

RED LIGHT

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—You were so right about that,

Miriam says to Pauline as they sit in the backseat of an Uber, a white Kia Sorento, surrounded by what can only be described as a shrine of convenience, one backseat pocket stuffed with half-filled boxes of Tic Tacs, Altoids, and other non-candy disappointments, the opposite packed tight with an assortment of grocery checkout magazines plastered with headlines one can't help but read in a movie preview announcer's voice<sup>1</sup>, index card signs plastered all around, all of which read "PLEASE RATE FIVE STARS AND GOD BLESS :)"<sup>2</sup> in fading blue ballpoint pen, and multiple Little Trees in various scents hung like Xmas ornaments. Miriam feels that she is

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<sup>1</sup> LOSE 202 LBS: THE NEW "MUD AND CANDY CIGARETTE DIET"/PIZZA RAT: SIX MONTHS TO LIVE/KATE TO EX: YOU'RE A BOZO: HOLLYWOOD'S *CRUSTIEST* DIVORCE/MURDERED BY A *LOBSTER?!:* FISHMONGER TO THE STARS TELLS ALL/etc.

<sup>2</sup> Felix, the Uber driver and owner of this white Kia Sorento, put these signs up about three weeks ago, after he received his first non-five star rating of his entire year-and-a-half long Uber Experience. It was a two-star, and Felix, if asked, really doesn't want to talk about it. However, we shall. The passenger's name was Roger Polk. He was a fifty-nine year old man. He was on his way to the local Sbarro. Fifty-nine-year-old Roger Polk was on his way to the local Sbarro so that he could consume fake pizza and be an asshole. He entered the Kia Sorento at exactly 1:37 p.m., burping a hello to Felix. Five minutes into the ride, however, Roger Polk began to communicate via actual, human words. He began to ask Felix anything and everything about his life. At first, this felt wholly harmless to Felix; Roger Polk wanted to know where he was from, when he started doing Uber, if he liked doing Uber, what kind of music he liked. Felix was fine with this, he assumed Roger Polk was just one of the talkative ones, and while Felix wasn't talkative himself, he was perfectly fine with accommodating a talker if it meant a good rating and/or tip. Then, Polk pivoted. He began to get a little too personal with his questions, asking Felix what his Social Security number was, what his SAT score had been, his blood type, his feelings on the Oxford comma, etc. Obviously, Felix refused. Roger Polk became aggressive, yelling about how there was no human connection These Days because everyone is on their damn phones all the time, how you can't trust anyone under thirty (Felix was, and is, thirty-two), and how Felix and everyone like him present the death of American society as we know it. Felix simply chose to not engage and soon pulled up at the requested Sbarro. Polk continued to scream as he exited the vehicle, and of course, left no tip and a two-star rating. Thus, Felix was thorough in his resulting sign-posting. It wouldn't have deterred a man like Roger Polk, but at least it made Felix feel a bit better.

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of course correct in her claim that Pauline was so right about that, that being that Alex Sonn did indeed ruin the office Flag Day Party<sup>3</sup> by deigning to discuss the Mouse People, those horrible little humans-turned-maybe-not-humans by a lack of being able to Suck It Up and just work, and that Gertrude Young was wholly in the right when she told him that he was absolutely wrecking the Flag Day Party and that he should absolutely fuck off. Pauline, in a sort of eager gargle, says,

—Yeah I suppose it didn't seem like the right time and place.

—I know I know I know right! Of course he ruined the whole thing. How could she come for Gertrude like that?

The she in question can be identified as Maggie Plum, M to her friends, M&M to her boyfriend, and Receptionist to Paws n' Claws Studios. She didn't even mean to entirely come for Gertrude. She simply felt that maybe Gertrude might be overstating Alex Sonn's negative contribution to the Party, that the Party couldn't be totally ruined if most of them were still having a pretty good time. Yet Maggie spoke up and thus brought the wrath of the Flag Day Party down upon herself. Then, apparently incapable of reading the room, Maggie went on to softly suggest that maybe, just maybe, a reserved, controlled conversation about the Mouse People wasn't necessarily the worst thing, that it could make this particular Flag Day Party more

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<sup>3</sup> Miriam and Pauline's office, Paws n' Claws Studios, is Innovative. Not only are they Innovative down to the basic level of their business model (the representation of Animal Influencers™), but they are also Innovative in how they treat their Team Members, which includes (but is not limited to) Office Celebrations. PCS, in its earlier days, tried out throwing an Office Celebration for Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, and New Year's. Many Team Members attended these, but because of the popularity of these holidays with the general public, PCS couldn't get every Team Member to attend. To PCS, this was unacceptable. How can a Team be a Team if not all of the Team Members are there all the time? Thus, the Flag Day Party was born, attendance mandatory.

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interesting and memorable. Bunches of Team Members surrounded the five-foot-two Maggie Plum, shouting and shouting, until Maggie departed the Party.

Miriam claps her flaky hand against the protruding ridge of the interior car door, just below the windows that haven't been wiped down since Paul Ryan was the Speaker of the House<sup>4</sup>, and grips it tight as Felix makes a sharp turn onto Simpson Street.

—Jesus,

She huffs, and she looks over to Pauline, who gives her a dizzyingly exaggerated nod, as if she is bobbing for apples. Miriam continues,

—Who even is she? I feel like I never see her.

—Who is who?

—Oh my God, Pauline, the girl who came for Gertrude!

—Oh. I'm so sorry. I was spaced out for like a second there.

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<sup>4</sup> Felix simply hasn't had time. No one has yet to complain about the windows, and with the exception of Roger Polk, who also did not complain about the windows, he's still been consistently earning five-star ratings. He used to get the Kia Sorento washed regularly, before he realized that his customers don't seem to care very much at all, but he's now taken on a third job, in addition to his Uber driving and his Boomer-handling gig at the Arby's in the next town over, creating a personal, holy trinity of capitalism for himself. Felix has finally acquiesced and filled the remainder of his free hours with shifts at one of The Company's\* warehouses two towns over. He had toughed it out and resisted for quite some time, treading carefully outside The Company's maw of employment. He had heard it deemed worse, more oppressive, more throat-twisting than both the realms of Gig and Customer Service. But alas, Felix could begin to feel his body collapsing into itself, and thus he needed extra funds with which to bring nutrients outside the sphere of Top Ramen into his diet. The easiest, most immediate choice, was to become not an employee of The Company, not an associate, nor even a team member, but a Boss. Everyone is a Boss at The Company, and The Company has a job for everyone.

\*The Company's name is, of course, censored via the act of calling it The Company. As of May, this has been required by law in all written words, speech, and signage. The use of The Company's real name is wholly banned — even its owner and CEO may not utter it under pain of prosecution under federal law.

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Pauline is not so sorry, nor was she spaced out for like a second there. They are stopped at a red light, still on Simpson Street<sup>5</sup>, a red light at which neither Miriam nor Pauline know how long they'll stay. The Uber drivers usually don't take this route to their homes and they certainly never go this way when they're driving themselves. They've heard it's "sketchy".<sup>6</sup> Now,

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<sup>5</sup> This isn't just any red light. This is that beast, that horror, the Red Light on the Intersection of Simpson Street and Holywell Avenue. Slower than Internet Explorer, older than a Senate Republican, the Red Light on the Intersection of Simpson Street and Holywell Avenue is Felix's main gripe with his work as an Uber driver. Not only that, but it's one of his main gripes with life in general. The average red light lasts about two-ish minutes, seemingly longer to the driver in a rush, but nonetheless about two-ish minutes. The RLISSHA is far longer than the average two-ish minutes, and that's not just an illusion conjured up by Felix's overstretched imagination. Felix has timed it. He has done so on three separate occasions. He has obtained three separate measurements, respectively: seventeen minutes and three seconds, sixteen minutes and fifty-eight seconds, and seventeen minutes and twenty-seven seconds. This, of course, has become an issue near-and-dear to his heart, as he finds himself on Simpson Street quite a bit between his Uber work and the route he takes to his new job at The Company's warehouse. He's posted on Facebook about it many times, often with all-caps and emojis, and he's received quite a few corroborating comments. Two months ago, on one of his rants about the RLISSHA, complete with little flush faces, his friend Derek Lace, a resident of another town and thus uninvolved, commented that maybe Felix should take the issue to a Town Hall meeting. Felix love-reacted, and told Derek that yes, that was a great idea, he would definitely do that. He found himself, a week later, sitting on a folding chair, huddled under fluorescent lights amongst pasty elderly men all in variations of the same outfit, and lacrosse and soccer moms vibrating from concoctions of venti espresso beverages, wine of all shades, and varying volumes of self-righteousness. Felix spent the entirety of the meeting in an unconscious vortex of stomach pains and sweat, and staring down at the yellow legal pad in his lap. He never spoke. He found that he could not. Felix has not returned.

<sup>6</sup> To clarify, Miriam and Pauline were not told about the alleged "sketchiness" of this area, an area defined by the thoroughfares of Simpson Street and Holywell Avenue, an area simply crawling with Mouse People, at the same time, in the same place, or even by the same person. Miriam grew up here, in this town, but Pauline's relatively new, she only moved here a few years ago when offered a job at PCS, after the appearance of the Mouse People. All Pauline has ever known here has been a Mouse People-ridden town. She first heard about the Mouse People by word-of-mouth. About three weeks into her new position at PCS, Pauline found herself supervising a Thanksgiving-themed photoshoot for Hans the Possum, a fast-rising Animal Influencer™ with, at the time, eighteen-thousand-two-hundred-and-three followers on Instagram, sixteen-thousand-five-hundred-and-forty-seven likes on Facebook, and forty-six-thousand-one-hundred-and-one followers on Goodreads. The creature spent the entire photoshoot scowling, drooling, repeatedly flinging off his pilgrim buckle hat, and lumbering around the false Thanksgiving dinner table in his black buckle boots, sending plastic potatoes

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Pauline is entranced, she can barely process the words Miriam has said to her, she cannot take her eyes off the streaked and dusty glass of the Kia Sorento, her skin is boiling, her gray matter is rumbling around in her skull space like some bowling ball of consciousness, she is struggling to process what she sees. She watches the figure move up the pole, the shining metal pole decked out in aged black chewing gum, cryptic stickers, posters for lost aspiring Animal Influencers™, ads for tutoring and guitar lessons with phone numbers rustling in the breeze, she watches the figure move up the metal pole at increasing speed and she cannot stop watching. Pauline wonders if Miriam sees. Pauline has never seen one of these before, in real life, Pauline does not know what Miriam would expect her to say, or do, if anything. Pauline was never entirely certain they were even real. Miriam is looking ahead, as if she herself is driving the Kia Sorento. As if Miriam would ever drive a Kia Sorento, or an Uber of any kind for that matter. Pauline cannot stop watching the figure move up the pole, and her throat is lined with tacky glue and feathers. She shoves spit down her pipes, over and over again, until she finds herself able to turn to Miriam and say,

—Hey, uh, do you see that?

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and cardboard stuffing flying to the floor. Pauline, new to the Animal Influencer™ scene and observing all this chaos go down, had remarked to the lighting person, Leslie,

—Gosh, possums are just the worst creatures, aren't they?

—Second worst, in my opinion. The Mouse People are the first worst.

—Mouse huh?

—What, you don't know? Here, let me Google it and show you what they are.

Miriam, unlike Pauline, did not need to be told. When the Mouse People first appeared, people talked about them, yes, but Miriam came too late to those conversations. Her first encounter with the Mouse People was by sight, a sight she encountered standing stock-still on the sidewalk of Simpson Street, a sight in which, for just a moment, she locked herself into the Mouse Person's empty eyes, a sight in which the Mouse Person scrambled away moments after, as if afraid of Miriam herself, a sight in which Miriam felt downright insulted, a sight she has tried her best to forget, and now she is glad that people choose not to discuss them.

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—See what, Pauline?

—Pole. The thing on the pole.

—What thing on the pole?

Miriam doesn't bother to look, nor does she even think about trying to look. If asked, she'd tell you her eyes are tired and have better sights at which to be looking. Pauline will tell her.

—I don't want to say.

—Huh, what? Okay.

—It's one of them.

—What do you mean by them. Why won't you just say it.

—The. The.

—The fucking what Pauline. The fucking what.

—Mouse.

—Oh. Oh. Pauline what the fuck.

Miriam makes the delayed effort to crane her neck and now both she and Pauline see the Mouse Person scaling the pole from which the traffic light, the RLISSHA, hangs suspended. She is almost to the top now. She pulls up her emaciated form inch by inch. Her front faces the Kia Sorento, a face devoid of feeling. The Mouse Person's skin is just a hair grayer than the overcast sky.

—What is it doing?

Miriam asks in a squawk, expecting an answer. She had been squirming about in her seat and jiggling her leg out of habit, but Miriam now sits wholly still. Miriam's seen them around,

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she's looked down alleyways in passing to see them scampering about in tattered corporate uniforms, she's seen them darting across the street, their grayscale dried skin shining in the carnivorous sunlight. Miriam has not seen them climb, nor would she have guessed they could climb if you asked her. She always assumed they were weak, what from all the work they do, the work they just can't handle. Miriam does not want it to be climbing. She continues,

—Oh, Pauline, this is your first time seeing one, isn't it, you good?

Pauline says nothing, as people are wont to do upon first encounter with the Mouse People.<sup>7</sup> She simply continues to watch as the Mouse Person reaches the top of the pole, as the Mouse person begins to move out onto the horizontal pole from which the RLISSHA hangs. Pauline's nervous, that thing looks like it's dying, like it's about to vomit all over Simpson Street, but she's also kind of impressed with how well it climbs. The RLISSHA is, of course, still red, red to the point where it has forgotten green, red to the point where red is the only color it or anyone in the Kia Sorento knows. The Mouse Person swings her wisp of a body around the electrical branch, so that she is now dangling down from the pole, her legs fluttering like insects,

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<sup>7</sup> With the exception, of course, of Maggie Plum. The now-scorned co-worker had previously heard of the Mouse People, and had seen photographs of them, so she was quite prepared for her first encounter. She ventured upon one at dusk, while walking home from a friend's apartment. Her Mouse Person, like the one Miriam and Pauline are observing right now, right at this moment, was a female Mouse Person, dressed in a Burger King employee uniform and looking quite undernourished and desperate. The Mouse Person was holed up in an alleyway, rifling through trash cans. Maggie assumed that she was doing so for food, but she never confirmed it. She tried asking what the Mouse Person was doing, as well as what her name might be, and the Mouse Person answered her. They're known to answer when spoken to — despite their upsetting appearances, the Mouse People usually don't mind talking to regular people. Maggie, however, could not hear what the Mouse Person said. She, like all the other Mouse People, was far too quiet to be heard without leaning in. Brave souls will often ask for the Mouse Person to repeat themselves, and lean in to listen a second time. Maggie was not a brave soul. Instead of leaning in, she simply grabbed an unopened Luna bar from her tote bag and tossed it at the Mouse Person and power-walked away.

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her flaky paws wrapped with a tenuous grip. She spends a few moments up there, as if she is somehow enjoying herself, enjoying the breeze. She wears, as the inhabitants of the Kia Sorento can now plainly see, a uniform for The Company. She, like Felix, is a Boss. The overcast sky, the same color as the Mouse Person, appears to consume her, to swallow her up into the colorless cold.

She falls. She does not die. The Mouse Person lands on the roof of the Kia Sorento, slightly denting it. Her limbs, limbs of a human dyed gray, are spread out like the points of a star. Felix might be able to get away with not getting the dent fixed. Miriam yelps for a moment, and only a moment, only the moment she needs, and Pauline half-tries to scream but the sound grows stuck in that concoction of tacky glue and feathers. Felix, a slightly shaking Felix, rolls down the window, sticks his head out, and asks,

—Can I help you, Miss?

The Mouse Person squeaks something that is unintelligible to Miriam and Pauline.<sup>8</sup> They watch their driver lean in, like the brave soul he is. Miriam does not understand how he can lean

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<sup>8</sup> What the Mouse Person squeaks, however, is not unintelligible to Felix, who has leaned in. Felix hears, in the softest tones possible,

—Can I ride on your roof, please? Can you take me to The Company warehouse? You work there too, right?

Felix catches a glimpse of her arm, which is marked with seven black Xs. He has only heard about this before, not seen or experienced it. The robot who roams The Company warehouse, watching all the Bosses at work, marks mistakes on the workers' arms with black Xs. The robot's name is Sebastian, and Sebastian is strict. Sebastian has googly-eyes glued on him, to justify even giving him a name in the first place. The black Xs, from what Felix has been told, are meant to hurt. They are meant to stay there forever. The uniform for the Bosses is long-sleeved, but Felix can see these Xs now, for the Mouse Person has her sleeves rolled up in defiance of The Company's dress code. Felix says,

—You may. Hold on tight.



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in at all. Pauline finds that she is too far away to lean in. After a minute he pulls his head back inside the Kia Sorento, turns to his passengers and says,

—She’s going to ride on the roof, if that’s alright with you.

Pauline nods, her head accumulating a new weight. Miriam pauses for a moment and huffs. She then rolls down the window, sticks her head out, and says to the Mouse Person,

—Hey! Can you Venmo me for your share of the ride?

Miriam’s voice ripples, yet reverberates still. She rests her eyes in the Mouse Person’s well-rounded ear, not her eyes, and she watches the grayness absorb her demand. She gives up in the face of no response, and looks away. Miriam buries herself in her phone, her shoulders about an inch and three-quarters higher than they normally are. The Mouse Person’s head and neck loom down for a few more moments in front of Felix’s window. Her eyes meet Pauline’s. Pauline does not want this, but she is stuck, and somehow cannot look away. Pauline is in a panic, her stomach is bubbling and boiling, her eyes catch something in the Mouse Person that she cannot place but feels innate, feels innate and familiar and commonplace and more of a home to her than her own throat and gut. The Mouse Person’s eyes are devoid of pupils, just gray circles closed off by off-white. Her lips, gray lips, are scaled like a fish. The skin on her face twitches and wrinkles, rolling about, a river to nowhere. Pauline thinks she looks like vomit. Pauline knows she is not the actual color of vomit. Pauline stares into this portrait of death and it All falls away, her clothes, her employment, her name, her consciousness, and all the atoms in her being. Her brain is burned. Pauline feels as if her own back has left her. Pauline slides her hand behind her to ensure that her back is still there, that this sensation is not a physical one. She thinks her back remains. Pauline wishes the Mouse Person a happy Flag Day, and the Mouse

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Person nods just once, a deep nod, a nod that rolls, and then the Mouse Person pulls herself up and out of view. Felix turns back to look at Pauline and Miriam. He says nothing, and turns back around. The light turns green.