

Tayler Hanxi Bunge

## F KIRA AND ANTHONY AND ELLEN ON SUNDAY

“DON’T BE SO BOURGEOIS ABOUT IT,” KIRA TELLS US.

Anthony and I look at each other, briefly, while Kira looks back at the menu.

“We just need time to consider,” Anthony offers.

“Forget I even asked. Seriously.” A smile, a terrifying one. “I can go alone.”

“What do you think, Ellen?” Anthony asks me, but it’s just verbal filler. There aren’t many other ways that I can answer.

Kira had suggested a party that night, one with her friends from her book club where they (ironically) read smutty grocery store novels and (ironically) talk about them sincerely. Anthony can’t stand that kind of smug condescension when there’s not even an audience, and if he doesn’t go, I don’t either, because of the rules. We are Kira and Anthony, or all three, or just Ellen, but never any other way.

The party was an orgy, she’d told us before the server even brought water (who says “orgy” anymore, even? How bourgeois is that shit?).

Later at their house, Anthony pours us all glasses of wine and then sits in his Eames chair to roll himself a cigarette. They have silent air purifiers throughout the house, hidden away in recessed walls and floor cubbies, so the smell of smoke only stretches as far as his arm’s length. He hits the remote and the blinds roll down the windows, the dusk light fading into a steamy, golden haze across their living room.

“How do you feel?” Kira asks me, sitting down on the couch and untying my hair from its bun.

“I feel good,” I tell her, the wine warming my face.

“You smell good,” she says. She smells like eucalyptus, probably from the diffuser in her shower, and I wonder if she wasn’t just smelling herself.

Our skins fall into the egg white couch and Anthony sits and watches everything, as he usually does, though he checks his phone at one point. I almost laugh. There are moments when it feels like it’s just Kira and Ellen. But those moments don’t really exist.

Later, we lie on the floor, Kira and I, and we listen to the muted hum of the central dehumidifier that kicks on to wipe the room of our bullshit. Kira runs a thumb over my collarbone while Anthony gets up to use the restroom, as he usually does.

They married seventeen years ago, when Kira was thirty-nine and Anthony was twenty-six, and have had arrangements like this the entire time.

I'm not sure what their sex lives were like before each other, or their sex life with each other. She and Anthony have different speeds. Kira, like me, likes to be watched. She, like me, likes multiple partners in multiple places, but would never say she "lives" with anybody, because that would mean she "lives" somewhere. This house, the one Upstate, is just a seasonal place for her, but Anthony never leaves. I've never seen his body—I don't really look, there's no Anthony and Ellen—yet he's still part of this, just like the house, and it's nice to know he's there in the same way that it's nice there's always oranges in the foyer bowl.

That night, we all lie in their bed and watch *The Sopranos*. I'd made the mistake of telling them I'd never seen it, and they made it their mission to binge the entire series with me every night of the week. It was clear that I was just their excuse to rewatch a decades-old show, something that would seem childish and undiscerning with all the other premium options available, and all the other non-TV options that were always available (so many \$600 custom-made backgammon boards in so many \$6 million homes), but with me in the room, it was like they were curating a television *experience*. It didn't matter that I usually fell asleep midway through the first episode, sometimes waking up at 2 a.m. to find them still watching.

The next morning was Sunday, and the dinner party was that night. Looking back, it's bizarre to remember how we felt at the beginning of the day. We were close, bonded, waking up entangled, sprawled out together while Anthony made us all double espressos.

In the afternoon, Kira and Anthony go to the store for a last-minute bottle of Scotch while I stay back and wait for the chef. I put dry shampoo in my hair, dress myself in the brown silk suit set that Kira bought, and I sit in the den, drinking a small glass of wine, looking at the stacks of books they'd collected over their years together, books they'd read long ago and kept because they were so nice to look at, to shelve away and sit in the quiet as a reminder to you and all your guests that you own something that you could use, but don't. But *you could*.

Every invited guest was to bring another guest that no one else at the party would know. It was a fun game, we'd played a version of it in college, except at Kira and Anthony's party, the guests would arrive separately, and you'd have to guess which person brought whom. It was a stupid, vicious parlor trick, and was only fun for about the first twenty minutes, but it added a cruel edge of tension to the room, a fear of shame if it seemed that no one liked your guest and you had to watch, silently and undetected, while the room disapproved of your taste in friend. Like a game of *murder* but with actual stakes.

Kira and Anthony get back and shower too, then meet me in the kitchen where the crew has arrived to set up the spread. They've both chosen to match me in odd, not-immediately-obvious ways—Anthony is in all-white linens with a brown belt and gold rings, Kira in a silk maxi dress that I would have ordinarily called *beige* but have since learned is one of eighty swatches of beige. Kira paces back and forth, adjusting the sprigs of inedible greens and bowls of inedible lemons that they've laid out on the sprawling twenty-person dining table. While she smells a sauce that someone is reducing on the stove, I realize it was me that was made to match them, and I feel dumb.

"She lost her shit at the store," Anthony whispers to me. He sometimes pretends we share secrets—we both know Kira intimately, so we both can talk about her behind her back. There is Anthony and Ellen, but only about Kira. I hate when he does it. For what we lack in having ever touched skin we do not gain in things seen and known. Sometimes I wonder if I am Kira's wife more than Anthony is. "Total meltdown. Thought she was going to throw a fucking bottle at the kid."

"A real kid?" I ask, hiding my moving mouth behind my glass while Kira watches us from across the room.

"Like your age," Anthony clarifies.

"What was wrong?" I ask.

"You never know with her," he says, then runs off to help her greet the doorbell.

The first few guests arrive within moments of one another. As they walk through the skyscraper-tall imported Italian door, I recognize some of the invited names from photos but have actually met none of them—and all of them, even the extra guests, seem like versions of people I've seen going into airport lounges my entire life but who I never imagined had actual lives and voices and jobs.

I linger by the fireplace, chewing on the end of an olive spear, watching everyone meet and small talk, realizing that I am Kira and Anthony's *guest that no one knows*, and trying to figure out how invincible my intimacy with the hosts makes me in order to ride out the storm of anonymous scrutiny.

"Benji," Anthony says suddenly, putting an arm around me. "This is Ellen. Ellen, Benji. Ben gave me my first job way back when."

Benji is a severe looking man with huge eyebrows and a ratty, patchy beard. He is shaped like a leafless stalk of bok choy. I wonder if he brought Lucy, the woman who would rather be any other place than here right now, nursing a glass of white wine in the corner.

"Lucky man," Benji says on an inhale, breathing through his teeth as he speaks.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask, playing dumb.

“Can’t believe you let Kira in the room with this one,” Benji says, speaking over me.

“Kira can do whatever she wants,” I tell him, and wonder if Lucy is his toy because that’s easier than wondering if I am Anthony’s.

The doorbell rings again and Kira opens it, and I hear the voice before I see the face. And suddenly I feel like I’ve been caught wearing a cheap romper in the Target bathroom, naked from the knees up while a lady opens the door with the broken lock. Everything I am is suddenly out on the rug, it’s in the room now for everyone to walk around and talk around, all plain and there and empty. It’s her—Jill, the one years before Kira and Anthony, so long before that I had never thought to use them all in a sentence that involved *before*.

Jill looks like she did when we were twenty-four, but she’s grown her hair out, and has walled off her right arm with tattoos. She’s been vaping—she walks in from a cloud—and is wearing giant sunglasses over most of her face that are so huge, it’d be easy to doubt my eyes. But I hear her. And there she is.

It’s hard to tell if she spots me too, at least as quickly as I did her—I’m about twenty pounds less than I was at twenty-four, and my hair is bleached, which it never had been before Kira and Anthony. There’s also something dripping down from inside of me that I’m certain everyone can smell—of anyone, she would. It’s the creeping sense that I am mediocre, that I am one of the ones who does the jobs and buys the groceries and drives the cars and dies, and I might be remembered by my neighbor or my mailman but for the most part, I am here to be no one at all but a station around which Kira and Anthony might orient themselves. Jill had once been my station, back when I thought that I might be bigger than I eventually turned out to be. It’s impossible to fight for air in rooms like these, and the moment Jill shakes Kira’s hand, my timelines have converged and there is a rift, a tectonic shift in my attempt to matter. I do not.

Jill smiles all over the room, Tetrising herself into different conversations and handshakes like you’re supposed to in this weird, loose, choreography. I manage to avoid contact until we’re all seated, cheering to Kira’s toast about being or time or gratitude. Jill is seated between Kira and Anthony, an intentional head fake to not distract from the final reveal, while I am across the table, next to a woman named either Stephanie or Blinky (her mouth is full).

Suddenly, when Kira makes a small nod across the table at me, I can tell that Jill finally sees it. Her eyes trace the outline of my face and she stops smiling.

“So,” Kira goes on, talking over the weighted, visceral horror growing

between me and the woman beside her. “I guess this is when we get to the fun part. I’d say do a drum roll, but… Yikes.” She stretches out the corner of her mouth in a grimace and people snicker. Pause for laughter at the expense of people who think idioms or social cues, the kind that are meant to excite and unite, possibly spark the joy of recognition, are beneath them.

“This is Ellen,” Kira said, gesturing to me. “And I guess we kind of cheated, because we’ve told many of you about her. But, welcome, Ellen.”

“Hi,” I say on cue.

“Thanks for being here,” Anthony follows up. “Who’s next? How about this one?” He puts a hand on top of Jill’s exposed shoulder and I can already feel what’s next.

“I’ll go,” Jill says explosively, shaking off his hand.

Blinky stands, trying to beat her to the punch. “Hold on, what about the suspense?” Blinky says, and everyone laughs again. “This is Jillian. She’s a buyer at Vuxar. She found me that new Mitchell that’s in my den, a few of you have seen it.”

“We didn’t hear about Ellen,” Jill cuts Blinky off.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Kira replies. “Ellen works at Cork and Bean in Denver, on 7th.”

Jill stares at me. “I love Cork and Bean,” she says.

Once the intros are done, everyone starts eating and I excuse myself to the bathroom—the one on the third floor, away from the noise.

I bask in the muted silence and let the water run, trickling out of the flat, wide-mouthed faucet and into the round, imported, almost transparent basin. Just as I open the door to leave, Jill suddenly pushes in past me, moving me back into the room and shutting the door behind her, locking the deadbolt.

“What are you doing here?” she asks at a soft whisper.

“What are you doing with Blinky?” I ask in return.

We hear footsteps outside of the door.

“Who?” Jill turns the water back on to cover our voices. “Did you know I was coming?”

“No—but the world is small.”

“Too small.” She washes her hands and checks her skin closely in the mirror. “You look different.”

“Yeah, well, a lot’s happened.”

“Tell me,” she says, sitting down on the closed toilet lid, crossing her legs. She takes a huge drag from her vape, blowing the cloud into the bathtub.

“I don’t know. Why are you still in New York?”

“I came back from Osaka a couple years ago.” She speaks while she

unravels the roll of toilet paper, letting it fall onto the floor, layering over onto itself. “My contract ended, and the job opened up at Vuxar, and then Stephanie came in a month ago, and I’ve been managing her account.”

“Well, look at you.”

“And so, what?” She gestures around us. “You live here?”

“Sort of. Not really. I still have a place in Denver.” *Place* sounds more like property than *apartment*, and obviously more than *room*. The vagueness of insincerity, the blurry covers of illusions of stealth wealth. I’ve learned well. “But I’ve been here most of the summer.”

“Well, look at you,” she says back to me, looking like she genuinely means it. “How’s your mom?”

She reads my face in an instant.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry,” she says quickly.

“It was a long time ago. She was sick. I mean, you remember.”

“Yeah.” She pauses, and I can tell she considers reaching out. She doesn’t. “I wrote you a letter.”

“I know.”

“So you got it?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry I didn’t reply.”

She tries to see through the backs of my eyes, then sort of half-snorts through her nose. “Do you think they’re gonna sacrifice us in the basement? Try to steal our skins?” Her tone is light, encouraging, generous.

“There is no basement.”

She laughs, then quiets herself and stands. “Okay. Well. Ellen from Cork and Bean on 7th.” She reaches out and hugs me, squeezing tight.

“You don’t have to say it like that,” I tell her.

“Oh man, Ellen. And still.” She smiles a sad smile. The saddest smile I’ve seen in years but only because I know hers most and best of all. “You’re fighting so hard, even still.”

As she walks out of the room, I feel wafting out with her a tenderness that she was willing to show me, one that has become so easy to live without as I have learned to mistake judgment for attention.

The rest of the night shoots by in a blur of unrelated stories and quick, stabby battles of correct and incorrect art commentary, the paintings they trade back and forth amongst themselves, the theater companies they all donate to (and the ones they don’t), the various money laundering these types get away with publicly and proudly, rolling the same bag of beans across aisles and bank vaults as they swap Mitchells and Koonings and Lucy’s and Jills and Ellens. The conversations and the words shoot from there to there to there, catching clout and intrigue as they move, planning the next

quarter of write offs and framed high yield savings accounts mounted on their walls or in basements of museums.

I didn't always have this angle on them, not at the beginning. It's not even disdain or criticism that I have—these dances are as second nature as anything we do, or that I've learned to do. When I met them, I was still the person Jill once knew, and Kira's and Anthony's personalities were unknowable things—things you couldn't identify in the dark, so you made up stories about the wealthy and the socially embittered to keep yourself safe.

They'd walked up to me at the Clyfford Still Museum downtown while my ex was in the bathroom. Bathrooms and exes are all that I retain from my life of just Ellen. That day, Kira spoke to me first, complimenting my blue Docs (that I later learned she hated), and asked if I was a painter. I'd said yes, because at the time I was still pretending I was, despite not painting since college. She had Anthony give me his business card—he owned (owns) tenuus-ridden warehouses in the arts district that he was converting into “lofts” for artist “residencies,” and he knew a few people I should meet and maybe apprentice with—and said to call him. Apprenticing felt like such an odd, Mozartian thing to suggest, but I liked Kira's deep, scratchy voice and her focused, gray eyes, and so I waited two days, then called him on my lunch break. I never saw my ex again, not after telling them about the arrangement Kira and Anthony had offered.

I arranged to meet him for lunch, but Kira showed up instead, and over fennel salads we mapped out what the arrangement could be, and she asked if I'd ever done that before, and I said no, and by the evening, I had a ticket to La Guardia. The whole thing was a *why not* that evolved into a *how could I not*, and from that first lunch, I felt an urge to know their lives and know her body, and was convinced I was watching as much as I was watched. Confirmation of self, maybe—holdable, knowable, seeable self, one more purposed and used than I'd been my whole life.

I'd known Anthony was part of the arrangement, but he didn't reappear until my first night at their house where he dutifully stayed several yards away from us, respecting the distance.

“We want you to feel safe,” Kira had said. “He'll sit wherever I tell him to sit.”

It was reassuring, knowing she was something of a vessel between him and me, one that I never really had to traverse but could still peer into to make sure he stayed away, back when it often felt like Kira and Ellen. When I asked, later, what she saw in me, she had no answer except: “I wondered if you knew where you were going.”

Their house was bigger than my seven-unit apartment building, and they never went shopping for groceries—always delivered. It was all something

that felt as equally untouchable as someone like me was to Anthony until, eventually, you do come to know them. And, eventually, you fall inside as deeply as you used to be outside, and Anthony became a vessel between Kira and me, and I could only know her if I was being watched by him. And it was all fine until I realized the “safety” was just as much an outfit to try on as the “apprenticeship”—something they know someone like me will want and need, something to secure the vote because they know they still hold the reigns, and they can promise anything because you’ve never seen anything like them before, and you don’t know what to look for.

I sip my fourth glass of wine slowly, my eyes darting across the room as I search for wherever Blinky and Jill have gone, trying to size up whatever agreement Jill must have made, trying to understand what kind of woman Blinky must be to have transformed a woman like Jill.

“So what was happening in the bathroom?” Kira asks suddenly, wrapping her arms around my shoulders like an anaconda.

Blinky appears at Kira’s side. “They’re old friends. Isn’t that funny?”

*They. Funny.* I shudder at her strange, crispy voice, crackling through the air that keeps shrinking between Kira and me. I try, again, to find Jill in the crowd.

I can’t believe she’s told her. I can’t believe that she, maybe, isn’t an Ellen or a Lucy, she’s a Blinky and a Kira and an Anthony and a Benji. That, maybe, her joke about the basement and the skins was the same joke about “safety,” the one to let me know she was at my level—but she really wasn’t, and she never would be again. No one was, and I was only ever seen as something to be seen. There was a time she knew me more clearly than anyone had ever before, but now, with the truth of her own station having evolved into something bigger, into one who watches, I wonder if anyone ever will.

“That’s fucking crazy,” Kira says. “From...?”

“College,” Blinky says, not waiting for me. “Little buddies.”

Jill leaves without saying goodbye, and by midnight, everyone is gone except the three of us. Anthony lights a cigarette and sits on the stairs by the entryway, turning down the dimmer so the foyer only glows by the porch light out the window.

“What a fucking trip,” he says, and I can’t figure out if he’s talking to me or Kira. As if he can read my mind, he adds, “You never know with these things, Ellen.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, sitting on the arm of the couch.

“It’s just that,” Anthony tries. “It’s funny to remember that you have a past.”

"That doesn't make any sense," I say quickly. "When you met me, I was with someone."

"Yeah, but you know what he means," Kira says, defending him.

"No, I don't," I say flatly.

"You're just," he goes on, gesturing his hand, finding the word. "You know. Ours. You know what I mean. No no, hold on, you know. Not in any weird, possessory way or shit. It's just like, you know, if you saw your teacher at the grocery store. What are they doing here? They eat, too?"

"So you forget that I'm a person," I say.

Kira tsks. "You're being hyperbolic," she rolls her eyes.

"And you're being dumb," is all I have. Bad words, tripping out of my mouth in clunks and chunks, knowing suddenly that there was nothing I had to defend myself against these two. There were Kira and Anthony, and then there was Ellen. And I felt naked in their giant house, and I was only playing dress-up as someone with eyes, but eventually it all comes out, it has to—they hold the world, the watchers, and we will never live in the same one.

"Okay," Anthony laughs. He thought I was funny. I was amusing. Watching me fuck his wife for sport. Watching me defend myself for sport.

"And insulting and controlling," I go on. It hurts more to stand up to Kira than it does to stand up to Anthony, so I stare Anthony in the eyes instead, hoping Kira knows that I really mean her, that it is really Kira who is breaking me apart right now, not Anthony, not Anthony in the Eames chair who thought he had a secret, touchless world with me—but Kira, the one who pulls the strings of disapproval and disdain. "You just think I'm a human vibrator, or live-action babysitter porn. You're being evil."

"*Evil?*" Anthony repeats, almost laughing. "Come on, Ellen."

"Shut up, dude," I say.

"*Dude??*" Kira laughs. "Ellen. Honey."

"You know what?" I finish my glass of wine and keep my eyes glued to Anthony's mouth, his too-straight too-white teeth, feeling Kira behind me, reaching out to touch my back. "Stop." I move away feel felt shivers up my spine, fearing—knowing—that that might be the last time Kira will ever touch me. "I need to go."

"Fine," Kira says, sitting back down at the dining table, putting a piece of leftover smoked gouda in her mouth.

They both stay put, focusing on their drink or their food, while I gather all my shit and put on my shoes and go to the door.

"Please don't call me," I add, wishing they would fight for me, knowing they never would, that that would feel too much like groveling, and groveling felt too much like hoping, and hoping was the opposite of taking, and taking was all people like them ever knew how to do.

I leave and hear the door slowly shut behind me, latching into place. I walk down the driveway and sit on the curb in my brown silk suit, waiting for my Uber, looking for Jill's number in my phone, but I deleted it years ago.