

THEORY OF HARMONY

NICHOLE LEFEBVRE

At my desk, I hear the tick of Michael's watch from where he sits, on the sofa. I start counting measures of rest in my head, to its languid beat, *one two three four, two two three four*, as if I am playing in a concert band again and am waiting for the right moment to re-join the song, *three two three four, four two three four*. Online I open a metronome. I love the sharp clicks; they straighten my posture. I slow the metronome until I find his watch ticks *adagio*, 66 beats per minute, too fast for accuracy, and far slower than the 120 I usually count, *five two three four, six two three four*. It has been six weeks since I began taking an SSRI. Too soon, it seems, to start working.

Michael turns toward me, smiles and says, "That clicking might drive me insane."

I silence the metronome. Feel a wave of frustration. "However we may deceive ourselves in moments of intimacy," Inga Clendinnen writes, "'the other' begins at the skin."

I cannot, logically, be annoyed that Michael doesn't want to listen to a metronome. It is a sound most recognize as annoying. Still, when I shut it off, the heat leaves my chest. This is an old reaction: go cold, close up. If I lived alone again, I tell myself, I could turn it up, speed it up, play it louder. Maybe I want to live alone again, I think, brain heading downhill. *One two three four, two two three four*, my therapist says the spike in anxiety over the past few years proves this walled defense no longer works, *three two three four*, proves I

don't want to shut him out entirely. I remind myself that love requires accepting we never get inside the other's head.

It's good Michael can't hear everything: I have had Vitamin C's "Friends Forever (The Graduation Song)" stuck on repeat for as long as I can remember. Lucky me! Then I move into *Alouette, gentille alouette. Alouette, je te plumerai*. Now I whistle my practice arpeggios from when I played classical piano as a teenager, trilling the notes leading from one octave to the next, as if I am a mating bird, and while I whistle I increase my mind-metronome clicks, whistle faster. This he hears. I stop, smile, apologize. How is it my partner isn't sick of me yet? What does it sound like inside a quiet head? As *we go on / we remember / all the times we've / had together*.

My long-standing problem is remembering. If given an image of the heart, I will memorize each vena cava (superior, inferior), the length of both ventricles, and report it back, picture perfect. I can map for you the exact vacuum lines of my childhood. My sister calls to fill in her blanks. "Did we celebrate Thanksgiving? Did we have a tradition?" I always act like it's a strength, a parlor trick, laughing as she says, "You're the memory for us both."

I admit I am skeptical of the phrase "eidetic memory," perhaps because my mother has bragged about having one, though her stories change depending on the audience, how cruel that feels to put down, and because, statistically, eidetic memories fade after age twelve.

Arnold Schoenberg invented the twelve-tone technique to ensure equal weight to all tones on the chromatic scale, to avoid emphasis on any one. With all twelve notes given equal airtime, the music has no key. As a pianist at fourteen, fifteen, I didn't get any Schoenberg to perform. My competition songs were calm, measured, with bouts of playful staccato. Debussy, Mozart, G major, D minor. Beginning, middle, the music climaxes, then recedes. My teacher must have known I needed stability; I wore my posture like a two-by-four tucked into the back of my jeans.

In my next home, I will have a piano again. In our next home, we . . .

My piano sits in storage in my father's garage in Florida. I will pick it up, move it forward. I will play songs that are strictly com-

posed, yet, to the untrained ear, sound unfinished. I will find comfort in admitting how unfinished I am, too.

My desk is an unfinished birch plank, as long as the wall, with a tidy row of books by my favorite authors. An author makes it to the desk if I have read three of their books and still want more; otherwise the books remain on the shelves, alphabetized. It occurs to me now, as I tap the smooth paper spines, that I have been reading about couples, divorced or in peril, for three full years. I want to shrug—can't help what I'm drawn to!—but that would be deflecting, with a joke. "When you read or write you seem to achieve that control which the lover craves," writes Anne Carson, "a vantage point from which the dilemmas of 'now' and 'then' may be viewed with detachment." Reading about the end of relationships is, in this way, a comfort—a way to rid the potency from the past.

Whenever an acquaintance mentions a wedding, their own, or, say, their parents' fortieth anniversary, I can't sit still. If it's at a bar, my thighs bob. I listen as my bare skin unsticks from the leather stool, in loud, drawn-out tics. My parents love as if in competition. This is a line I used to believe and even say out loud. Their second marriages began and ended in the same years. Their third happened, like clockwork, with the next decade's passing. Joan Didion writes, "Marriage is memory, marriage is time." I can't remember a time my parents were happily married! I told my father's third wife, as they neared year ten, that she better buy herself a wig, or else adopt an accent, trick him into thinking she was next.

This year, I will be thirty. This year, my mother got her third divorce. This year, my father and his third wife celebrated their twelfth anniversary. The neat patterns of my childhood are cracking! I used to say I would need to date a person for a decade before marriage, certain I'd inherited the ten-year itch. Nearing year three with Michael, I am already antsy. I wonder if this means I am maturing or is a sign he's the right fit.

I tell myself it's okay not to believe in marriage. It's okay to simply be together, live together. It's okay not to want a marriage, but the awkward thing is, I do. The irony of those two words cropping up is not lost on me. Hopeless romantic and cynic, both. Worried I

will end up divorced and alone, or worse, stuck with someone I no longer recognize. I can't shake the feeling that divorce is the purest form of failure, can't help but imagine myself sprinting from the altar, fulfilling my father's nickname for me: Love 'em and Leave 'em LeFebvre.

When I think of weddings, I picture myself and my sister, six and nine, holding hands in my father's laundromat, watching him marry our first stepmother. My little brother sat cross-legged on the floor, bowtie squeezing his baby fat into even chubbier cheeks. To make us girls feel included, they gave us gold-plated bracelets engraved with our names and their wedding date. Instead of a DJ: the whirl of triple loaders. Fragrant dryer sheets in place of flowers.

It was the first day of spring, 1995. I am certain we closed for the occasion but underneath their vows I hear the cyclical thump of sneakers in a dryer, that partisan heartbeat. My father said they got married where they met. He joked folding was their first date.

"Liar," says my mother. "He couldn't tell you kids they met at a strip club."

Michael and I met at grad school orientation, in Virginia. His hair was buzzed close to his scalp. I turned in my chair to say hello to him, this shy-looking man with big ears and a red t-shirt that accentuated the ginger hair in his beard. I wore black heels, black skirt, white collared shirt with black grid lines, long black blazer vest. I was nervous, and when nervous, I veer overdressed. Michael told me he'd driven cross-country from California and shaved his head when he arrived, laughing as he palmed the fuzz. Outside the window, undergrads ate dumplings in the sunny amphitheater; the cement seats filled and emptied as the hours passed.

I'd soon learn that Michael's hair is curly, his lower eyelids freckled; the university brings llamas into the amphitheater during finals week, to soothe its overachieving student body. Michael takes his father's old 35mm to parties and lets months elapse before he develops the film; the time allows people to forget what has happened, to be surprised by their faces: deliriously happy. Once, camera in

hand, Michael told me that if you overlooked his father's death, his childhood was idyllic.

When I think idyll, I picture myself and my siblings running laps around the family laundromat. Parents offstage, folding and pressing strangers' clothes into clean, crisp piles. No weddings, no stepparents yet. Summer, with all the dryers going, heat pulsed visible waves through the room. My siblings and I would dunk our arms into a full bucket of quarters; the coins shifted and pooled, cooling our bodies. The hottest days, we'd strip and sit in the top loaders, each in our own personal Jacuzzi. We'd hold down the buttons with the flats of our wrists as the machines filled, laugh and dip down and slam the lids on each other, test how long we could handle the water rising, before screaming and pounding on the lids with our fists.

"Whoever invented marriage was an ingenious tormentor," wrote Susan Sontag in 1956. "It is an institution committed to the dulling of feelings." It appears, in compiling these notes for an essay left unfinished, Sontag was talking herself out of her marriage. "The whole point of marriage is repetition. The best it aims for is the creation of strong, mutual dependencies." I catch myself nodding and then shaking my head. I admit I find comfort in repetition. Each morning when I sit at this desk I light a candle so I can smell something specific. I add the match to the row of other burnt matches on the windowsill, with an index finger's width in between. When I accumulate twenty, I swipe them into my palm and throw them away. Two years after she wrote those notes, Sontag and her husband divorced.

I attend weddings. I witness joy and promises of commitment. I have been known to say I love weddings. All dolled up and an open bar. The swell of romantic energy! Shoes kicked off, dancing into the night.

I have also said, more times than I can count, that I don't believe in marriage. The odds, simply, are not encouraging. Marriage grates my better judgment. It turns the smartest women I know into clichés. A friend with a master's degree posted a map of her four-mile run: #sexyforthedress #sweatingforthewedding. Another changed her own fine name to something resembling a skin disease.

Marriage, I fear, is an admission you can't move through life on your own, that you need someone else to take care of you. My mother says my father made her feel worthless, nicknaming her Baby Hippopotamus; reminding her she went from high school to his laundromat, so what else, exactly, was she qualified to do? She met her second husband while selling appliances. Three kids under six. Two in diapers! She had to marry again to get out of debt.

And yet: Marriage is a choice, not a solution. Michael: person, not pattern. Family history isn't doomed to repeat. I look at Michael, where he sits on our slate-gray couch, searching for a movie for us to watch tonight, serene and focused. Behind Michael's shoulders, the cushion lies in a taut, un-rumpled line. He's fifty, sixty pounds heavier than I am, and when he stands, the cushions re-fill, good as new. My side has a permanent hollow, as if when I sit, I am secretly burrowing down.

I close my eyes and see Michael in the Sugar Hollow woods, wearing a faded green bathing suit and t-shirt, white tube socks reaching up his shins, camera on his neck. At the swimming hole, the bright trees reflect down into the water, staining it green. Michael needs shade, I crave the sun, so he wades alone across the shallow waterfall, its rocks algae-slick, and, shin-deep, he stumbles; he releases a quick, gravelly laugh and catches himself upright, as his sunglasses slide from his nose down into the water.

"Not again," I say, pointing as they float for a moment and then sink away. It's his third pair of sunglasses lost to this water. He drops his backpack in a heap, peels off his shirt, begins his first layer of sunblock, squinting moodily, despite the shade. It's midweek, perk of grad school. We're alone. Quiet, but the sound of the waterfall trick-el-ling down. I strip to my one-piece and smooth out my towel. Read a few pages. Turn over, onto my back. I try to read, instead, the other book I've packed, but nothing's taking.

"What is wrong with me?" I yell across the stream to Michael, lifting the books I've brought: *To the Lighthouse* and *Drown*. He shakes his head, smiles with his teeth cut into his bottom lip, likely suppressing a comment.

"I thought they'd be thematically appropriate."

"Up," he says, standing while reaching into his bag.

"I meant, as in water-adjacent."

We're on our separate rocks, his cool, mine too hot to stand without dancing. He tosses his spare book across the water. I catch it, as he quotes it: "We will live on mangoes and love." I remember thinking the image of rocks split by water was a perfect, albeit heavy-handed metaphor for coupling while retaining autonomy—so perfect I took notes on a receipt rather than read.

When I read about divorce I don't feel relief, exactly. I feel a head-nodding affirmation, a well *that's* to be expected. It is as calming as satisfying as plucking the hairs from my shins. I relish the details: Edith Wharton left her loveless marriage in 1913, after twenty-eight years. It was not a secret that she and Teddy Wharton didn't love each other, didn't sleep in the same room, didn't share interests aside from their dogs. She had an affair with a prominent bisexual journalist. Teddy "speculated disastrously with \$50,000 of her fortune, lived riotously in Boston with another woman, and returned to Paris to subject her to violent abuse."¹

Unable to process how Edith would manage on her own, despite her commercially and critically successful novels, a reporter asked her: "What will you do now?"

I picture her grinning, Papillion tucked under an arm, wisps of hair falling from her high, puffed bun. She said, chin up, "I'm going to eat the world, leaf by leaf."

"Leaf by leaf" is tattooed under a leafy rose on my left bicep, a reminder to keep moving, traveling, reading, growing, never stop feeding off this world. I like to think Edith Wharton would be star-tled by her words becoming so permanent, away from the page, startled and then calmed when I remind her tattoos are another way women can riot against what society deems as *uncouth*.

In my daydream Edith and I are drinking pisco sours and petting her dogs. They scramble around our skirts, which, I'm surprised to find, block the blows from their sharp toenails, entirely. Her house is a thirty-minute drive from my hometown, so, one century excluded, our friendship feels within reach. What begins in her drawing room moves to the library, lazing on and around the wrap-around porch, before running upstairs and banging on the guest suite door, hiking up our skirts and

¹White, Edmund. "The House of Edith." *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 54, no. 7, nybooks.com/articles/2007/04/26/the-house-of-edith. Accessed 1 Jan. 2018.

insisting Henry James give us matching stick-and-pokes on our thighs. Bite after needle bite of pain. Etch, etch, etch. Edith takes my hand. "Squeeze it," she insists. Etch, etch, and . . . done! Henry wipes away the inky blood—ruddy menstrual brush stroke across my inner thigh—to reveal the single word: Maisie. Edith laughs and laughs and Henry joins in, the two falling over in a hot irreverent heap, and I feel third-wheel, all of a sudden, a child, ashamed.

"The name Edith has gone out of fashion!" I say. "Only grandmothers have it now!"

She sits upright, sours, tells me, "Divorce is actually fun. Get over it, already."

When Michael sees the tattoo, he teases me by singing a song he learned in preschool: *Leaf by leaf, row by row, we're going to make this garden grow.*

Grow is a fine motto for the past three years: I have tried to hit reset, tried building my ideal life. I moved to a new state, alone, left my piano in storage, threw away sixteen years of sheet music—an attempt at foregoing hobbies to focus on writing, a melodramatic act I now regret—earned a master's degree, kept in touch and vacationed with close friends back in the city, began teaching at a university, worked at an archive—showing off Plath's copy of *Leaves of Grass*, an artist book printed in invisible ink—took up embroidery, then swimming, then ballet, traveled across the South, hiked to a swimming hole, published work I am proud of, kept over ten plants alive, killed at least five. Fell in love. Stayed. Asked him to move in. I loved living alone: the silence, the space. It surprises me how much I love living, creating a home, together. We have decided to live next in California. We will move in three months, drive his gold Jeep back across the country, from where he came.

Of this decision I feel a fluttery excitement and still can't stop fixating on the hypothetical end: how tears would stream down Michael's face and mine, his pink-lined, hurt, watery eyes; I imagine the final time we make love I ride his cock and press my throat into his hands, tell him not to stop, he chokes me so hard I'm left with a red necklace, going-away present; no, I imagine it tender and lov-ing, he spoons me and kisses my temple from behind, and I watch as his pink freckled knuckles grip into my breast.

This is irrational, intrusive thinking. It's as bad as how when I walk to work and am overly stressed, I can't stop the same phrase from looping through my head; as my left foot hits the ground I think *squishy*, as my right foot hits, *baby*. I don't know where this phrase comes from—I am not ready, do not have enough money for a baby—I simply think it as I walk, *squishy baby, squishy baby*, sub-dividing two syllables as two beats per step, I can't stop it, and it feels good, the faster I walk, the faster I say it, *squishy baby, squishy baby, squishy baby; squishy baby, squishy baby, squishy baby*.

I don't think I'm explaining this correctly: the phrase repeats but it isn't overlaid with images; think of it as insistent dissonance. A sound I can't stop from looping, intrusive. A line of music I need to play over and again until it is perfected, until the judges pass their silent inked-up scoresheets with the commentary I rush to read as if it might bite: yes you've qualified for nationals, yes here's a shot at the scholarship and the Steinway, but check fingering, please, in measure 43, you played F-sharp rather than natural, you sped the *adagio*, you slowed from 87 to 107. It seems impossible but I can still feel the frustration for mistakes I made in 2005. A headache begins, dull yet pulsing. The difference between a pianist's AA and AAA rating was one point: 90 to 91. Sorry, no. Not perfect enough.

Online, I find a Schoenberg piano composition. Breathe in, out. I feel in my shoulders, in my biceps, my back, how satisfying it is to let your fingers land on what someone else hears as the wrong chord. My mother told me she always volunteered to take out the recycling at the kitchen goods store where she worked, recycling as in broken plates and glasses. "You had to throw them in the dumpster," she said, eyes glinting. "I love the sound of smashing glass." She landed heavily on the uh sound in love: *luhve, guttural, lingering. Love.*

"Do you mind using headphones?" Michael asks. "This song is making me anxious."

What sounds good, beautiful, to one ear, is hideous, ridiculous to another. I plug in the white ear buds and laugh, a little. My sweet love! To be fair: Schoenberg is used in horror films; the monster creeps from the shadows, the edge of the building beckons.

In his *Theory of Harmony*, Schoenberg writes, "A composer can still not give a performable picture of the rhythms he actually has

in mind.” No matter how hard we try to get these inner rhythms onto the page, the lines are altered by the act of writing, and it surprises us, how they’re changed.

My mother’s second wedding was a surprise. My grandmother walked in to what she thought was her fortieth anniversary party; when she saw the altar, she thought she and her husband would be renewing their vows. My sister and I wore our first communion dresses, tulle skirts like kiddie wedding gowns. My brother’s tux could’ve fit a teddy bear. My mother was gorgeous as she stepped forward, burgundy lips parting into a smile. Her heavy beaded dress whispered along the grass. Two years later my father would file for full custody of my brother, on the grounds the boy was not physically safe. When the social workers asked, my sister and I didn’t mention our stepfather pulling us around by the ponytail or ear, waking us to re-clean the stove. Losing all three of her children, we silently decided, would be too much for a mother to bear. We lived between houses, pretending to be calm, unbothered, for another eight years.

Now my mother wears her wedding rings on a chain around her neck. Stacks them down her pinky when she’s thinking. “People get sick of me after a while,” she said once. I didn’t know how to respond, so I said she was stuck with me, and put the kettle on the burner for tea.

At my back, the wooden chair creaks. The sound roots me to the present. I wriggle my fingers. I am supposed to remind myself I have a body when my mind cycles, gets stuck replaying the past. I am supposed to focus on my fingers, my toes, this is supposed to stop the intrusive thoughts, the whistling, the counting. It often results in my miming the right hand to Mozart’s *Fantasia K. 397*. I can’t resist tapping the melody on my desk. I stop ten bars early; Mozart died before finishing its composition, and although I used to perform the published ending, it now sounds tacked on. False and reaching.

I slide out the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Symptom Checklist that my psychiatrist used to diagnose me and the packet of information she gave me to read. She said she

could tell I would research on my own and she'd rather I read her materials than some-thing odd I might find online . . . as if I would cite a dubious source!

At home I discovered her checklist desperately needed a copy editor. When I returned, I asked if the typos were a test. She didn't laugh. She suggested my edits were symptomatic.

It is difficult to separate the neat and orderly from perfectionism as illness, curiosity from disordered thinking. What came first, di-orce or the fear of endings? The metronome or musical obsession? When I was upset, at twelve, thirteen, I'd tell myself to buck up, knowing it could always be worse. I'd sit at the piano for hours, and forget, numb all feeling. I hear my piano teacher's voice, deep, dis-content: "You'll never be perfect enough," how I echoed that phrase to my siblings when they begged me, as I was practicing Mozart for hours, to play another song, please. Some would call her harsh. I knew she was giving me the gift of the truth. I see again how dis-appointed my piano teacher looked, in the hotel at nationals, when she caught me sneaking to the roof with a boy: "You know better than to get distracted." And though I liked that boy, wanted to know him, stayed up late talking on the phone to him, though he offered to take a taxi to my house because neither of us could drive yet, I never saw him outside of piano competitions and studio events. I knew better than distraction.

When hormones would risk clouding my judgment, I'd picture my mother's eyes, in the rearview mirror: I've run down the steep green hill from my father's house to her car and she wants to know who else is coming home tonight. She tries to rid the emotion from her voice but I see her long lashes, wet from crying, have flecked her glasses with mascara, black dashes like accidentals. I tell her only me. My mother sighs as she shifts into drive.

In public I don't mention my mother's reasons for divorce. I do this, maybe, to protect her, or else to keep my stories light and amusing, to skewer myself as a classic kid of divorce. Here's my baggage. How funny! The first husband: my father, who cheated; the second, closeted and abusive; the third believed in ghosts and left to develop his medium abilities. I prefer a good story over reck-oning with the detail. I mimic the overblown shivering fits of my mother's third husband that meant he had sensed a presence.

He once showed me photos of a porcelain doll that had tipped over on its own. Proof of ghosts, he told me. I said, Gravity.

I think, perhaps, I am an asshole. I am, in the least, judgmental. Insistent on joking, weaving it all into a story. It is, by now, compulsive as counting. I list her men *one two three*. If I forget, if I get over it, then I might not understand what it all means.

A comprehensive study of musical obsession in the *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* outlines the three inter-correlated beliefs linked “theoretically and empirically” to obsessive compulsive symptoms:

- a. perfectionism (P) and intolerance of uncertainty (C); collectively as (PC)
- b. over-importance of thoughts and the need to control thoughts (ICT), and
- c. inflated responsibility and the overestimation of threat (RT).

PC involves beliefs that mistakes and imperfection are intolerable, along with beliefs that it is necessary and possible to be completely certain that aversive events will not occur. I understand, on an intellectual level, that failure is part of life—that divorce is not failure—and still I believe if I am strict and focused, I can avoid both entirely.

“Be sweet to you,” Michael tells me, when he notices my frustration. I smell the cedar and almond oil in his beard. I smile and pretend I’ll be gentler.

“You’re tapping,” he says, pointing at my right hand. “I mean it. Be sweet.”

I leave my desk and join Michael, his laptop balanced on the couch between us. “How about this Taiwanese movie *Yi Yi*?” I tell him I’m not sure I have three hours of attention span in me, pulling the maroon knit blanket up and around my shoulders, tight and tighter across my throat.

“It starts with a wedding and ends with a funeral,” he says, eyebrows raised, knowing I’ll agree, and I do, though admit I’ll answer emails while we watch or else start a crossword puzzle. But when the film begins, I see a small child with big ears and a shy smile. A camera hangs around his neck. His white socks nearly touch his knees.

The scene changes to a teenage girl playing the piano.

"She's not that good," I say. "*Moonlight Sonata* is very easy to play."

"Because it's easy means it can't be good?"

I admit I am being insufferable. I don't admit *Moonlight's* third movement poses a problem for my too-small hands. I settle deeper into the couch, my forehead tucked into Michael's neck.

Michael was the first person I told about the worst obsession. One night last fall, we lay in bed, our heads sharing his pillow, foreheads kissed together. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him but my chest began to fill with sand, it weighed heavier and heavier, then another question began to cycle through by mind, dense and dry on the back of my tongue, and although I wanted to send him off to sleep with kind, loving words, the phrase that came out was: "Do you know how Sylvia Plath tried to kill herself, the first time?"

"No," he said, eyes narrowing. I mistook his concern for interest.

"Her mother was out of the house. She left a note that she was going for a walk, stole the sleeping pills, tiptoed down to the crawl-space in the basement."

"I don't want to hear this before bed," Michael said, but I needed to finish or I'd be stuck in the basement swallowing pills.

"She took too many and passed out, threw up. A day later she came to, confused, tried to sit up, and bashed her face into the low ceiling."

"Stop," he said.

"There was a search party. They thought she'd been kidnapped while out for her walk."

"You can't do this before bed, Nic."

"I need to. Her brother heard the moans coming from the basement."

"Please."

"It comforts me."

"That worries me."

Some nights I'm driving my family off the highway; I don't want to, but I gun it and careen through the guard rail and into the river, I watch them scratch at their seatbelts, attempt to push the doors open past the immense water pressure. Or I watch Michael's eyes closing for the last time. Moons up, I'm in the old apartment. I

breathe in what I don't trust is oxygen. It's carbon monoxide. My body turns blue from the lungs up. Now my head is in the oven. Now I'm pushing the stroller into traffic. Now I have a handful of pills. Now I'm falling off the bridge and into the icy current. Now I'm cutting, deep enough to see bone, wrist flayed open. Blood fills the bathtub, seeps into the pillow, white dyed red. I can't stop it. I hadn't told anyone before Michael because I didn't want anyone to think I was suicidal. Or homicidal. Next, I told my therapist. I asked her to please find a way to stop it. I asked her to please find me a psychiatrist. Each night when I try to relax into sleep I feel instead death, like a wave if a wave could evaporate at once, swell to empty. I can't catch my breath and jolt upright, worried my life's happiest moments will be marred by the feeling of my body hitting cement.

The film we're watching has a tenuous cord between the happy and despairing, a wedding scene followed by a suicide attempt—or perhaps a nap in a bathtub; it is hard for me to follow. I keep looking over at Michael instead of reading the subtitles. His face at rest is a balm. The family is large, growing larger by marriage. It is difficult to tell who belongs to whom, so I begin to find and read aloud facts about the film from IMDB, to help make sense of the relations.

In translation, the title *Yi Yi* means literally “One, One.” Idiomatically, it's “A One and a Two,” or “One by One.” *One two three four*. Written in vertical orientation, the two strokes resemble the character for “two.” *Two two three four*. Alongside Michael, I feel calm and warmed by the idea of being part of a pair.

When the eight-year-old boy is bullied at school, he develops an interest in photography. He asks his father, “Daddy, I can't see what you see and you can't see what I see. How can I know what you see?” The father thinks for a moment and then tells him it's a good question. “That's why we need a camera.” They drive off in silence, neither attempting to explain how he sees. At the end of the film the father looks at his child's portraits: at first, studying each stray hair, and then shuffling forward, faster and faster. They're all images of the backs of heads.

What prompted me to call the university hospital's psych department that winter was a photo of the back of a woman's head. She

wore a red beret over blonde hair, golden. I'd spent my birthday in Michael's hometown and he stayed on for Christmas with his mother. I was alone again in my apartment, the one that had so quickly (too quickly?) become our apartment. I replayed long-finished arguments, searching in his words for a sign, sieged by the idea we couldn't work. What I felt wasn't loneliness. It was an old, skeptical chill.

I had begun obsessing over time zones, charting our difference, the distance between our coasts. I counted the hours *one two three* until he'd wake up, pacing from the kitchen to the bathroom, scrolling on my phone through his years-old social media. I wanted to stop but couldn't. Instead, I sat on the couch we'd bought together, laptop open to his Facebook, picturing him, sleepy-eyed on his mother's L-shaped couch. I felt pathetic, ridiculous, anti-feminist. We love each other, I told myself. We chose each other and yet . . . I was living inside an undiagnosed, irrational disorder. OCD feeds on uncertainty. It wants a hug and warm blanket.

A five-year-old photo showed Michael hugging the woman in a red beret. I felt a warm trickle from my nose, and when I swiped my thumb, saw the dark red blood. This is what it looks like when Michael hugs you, someone commented. He looked so happy, in the photo, sweetly serene. I closed the browser, pinched my nose into toilet paper, and called for help.