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Microwaves

This basket contains too much biography, my life in goods — empty calories, single-serving packets camouflaged under a layer of fruits and vegetables that will go unconsumed, rotten on the counterette of a kitchenette because I don't know where to put my eyes when I eat alone, so I turn on the TV, consume yet another single serving of something and replay what I did not announce to the cashier:

I am not alone.

The cashier has seen this never-quite-a-meal assortment before. He sees the future strung out before me — a long, white, waxy receipt that floats past whooshing automatic doors into the parking lot, a short drive toward this efficiency apartment, its remicrowaved takeout, its week-old, unrinsed dishes. The cashier knows, based on my purchases, that one day the top of my ass will supernova, expanding until it's even larger than its other half. He knows that you and I are not synchronized park swings.

I shop at different stores. I hand over the same plastic basket to another fluorescent face, unfold its clinking metal handles and try to wipe their rust smell from my hands. I

accept the charges, fold up another trailing receipt rather than letting it flutter away. But every cashier knows how this basket empties.

Will that be all?

There are no provisions to explain us — our standing Saturday night (don't stay too long past your Sunday alarm) arrangement. Hunger consuming itself is not sustenance. We are ingredients that combine to make nothing.

I follow a drawerful of receipts back to a year ago, to a green stucco four-plex, upstairs, with hardwood floors and a dishwasher, in the kind of neighborhood where you could take a walk to get a great cup of coffee and the best-ever brunch and if you felt like making a day of it maybe a discount movie ticket. I left its washer/dryer hookups for laundromats and that repeated question, the one we push aside casually, as though we have a more modern arrangement, even though we don't. Still I scour Craigslist for green-stucco great-coffee four-plexes with hardwood floors with dishwashers with you.

You don't live together?

Our friends are always surprised. They use carts with wheels and make recipes from scratch; they pack each other's lunches. They cohabitate in trashy (call it transitional) neighborhoods to save money on rent, and together they choose what deep, warm color to paint the sunroom and what found art will cover the walls. They have a thrift-store hi-fi and a borrowed or inherited hope chest for a coffee table; they have a manner of conversation that assumes by choice of words that they have no plans not to be together. Their apartment is familiar, a reminder.

We are not them. We won't be. I know this. And yet — stay.

If you lived here, you'd be home by now.

Their online profiles taunt me in late night Google searches when my double bed is half empty and actually just a futon built with tiny, disposable wrenches and covered in queen-size sheets, the extra folds twisting to keep me awake while yearbook faces register for dining room furniture sets at wholesale clubs.

I know guarantees mean shit these days. And yet —

They probably feel loved now, even if they are just pretending it's forever. They don't worry about any of the ridiculous things I do, now that they have been condensed to their basic reproductive elements.

My elitism folds back onto itself like the pillow next to me smothers.

I should pretend to be ages I have already been, in which none of this has crossed my mind and I can continue to nurse doctrines of romantic autonomy over unnecessary beers. Instead I expand on an invented world in which we could live together, with microwaved hot water for tea, the nights' routine of books in bed and smooth sheets trapping shared body heat. It is not this world. Here we combine to nothing.

The first bursts of the universe are auras still glowing unseen around us, sparks from forming elements and colliding gasses.

Scientists say that if we could see microwaves — if our eyes would absorb them, if our brains would interpret them (they can't, but if they could) — the entire sky would glow with a brightness astonishingly uniform in every direction.

This universe expands and every day we are smaller. The servings shrink; everything doubles.

Microwaving a frozen entree, I try to imagine this momentary furnace of a universe churning in its simultaneous states — matter and energy and spirit like solid and liquid and gas inside a tiny box of rotating light.

Ding, Ding, Ding becomes the sound of everything tonight, another inescapable metaphor, ingredients of our unnecessary explanations, labels printed below each item in each aisle. Our understanding is that of never really. Picture a string, a particle, a wave; and then unpicture it. It is not the thing you have called it.

Here's another inescapable metaphor: We are the time-traveling light of a far-off star, flickered out.

From across the galaxy, telescopes aimed into history can tell we are already gone. It's just these microwaves we shed, causing heart problems in convenience stores. No chart can explain where those microwaves go when we have lost them.

Picture the night sky, planetarium dome; and then unpicture it.