach the lone octogenarian sitting at the information desk, upright and stoic despite her obvious discomfort. A white plastic oscillating fan is trained directly on her face, but, even so, her thick layer of tan foundation is muddied with sweat. She tells me with a practiced and kind efficiency that the medical records office is in the sub-basement. I tell her that makes sense, history being foundational and all, but she cocks one ear toward me for clarification, and I just thank her and find the elevator.

The basement air is cooler but mouldier. The medical records department has one of those doors that is bisected halfway up. When I knock, only the top half opens, as if an invisible magician is revealing the upper part of his assistant.

Her name tag says Tracey, although she does not introduce herself.

It's tempting to cast Tracey as a cartoon villain

here, but Tracey is just exceptionally normal. Maybe 5'6, a smart salt and pepper bob, a purple button-up shirt, untucked.

"Hi!" I enthuse.

She raises her eyebrows impatiently. There are many, many boxes behind her.

"I'm—just looking for my birth records? I was born here."

"A while ago..." I add conspiratorially. Perhaps there is some common ground to be found here. Just two gals on the spectrum of middle age!

Her eyes squint slightly. She frowns.

"What year were you born?" She has no inflection for me to describe. Subtextless.

"1975."

Now I think she is relieved?

"Sorry, anything before 1980 was flooded out two years ago. We had to pitch them all."

Always a few years too old.

"So, they're not, like, in a computer or anything. Anywhere?"

"Nope."

I have come this far, so I persist.

"So if I wanted to know my birth time—"

She raises those goddamn eyebrows.

"I'm out of luck," I say apologetically.

Now tilts her head, almost imperceptibly. I think she's teetering between apathy and curiosity.

"Why do you want to know what time you were born?"

My last hope is that Tracey is a closet astrologist, which might compel her to do some digging.

"It's, like—it's for astrology? So I can find out my moon sign. You know, like your inner emotional state? It's—" I stop speaking because of her fucking eyebrows.

"Yeah, no, I'm sorry we can't help you. Good luck with all that."

Fuck you, Tracey! Christmas and Easter are fake too! Also there's definitely asbestos in those ceiling tiles, don't get cancer, bye!

On the drive home, I stop at the A&W drive-through.

I get a non-diet Coke and a Mama burger, which I know is a bit on the nose.

I feel like I could cry.

I wonder why I don't.

Rae and I are soon back at the pool. It's a Tuesday afternoon, so it's not too busy—an old Portuguese couple, a group of teenagers noisily skipping the last days of school, a sun-leathered old queen in an orange speedo, blasting Robyn on a portable speaker, God bless her.

I'm wearing my favourite Ninja Turtles t-shirt, because a cancer bubble in my scar has burst, and it is covered in a thick dressing that can't get wet. The other night I read about the etymology of the word cancer. It comes from the Greek for crab, *karkinos*, because early pathologists thought the swollen veins around tumours looked like the limbs of a crab. I also found out that some crabs can live up to seventy years, which seems like a very long time.

Rae, perhaps in solidarity, is also wearing a t-shirt. Theirs says "High Heels, High Hopes!" in a turquoise 70s airbrush font. They are telling me about a bad date they went on, where the person monologued at length about the many uses of coconut oil—put it on your skin, put it in your hair, put it in your rice, put it in your vag. Rae goes on many bad dates, and a few good ones, but nothing sticks.

I don't put sunscreen on. Perhaps in solidarity, neither does Rae, even though the sun is scorching our exposed skin red. I wonder if later on we might regret this hubris, but perhaps I will be grateful for a different sort of pain.

We are silent for a time, as we often are. With Rae,

it always feels like we are swimming side-by-side in the same water—there's no need to describe its temperature to one another, and we can feel the currents that eddy from our parallel bodies. They can tell when I'm treading water, or holding my breath.

"So. I need a power of attorney. Like, for medical decisions and stuff."

"Yeah, babe," Rae says, as if this has already been decided.

"Everything the light touches is yours. All of this," I gesture to my possessions scattered in front of me on the pool deck—my old brown leather purse, my phone, my defective wireless earbuds.

"L. O. L.," they say, pronouncing each letter, like a millennial, not laughing, but half-smiling.

"And Mum."

Rae pauses.

They reach over and place their hand on the back of my neck. They look at me, and I'm arrested by their face, which has never seemed so open, so radically soft. It feels like they are motionless for a long time.

"You know how much I love road trips north," they say.

I don't really know how to describe the feeling of their hand on me—it's as if it's cracking me open and holding me in at the same time. Their hands promise to carry everything that is too heavy for me.

When they finally release my neck, I'm homesick for their weight. The sweat-print they leave behind cools like new skin. We are silent again. I turn my head and stare into the sun, my eyes as open as possible, until they are watering.

Rae says that they're hot, and that they're going to take a dip. Standing at the edge of the pool, their shoulders tense upward and their fists clench, protecting themselves from the impending cold, before they pencil in and start their lengths.

I love watching Rae's graceful front crawl. I have

long been envious of their strokes, which have an unpretentious truth to them, concise and simply-stated. There is a smooth, confident muscularity that I have never been able to master, and I am hypnotized by their arms, which slice kindly and carefully into the water, like a merciful surgeon trying to minimize blood-loss. The boomer in the next lane smashes the water earnestly with his open palms.

When, sometime later, Rae emerges from the pool, they dry themselves off beside me. They tilt their head to one side and smack it to get the water out of their ear. A few cool droplets from their hair land on my face.

“What time is it?” They squint up at the sun.

The days are still getting longer. The leathery queen’s playlist seems inexhaustible.

“Don’t worry, we have lots of time.”