

Third Presence

I.

Things started crumbling. Concrete silt and dust littered the sidewalks. I would wake up with my head where my feet should be and my feet where my head should be, even when I entombed myself under the duvet. Things that shouldn't mold did, and things that should mold didn't. It was a great big brewing and festering sore, plastic bread for breakfast.

It was around this time that I met Wes. The day I met him, it was 100 degrees. I had just come back from a run and was walking into my apartment when I saw him behind me, sliding up the stairs with his back against the brick wall and his arms outspread, carrying a 55" flat-screen TV. A vein ran down his red forehead. He stopped at the landing, lowered the TV, and sat beside it, rubbing his jaw. I worried that if I said anything, I'd startle him, but he looked at me over his shoulder and nodded briefly, indicating that he had already seen me.

"Are you on this floor, or are you just stopping to rest?" I asked.

He pointed and nodded at the door behind him, the door next to mine. He was still too out of breath to speak.

"Oh, that's funny! I'm right there," I said, pointing.

He nodded a third time, smiling slightly.

He had dark hair and eyes, a hairless jaw, and tight skin that was a pale, dusty brown, except for his face, which was bright red. He wore a heather gray t-shirt and navy-blue chinos, beat-up but expensive-looking sneakers, and a thin gold chain. I placed him at 26 years old, with a five-year margin of error.

"Do you need help bringing that in?"

"Sure, thanks," he said with a sigh. His voice was higher than I had expected.

I walked over and picked up one side of the TV while he picked up the other. We started moving, him walking backward, facing me. When his back bumped into his door, he said, “Oh shit, we need to put this down.”

After lowering it, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a single key. He inserted it in the lock, turned it left, rattled the doorknob a few times, and kicked the door open.

“These doors are so annoying,” I said.

“Yeah, and a fire hazard. They should open the other way.”

We picked up the TV and kept moving. Once in the apartment, I asked where he wanted it, to which he replied “there,” indicating with a nod a corner in the living room. His apartment was both sparse and messy, moving boxes and rolled up rugs everywhere, empty walls and very little furniture.

“Do you want anything to drink?”

We drank lemonade in glasses on the living room floor and talked about ourselves. He told me his name was Wes, he moved in a week ago, which made sense why I had never seen him as I was hardly outside and mostly nocturnal during that time. He used to live across town, but chose not to renew the lease after a second year because he wanted a change, and chose this place because of the exposed brick and high ceilings. He told me he was 26—I’m good at guessing. He told me he was a graphic designer, but wouldn’t tell me for what company, he said I’d make fun of him. I had a few guesses—Pornhub, MiraLAX, the Vatican—but I kept them to myself. I didn’t feel like trying to be funny.

I told him more or less the same stuff, although definitely less. I’m not so quick to volunteer personal information, even if it’s as innocuous as where I go to school. “I’m a student” was enough for me, and when he asked where, I asked him again where he worked. He laughed at this. I didn’t have to try to be funny to make him laugh.

When I was leaving, he asked for my number, which I gave him. Later that night, at around 9 pm, he texted me. Already in my pajamas, I went next door for “another drink and to watch TV,” as per his invite.

“Hey Carina,” he said with a smile when he opened the door, like a dog greeting you after work.

He was still in the same clothes. I wondered what he had done since I saw him earlier. I hadn’t heard any bumping or thudding, but now there was a navy-blue couch in the living room facing the TV, which was in a different place than we had left it, resting precariously on a stack of books that looked vaguely like encyclopedias.

He asked if I could take my shoes off if I didn’t mind, which I did. He asked how I’d been in the last six hours. He asked if I wanted a dirty martini as he was already pulling out two martini glasses.

“It’s funny, I have all the ingredients and supplies for a dirty martini, but not a single vegetable in the fridge,” he said, like these circumstances were the result of someone else’s doing. “Well, besides the olives.”

We sipped our drinks on the couch while Roku’s cityscape screensaver floated by on the TV. We had only gotten as far as turning on the TV before we got carried away in conversation about TV. He said he liked *One Piece* and *The Wire* and *Succession*, and *Love Island UK* when no one’s looking. I wondered how many women he had sipped dirty martinis and watched Love Island UK with.

I told him I didn’t watch much TV because I didn’t have one, only a laptop that hurt my eyes, and I didn’t have access to any streaming services anyway. He said he’d give me his passwords.

“Sharing passwords?” I said. “What, we’re jumping all the way to fifth base?”

Like anything that wasn't even slightly more humorous than reciting a serial number, this made him laugh out loud.

"You're right. Maybe we should go step by step."

We had sex. Not directly after that comment, but eventually, when we finished our drinks and ran out of things to talk about. There was nothing notable about the sex, except for the fact that we had to get a little creative position-wise to not fall off the couch. But nothing too creative. He finished. I didn't. I did come close at one point, in the beginning, when he was rubbing on me under the pants but over the underwear with his middle and ring finger, but I made him stop before he touched skin because he was too good at it. Except for one person whose name I've almost successfully forgotten, sex has never been much of anything at all to me. It's just something I do to feel like I'm getting the most out of a pill I already take for my irregular cycle.

Afterward, we lay in each other's arms, wrapped in a gray afghan. I shivered on purpose, feigning my sensitivity to the central air. He pulled me closer to him.

"You busy tomorrow?" He asked.

"I have a 9am."

"Ah...and where would that 9am be?"

"School."

"Okay...what school?"

I figured he would be inconsequential in the grand scheme of my life and divulged a little more about myself. I told him I was a "super senior" at the community college down the block, that I was supposed to graduate last year but still had some credits to complete, that my dad taught biology there and got me free tuition, which, combined with my status as an only child, allowed my parents to pay my rent, which was partly a gift and partly an apology for my

agreeing to go there and not somewhere more prestigious like I had wanted, but that after this semester I was on my own financially. He asked what I studied.

“Psych.”

“Nice. Are you gonna go to grad school?”

I shrugged. “I guess I’ll have to if I wanna do anything lucrative in the field, but I don’t know what I wanna do yet. I think for now I just wanna make money and revisit that question in a few years. It *was* a free degree, more or less. And I’ve saved up a lot from babysitting and tutoring on the side. I think I wanna nanny after I graduate in December. It’s so easy.”

“God, I could never. I’m awkward as hell around kids. But good for you. It seems like you have things...figured out. You’re young.”

“So are you.”

“Yeah, but there aren’t too many choices left to make, career-wise. I mean, there are some things I definitely think about. Do I switch departments? Do I start freelancing on the side? You know, that kind of stuff. But in the big ways, I’m pretty locked in.”

I twisted to face him. I had spent so long staring at the navy upholstery I started to forget what he looked like.

“Hey,” I said. “I told you where I go to school, you have to tell me where you work.”

“Listen, a job is a job is a job. You gotta eat. I might not be proud of every aspect of how I make money, but no one is—”

“I am.”

“Your parents pay your rent, you don’t count. Anyway, the world is fucked, and there’s no job I could have that would change that fact.”

“Okay, so where do you work?”

He pulled his face away from mine slightly, studying.

“I do graphic design for Lockheed Martin.”

II.

Exactly one week later, I was sitting at his kitchen table, another piece of furniture among many that had materialized when I was gone. We hadn't ignored each other that week, nor did we try to connect. He had his life, I had mine. It would have been so easy for one of us to have knocked at any point, but too easy. We both seemed to understand without ever saying that we shouldn't have 24/7 access to each other. Sunday evenings were a nice time, not that our meetings needed to become regular.

Like the previous week, he texted me and asked if I wanted to come over and hang. This time it was an Aperol spritz, his liquor cabinet growing alongside his furniture and decor, which was all neat and clean and followed a color palette of dark blues and grays and creams, with the occasional pop of red. His apartment looked like what I imagined an Ikea to look like, although I would never tell him that.

“I have a question,” I said, shifting around in my plastic wood chair.

“What's up?”

“Can I look at what you do for work?”

When he told me who he worked for last week, I laughed out loud. He would have done the same to me. But I didn't think much of it after that moment. Someone's got to design their logos, God forbid it's the guy I've seen once a week for two weeks.

He laughed and shook his head, then disappeared into another room. He returned with his laptop. He opened it on the table, typed something only he could see, then spun it around to face me. On his screen was a densely populated Excel spreadsheet.

“Damn. I was thinking more like Photoshop or something.”

“Sometimes I do mockups on Photoshop, but my primary responsibilities are in testing and analytics.”

“Okay. What does that mean, what do you test and analyze?”

“Basically, I work with my team to measure how certain design elements affect our audience. And when something needs to be changed or created, we develop and administer tests to gather feedback. Then we communicate that feedback, and other teams create the designs or implement the changes, then we look at that data, and so on.”

“So you run, like, focus groups?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes the tests are intra or inter department, for quantitative things especially. How many clicks does it take to get to a certain page, you know. Stuff like that.”

“Damn, well, that’s really fascinating.”

“No it’s not.”

“No, it is. To me. Fascinating in the sense that there’s a demand for this, that this is a real, full-time job. That you guys bust your asses over what color the stripes should be on the side of the rocket.”

“I mean, I mostly do digital stuff—website, video graphics.”

“Yeah, well, it’s all the same hex codes though, right?”

“I told you I’m not, like, proud of this!” He was laughing while he said this, but there was a defensiveness to it, like he was worried I was going to start telling him things he already knew.

I didn’t. I closed his computer. I finished my Aperol spritz. I sat next to him on the couch, the TV off this time. I had sex with him again. I lay naked next to him again. As the air cooled and the sweat on our skin dried, he draped the grey afghan around us, again.

He broke the silence: “You know Carina, sometimes I find you easier to talk to when there’s a third presence.”

I had no idea what he meant by this, not even a guess. And what did he mean by “sometimes?” There have only been two times that we have talked, three if you count the stairway encounter! I wanted so desperately to know what he meant purely out of curiosity, but I didn’t want to have to have a conversation about it. I didn’t want to hear what he had to say about me, how wrong he might be, or worse, how right. Instead, I turned to face him and smiled.

“I know what you mean.”

I kissed him before he could respond. We ended up kissing for about two minutes straight, and by that point, this “third presence” was long gone. I stood up, got dressed, said goodbye, and left.

I wondered when I’d see him again, but the wondering stopped as soon as I reached my front door.

III.

The third and final time I saw him was two weeks later. He texted me a week after that second Sunday, asking if I wanted to come over. He even acknowledged the regularity of our visits in his text—“sooo we working the sunday night shift again tn?”—but I told him I couldn’t make it. Which was true. He said that was “too bad” and told me to have fun with whatever it was I was doing. No pressure, no stakes.

I was the one who reached out next. A week after I declined his invitation, I texted him first thing in the morning, asking if he wanted to hang out that night. He said yes.

At 8:59 that night, as I knocked on his door, I reminded myself of my rules: no drinking, no sex, no crying. Maybe if he had taken longer to get the door I could have come up with a more thorough plan of how I would conduct myself, but before I could think about anything else besides my three rules, his warm, smiling face greeted me in the doorway.

“Long time no see,” he said.

“I know. It felt like a year.” My tone came straight out of a table read for a Mucinex commercial.

His apartment was hot and smelled of oil and garlic. His counters were cluttered with pots and pans and dishes and cutting boards. I noticed an apron hanging on the back of one of the chairs.

“Made mushroom scampi. I didn’t know if you wanted any, but if you do, there’s a whole Tupperware of it in the fridge.”

“I’m okay. Thank you though.”

“Alright, your loss. But I do have some pinot leftover...”

“I’m also good on that. But thanks”

“What, more of a red girl?” He hadn’t stopped smiling since he opened the door, but I could tell his face was starting to get tired.

“No, I like both, it’s just...I don’t think I’m gonna drink tonight.”

“That’s cool. Probably not a great habit we’re forming, drinking on Sunday nights. I’ll take tonight off too. I had some with dinner anyway.”

I sat on his couch, and he came and sat next to me. We always sat this way at first: facing forward, about a foot of space between us, our legs uncrossed but not quite open, our knees suggesting that eventually they’ll touch.

“Maybe we could watch something today,” I said.

“Wow, breaking tradition left and right. No drinking, actually watching something. This is crazy.” He grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. “Did you have anything in mind?”

“Honestly, no. Maybe you could just show me something you’re into?”

He lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. I knew he would. He highlighted the HBO Max app and stared at the screen, like he was nervous to click on it or something, then turned to look at me.

“Have you ever seen *M*A*S*H*?” He asked. A, a slight grin was spreading across his face.

“Um, my dad likes it, and it was on a lot when I was a kid, but I never really paid attention to it. Why?”

“Okay, I randomly started watching it recently because I had never seen any of it and like, wanted to know what the deal was, and it’s kind of like, *good*. I don’t know, would you maybe wanna watch it?”

“Can I be honest with you?”

“Yeah.”

“I think we can do better than that.”

“No, yeah. Me asking you to watch *M*A*S*H* in 2025 is, like, objectively ridiculous. I mean, I am kind of watching it as a joke anyway. There’s definitely a level of irony to it.”

“Yeah, but you’re still watching it.”

He laughed at this, of course.

We eventually decided on *Fleabag*. I’d heard of it but didn’t know much about it other than it being British. He said he thought I’d like it.

I did. More than I wanted to, because what I really wanted to do was bide my time and think things over, but I couldn’t even do that because the show was too good to tune out. I briefly considered getting my own TV and taking Wes up on the password offer, but this line of thinking was interrupted by a sex scene, which reminded me of my second rule, which reminded me it was getting close to the time Wes and I would start inching towards each other. Looking at the

gap between us, I realized that we already had, our hips just one readjustment away from touching. I knew at any moment he'd slip a hand behind my back or start rubbing my knee with his thumb, I could tell by his breathing. I had to be careful. I didn't want to make it obvious that I was watching him, but I needed to stay vigilant and be one step ahead of his attempt at contact to shoot it down before it went anywhere.

When I sensed movement out of the corner of my eye, I yanked my body away from him.

"Not now," I said. "Not tonight."

"What? What are you talking about?"

I didn't know if I had miscalculated the moment, or if he was too embarrassed to admit what just happened, but now it was my turn to play it off.

"Nothing. Sorry."

"Sex?"

"So you *did* know what I meant!"

"Well there aren't too many things you could have been talking about. Wasn't too hard to guess."

I stared forward, not sure where to go from there. I thought we both might have been holding our breath. I leaned back in as he put his arm around my shoulder in the slowest, most careful manner you can imagine.

"That's okay," he said, breathing out. "We don't have to."

I wanted him to ask me questions. I wanted him to pry. Not in a nasty way, just in a way that showed me he was curious. But with his arm around my shoulder, the hair on his thumb knuckle tickling my bicep, I knew he was not going to say another thing.

"It's not that I don't *want* to—"

"Hey, it's all good. You don't have to have a reason."

I wished I could have slipped my hand up the back of his t-shirt and sat him on my lap like a puppet and made him ask questions. Instead, I hunched my shoulders forward and rested my elbows on my knees and my chin in my hands. I closed my eyes and took a long, deep breath.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“Think about *why* I might not want to drink or have sex. Those two things, think about those two things.”

He stared blankly at me. “You gotta give me a hint or something.”

“What kind of person doesn’t drink?”

“Muslims? Mormons? Kids?”

This made me laugh, genuinely, and a short but dreadful wave of guilt washed over me, but it passed, and I sat up straight.

“Oh my God, no. Okay. Think about...well, sometimes something happens in one’s life—”

“Damn, you’re really making me answer your riddles three!”

“Why would I not want to have sex with you?!” I said in a half-yell, playful, but pained.

“I don’t know, you’re on your period?”

“I wish.”

He laughed a little, confused.

“No, I mean, I really, *really* wish.

He stared at me with a genuine, almost comical focus. Gradually, his face dropped. I could see the calculations behind his eyes. Eventually, he put his hand over his mouth.

“Oh my God,” he whispered. “*How late?*”

I wanted to cry, but instead I sat up very straight and stared at a point beyond the TV, beyond his apartment, beyond my apartment one wall over, somewhere very far away. In lieu of crying, my entire body began to shake softly. What made me the most upset was how I delivered the news, making him put the pieces together, practically flirting with him. I hadn't planned to tell him, but I didn't plan *not* to tell him. I think I just assumed I wouldn't. I'm usually so good at withholding.

I realized I had never answered his question. "A week. Less, actually. I was supposed to get it on Monday. Six days ago."

"Well...that's not...that's not *terrible*, right? I mean, that doesn't *necessarily* mean anything, right?"

"For me, yes, it does. Mean something. I always get my period thirty days after the last one ends. I get it in the morning. It's always been like this since I went on this birth control, which was five years ago. I've never skipped. I've never even been late."

"But you're *on* birth control. It's not like we were having unprotected sex."

"I am. But it has a 99% effectiveness rate."

"Yeah, 99%! That's, like, impossibly good odds!"

"Well someone has to be the 1%! Why shouldn't it be me? What makes me so special?"

"Have you taken a test?"

I shook my head no. I had been too scared.

"Well, maybe let's start there." *Let's. Let us.*

A good thirty seconds of silence passed around us.

"Wait," Wes said eventually. "I just want to get things straight. So, *you*—and I'm sorry if this is rude, but I just want to know—you're not drinking, because you don't want to cause harm, meaning...sorry, I don't know how to put this. You might...*keep?*"

“Oh,” I said. My voice was much smaller than I wanted it to be. “To be honest, I hadn’t thought about that. I guess not drinking just felt like the right thing to do.” That was the truth. I hadn’t thought about it. It did feel like the right thing to do.

“Jesus, I don’t even know why I asked. I’m so sorry, I think I sort of...*freaked* a little. That’s not at all what we need to be talking about right now. That’s not at all what you need to be thinking about right now. And that’s a choice for *you* to make, if...”

I could feel my face beginning to crack again. I opened my eyes wide to try to physically suck the tears back in. I had followed all my rules, and I wasn’t going to break now.

But his question replayed on a loop in my head. Too upset to speak, I could only think. *Why? Why would he ask me that?*

With a heaving, shuddering breath, I started to cry. It was quiet, controlled, and unceasing, like a stream. Wes spoke to me in a near-whisper, offering words of reassurance, at least I presume. I wasn’t really listening. He stroked my hair. I let him. I even softened into him. What else was there to do?

Unceasing as my tears seemed at first, they eventually slowed. As my cries became hiccups, he gave me a final squeeze, patted my knee, then stood up and walked into the kitchen, which I appreciated. I wiped my nose with my forearm. I coughed into my elbow. I leaned forward to stand up, then leaned back. I repeated this back and forth motion a few times, swaying.

Wes returned with two glasses of water and handed me one.

“Thank you.” I drank it in one gulp. “What were we talking about...before...”

“Tests,” he said.

“Oh, right, yeah. I’ll get a test tomorrow. I’ll get three, actually. Would you hate me if I didn’t tell you the results?”

“No, I wouldn’t hate you.” He paused. “But I would want to know.”

“Maybe I’ll only tell you if it’s good news.”

“I’m sure it will be. There are a million reasons your period can be late.”

“Wow, really?”

“Oh yeah, you didn’t know?”

I thought of an idea for a joke that I knew he’d like, something along the lines of “hopefully it’s just heart disease,” but I didn’t say it. I just laughed.

After a long silence, I stood up.

“I think I’m gonna go home. I don’t think there’s much left to talk about.”

He stood up and hugged me like a teammate after a tough loss. I hugged him back like he was an old family friend I hadn’t seen or thought of since we were kids.

*

During that time in my life, the roughly three-month span that included, among other things, my time with Wes, I would lock myself in my apartment for days or even weeks at a time. I had my ways. I’d stock up on groceries. Order takeout. Wash my clothes in the shower and dry them on the fire escape. As I mentioned, I was in my fifth and final semester of school at the time, which I successfully completed. I’d call it a miracle, but really it was just good planning. I took excellent care faking illnesses, faking appointments, faking grandparents. I only needed nine more credits to graduate, two of which were covered by a virtual seminar. I graduated, but with very little to show of it. The few friends I still had from my earlier, more present years didn’t have very high expectations for me. I would tell my parents I was busy, and

they believed me. The family I had nannied for over the summer didn't need me once school started, but said they'd reach out if something came up, which I guess it never did. I didn't reach out to any of the other families in my contacts. I knew that wouldn't have been fair, because I knew that even the prospect of making money wouldn't shake me out of my trance, a trance that was, conveniently, very cheap to maintain with my rent covered. I made time when I needed to. I enjoyed it even, a dinner out, a long walk to the river, a mid-morning run, but most of the time I sat very still and let the shadows grow and shrink on my bedroom walls, trying to convince myself they had nothing to do with me, that the light sources and large objects that created them existed in a different universe.

I never took the tests, never even bought them, like I told Wes I would. I thought about texting him anyway and saying they were negative, but I felt like that would have brought me bad luck. I just waited, and waited, and waited, until one day, thirty-three days later, I woke up to a familiar pain in my lower stomach. I ran out of bed and into the bathroom, pulled down my pants, and sat on the toilet. Blood.

Blood, like I was used to, how it always looked. I leaned back against the toilet seat. Humming to myself like I was in a walking Tampax ad, I put a tampon in, washed my hands, and looked in the mirror. My first thought was to call that person I briefly mentioned before, the one "whose name I've almost successfully forgotten," and tell him the good news.

I imagined calling Cameron, whose name I clearly *do* remember and probably always will, and saying, "Hey Cameron, hey Cameron Stills, it's me, Carina Antonov, and guess what? I thought I was pregnant because even though I'm still on that birth control that you know all about I skipped my period for the first time ever, and the timing made sense because I had sex with my next door neighbor two weeks before and then again one week before I should have gotten my period but didn't. And I told the guy for some reason, because I thought that would

make it go away, but it didn't, and then I said I'd take three tests and let him know but I never did, and then a month passed, and I obsessed over it so much until I almost forgot about it, but then just now I woke up, and guess what? My period! I don't even know what I would have done if I were pregnant. I mean, I do. But what if it were yours? I know that's impossible, but I can't help but think about it. Or what if I had a scare when we were together, would I have hoped for the same results? Or would I have dropped it all for you and our baby, and would you have done the same? Maybe there's some universe where that happened and we did drop everything and everything turned out beautifully, and if I could only prove that that world existed, I would find some peace in this one. Anyway, I'm still here. I'm sure I don't have to remind you. I've been hiding, you know how that goes, but I'd love it if you came and found me. God, that sounds corny. But it's true. If you said or did anything that even slightly implied you might want to come looking for me someday, I'd send you my exact coordinates and not move from that spot until you showed up." All of that, before he even got a chance to get a word in.

But I had deleted his number over a year prior. We had each other blocked on everything. I couldn't even send him a letter, because I didn't know his address, I didn't even know what city he was living in. I had my guesses, but they were meaningless.

Instead, I opened messages and started composing a text: "Hey, I'm really sorry I never got back to you. Crazy past few weeks. But good news, I just got my period! Sorry if I scared you, but at least you can relax now. Hope you're well." I read it over a few times, taken aback, repulsed almost, at my formality, but entered "Wes" in the recipient line at the top and hit send anyway. I had no interest in reading his reply.

The urge to contact Cameron had not gone away. Instead of entertaining it, I decided to go for a walk to the river. It was a clear, chilly fall day, and I knew the water would be beautiful. I figured I could make it there and back before my online class started at noon.

Stepping out of my building, I winced at the cold and the sunlight. I was underdressed, in only leggings and a crew neck with a sports bra underneath. I felt the cold air on my stomach. It seemed to ease the cramping momentarily. I started walking, my feet leading me to where I needed to go.

When I say I never saw Wes again, that's not true. I saw him from behind and from afar, entering the building, dragging his bike up the stairs. I'm sure he saw me too. Sometimes I considered asking him about the "third presence" thing, if even just to confirm that it was a real thing he said and not something I hallucinated, but thought better of it. How we knew that whatever we had had promptly ended exactly when it did, I'm unsure, but we knew. That's just how things were with him, clean, smooth, unspoken.

He was, in some way, connected to my withdrawal from reality. In the immediate aftermath of our brief encounter, I was certain that he made everything worse, but I don't think that's true anymore. If *I* got worse after meeting him, it couldn't have been his fault. What did he do? He didn't even get me pregnant, he was just there. If anything, he was a reflective surface, but in the way that a spoon is, how it flips you upside down. Wes, his apartment, his job, his world, everything about it felt inverted like that. He had his life, I had mine.

The water *was* beautiful that day. Red and orange leaves glided down onto its surface, sending out concentric, hypnotic rings. I watched the waves ripple towards each other and interfere, canceling each other out. I blinked. The black water was like a mirror for the sun, so bright in certain places that it hurt to look at. I looked anyway, because it had everything to do with me.

