

CHRIS EDMONDS

Elsa

GREEN DOESN'T WORK AFTER DARK.

The lights on Market Street flash yellow at night. On the side streets, they flash red. At night, you're supposed to be cautious, drive slowly, check and double-check before pulling on to a road. Be careful, no green, no full steam ahead. Walk, don't run. Max likes that. That's what he thinks as he walks home after work: "I'm playing by the rules."

The bum in the bus shelter makes him uneasy. Max makes a list in a head of all the things he owns and all the things he has access to, all the things the bum might want, might decide to take: money, an apartment, a car, a job, a bed, food, clean clothes.

Max said hello once. That was six weeks ago when it was still cold. The bum didn't say anything, didn't ask for anything, didn't try to take anything. He went on smoking his cigarette. A tiny fire in a freezing world. Alone and stationary to Max's alone and moving.

The bum is cautious, too, with Max. He's red and yellow. He's not green.

When Max gets home, he doesn't turn on the lights. He lies down on his bed and wonders if he can sleep without closing his eyes, if the world's dark enough to make his brain believe his eyelids are already shut. He takes off his shoes and falls asleep, eyes closed.



"The French," Elsa began, "have five variations to the verb 'to leave.' You can *sortir* and *partir* and *laisser* and *quitter* and *s'en aller*. The last one—do you know it? It means to go away and never come back."

Max watched her descend the stairs that led to the parking area behind the two-story building in which they'd shared an apartment since the previous winter. It was January when she left, and snow clung in patches

to the gravel of the driveway. Where the snow wasn't, ice shone in the early morning sunlight.

From the driveway, Elsa turned her equine face with its closely set eyes and exhaled. She'd complained about his curtainless windows the first day she came to the apartment. She complained again on her final day. Through the cloud that came from her breathing, she mouthed, "I can still see you," and disappeared behind the tinted windows of her car.

Max couldn't see Elsa anymore, but she could see him in his bare window, looking down at her, waiting for her to go. And she did, gone at last out on to the road and away from Max, their apartment and all of the unwanted items she'd left behind, because she didn't care to take them away with her. She'd left them as reminders that Max knew at once he couldn't live with. As soon as she'd gone, Max pushed her remnants off the apartment's sagging porch. He watched what was left of Elsa scatter on the snow and ice where a few minutes earlier her car had sat in cold disuse.

"The fuck, man?" Jarod called up from his ground-level apartment.

Max went back inside, closed the door and spent the next hour covering the bare windows with black plastic trash bags. "I don't see you anymore," he told himself.



Purple seeps in at the edge of the windows, as loose strands of daylight slip past the plastic bags. Max knows it's morning, but he's slow to get out of bed. His body lies stiffly, the clothing he wore the night before damp from a restless sleep. Max rubs his eyes and reaches for his glasses. Every day begins eventually, he says aloud in the empty apartment.

Max makes coffee after pulling on the sweatshirt that he keeps on the floor beside his bed, ready for the morning, winter, spring, summer and fall. Max never measures the coffee grounds or the water correctly. When Elsa was here, Max never made enough for two. Now he makes more than he needs for one.

Max showers and dresses and starts to think of what he'll do with the remaining few hours before he has to be at work.

A one-two, one-two-three knock raps at the door, and Max goes to let Jarod in. It's my signature, Jarod told Max the first time he visited Max's apartment. Sometimes Max ignores the knocking, hiding a little while longer before he has to go outside, but this morning, he lets Jarod in.

"The bags, man," Jarod says, "they've got to come down. It's been months, and anyway it's beautiful out today. Have you seen the sky?"

Max hasn't, but he can now with the door open, the door Jarod neglects to close. He's making a point; he's not being forgetful. He and Max both know this, so Max looks out. Winter's gone, Max thinks, and so is Elsa. But even that's improving. He doesn't think of her as often as he used to. He doesn't have any of her things anymore, and he hasn't called her in weeks. This is progress, he tells himself. He tells Jarod he's working things out.

"Yeah, right," Jarod says, "but anyway, this guy was asking for you earlier. Stopped by my place. Odd looking, and a bit old, but he seemed harmless. I told him you were probably still asleep. You expecting somebody?"

"No, no one," Max says, and he pictures his father standing at Jarod's door. A "pardon me" forms roughly on his lips, the raincoat he wore this time of year belted around his waist, his face twisting awkwardly as he prepares to speak.

If Max's father came searching, Jarod waited too long to tell him. Max's father died of cancer six years ago. Jarod doesn't know that. Jarod doesn't know very much about Max, but he does know that Elsa left. He apologized for getting upset about her stuff in the driveway. "I've been through enough chicks to have been through that," he said when he stopped by two days after Elsa drove away. He's made a habit of stopping by since. Sometimes Max wishes he could keep him away. Other times he's happy for the diversion.

Today, Max hurries him out the door. He tells Jarod he doesn't feel well, which is true. He hasn't felt well for days but hasn't bothered about medicine or a visit to the doctor. "I'm young. I'm healthy. I'm progressing," he tells himself.



Onion, olives, tomato, garlic, pepper, thyme, olive oil, fish filets. The dish predates Elsa. Now it postdates her. Max hasn't seen Jarod or the bum in days. He wonders where they are. He wonders if they're together. He wonders if they're thinking about him. The fish is done. Time to eat.



When it's really cold, the bum covers himself in trash bags. The bum pulls the yellow drawstrings tightly over his nose and mouth, leaving just enough space to breathe and to smoke, but not enough to let much of the cold in. The bum's smart, Max can tell.

The yellow drawstrings hang in front of his hidden face and look like drooping ears, or dirty fangs, or broken antennae. The red dot of cigarette crackles as he inhales, like a burning eye staring out from the dark. He'd look scary like this, if Max hadn't already decided that he isn't. He doesn't want the things I have, and if he did, he'd have taken them already, Max thinks. Still, some nights Max doesn't cross the road until after he passes the shelter, just to be sure.

The bum's not at the bus shelter tonight. No one is. It's late, and it's warm. Maybe he's found somewhere else to spend the night. Maybe he's by the lake, sleeping hunch-shouldered on the shore, no stranger walking by to peer in at him, no stranger to keep his distance for fear of his safety.

Max sits in the bum's place, staring back at where he stood a moment before. I wish I had a cigarette, Max says. He doesn't though. Max doesn't smoke. His asthma won't allow it, and besides, he thinks he has enough bad habits already. The bum is becoming a habit, but Max isn't sure if that qualifies as good or bad.

No one's standing where Max stood. The street is empty. The city feels empty, too. There's a car in the distance now. Its lights peek through the night, twinkling like faraway stars. But the car doesn't reach him. It turns off a few blocks before the shelter.

There aren't any cigarette butts on the floor of the shelter. There aren't any wrappers, any pieces of paper, any indication that anyone's been sitting here, night after night, in the cold and in the heat. The streetlight shines weakly on the spotless ground. The bum is clever when it comes to the cold, Max thinks, so maybe he's clever not to leave traces of himself behind. The shelter feels like a secret Max and the bum share.

A police cruiser slows as it passes. Max waves to the officers inside, the two of them sitting in front, looking tired and unlikely to hassle Max so long as he doesn't give them reason to. They think I'm him, Max says. Max waves a second time, and the officers drive off.



At the end of the driveway is a road, and across the road is a park. Beyond the park, a lake. Beyond the lake, mountains. Beyond the mountains, there could be anything. I can go there, he says. I can go and come back, or I can go and stay. I can go now, if I want to, he says.

The Saturday shift is the busiest of the week. The presses start at 9:30. The machines spin in a blur as plates transfer to paper, and papers arrive in the work area in the next room, riding along what looks like a train track

suspended from the ceiling. A train track, Max thinks, or an amusement park ride.

At the end of the ride, papers are bundled in stacks of twenty-five and then distributed to Max and whoever else makes up the crew for the evening. The crew stuffs inserts into the papers, comics pages and magazines and fliers for stores having sales and stores promoting new products. The job numbs most nights, but on Saturday the work area buzzes. More people come in on Saturday, new faces making old mistakes. Sometimes Max thinks his bosses find recruits at homeless shelters and halfway houses. The man next to him tonight has an anchor tattooed on his forearm. “You can call me ‘Captain,’” he says.

Max, Captain and two others work, two to a side, along a rectangular metal table. Bundles of newspapers and bundles of inserts are kept on the left and right at each station, a clear workspace is left in the center. Finished papers go to the pallets at the end of the table. The process is simple, but Captain isn’t doing well.

“Ah, shit,” he says as the bundle of inserts slides off the table and scatters on the floor. “Ah, shit,” he says again, a little louder. Workers at other tables look over at him, pushing the inserts into a pile and scooping them back to the table. The crew boss—a short, wizened man with tawny skin, who everyone calls “Sull”—tells Captain to focus on his job or focus on getting out. “One strike,” Sull says. “Two’s all you get.”

Captain resets and starts stuffing again, not caring if a reader gets four of the same flier or none. He wants to finish quickly and leave. People like Captain don’t come back. People like Max do.

For the third straight week, a redhead two tables over eyes Max. Freckles crest across her smallish nose and gold hoops hang heavily from her ears. Max thinks she’s wearing more makeup tonight than the previous two weeks, and at the end of the shift when she asks him to join her for a drink, he can smell her perfume mixing with sweat. “I’m Kellan,” she says as she extends her hand. “Max,” he says.



The bus shelter is empty again when Max passes by. After her third drink, Kellan switched from talking to whispering in Max’s ear, her breath betraying its minty sheen with the alcohol she’d been consuming. Her smells made Max uncomfortable. Her hands, now on his arm, now on his wrist, made him more so.

“I’ve got somewhere to be in the morning, early,” Max said as her palm fell to his knee. “Really early.”

A block from the bar, and the world is quiet. Another block, and the lights flash yellow and red. Max was cautious tonight. Max sits in the bum's place again.

A couple walks past, but neither looks at Max. In a moment they're gone, and the street is silent. Before he leaves, Max takes out his keys and scratches the bum a note: "I'm waiting, too."



It's dark a week later when Max wakes up in Kellan's apartment. "This is a green-light night," he thought as she searched through her bag for the keys to the front door, one hand lost the bag, the other tugging at Max's belt.

The humid morning and Kellan's crowded apartment make Max claustrophobic. His throat scratches as he tries to keep his breathing quiet. He shuffles around in the half-dark looking for his clothes and then for the door that leads him outside and away from Kellan. When he sees her next Saturday evening, he'll act as though none of this happened.

Max untangles the memories of how he arrived at Kellan's and eventually finds himself on the route home. The bum is at the shelter, but Max crosses to the other side a block before. This isn't how they're supposed to meet, he thinks as he shuffles across the two-lane road, ahead a delivery truck that travels too fast, even at this hour. The burning dot of the cigarette follows Max as he passes on the opposite sidewalk.

After a shower, Max makes breakfast and brings the leftovers to the shelter. A cigarette has been put out on his note, but otherwise the shelter is clear. He leaves the paper plate with its two pancakes and returns home.

Kellan called while he was out. "You know you shouldn't just leave after—" her message starts, her voice distorted by the answering machine. She sounds harsh and pleading. She doesn't sound like Elsa.

Max met Elsa on a city bus when it was raining. He usually walked wherever he went, but in bad weather he took the shuttle downtown. Elsa was already on the bus he stepped aboard, the green wool of her jacket mottled by raindrops.

He missed his stop, but when Elsa got up for the next one, Max joined her. "I don't know where you're going, but I'd like to go with you," he said when she turned to see who had followed her off the bus.

An hour later, they were in her room, pulling at each other's clothes, Elsa's breath warm against Max's neck, his skin turning to gooseflesh as she traced circles on his back. When it was over, he wanted to stay, and so she let him. He spent the rest of the day reading one of her textbooks, as she

slid about the apartment in another man's boxer shorts and an oversized sweatshirt. She made scrambled eggs and tomato soup for dinner.

"You can come back tomorrow, you know," she said. And he did, and he did the next day and the next day and on the fourth day he helped Elsa move her things to his apartment without curtains.



Max erases Kellan's message and then dials the last number he had for Elsa. Another woman answers. "What have you done with Elsa?" he thinks and hangs up on the woman's annoyed hellos.

"Would you," she said for a second time, "would you love my baby if you met it in heaven?" When Elsa was twenty-three, she miscarried a pregnancy she didn't want but one she couldn't bring herself to terminate. Sometimes early in the morning, Max saw her holding her stomach where the baby had briefly been years before. In the pale light, her face looked caught between despair and joy. She looked old and young at the same time.

"Would you?" she asked. "No," Max said. "I'm not sure I could even love my own."

She didn't speak for a long time. When Max heard her crying, he dressed and walked across the street to the park to wait for the sun to come. Max left, and Elsa started leaving. When he returned, the few things she wanted to take with her were packed, and the rest fell in ragged heaps throughout the apartment.

"The French," she began.



Max watches as snow falls outside. The cars are covered, and the trees have become bulbous, cartoon shapes. The world has grown fat, swollen, become puffy. A cat pads across the driveway and disappears into the building behind his when someone he doesn't see opens the door for it to enter.

It's winter, or nearly. Max doesn't live near the park anymore. He tells the new people he meets that he crossed the mountains and came to somewhere else, but in truth he headed away from the mountains and the lake and the park and the street and the driveway that leads to them all and found another way through.

Three nights after Max left his note from the bum, he found a scrap of paper tucked between the planks of the shelter's bench: "I'm not wait-

ing.” Max had hoped for an invitation to join him, to sit in the cold and the heat, quietly, through the night. Now he sits alone, in this new place. This new place is better for me, Max tells himself.

It’s dark, and the cat is outside again. Max can see it in the light cast from the doorway of its home. Looking for its paw prints, the cat finds none. The snow has filled in the ones it made earlier. The cat turns back to the door. In a moment it can be inside and someone will hold it and someone will feed it and give it something to drink and someone will make it warm.

But instead, the cat steps away from the door, cautious at first in the deep snow. Red and yellow in the green-less night, the cat moves forward in search of what it left behind.