

Caro Claire Burke

HERE IS HOW I COME UNDONE

One week before I move as far from home as I possibly can without hitting an ocean, I sit down with my parents and tell them about My Fate.

I speak as quickly as possible, so as not to lose my nerve. It's never easy to talk about these kinds of things. I finish by saying, "It will most likely happen soon."

My father speaks first. "How soon is soon?"

I swallow. I cannot look my mother in the eyes, although she searches for mine. "Probably within the next month."

They take a collective breath, but neither of them faints or begins to cry, so my fingers unclench. The worst is over.

When you live in New England, there are three acceptable reasons for getting married at twenty-three years old: you're religious, your fiancé's a southerner, or you're just plain stupid.

On a parallel plane, there are two acceptable reasons for getting married at twenty-three after nine weeks of dating: you're uneducated, or you're just plain stupid.

I am none of these things. I have a college degree, a strong skepticism about the possibility of an afterlife, and a history of making smart decisions. What's more, the man I want to marry is from a coastal Massachusetts town ten miles from mine.

I have no excuse for something as irresponsible and unnecessary as marriage at this point in my life. But I have seen My Fate, and it pulls at me, constantly.

It starts with Aristotle.

Hamartia, the fatal flaw. Tragedy incarnate. We all have something that can undo us. The white flesh of an exposed ankle. A shared glance with a stranger in a crowded room. The needle piercing the skin at the crook of the

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elbow, and the resulting sigh when the chemicals hit.

Here is how I come undone.

My life begins in earnest two months before I leave Boston for Los Angeles, in the spirit of some Meccan pilgrimage it feels all artists must eventually make. (Los Angeles, or New York. I choose the sun.)

A text message sets my phone aflame in the middle of a hot night in June. He won't remember sending it. I will later insist that this is because Something did it for him; he will later insist I'm confusing the cosmos for a six pack of warm beer.

The following morning, I stare at my phone. I've known this name for ten years, but it has never meant anything to me.

The choreography, in retrospect, is stunning:

We attended the same high school, he a year ahead of me, and then the same college—he went for academics; I went for athletics. He moved back to Boston after graduating, and again, so did I, both of us drifting through the same rotation of bars in the same tiny city for two years without ever running into one another. Over nine years, we have spoken a handful of times, all of it pleasant, all of it in passing.

For the better part of a decade, we have been brushing fingers through the cosmos, neither of us paying attention, until Something finally decided it was time to force the matter. He is a stranger—but not really, not entirely—so it is simultaneously surprising and uninteresting that he has reached out.

We exchange a few texts, and he asks to meet for drinks. What weird timing, I think. Twelve hours before, I was telling my landlord I wouldn't be renewing my lease.

Our first date is outside of a jazz bar, at the end of a rickety, communal table filled with friends and business partners, people whose lives aren't collapsing and being reborn at this very moment.

"This is weird," he says as I sit down.

This is it, I think, and he leans forward to begin our first real conversation.

Actually, *this* is it, thirty minutes into the date, our heads bowed forward over cocktails stuffed with herbs, as he says thoughtfully, “So if your cat’s name is Pancake, does that mean a Jewish person can call her Latke?”

Boom. Crash. No survivors.

The night after our second date, I shed my clothing, my skin, and my old life into neat heaps on his bedroom floor.

Two weeks into dating, we are already dancing around the inevitable.

“I love you . . . nicorns,” he says.

“I am madly in love with you . . . tube hip hop tutorials,” I reply.

“I am completely obsessed with you . . . unanimous votes in the Senate,” he sighs.

One month in, he presses his forehead to mine in the dim lighting of his apartment at two in the morning. We are both a little bit drunk from seven hours of Coronas, my ears buzzing from standing too close to the live band in that dumpy pub toward the end of the night.

“I love you,” he says, then shakes his head, changes his mind. “I’m in love with you,” he clarifies.

I try to say it back, but it comes out differently: “Marry me.”

There is a reason, I think, why we call the things that kill us fatal.

“Marry me,” I say again, because it felt so good the first time around.

He tries to say it back, but it comes out differently, again: “I’ve been applying for jobs in Los Angeles since the night we met.”

This is the part where I rise out of my body and look down from the ceiling, rolling my eyes at myself.

Jesus, I think, could you become more of a cliché? Do you really think

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you're the first person to fall in love, to lose your mind, to forsake reason for emotion? This is the least original thing on the planet. Love is the least original thing on the planet.

My body sighs. It knows.

Pull it together, I scream.

He stands up and gets us water, and his thumb brushes mine when he hands me the glass. It's enough to send my spirit hurtling back into my skin, so that I'm staring at his face once more, which is enough to give me vertigo all on its own.

It's not love, I suddenly remember.

It's a trajectory, a set of grooved lines that my wheels have finally slipped into.

My body relaxes.

"The fates were people. Did you know that?"

My sister makes a noise over the phone. She's rushing to work, and I'm naked, balancing my phone against one ear while I paint my toes, all of my freelance work done for the week. My sister likes to joke that I will find a way to spend the rest of my life without ever going a full day in pants. "Yeah, I did," she says. "I took AP Latin, too."

"I just think it's interesting," I say.

"Did you call the movers yet?"

"No."

"Are you changing your mind?" Her voice is hopeful. She doesn't want me to leave. "Are you reconsidering because of the new . . . situation?"

I screw the cap back onto the bottle of nail polish. "No. He's coming with me."

We say it so often that the words begin to sound like nothing.

"Marry me," I say when he helps me move all of my things out of my apartment.

marry me, he texts me when I send him a funny news article.

"MARRY ME!" I shout when he surprises my mother and me at the airport, right before I leave for the west coast.

After we've crossed through security and he has taken a cab back to work, my mother turns to me, her arms folded over a cat carrier. "You know, it feels like you're treating this a little bit too lightly. You shouldn't say that if you don't mean it."

I shrug. "We do mean it."

"Well, you're going to ruin the sentiment if you say it all the time."

"Don't people do that every day with 'I love you?'" I fire back.

She raises her eyebrows, considers my point, takes a sip of her cappuccino. "That's fair," she concedes.

"I love you," I say, and she laughs a nervous laugh.

When my mother leaves California a few days later, after ensuring my new apartment has a fire extinguisher and a French press, she makes me promise her that I won't elope.

"If you're going to do it, I want to be there," she says, and the fear in her eyes causes a hairline crack to run down my heart. I wish I could scoop some of my brain out for her, handing her my cupped thoughts as a full explanation. But I can't, and so she says again, "Just let us be there when it happens."

I'm so sorry for terrifying you, I think. "Okay," I say. "I promise."

California is exactly what I hoped it would be: strange and vast and completely unconcerned with what I have to say. I find a family to nanny for in the evenings and get a part-time job writing for an online magazine, publishing articles about IUDs and apple cider vinegar recipes and scary sleep facts that explain why your eyes are baggy each morning. I tell myself that this is the year I'm going to write and finish my first novel.

The weeks pass.

I drive to soccer practices and playdates beneath the palm trees, making a point to answer my phone meticulously when my family calls. I'm elbow deep in a manuscript about mental illness, so I know it's crucial in situations such as this one to sound calm. My family, after all, is looking for any reason to confirm that I have gone clinically insane.

"What's the weather like today?"

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My mother possesses an endless reserve of small talk as ammunition. This is good; otherwise she would have no choice but to ask where her daughter has gone, the one who believed up until a few months ago that becoming a supreme court judge was Her Fate. (Before you come undone, you tend to wonder and guess at what will undo you. It's not that I can't become a judge anymore. I simply know now that everything else to come—the jobs and the places and the people and the things—is incidental.)

"It's warm," I say. "Seventies. It's beautiful."

"And how are you feeling about Your Fate?"

She still talks about him cautiously, like it might trigger some animal response in me. Which, to her credit, it might. "I'm feeling great," I say. Don't sound too happy, I think. Sound certain. "He left this morning. Think he's sleeping in New Jersey tonight. His job starts next Monday."

"Wonderful," my mother breathes back. She's trying to sound calm, too.

Here is the first thing you learn when you are obscenely happy: nothing comes for free.

But the Greeks could have told you that.

My loopy smile triggers concerned frowns and respectful, probing questions. I try not to panic when people look at me in surprise at what I've become. I remind myself that it makes sense. After all, I shed all recognizable parts of Me in heaps and coils onto the hardwood floor of a now empty apartment in Boston. I know it might take awhile for people to recognize this new skin.

Still: I keep smiling. I walk under the relentless sunshine, and my shoulders turn pink instantly. I wait for the burn to peel off in painful, embarrassing flakes, but it doesn't. The skin simply turns brown.

"He's moving out here? Already?"

I smile at the Talking Head in front of me. Look less crazy, I think. "He's on his way right now," I say.

It's a tightrope walk. When someone thinks you're a lunatic for having someone move across the country after you only just started dating, it won't lend sanity when you add you're hoping to be married by the New Year. But if

you don't say something, it will look like a secret, a lie of omission: something you're not willing to defend.

"You must be really happy," another Talking Head says over the phone, a few days later.

"My Fate is lovely," I reply. "The loveliest."

"It seems serious," they offer.

"It is," I say, then steel myself. "We're planning to get married soon."

What happens next is akin to word vomit, something they'll try to smooth over moments later, after they've shocked even themselves at such a flash of uncontrolled emotion: "You barely fucking know him."

And here is the point where the chess pieces reach a stalemate. I can't tell them the truth, because then they'll think I've been trafficked, or brainwashed, or lobotomized. So instead, I give the zero-sum answer, leaving both parties dissatisfied.

"I know," I say. "But I'm doing it anyway."

My sister calls.

"Mom said you haven't changed your mind."

"Did you think I would?"

I am inching home in dead-stop traffic underneath a cotton candy sky. The shadows of the palm trees dance across the pavement of the suburban street that the city treats like a highway. To me, even the traffic here is magical.

"I guess not," my sister answers. There is a clang in the background—her fiancé is cooking dinner. My sister has done everything right. She is older. She has a steady job and a perfect (and I mean *perfect*) diamond ring, one that I helped to pick out. She dated her fiancé for a year before getting engaged. Their wedding is in eight months, and yet—if all goes to plan, I will have a wedding band on my finger before she does.

"I'm not saying I don't love Your Fate," she says. Her voice is a remarkably controlled combination of optimism and rationality. Remember how that sounds? I think. Copy it. She continues, "I just think you should take some time to figure things out. There's no rush."

"I'm not rushing," I edge the car forward six inches, and then throw it

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back into park.

She switches tack. "It takes a lot to make a relationship work. Love is never enough."

Love may not be enough, I think, but Fate cannot be overcome.

The palm trees sigh overhead. "I know," I say, and edge forward again. "I know."

Around this point, I begin to compile a list of what I would sacrifice to keep My Fate intact.

I start out small, to see how it feels:

Gluten, overtly girly wall decor, dancing with strangers, flirting with bartenders, flirting with anyone who bumps into my orbit, the use of the silent treatment as a weapon of mass destruction, pineapple (he's allergic), vacation days used for friends, spreading my limbs across my mattress as far as they can go, acting my age, my lucky stained underwear, a condom wrapper a British Olympian used with me once. . . .

I pause and close my eyes. I roll my neck around on my shoulders. I crack my back.

I open my eyes.

I go bigger.

I let go of my two cats, the family dog. All spicy food. Half of my friendships. My ability to make singular decisions. Full days spent in bed speaking to no one. Holidays with my family. All of my friendships. My writing hand. The dream of living in another country. My career. The small sum sitting in my savings account. My relationship with my sister, my parents, my future children. My manuscript.

I can see the flames. The heat of the bonfire makes my eyes water, but I'm still here, breathing. Eventually, I look down at my handwriting and take inventory. It occurs to me that there is nothing left in my life to give up. There is nothing I wouldn't burn, if I had to.

I can't decide if this is a terrible sign for marriage, or an excellent one. I want to call My Fate and ask his opinion, but he is currently on the road. I don't want to distract him. Instead, I pour wine into a coffee mug and settle onto my kitchen floor. I lean my head back against the cabinets and close my

eyes. I imagine all of the pieces of his life slipping out of the window, one by one, as he drives west to find me.

My best friend calls.

“I didn’t know you wanted to get married in the first place. I was always under the impression that even when you found the right person, marriage wasn’t a part of your equation.”

My best friend is dead on the money. She’s also My Soulmate—which is different than My Fate— so it’s difficult to tell her about the heaps of skin back in Boston. I imagine how she feels. Only two months ago, I was telling her I couldn’t imagine a hell quite so hot as marriage. I think to myself, I am certifiably batshit fucking insane.

“I still don’t want to get married,” I say. “But I want to marry him.”

(Here is a more accurate way to say the same thing: it is a terribly exhausting and futile exercise to rail against Your Fate. Even more so to delay it.)

“You want to marry him.”

“Yes.”

My best friend sighs. “And what, exactly, will marriage accomplish?”

My shirt sleeve is spattered with smears of blood from the cuticles I pick at during these conversations. I bring my thumb to my mouth, then drop it. “It won’t accomplish anything, I guess. It’s just, I don’t know. Inevitable, or something.”

“Inevitable, or something,” she repeats.

“Yes,” I say.

“Okay,” she replies after a moment. “I’m with you. Witness at the courthouse, or whatever.”

I sigh and unclench my battered fingers.

The conversation moves forward. As my best friend tells me about the ten-car pileup she passed earlier in the day, I make a promise to myself that I will say the same thing to her when she shows up, battered, bruised, and certifiably batshit insane, to tell me about Her Fate:

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Okay, I will say. I'm with you.

I begin to collect the reasons people give me for why I am making a terrible, irretrievable mistake:

You don't know each other at all.

You don't know yourself at all.

People change a great deal in their twenties.

You're too young to do anything this serious.

You're too old to do anything this stupid.

You have no idea how much effort marriage can be.

He might cheat on you, he will cheat on you, you will cheat on him.

You will grow bored with him, he will make no money, he will not be able to keep it in his pants. He will fuck the nanny, he will fuck his secretary, he will fuck a strange woman in the bar and give you herpes for your thirtieth birthday.

I fold the arguments carefully into my pocket, one by one. When I come home each day, I release them into the company of their compatriots. Like succulents, they thrive with little to no attention and an occasional squirt of water.

I watch my collection grow by the day.

I call it Due Diligence.

"What if I can't have children?"

"We'll adopt."

Even with fifteen hundred miles between us, My Fate answers without hesitation. He is at a gas station, some meaningless coordinate in the middle of the country. I can hear the rushing of cars behind him. I pray he isn't standing close to the road.

"What if we can't adopt?"

"Why wouldn't we be able to adopt?"

My Fate doesn't believe in Fate the way I do. He sifts through the cosmic matter, skims the good off of the top, and leaves the rest to curdle. His concerns are physical: how we will do this without offending our families,

how we will merge our lives as smoothly as possible, how he will find a suitable ring in a short amount of time.

“Let’s just say we can’t,” I say. “We can’t have kids at all. Would you hate me?”

Due diligence, I think to myself.

There is a pause that travels through the phone and expands outward. It unfolds east and west until it covers the entire North American continent. In truth, it’s a second, maybe less, before he answers:

“I’d be really fucking sad. But I’d live.”

This is what hubris looks like:

1. Loving someone so much that you would give up anything for them. (Cue the inevitable heartbreak, the obvious plot twist.)
2. Thinking that you are happier than everyone else. (Cue a piano falling out of a third-floor walkup.)
3. Moving through the world as if the rules do not apply. (Cue those two, murderous words: *Marry Me*.)

“I’m writing an essay about it,” I tell my best friend.

“On the marriage thing?”

“On the marriage thing.”

She snorts over the phone. “Fifty bucks you publish it on the same day he asks for an annulment.”

We don’t laugh because it’s a dark joke. We laugh because our religion is superstition. We laugh because if we didn’t, we would have no further recourse than to fall onto our knees and pray to be spared.

I know what you’re thinking.

This looks like cold feet, the way I measure and weigh the value of each specific fear. If I were confident in *My Fate*, I wouldn’t be writing lists that leave me staring into the cold black of my ceiling at night.

Here is the truth: I am very afraid. But I’m not afraid of what you’d

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think.

I'm not afraid that he's going to cheat on me, or bankrupt me, or fall out of love with me. I'm not afraid of the institution of marriage, and I couldn't give less of a shit about what people think of me.

Here is what I'm afraid of: no one ever specifies how much time you will be given with Your Fate.

I'm afraid of the California sun.

I'm afraid that My Fate and I will burn so brightly, our wax will melt in fat globs off of our backs, and we will plummet to the ground on an errant Tuesday afternoon.

I'm afraid that we will survive this fall, only to find ourselves separated by thousands of miles of land, without a compass to find our way back to one another.

Okay, I'll be more literal about this.

I'm afraid he will get cancer.

I'm afraid I'll be struck by some texting driver who didn't see the pedestrian walk signal.

I'm morbidly certain that we will not both reach old age, because there's no way you are allowed to receive a Fate this beautiful without paying for it.

Nothing comes for free.

My father calls. My mother has given up, but he is slow and persistent like the waves that wash over the Santa Monica shore. I stare out at the waves from my perch on the beach, phone against my ear. I am tired of being meticulous. I'm ready to start sending these calls to voicemail.

"Give yourself a year, that's nothing in the grand scheme of your life," he's saying.

I nod, and then remember he can't see me. "I hear you, Dad."

"But you're not convinced."

"Time's not going to change the end result." I brush at my foot, and grains of sand cascade off my calloused skin.

"Time reveals character," my father replies immediately. There is that

New England practicality, almost as intoxicating as My Fate itself.

I say nothing. I'm stumped.

Here is what connects hubris with hamartia: a great, heaping spoonful of irony.

That which dooms us is inevitably what intoxicates us. The thread that will unspool us is the one we can't stop picking at.

We unravel ourselves.

Romeo and Juliet would've been absofuckinglutely fine if they had just chosen to flirt in secret like normal preteens. But instead, they chose to shed their skins onto a bedroom floor, plunging into their Fates—into the Fatal—with eyes wide open.

Although it might be unfair to say Juliet *chose* to marry Romeo.

It is never a choice to greet Your Fate.

In pretending to keep the rest of my life afloat, I have piled up a thick stack of memoirs on mental illness. Research for the manuscript, I tell myself, but really, it's capital D distraction. Beautiful, gory Distraction, until I come across My Fate in the pages.

It's in a memoir written by Emma Forrest, whose love flew as high as mine before crashing into the earth. Her Fate, as it turns out, was actually spelled like Phase. There is one section in particular that I read over and over and over again, in which her therapist tries to explain why Her Fate disintegrated before her eyes:

"There is a psychiatric occurrence we see in men—not often women—where they put all their hopes and dreams onto one person, so intensely that it trips a wire in the brain circuitry, and causes them to go, in a minute, 180 degrees the other way."

I stare at the page. With one hand, I reach behind my head and press my fingers against the soft, warm skin that separates my shoulder blades.

I bring my fingers back. They are dripping with warm wax.

I read the paragraph to My Fate over a phone connection as shaky as my

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voice. He begins to respond as the connection fails, and I am left with white noise. Then, a series of texts arrive onto my screen.

First:

what alternative would you recommend?

Then:

that we stop?

And the last bubble, a minute or so after the first two:

I have no option but forward

An alternate translation of those texts, shaped into the scarecrow stuffing of a riddle:

If you knew how your life was going to end, would you change anything?
Would it make a difference, even if you did?

My father calls, again.

“I know I said to wait, but I also want to tell you: don’t wait too long.”

If I weren’t sitting in traffic, I would grind the car to a halt anyways. I think, sound calm.

“Okay.”

He speaks haltingly, which is unusual for him. “I just mean to say, if this is good, don’t let it slip away. I married your mother after three years, and I knew I wanted to marry her from the first day. I’m lucky she waited. Other people, not so much.”

I try to imagine what has happened in his life to make him say this, and I am suddenly floored by the staggering depth of what I don’t know about my father. He continues, “Sometimes, it’s just right.”

I nod, and wonder why it never occurred to me to say that in response to all of those talking heads. My father says it again, and I really feel it this time. “Sometimes, it’s just right.”

“I hear you,” I say. The flames fall away.

Nothing good gets away.

Steinbeck said that in a letter to his son about love, and it has always seemed like the stupidest advice I've ever heard. Good things get away all the time. People treat each other terribly every single day. They fuck the nanny and make less money than they promised and hand out herpes for birthday presents, all the while growing so bored with the good thing in their grasp that they eventually let it slip through their fingers, certain that something better will come along.

But now, I wonder if Steinbeck was more like my father and me than I initially thought. I wonder if he was talking less to his son about earning or grabbing or praying for something good, but rather, about the practice of relenting to it. There's something fateful about what he said, I can see now—although I would add an asterisk.

Nothing good gets away*

*if you grip it tightly with both hands.

On our second date, my Fate and I stopped at a bench in a nearby dog park before he walked me home. "Tell me three things you like about me," I said.

He nodded and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, staring into the stringed lights hung around the central fountain. "You're funny," he said, then added, "Like, really funny. That joke about a skin lamp—" He trailed off, shook his head, smiled.

I was silent, so as not to disturb the molecules solidifying around us. He ticked off a second finger. "You make me uncomfortable, in a good way."

"And the third?" I asked, and he turned to look at me. I held my breath. "I have no idea where this is going," he said. "And I like that."

I nodded, and it was the first time I ever lied to him, because the truth was that I knew exactly where this was going. I could see everything, right there in that dog park, all of the years unfolding before us, accordion-like, into the darkness: job offers and marriage certificates, screaming fights about the future of self-driving cars (he's right), about whether bitcoin is stupid or not (I'm right), juggling children and children's children and worrisome bills and health scares and maybe even a tattoo or several along the way.

It all came together to form a route, a highway unfolding straight into the horizon, not unlike the roads he would drive west in two months' time. The only thing I couldn't see—the only thing I still can't see—is how much

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distance we would cover; how much time we would be given along the way.

I text My Fate late one night, lying on an air mattress in my empty bedroom.

we should donate blood

okay, he replies. He's somewhere in Arizona.

I will do things like this for the rest of my life: tiny gestures to the universe, acts of goodwill that feel, to me, like a fair bargain in exchange for just a few more minutes of time added to our clock.

He will go along with them, not because he believes in bartering with the universe, but because he believes in me.

The next morning, he texts me from somewhere outside of the Grand Canyon.

The mountains were made with you in mind

It must be a delayed message because he's near canyons, not mountains, but no matter. He'll be here in a day, and after that, the rest is waiting. Meanwhile, conversations with others have begun to calm, as they always seem to. New gossip to distract, new crises to pick apart. The flow of phone calls has lessened to a trickle. The questions have shifted. Will I have bridesmaids? Will the wedding be big or small? Will there be a wedding at all? (We still haven't decided, but I see no point in telling them this just yet. I deserve to breathe without smoke in my lungs for a week or two.)

I creep home beneath a blood red sky. The sunsets here are already threatening to slip into the ordinary. The traffic is just as bad as always, except it doesn't feel magical anymore. It's just traffic.

The light turns red in front of me. I begin to type a response to him. My thumbs move slowly.

m, a, r-

Then I stop. Delete, delete, delete.

It's coming, I remind myself. You cannot speed it up or slow it down. It is a waterfall; a summer storm; a finger, pulling and pulling at the strands of your life. All that's left for you to do is this:

Breathe.

I type a new message.

I can't wait for you to get here

The light goes green. I inhale, and ease my foot off the brake.