

# equal halves | Carly P.

“I don’t know if I can handle you here for a weekend,” I say. My recovering-alcoholic, Newport Beach ex-boyfriend Gabe is on the other end of the phone. His rehab facility—a kind of Four Seasons without the top-shelf mini-bar—has granted him a weekend pass to visit his dying stepfather in Syracuse. Severe weather on the East Coast has prevented him from doing so, and he’s stranded in the Phoenix airport. “If I don’t come, I’ll have to go right back to Orange County. A five hundred dollar ticket wasted.”

“OK.” I said.

“OK, what?”

“OK, come. There’s a spare key under the ashtray on the back porch.”

During my nine-hour workday, I replay the details of our last month together. There is the musty smell of androgynous women—their American Apparel bras left behind our dresser—and whiskey bottles piled to forever near his side of the bed.

On the train home, I envision him lunging from behind my front door, stabbing at my face and chest. My mind, ever the survivalist, has learned.

I exit the train at Belmont. There are Latina girls on the platform eating burritos. Gabe and I used to eat a lot of burritos. I drag my feet. Slow, rough strides.

It is not raining, but everything looks blurry. The window display in a bookstore is merging into a Mediterranean restaurant sign, so that the covers of Danielle Steel melt into heaping plates of baba ghanoush.

I approach my building and see my neighbor walking her Rottweiler.

She is saying hello to me, raising her hand in a familiar gesture, and drawing her lips in smile.

I am saying hello back.

I am walking to my door and fussing with my hair.

I am pausing in the hall before my apartment.

I am remembering what it is like to feel asphyxiated standing next to a person.

I walk in and see him sitting languidly in my breakfast nook, spooning himself bites of sippy cornflakes. I glance at a vase on the foyer table. I want to throw something at him, to see him

double over his California denim. To see him gasp and wail and bleed into the acid-washed fibers, into his unabashed departure from Midwest sensibility. I want to tell him one last time to stop eating my fucking cornflakes.

He looks up at me, a stream of milk forging a trail through deliberate chin stubble. “Hey.”

I bite my lip. “Um, hey.”

Here, hunched over a child’s plastic bowl, sits the man that shoved his fist into the nose of a guy who felt me up at a Radiohead concert—left him screaming into his own hands, with tiny bits of bone and blood congealing in a kind of rocky soup.

I drop my purse where I stand and move into the kitchen. His olive eyes burrow into my neck.

Inhales.

Looks away.

I notice his ankles wrapping in and out of the chair legs in a nervous fidget. I suggest we smoke a cigarette. I turn. He rises behind me.

On the back porch, we watch the sun fall over Belmont Avenue. The sky is heavy, erupting in violent magentas, airy pinks, and blood orange. Gabe stares at me. He draws long from his Parliament and traces a line down my clavicle with his index finger where the light has spliced me into equal halves. I watch the trailing digit. It triggers the mind, the survivalist, and I remember any given night: wide-eyed at 3 a.m., hand curled over a can of Mace.

He puts his hands on my shoulders, then lets them fall and settle in the grove of my waist. I push my arms up under his shirt, moving them over his new, lean, California-Sunset Boulevard-early-Jim Morrison shape, and bury my face in his sternum.

Maybe it is the idea of Jim Morrison that keeps me from protesting when he lifts me by my thighs, shoves me up on the balcony railing, tears my skirt. Maybe I just want to fuck.

We spend the next thirty-six hours in a tangled mess of limbs and sheets. Once we pause to eat leftover takeout. Pad Thai, orange chicken, soggy spring rolls. It occurs to me, on the morning he is scheduled to leave, that I have not said more than a handful of sentences to him.

He buries a hand in the flesh of my stomach. “I love you. What now?”

I stare past him. Strands of sun pierce the floor-length mirror and reflect in a blur.