

Busy Season – by Henry Pialat

This story is set in 1993.

Picture a dark but large space, where top-nude women dance on a stage. The stage is faintly lit up by ceiling lights that swivel from where they are fixed, on the ceiling high above. There are half a dozen of these lights, and some are producing red light, while the rest produce white. The rotation of these lights is very slow, rotating while pointed at the ground below. Their brightness of these swivelling lights is not too fast or strong, because the owners of this place are trying to prevent seizures, one of which happened five months ago. This is a description of the main stage of a club, called “The Piper”, which sits on the main stretch of buildings that embody the town’s nightlife, on Jones Street. It stands among a section of the street that has two adult stores. At this moment, it is a Thursday, just after seven pm, in the winter. The sun has been gone for over an hour, and inside The Piper is quiet, due to today being a weekday that is not Friday, and also because the temperature is eight degrees with heavy winds.

Returning back inside The Piper, there are some people sitting around the stage, at small round tables with likely a beer by their side, and exclusively in parties of one. The stage is shaped like a jigsaw piece, and although there are scratches and stains all over the black wooden stage, they are decently-covered in this dimness. Also, the attention of the people sitting is firmly elsewhere. Within this large dark space, there is a cocktail bar tucked to the side, which is also lit with red ceiling lights that look brighter than their cousins above the stage, but this is largely because the ceiling above the bar is much nearer to the ground, about the height of any regular room. Right alongside the bar counter, there is a row of cherry-coloured bar stools, which a couple years ago were all bolted to the ground by the owners, to prevent the stools’ being spontaneously used in a fight. There are two customers here at the Piper bar, spaced well apart. One customer is a man in the centre of the counter, smoking a decent-brand cigarette and drinking a soda water. The second customer is a woman on the far edge of the counter. Pick any side of the counter you’d like, for where she’s sitting, reader. Left or right, up to you. I personally think it she is on the far left.

This woman’s name is Arielle. She works in the business district of the town, which can be found just a brief walk away, through the town square and past the train station. She works there as an accountant, or maybe she’s in human resources. Besides the much-thicker coat she is wearing, Arielle wears similar layers in this time of year, as to what she’d wear in the summer. It might be because she works in an office with a thermostat all year, but even when she was outside the office, and walking over to The Piper, she didn’t notice the cold, with the wind and the chilled air. Also, at the moment, Arielle feels a heat source inside her body, from the glass of rosé in front of her. Tonight, the bartender seems generous with the amount he’s poured for Arielle, which she remembers also on her last visit. It’s a different bartender this time, but the pour is identical.

Arielle is often looking up at the rear wall of the bar, up in the corner, at a TV. It’s a blocky TV that weighs maybe twenty kilos, which is angled down towards the bar’s customers, and hoistered into place with very tight screws, by installers who the managers must somewhat trust. The TV seems to be muted. Based on the visuals and captions, Arielle sees that the TV

is playing a news segment on trees in a rural place, which are being felled. She sees footage of men in wide-brimmed hats and flannel shirts, talking to the camera, and then sees a woman in similar clothes to herself, but younger and blonde, holding a microphone and talking. Shown next on the TV is a suited man in maybe his forties, talking in front of a massive, strangely empty stretch of land in the country, with two other men loitering behind him, also in suits. All three men look like they have soft hands.

On the other end of the bar, high up in the opposite corner, is another blocky telly. This TV has a different channel, showing some montage of a stylishly-dressed black guy singing to the camera, mixed with shots of him interacting with a woman, as if he's entwined in some romantic pickle. Arielle knows right away that it is a music video, but this TV is muted too, making the video look like an erratic compilation of camera shots.

Arielle might be a bit lesbian. She however, in her conscious mind at least, comes to The Piper on weekdays for the ambience. Arielle comes here once or twice a week, ever since she and her friends visited it for a little laugh two months ago, on a Saturday evening where they passed through this part of town. Arielle liked the dim lights, and how the venue is dark in a warm dreamy way. The Piper is also calmer than most bars she knows. She would enjoy things like cocktails a lot more, if she knew of more places with this type of atmosphere. The bar patrons face away from the stage, so in Arielle's head, the bar and the nude-dancer area are like separate establishments, and she is just visiting for the bar faculties. The Piper is quieter on weekdays, Arielle observes, compared to when she first visited this joint. Her office is only about six minutes from here, if she walks at her normally brisk pace. This club and this overall part of town feel safer than on weekends, although there are far less people, giving this place a semi-abandoned feel. During the workweek, the nightlife district might have some restaurants or a few clubs open, but James Street during this time becomes just a backstreet for commuters.

Arielle's bladder starts to sting, so she goes to the toilets. She leaves her navy winter coat on the counter, next to her rosé. Leaving a drink unattended, for some reason, leaves no worry in Arielle's mind. She just calmly notices that she is committing a cardinal sin in nightlife, and proceeds to the restroom. To get to the restroom, she has to go around a corner near the bar, and walk down a carpeted hallway, which has a glow-in-the-dark exit sign at its further end, above a heavy door. The woman's toilet is further down this corridor than the men's. Arielle finds these glowing signs to be an eye strain.

The women's restroom is really nice. There are soft warm lights that are much easier on the eyes. Folded hand towels in a little basket by the mirror. Oval mirrors, cream wall tiles, a framed photo of a Mediterranean seaside. When Arielle first entered in here on her first visit, she developed the thought that maybe this very graceful room was a practical joke, because she supposes that when a woman would find herself at the Piper, then the last restroom she would want to use would be at a place like this. This could mean that, if a woman was urgent enough to want the Piper's restroom, they would find out that fortune favoured them being brave, and they receive this restroom paradise. Arielle goes into a cubicle, a little bit mentally spaced out, while she does her business.

Arielle has black hair in a long bob, and fair skin. Her resting face is a mix of gentleness and restraint. There is a touch of warmth, but a much stronger dose of caution in her face, telling people like a silent alarm, that she will not become clay in someone's hands. In the past,

when needed, Arielle's face can turn abundantly sour. While she is on the loo, she takes a moment to enjoy the much wider sitting surface, compared to her bar stool. The toilet seat itself is ceramic and firm, much unlike the plastic ones that feel cheap in the way they slightly buckle under your backside. Maybe less than a hundred patrons use this women's restroom per month.

While seated, Arielle hears the restroom door get pushed open. She hears more than one pair of steps. One pair of footsteps makes way to a cubicle two down from Arielle, and shortly after, a very faint sound of pouring is heard, with a deep echo. The other pair of footsteps went over to the sinks, and Arielle hears a bag go on the sink cabinet, before hearing some gentle rustling, and other things going on the cabinet. Arielle recalls that she saw no other women out around the bar and stage, besides those on the stage. These ladies may have been in another part of the club, covered by shadow, or they may have just arrived a moment ago. Maybe the ladies just entered The Piper for the toilets, and they too are in the know, about this lavatory paradise. Arielle hears another sound coming from the sink, a series of beeps. A portable telephone? Maybe the lady outside is a big-time manager who can afford that purchase, and it's likely she works somewhere very near Arielle's office. Or maybe the lady is married to somebody who is.

A conversation is had by this lady, in a European language. It doesn't sound like the ones that have widely-known sounds, like Italian. It is fast and fluid, and reminds Arielle of a language like Russian, but it might be another one altogether. Arielle is curious as to where these foreign words start and end. How does an ear work, when it can properly decipher such a stream of syllables? The woman speaking has an occasional pause, before she lets out more sounds.

Arielle remembers she is on a toilet seat, and gets up. flushes the toilet and comes out slowly. She is ready to exchange polite nods, if she makes eye contact with the speaking lady. No exchange. The woman speaking has auburn hair, a light grey blazer, and a black skirt. She is dressed like she also is from the business district that's six minutes away. Arielle catches the woman looking into warmly-lit tiles while she talks, maybe doing so to keep her mood regulated while she is dealing with whatever is being said. The conversation seems to float between moods. Arielle is of course clueless about the exact topics, but she assumes they are likely connected to work, instead of life beyond it. She washes her hands, and heads back along the hallway.

Arielle's time at the Piper shortly ends, when she continues her drink and sits at the bar for ten minutes. She heads back out on James Street, where she sees that the foot traffic has faded a fair bit, since the commuters who return home through here have already done so. The heavy winds have reached a lull, and Arielle slightly notices this, but she figures that, whether there is wind or there isn't, she was always gonna take whatever conditions there are, making it maybe irrelevant to care about. The reduced wind lets Arielle slow her step a bit, and take a drawn-out stroll, almost like she would this time in the summer, when the Sun is able to lighten up the side of the horizon much longer, and give a more epic and patient farewell to people, slowly lighting the sky less and less.

After a few minutes, Arielle has made some turns onto other streets. These streets have some apartments that look chic, and at the ground floor of these buildings, there is maybe a salon or an office. Arielle passes an office for realtors, which has a large display window, with rows

and columns of paper sheets, which feature houses and apartments to buy. This window is lit up by an outside fluorescent light fixed on the wall above it, that shines downward. Arielle lives in a suburb just outside of town, about two kilometres from her office. She wants to fit in exercise during her workweek, doing so by walking home from her office, rather than take a taxi each evening. If she gets home by taxi, she may have more time to rest than to exercise, but she has observed that she'll keep on resting, and will not want to do even gentle laps at her local pool, which is her preferred exercise when she has the energy.

Arielle passes on a footpath this little strip of businesses, which include a grocery shop, a dentist, a couple of bars, and among them, there is a shopfront where there was once a chiropractor's practice. Now, there is a new tenant. The advertising for Dr Adams' practice, which Arielle has seen maybe hundreds of times, is gone. He likely retired. Arielle notices that the overhead signholder, fixed to the ceiling above the footpath, right in front of the tenant's door, has been modified. Instead of there being a cream-coloured card with black lettering, like what Dr Adams had, the signholder has a backdrop of what looks like an artistic rendition of outer space, with a dark blue backdrop, faint stars, and galaxies. There is lettering on top of the artwork, which has a neon aesthetic. The sign says, "REVERIE CONFESSIONS".

Arielle thinks the sign is likely for a new-age spiritual shop, yet she is unsure how the word "CONFESSIONS" fits in. She wonders briefly if customers will be paying to hear confessions from people, but she feels incomplete with that idea. Arielle also wonders if maybe it involves her giving confessions, but this idea flickers in her head with her giving it little thought, since she thinks instantly it seems too dramatic. Arielle sees a laminated sign on the door saying "OPEN". She decides to break away from the path leading her home, and she extends her arm towards the door.

Once the door opens a little, Arielle expects some bell to ring. Somehow, this silence catches her ears more than a loud ringing would. Maybe there is an invisible, un-hearable sensor, linked to an office in the back. She finds herself in a modest foyer that's purposed as a reception office. It is laid out with a grass green carpet and faded pink walls that are freshly painted, a receptionist's counter in a back right corner, made of cream marble and with a leather office chair hidden behind it. In the middle of the rear wall, there's a passage, which is covered with a cream linen curtain that could pass for use in a shower. Around the edges of the room are black leather ottomans shaped like benches. Two people are seated here, separately, with one reading a magazine and the other, a blonde woman, holding a plastic disposable cup of something steaming. Arielle sees the machine that dispensed this water, near the reception desk with a cute white bin. While she is scanning the room from the doorway, she wonders why the woman has such a hot drink.

Upon stepping in here like Arielle just did, the natural place to walk towards is right to the counter. Upon the counter is a small, neat pile of pamphlets, next to a small pile of multi-page, stapled white forms that look much more serious. This contrast between the piles fascinates Arielle a little. Arielle's eyes go over the serious forms. The form laying on top is titled "In Case of Highly Improbable Scenarios". Arielle glides her eyes along the page, seeing paragraphs about this place being a government-certified receptacle of classified personal information, and that the "counsellors on premise" are legally bound to keep details

confidential or else they and “the establishment, Reverie Secular Confessions Service Ltd” are to automatically both be fined twenty-thousand dollars.

The practical purpose of this form seems to be about the signee being okay with the really tiny and improbable scenario where their “identity and confidential information is leaked beyond these premises”, despite all the “rigorous procedures” in place for this instance. Arielle only glides over the front page of these white forms, and she loses interest in reading beyond it. She turns to the friendlier pile of pamphlets, and takes one. The pamphlets are folded up, and printed on glossy baby-blue paper.

This pamphlet says the name of this place, but gives a more direct gist of what here they do. The pamphlet’s words seem more inviting than the forms, but there is a solemn tone to it, like in ads for life insurance. After unfolding the pamphlet to see the inside text and pictures, Arielle would sum up Reverie Confessions like so. Reverie Confessions is a counselling service where people can either book an appointment over the phone, or come in spontaneously, to vent whatever is heaviest upon their chest. They could do things like admit their wrongdoings, they could speak about where they have been led astray in life, or maybe speak out about what in the future may be unnerving them. A wide array of personal ordeals may be discussed.

These conversations take place in booths that are sound-insulated, which consist of two sections, partitioned with a window that can be adjusted for varied visibility. On one side sits the counsellors, who are volunteers that are extensively screened before taking up their role, and are legally and ethically bound to not leak the info, such that they explicitly reveal the visitor’s details. This policy extends towards the Reverie staff, while they talk among each other. Arielle would say too, in summing up Reverie, that this system of confession and support differs from those within a religious framework, in that here, there’s no advice given to the people visiting, such that aligns with a religious doctrine. There’s an absence of advice given by the Reverie counsellors, unless it’s directly and absolutely requested by the confessing visitor, and that information would come strictly from Reverie’s own doctrine of unconditional love and support.

Arielle takes the pamphlet, leaves for home, then a couple nights later, she comes back here, to do a walk-in confession. She needed only to sit in the waiting area for under two minutes, before the receptionist gently told her to go “right on through to room seven”, gesturing with her arm to the cream curtain. There are two other people waiting, so Arielle briefly looks at them, for suspicion she may be jumping the queue. Arielle learns from the receptionist, who sees her hesitating look, that the two other waitees have reserved specific counsellors who will be available later on, unlike her. Arielle takes her purse from beside her on the ottoman, and she softly walks along the carpet, waving aside the cream curtain and noticing it makes an absence of awkward rustling sounds. She feels like she’s stepping into the first-class section of a flight.

On the other side of this curtain, Arielle sees before her a wide hallway, with a continuation of the same pink walls and green carpet. Both the hallway’s walls have a row of five doors, all painted in cherry red, and numbered from one to ten with a gold, pretty font. The numbers look almost a little bit tacky to Arielle, in that they seem too stylised. She goes to her designated door, number seven, and pushes it open. She is taken aback to see a second door, a few feet in front. Arielle has a split second of confusion. She steps forward into the chilly in-

between space, and firmly presses down on the second doorknob. As she pushes the door open, she feels how vacuum-tight the door is, and also, she feels trusting of this place's legitimacy.

This second door reveals to her a small room, with padded navy walls. The wall that faces Arielle has a huge, tinted window that almost looks like it shows the night sky outside (she has come here in the evening). Right up along this window is a light wooden table, with a soft, light-grey office chair, probably on the cheaper side. Arielle pulls the chair out and sits down. She sees what's on the table. There is an electronic-looking dial on the wall, under the window, labelled "Turn right to increase transparency". She also sees a box of tissues, and also a little black metallic bin in the corner. Arielle peeks in the tissue box, and sees that although none are protruding, that they have simply fallen back into the box because the box's opening is too wide. It's a familiar sight to her, but it's funny to remember this happens to everyone. The air has a faint herbal smell, and is a little chilly.

There is a faint cough from behind the wall. Not one that's performed to catch Arielle's attention, but probably because of the cold weather, given that it sounds phlegmy. Arielle turns the dial to the left a bit. The window, which is very opaque, eases up a bit, like an old photograph being developed, where it starts to show shapes and light from the other side. Arielle makes out a room through the window, draped in a filter of very dark grey. In the centre of this room is a black silhouette. The silhouette is thin, short, and looks feminine. Then the voice comes out, a female voice with an Aussie accent. She introduces herself as Anna, and says that she doesn't need to know Arielle's name, so there is zero pressure in returning the greeting. Arielle, for a moment, is reminded of The Piper, in how she would see the customers along the stage being chatted to politely by the dancers.

Arielle and Anna's session lasts for less than fifteen minutes. Anna gives an introduction and rundown, to remind Arielle of how these sessions go. Arielle then starts to let herself pour outwards. It starts off like a weak stream coming from a tap, since she is a little shy. But Arielle is hardly reluctant to be here. She guessed this ambience somewhat accurately, from when she read the Reverie pamphlet, or maybe even further back, when she first looked up at the cosmic signage, and didn't understand the exact purpose of this place. Anna knows how to hold space for Arielle, and she refrains from automatically saying anything when Arielle stops speaking, not even a "Yep". Anna sits like she is one of two people watching Arielle, with the other being the room itself. The padded walls are also listening, absorbing her words and nodding silently along.

Arielle has mostly confessions relating to ways she has, in her eyes, let down friends and family. She reflects on her immaturity easily spilling into her interactions with her sister, also named Anna, which leads to arguments or even little put-downs. She admits to the potential partners she has left in the lurch, after developing a great rapport with these men, only to shoo them away in some way. She did nothing explosive to repel them, but she has been letting little moments of her behaviour, in person or over the phone, subtly dampen their interest in her. She admits, in regards to how she lives in general, she is unsure whether she is being authentic enough, and whether she should be in some different city or even country, in maybe another career, with another friend circle.

Arielle, who is newly twenty-eight, says she views turning thirty as if it's the deadline for any sidestepping into different paths, and it is even warping her sense of age now, although she is

still two years from this “turning point”. She refrains from saying this to Anna, but she feels that her thirtieth birthday has already arrived in her life, in some way, and it is spending the next two years turning itself from a ghost, into an actual real event. This ghost will complete the transition on the actual day she is thirty. She refrains from saying this too, but it’s like she is observing one of her work computers, when she is calculating a figure for her report, and the columns of client data is arriving on her screen, but it is still slowly materialising from thin air. She feels near enough to thirty that she could round up to thirty-two, and then thirty-five, which is near other large numbers. Arielle takes two tissues from the box because she takes a vague guess that she will cry, but she ends up not, and instead uses the tissues to blow her nose. For half the session, she feels a bit funny hearing silence from Anna, and just hearing her voice be the only one swirling about, between them two.

Through the session, Arielle realises that she braces for interruptions almost at all times, in the form of some advice or an “Awww” or something. According to what Arielle is used to, the permission Anna is giving her to speak feels almost like Anna is simply zoned out, or ignoring Arielle. Yet when Arielle looks up through the window and sees Anna’s shadow, it is still, and it looks somewhat locked onto her while she speaks. This all takes some acclimatising.

Within the session, Arielle speaks during it for about ten, eleven minutes. Anna is given the stage, and she starts with thanking Arielle for coming here, in a motherly, maybe older-sister tone that somehow does not seem overly sweet, but satisfying as a follow-up voice from Arielle’s little rant session. Arielle had no idea in mind for the type of response she’d like, after bearing herself like this, but Anna knew immediately what Arielle did not know. It feels to Arielle that Anna maybe even knew in a telepathic way, since her dim silhouette exudes a bit of an ethereal feel. Anna thanks Arielle for coming here, and says that for strictly Arielle’s own sake, she made a good move doing so.

Anna starts to deliver some validation, going through with impressive detail, the key themes of Arielle’s talk, despite Arielle sorta bouncing between themes, and not consciously trying to be “easy to understand”. Anna has taken the tangled thread Arielle has given here, and with one hand, and maybe with fewer than five fingers, she has straightened it. Anna goes through the key things Arielle has said, and cushioning replies to each thing, about how stressful, despairing, and exhausting those situations are. When Arielle hears this, she may on some level know that Anna is being forcefully sympathetic, yet she is much more occupied by something else. A feeling, that is like drinking water for the first time.

This validation, Arielle feels that she really likes the sound of it. It may sound like Anna is stating the most obvious and effortless things, about how tough Arielle’s hardships are, but Arielle feels like this is such insightful, left-field stuff. Arielle later reflects that she could’ve said this stuff to herself, and fulfill herself in this way, but that idea has always eluded her, like it was hidden right in plain sight. Even that silence before, when Arielle heard her words be the only ones filling the room, as she admitted to what’s in her heart. That gesture, of Anna allowing it, felt innovative. Arielle, maybe after a very long time, was laying out her problems explicitly, rather than grumbling internally about their presence in her life, and sort of half-admitting they exist, wishing that they stay out of sight.

Arielle has done confessions many times before. She went to a Catholic high school, and she vaguely liked the way she could shed her problems and very straightly look at them, rather

than move with speed through her school term like usual, and juggle her classes and worries. Yet when it was time to receive advice from the priest, Arielle would start to act very polite, but sort of tune out. The priests and sisters at her school showed great care for her welfare, and she believed in their warmth. Arielle also knows that they wish for her, and every student too, to become as close as they could to being humans of the Catholic ideal. The clergy and nuns held space for her, just like Anna was doing, but they would ultimately want her to move towards leaving so much of herself behind, and advocate for a total reinvention of her behaviour, to honour their religious principles.

The ears on Arielle are absorbing this soft surprise, of Anna just simply reiterating and validating what she confessed. Anna's words are holding Arielle's under a warm lamp light that's far from intense. Her reply is letting Arielle's situation just be, with the only information Anna directs at Arielle being nourishing in merely a mild, and nicely uneventful way, like a warm and simple tea. Arielle is taking a break while Anna speaks, realising while sitting there that she is free of any need to brace upon hearing someone's two cents. In some past instances, her listener might have given advice that means very well, yet that advice may have contained some bias or imperfection behind it. The advice could be a bit jarring, incomplete, or straight-up not that well-fitting of a solution, or as just emotional support. This imposes on Arielle the task of parsing through that "fluff" for what fits best, while trying not to take offence at anything said, also while being at the same time, down and out. The puzzle pieces that Anna has put forward, to join with Arielle's gaps, needs none of that calibrating, so much so that it again, seems telepathic.

Once Anna has finished offering her sympathies, Arielle thanks her very much for them, and Anna says it's not a problem at all. Anna says this as if she did something that blatantly needed to be done, like picking up a wallet someone dropped while walking in front of her. Arielle has a pause, and asks Anna what her two cents would be on her situation, or at least parts of those circumstances. This question comes from a much more settled mind in Arielle, who feels she has received a lot, in an apparently simple set of replies from Anna.

Anna then speaks for a couple minutes about the advice she'd extend to Arielle. She speaks with this gentle hesitating tone this time around, of someone who wants to walk silently around whoever is listening, and wants to minimally impose on their mind. The advice is less about decisions for Arielle to make, but more from the place in Arielle's heart where she makes them, which in turn may affect those decisions she ends up at. Anna modestly encourages Arielle, as simply a partial solution she could try, to start considering other perspectives and emotional states that she can practice in her life, like that of self-forgiveness. As Anna carries on, Arielle's posture is restfully slumped, like she's having stomach relief from letting out a series of burps.

Arielle again thanks Anna very much, and after almost deciding to get up, she stays seated and asks Anna how long she has been volunteering for. Anna says to Arielle that she has been doing this for almost nine months. She explains she has been with Reverie Confessions at another location before coming here. Arielle comments that she is glad she stumbled by their new location on the way home from work, before smiling and giving out a little chuckle, at not knowing where to pivot their conversation next. Arielle then remembers she can leave this little room. Arielle tells Anna may she have a smooth night, then she goes. Arielle heads back through the corridor of faded pink, seeing that all the booth doors are closed. She thinks

about how many booths have people in them, and whether anybody will come in or out in the short moment she's passing through the hallway.

Arielle goes to the counter, to pay for her appointment. The receptionist is a fair-skinned woman with blonde hair that is combed, and stops just above her shoulders. She tells Arielle that the session with Anna comes to two dollars. Arielle's eyes briefly widen in surprise of a pleasant kind, and she gently lets out a laugh as she opens her purse, saying to the blonde lady that she expected it to be double that. Arielle has no coins, yet she has many other notes in her black city-slicker purse, and asks if the receptionist can split a ten. The receptionist can, and while she's returning the change, she says to Arielle to kindly tell others about Reverie, since they are quite new to this part of the city. In polite instinct, Arielle takes a pamphlet, drawing a mental blank for who she'll give it to. Once she heads out the door, she realises that the receptionist can't enforce whether Arielle tells someone, so she calms down.

Arielle goes home, and gets into her PJ's, even though the Sun has barely set. She lives in an apartment complex that is around fifty years old. It is gated and consists of a brown brick building with a courtyard in the middle. Arielle moved in here even before she got her new job position, when the apartment was arguably out of her price range, but the convenience to the city was too good. She sees herself living here for another year, at least. Arielle walks up a staircase inside the building, onto the second floor (Australian naming applies here). Her apartment faces towards the courtyard, making it all she sees when she's at home, her little community. The building gives more of a close-knit, old-school vibe than the actual people do, since everyone modestly here keeps in their own lane. With her apartment view, Arielle can feel like she lives further away from the city than she does, like she is living in a countryside monastery. Arielle thinks she made a good enough call, moving out of home for here.

In her fridge, she has her leftovers from last night, but Arielle goes and lays in bed, with her lamp off. She feels so proud and buoyant that she is content enough to do nothing all evening, and could slip asleep now. She may wake up extra early due to sleeping so soon in the evening, but she likes the sound of waking up at an absurd time. In the corner of Arielle's bedroom is a heater that she endearingly stole from her Mum, the other week. The heater is usually off and also unplugged, because Arielle forgets to turn it on, and also she is worried it will cause a fire overnight, given how seemingly old and rickety this building is, despite its prettiness. Arielle listens to her silent room as she lays there, underneath a weighted navy blanket and in her pink dressing gown, work clothes still on.

Arielle is up the next day at her usual time. She is still riding that wave of satisfaction from her confession, like it happened that very day. It is still so fresh in her mind, almost like the chemical half-life of these endorphins is a whole week. A layer of invisible, mystical cellophane is over all that Arielle sees, hears and thinks. All the sensory inputs, all the moments she passes through during her morning, looks as if they passed through a filter before directly reaching her. Everything looks fresher and relaxed. As she moves around her home, gets ready for work, and walks up to the bus stop, she feels the day is beckoning her to come and live it, and there's something to really see and do for her at the office, with her colleagues. Arielle's surroundings feel invigorated with the energy of what rippled out from her, last night. That energy was stored in her as oppressive and negative, and now it has brightened and warmed up the city.

She let one person know about her life, and it feels like she let the whole world know. The walls of her apartment, and her street, and the passengers on the bus, they're finally filled with an understanding of what she told Anna. Arielle would mainly feel on a different page from the world, out of gear from it, while she silently lived with the problems in her head. Her confession to Anna has made these problems pass through her and out, even though at the same time they still exist in her, and she is yet to take direct action towards them. The admittance that they were there has partially solved them. The morning after seeing Anna, Arielle is wearing a light grey business jacket rather than her navy. There is wind this morning, but Arielle's attention is instead on the vibrancy of the clear sky, and the way she feels about her surroundings.

Then, about two weeks pass. Arielle has walked past Reverie Confessions almost every day since then, being that it's on her way home from the office. Sometimes due to rain, Arielle may take the bus home instead of doing her evening steps, but in these two weeks, there is enough walkable weather that she sees that place a lot, and her passing by its door lets her relive how her appointment felt. That footpath of shops and businesses, where Reverie sits, feels like it is just all secondary to Reverie. Walking towards and away from its storefront, along that footpath, is like a pleasant version of when police sirens pass you, and the pitch gets higher and whinier until the sirens go right past. But in this case, instead of a straining sound that makes Arielle flinch, there's instead a rise and fall where Arielle remembers fondly what a nice spontaneous choice she made the other week. Also, the glowing overhead sign for Reverie gives off a mystical vibe to Arielle's evening, when she's making her way home, making her reminiscence feel dreamier than otherwise.

The services that are offered by Reverie have already been used by Arielle. One would think that after using them, she can be thankful and even very happy for an extended period after getting things off her chest, but ultimately, her mind would detach from this place and move forward in her life. But, when she walks past the Reverie storefront, there's this unexpected effect where it gets some gears going in her head again. Arielle has used the only services this place offers, but she ponders that there is something more, although that thing is unclear. As for the pamphlet Arielle took after her confession, she is yet to give it to anyone, like she said she would. It is laying on her kitchen counter, a little bit hidden under opened bills.

Arielle still knows where the pamphlet is, and when she is at home, looking in the vicinity of where her opened bills are, she can almost see through the bills, like X-ray vision, and make out the glossy, punchy blue colour of the pamphlet. She has utilised all that is mentioned within that pamphlet. The trying has happened, and her time with this business should feel complete. There are images that come and go in Arielle's head, of imaginary volunteers at Reverie, helping people out in ways that can be very hard to obtain in the world. She also imagines being back in that booth, during her session with Anna, with the large light-adjustable window between them.

Arielle's thoughts start to focus on other things, like how it would be to sit on Anna's side of that window, and hear what Anna heard during their session, and also what she heard from the other people visiting that evening. Arielle's mind starts to think about the booth Anna was sitting in, the passage that leads into that room, how long Anna spends in that room, why Anna signed up to volunteer at Reverie, and how one would sign up.

As far as Arielle's spare time goes, she is taking a pause from dating. She has sorta forgotten about that form of pastime, for about five to six months. She also has been absent from Tuesday volleyball, which she had been doing for over a couple years, and she currently lacks any other commitments beyond her office hours. She has been working overtime even in quieter seasons of work, when a specific "blanket on the bed needs tucking in" for a project. She is in terrific regard by her employers. Arielle can occasionally catch herself being vaguely saddened by her drift from her friends, due to this skipping on the volleyball nights, and all other outings. She's been so much on the go with work, that the sediment of how she feels has barely settled to the ground.

These days, Arielle has been inviting Lauren over less, and the same goes for how often they call. Also, Arielle has been less attentive towards her family, making fewer calls over the phone and more sparsely dropping by, although she still sees them at least once a week. That single time a week is for Sunday dinner, and it lightly flies by in a haze. As Arielle talks and bonds with her parents, she is sort of sitting in some thin but prominent bubble that lends her a little distance from her parents. The bubble dissolves when Arielle has reversed out of her family's driveway and driven off, back to her apartment, where she is in bed by ten. The drive takes about fifteen. Arielle has been recently listening to footy talk shows on AM radio, as she is a bit sick of her own cassettes.

The same day that Arielle has the epiphany about volunteering, which happened in a work meeting, she leaves the office before closing time, telling her supervisor that she has a check-up with her dermatologist, which she just remembered the day before. The supervisor takes in this news without scrutinising it, since Arielle is such a competent employee and does so much overtime, she can afford to be a little bit negligent at times and it would be instantly forgiven.

Upon setting foot out the office, Arielle gets to Reverie in twenty minutes. The overhanging large sign is switched off. She reads the opening hours printed on the door, and sees that it opens at six, which is in about three or so hours. Right now, it's a sunny and clear afternoon, with a nice chill in the air. Arielle senses that, since having the big epiphany in the meeting, all her ability to think has been blocked off until she completes acting on the epiphany. Arielle peers through Reverie's glass door, seeing pitch black, and maybe an edge of one of the ottomans. She knocks on the door with some weight to her wrist, then waits. She waits a minute, then knocks again, with more weight.

Arielle backs from the door, and goes on over to the supermarket next door. She buys an apple and a banana. She has a slight build-up of energy and enthusiasm inside her, which she wanted to pour out to the Reverie receptionist, about signing up. Arielle now sits on the bench beside the supermarket, and looks over the carpark. There are a couple dozen cars in front of her, which likely belong to office workers who work along the strip of businesses where Reverie is, since there were so few customers inside the supermarket. Most people are working right now at this hour, except maybe for tradies, who would have wrapped up by now.

Arielle is a little confused by how there can be this many parked cars, when the nearby businesses look too small to have that many people in total. She comes up with silence, when she tries to explain it to herself. If she was calmer and freer of her fixation on Reverie, she could have enough bandwidth to tackle that question a bit more. Arielle feels like she could

wait here on the bench until Reverie opens. She goes back to the door, and writes down the number on a notepad from her purse, then she walks to a pay telephone right by the supermarket. Arielle wants to see whether somebody will pick up, even though all the signs tell her the Reverie office is totally empty for now. She hears an automated message telling her how the recipient is unable to pick up. Arielle then feels her stomach starting to become heavy, likely from rushing when she ate the apple and banana.

This inner state, combined with the spending of energy from walking back to her apartment, puts Arielle in the right state for a nap. She sets her electronic bedside clock for forty-five minutes. Later when the clock starts ringing in a shrill tone, she gets up after a minute of getting her bearings. Now that some time has flown by, and she is a bit soothed from her nap, Arielle can bring her attention to other things than Reverie, like going to the local pool. She does a few laps, and then goes to the spa pool, where nobody else currently is. Perhaps the seniors who visit the spa have already come and gone, and she's grateful that she can freely turn her head and look everywhere around the spa without needing to politely narrow her vision. Arielle picks her nose a little.

An hour and a bit later, Arielle feels more composed and goes to Reverie. The desire she has to volunteer is a lot more manageable now, and she can no longer relate to the early fervour of loitering by the shops. The same receptionist gives Arielle a clipboard and form to fill out. It takes her less than ten minutes, and Arielle learns from the forms that Reverie will do a background check on her, before she is accepted. The form requests details like her workplace address, the phone numbers of some referees, and her driver's licence serial number. As Arielle fills in the forms, a certain flicker of thought occurs, about how this information may be excessive for this role. She then returns to filling the form, with the same outlook that brought her back here.

It takes about a week and a half for Reverie to call Arielle, at her work phone. They tell her that the background check has been successful, and she can undergo a casual interview and also a little training module that runs a few hours. Arielle feels like someone has unlocked her heart with a key she has not seen in a while. Some bodily sense has been created, and for the remainder of that working day, she feels like she is already a full volunteer, and her colleagues and clients appear to her like the confessors she will be helping. All the conversations with these people that day were viewed by Arielle with a new context, that she has a new identity towards them, of a helper.

Only a little time passes in the week, before Arielle has wrapped up her training. It consisted of sitting through a little sideshow in one of Reverie's rear offices, doing an oral quiz with the man who rang, and then briefly shadowing one of the counsellors by sitting in the booth with her. This woman has the same bob haircut as Arielle, and is named Vera. There is a top dog supervisor of Reverie, a man named Karol. Karol is a bubbly man, and is the one who phoned Arielle. He is very tall, and has short, thin brown hair. He also likes wearing sweaters and polo shirts. Karol seems content with Arielle just having two arms and a heartbeat. He gives his counsellors space to do their thing with the customers, and he's open to suggestions. Karol sees himself as only the benefactor who keeps the lights on, and not the ultimate expert in counselling.

Karol is semi-retired. He has chosen to use his slackened schedule to start up Reverie. He, at least in the past, has gone through great loneliness, as is known among the staff in

comfortable openness, who chat in the staff area that's small, yet well furnished with sofas and a mid-range coffee machine. For over a decade in his life, Karol had a form of mental illness. It was a mixture of depression and obsession, over both grand and abstract things and small details and decisions. In getting better, Karol began to believe through medical help, that the issue was less about the abstract topics, like death and whatever is the best form of political system, and more about the fixation that his brain was making upon them. He was confused by his brain's hyper-zooming-in on problems, taking this for the arrival of epiphanies, and he would not detect the difference at all until years later.

Looking back on this phase, Karol says to his counsellors that all the help he received from friends and his wife were well-meaning, and they tackled the issues he wanted them to help tackle. However, there was a total absence of people in his life who were just observing him. Everyone, including Karol, was trying to solve the thoughts, answer them, nudge them with opposing ideas. If Karol was sad about something, he would often wrestle his way out of that state, and only when tired, would he need to let himself remain there, until it passed during a night's sleep or a day's work (as a chiropractor). In this time of struggle, Karol and his loved ones also tried to get him to resist whatever worry or mental state he occupied, and they would not tolerate the issues being there in his mind, but rather they constantly put in effort to work against the thoughts, questions, and moods.

Karol is technically the boss at Reverie, but he has "handballed" the administrative stuff to a paid manager, the only paid person in the business, due to the admin things being so tedious, technical and unrewarding, when compared to what the volunteers do. Karol is often in the office, often dedicating his time here to improving the amenities for the volunteers. He goes and buys requested food for the fridges like apples and biscuits, non-alcoholic drinks, as well as magazines, plus even a second-hand stereo system, which is now accompanied by CDs of bossa nova, jazz, and other genres the volunteers have brought in. The break room's got bright red-orange walls, and is made up of two sections (ignoring the toilets). There's a lounge, with the stereo system and couches, and then there's the kitchen.

The team at Reverie leave the fridges largely full, and the stereo hardly played. The counsellors often have back-to-back sessions with folks, so the staff room is often quite quiet. Karol says they can come in here whenever, as long as they aren't abandoning a client, and he is lenient on ten-minute delays in seeing clients. He is often orbiting the breakroom and chatting with people on breaks, and he smoothly takes away any sense of hierarchy between him and others.

Arielle starts off her volunteering with shifts on Friday and Saturday evenings. She tries and gives each visitor a copy of how she remembers feeling when she saw Anna. Arielle sees many demographics, but she is yet to notice a skew towards a certain age or gender. Maybe that may change, as the year moves along. It seems often, that people come into the confessional booth like they were forced by the better part of themselves, under the threat of the imperfect part of themselves having some kind of eventual explosion, perhaps by breaking a mirror or by flat-out staying in bed one day, and getting up for no-one. Sometimes, the clients seem so distraught that Arielle recommends they go to the emergency department, or call a hotline. For the people that come here, there is generally some more distance between them and disaster, as opposed to the eleventh-hour nature of hotlines.

Lots of visitors are in a somewhat similar lull to Arielle. She hears countless tales of people becoming more and more isolated, and losing the spring in their step from walking all the time through molasses. They continue doing their commutes and seeing people, but they feel insulated from all voices who try reaching to them, like they're walking in a soundproof body bag. These people may often be materially, financially and perhaps intellectually, without a scratch. But they still feel large stubborn blades inside of them, which work on different levels of this world than the domains where they're "winning". These people want to defend this battlefield in their minds, but they find very few options, let alone ones that work. They try advice from husbands and wives, and bestest of friends, and they may remain just as poorly equipped.

While at Reverie, these people receive something that they don't really get in adequate doses from loved ones. That thing is the absence of ideas from the person who's listening. Arielle lets the client's words fill the air, and lets their pauses and rhythm be the only thing happening. She sits in silence behind the tinted window, which often gets adjusted to be somewhat visible, or else the maximum dimness seems to the client like they are totally alone, which is perhaps how they usually feel. If the window is too transparent, then it could stop how easily the words flow from the client, and they may also feel pressured to keep eye contact, and be more palatable in their body language and stuff.

By letting the client freely talk, Arielle thinks she's watching them float around in a space station. The silence from her may feel, to the client, like slightly chilled ocean water, at first. But then the person adjusts and even finds the chill to improve how they feel. They almost always find some stability, as minutes pass, in being the only ones to talk for minutes on end. Sometimes, the clients may have had nobody in months to let out these words to. Their comfort to lean on folks, like the counsellors, may have severely rusted or be plainly non-existent. In these cases, the counsellors may need to actively try and induce the client into letting out even a little of their ideas.

The shifts can often be tiring for Arielle. She may go right to bed after a night volunteering, choosing to eat at breakfast instead. As she walked home, she would hold her apartment keys in her pocket readily, in case she met trouble, but due to her fatigue, she stopped being bothered. The more shifts Arielle does at Reverie, the more she becomes able to stay awake after her shift ends, meaning she can start having late dinners. It takes only a few weeks for her stamina to meet this bar. Sometimes in her shifts, Arielle sees returning faces who have more to say, even if they said so much in the first session. They may track over the same exact topics as last time, because the same problems may need many, numerous outlets of repeat ranting. Arielle herself ended up going as a client twice more, and she mainly repeated to Anna what she said in their first session together, but with some variations in what she emphasises and dwells upon, and also in her emotions.

There are lots of clients who seem very buoyant, sociable, and well-adjusted in how they speak. When they mention their issues, like a divorce or a redundancy, or maybe something like bipolar disorder, Arielle thinks that these issues sound totally separate from the person saying them. These clients, who are specifically here due to deep distress, can sometimes have what looks like a double identity, where one of those identities, the one in which there's distress, looks unconvincing. A well-off accountant, who is also a mother, may look like she is doing a lame impersonation of someone in pain, when she describes how prone she is to

sitting in her ensuite, and making little cuts on her forearms. Arielle may fully trust what this woman is saying, but when she sees signs of surface-level ease come right beside signs of deep pain, the descriptions from the woman may remain as a surreal surprise to Arielle.

At a point later on, Arielle starts taking a shorter shift on Wednesday night, but even that is too tiring, so she stops doing shifts on that night altogether. Her mind wanted to do the shift, but her body needs the breathing room after work. She still wants to fit in a third weekly shift, but she also knows reluctantly that it's not sustainable, given the amount she already works, and how much she needs to rest. She has been doing less overtime at her job, since starting volunteering. Week after week, Arielle feels less bound to her office. She can tolerate her own company much more, while at home. She feels a bit more willing to speak with friends again.

After she became more accepting of her energy limits on weekdays, Arielle realised that she can still drop by Reverie, and spend an hour doing some admin. She starts coming into Reverie on a few weeknights, and sees to any housekeeping or paper-pushing, also sometimes jumping into a confession booth if there is accidentally a double-booking, or a counsellor has called in sick. While she awaits the client in the booth, Arielle may initially feel that she's sitting in her own body, as she normally does. Then, when the client comes in, and they settle down, get their bearings and start talking, this makes Arielle start to feel like she's suspended in amber, and she gets more and more entranced in the client's plight.

As a sidenote, Arielle has become less interested in watching television and radio, or even reading magazines like she sometimes would, about breezy pop culture things. On weekends, when she sees her friends, she would become less alight when certain topics would emerge. Like for example, if a friend vents about issues that come with booking a holiday, or a workplace that is sub-par in handling a project, or a cousin's wedding being delayed. Topics that are less turbulent than what Arielle hears at Reverie.

It's perhaps true that Arielle talks about a limited range of things at Reverie, since it's always revolving around people's heaviest problems, which can be grouped into very common themes. It's also very one-way, given how Arielle's priority is to listen and hold ample room for their words. Yet, Arielle still feels that these interactions fire her up more than being around her friends. It has gotten far less regular, that among her peers she sees kindred people. Arielle felt this much more when she saw a shy teenager, eight years younger than her, who had just left his home due to rampant drug problems. The clients seem to be made up of different pieces than Arielle, but their souls seem to float in a much nearer orbit to hers, to the point it feels harshly clear when she's with other people.

On one Friday evening, at about twelve-thirty, Arielle and two other counsellors are on shift. Reverie has gained some traction in the past few months. It's like when a barbershop is opened in some suburb, and the level of visitors shoots up. When Reverie reaches closing hours, one of the counsellors checks each of the booths, on the client's side, for anything left there. The accountant left hours ago, and her office is peaceful and empty. When it has been Arielle's turn to check the booths, she has seen that visitors have started to etch into the table with their nails. It looks to be from clients who fidget, maybe from awkwardness. So far, it's a very slight thing that's been observed.

Before they fully close, Arielle tidies the kitchen and washes the coffee cups. Being in a kitchen makes her remember that she has no leftovers to eat tonight. Someone else who had a

shift tonight, Peter, mentioned in the staff area that he's going to get some takeaway sushi later, and anyone can come. Arielle would've declined and got takeaway on her own, but she feels like something light, and also the sushi bar is just five minutes from here, compared to other options like the sandwich shop (which has very late hours for a sandwich shop). As Arielle, Peter, and the other counsellor, Maria, walk on over to the sushi shop, it would be plausible that they maybe feel unsafe, given it's after midnight. But, a six-hour shift of riding out the darkest of people's issues can make barely-lit streets have a calm daytime spirit.

The sushi restaurant has a few patrons already. The decor here uses lots of dark green and pearly white. The room's middle has a kitchen where Asian cooks are about to start cleaning, having done most of their cooking for the night. Maria asks Arielle and Peter whether they have tried sake before. She says it's a good bedtime ritual when one is eating Japanese food in the evening. They sit in a booth, and they start reading the menus. A moment later, Arielle feels an enthusiastic pat on her shoulder. She looks up, sees a girl she knows, and greets her in a bubbly tone. It's her friend Alice, from the same friend circle as Lauren. Alice has very dark brown hair, she's tall and slim, and she was probably eating in here already.

Arielle and Alice speak for about a minute. They last saw each other two months ago, at an engagement party. They have known each other since year ten, being pretty close in recent times until around a year ago, when Arielle started intensely isolating, and building compulsive work habits. Alice leads their brief chat, and Arielle is grateful she's doing this, since Arielle is too wiped after her shift to think of things to say, but Alice always has a question. Despite them recently being more apart, Alice is nicely regarded by Arielle. She sees her as a considerate and easy-going friend.

In this conversation, Arielle forgets this regard she otherwise has. The very moment she realised who had approached her, she saw Alice less as a nice individual, and more as a beacon of everything that Arielle has been disliking about her friends. Alice's nature has been replaced with a shallow shadow of it, in the eyes of Arielle. Even if Alice showed genuine delight in bumping into Arielle, and she wanted to really know how she has been, this truth was blocked from Arielle, so she was disillusioned about this chat from the start. And since she's eating here with people from Reverie, she sees a shallow shadow of these people too during her chat with Alice, but this shadow instead exaggerates how terrific they all seem. These "shadows" that are happening at the same time, they combine to make her more prone to dissatisfaction. Arielle still comes across as polite, but she's a little bit dulled down, and not fully present while chatting with Alice.

The chat is over, and Alice is back at her table. She wasn't asked by Arielle about who she came with, even though it could've been people she knew. Arielle returns to the menu, being thankful that Asian restaurants have more pictures in their menus than Western ones, allowing her to better imagine what's in store. Maria asks Arielle, "How do you know her?".

"We hang out in the same friend circle. We've been friends since school." says Arielle. Her voice trails off as she talks, and there's a feeling to it that gets the table's attention. Arielle feels quite fogged up after seeing Alice, and the energy dump of such a surprise this time of night. A moment of quiet goes by for the table. Classical piano plays from the ceiling speakers, and you can hear the motion of the cooks. Maria goes, "Are you alright?". Arielle now sees how poorly veiled her dismay is. She accepts it. Arielle gently asks Maria, under

her breath, if Alice is within earshot. Maria does a brief glance around, and sees nobody who is Alice-looking. Maybe Alice is sitting on the other side of the kitchen that's in the middle.

Arielle is keeping her eyes on the menu. She tilts her head and gives a grin of dismay. She starts her explanation with a pretence that Alice is very nice. "I just am....detached from those friends. I've been with them for ages. About ten years? I hear whatever they've got to say. It's all like a bunch of crap. Crap that they can solve in an instant. Or even if they can't solve it, it's so little compared to the stuff we hear." The table replies with quiet. "Their lives are fine. They let themselves get rattled by nothing. It's unbearable, it's been like that for a while now." Arielle is yet to pick her meal.

Since Peter is on the edge of their booth, he offers to get up and order for the others. Arielle says, "Sorry, one second." and tells Peter she'll have the tuna tataki, with a no-sugar coke. Arielle chose this in a hurry, her menu being open to where they list the tuna tataki. Also, she feels less guilty eating the fish tataki than the beef. Peter goes to the counter, then Maria goes back to what Arielle said.

"Do your friends all complain a lot?"

Arielle gives a little nod. "They do some of the time, but really, not that much. They talk about good things, a lot of the time, and none of them are like constantly downbeat. We rant, but that's normal. The girls are so...do they know at all what it's like, to have actual big things on your plate? It's so thin, all the stuff they say. They sound so well-adjusted to life, they are always floating. They're surface-level. I'm not saying they are shallow, I'm saying that they have nothing that drags them under the surface. I don't wish that stuff on them. It just puts me to sleep, when I volunteer one night, and then go see someone like my friend Lauren, she's one of my best friends, and the worst thing in her life is when she bought an expensive jacket that she regretted."

Maria is much smaller than Arielle. But there's some surprise effect where, when Maria is asserting herself in some form, like being kind or firm, it makes a bigger statement than if she were taller. She has had a slightly longer shift than Arielle today, because she filled in for a counsellor whose shift finishes right before hers, who had to leave early for some reason. Although it's not explicitly known to Arielle where Maria was born, her accent and features suggest the Philippines. She's wearing a black leather jacket, which would go nicely in-hand with a Harley motorcycle halved in size.

Maria is looking in Arielle's eyes. Arielle is looking at the marble table, and her face has an afterglow of dismay in it, after what she just discussed. Peter comes back, and sits in his spot. He slides everybody the drink they ordered. Arielle sort of expects Peter's arrival to bring a change in focus for the table, but she sees that Maria's mind is still churning. Maria asked for a bottle of sparkling water, Arielle has her diet coke, and Peter is just having water, which he's yet to take from the cashier, because his hands are full with the other drinks. He says, "We'll worry about splitting the cost another time. I'm too tired right now. Youse can pay it through food, some other time." Peter gets approval from the girls.

Maria puts her hand on the table, towards Arielle who's opposite. "Yeah, the stuff we listen to is very different than with friends. I used to get that. It gives you like a numbness, whenever you're speaking with people who have got it more figured out."

Arielle nods, "Yeah."

Maria continues. "I actually now get something different out of those more normal conversations."

Arielle nods again, slightly. She's as much all ears as she can, at quarter to one in the morning. She however respects that Maria is trying to be helpful here, so she tries to zone in to the extent that she can. Peter has come back again a second time from the counter, with his water. Maria moves along with her idea. "I think that when life's going good for me, it means that it's largely good. There may be some crap stuff, but it's very little and I can tolerate it. Good times, or even okay times, they can last for so long, we end up getting no practice for when crap hits the fan. When the good times end, and maybe life gets really bad for me, then I would maybe want to, for example, go to Reverie, and see someone. I might really need to go see you, but at the same time, that part of me that's supposed to reach out, it doesn't work. It never got practice. I freeze, like in fight-or-flight. I might just feel too worthless, or lazy, or some other excuse, and then I never go for help. I think, if people could get practice, in seeking warmth, or love, then we'd have way more people coming out to see us. For when things are crap."

Arielle's field of view makes her feel a bit claustrophobic. She is stuck between looking at Maria, and also down at the table, during all this. Maria is making eye contact with her, behind her thin metal frames. For this time of night, which is now morning, Maria seems quite focused on making her point. Her eyes and posture are showing some fatigue, but this entire topic has made her demeanour a bit more animated than before. Maria has passion but she keeps her volume mild towards Arielle, who nods out of politeness and is wearing a warm resting face. Arielle thinks she is maybe overdoing this, but she knows Maria is putting forward a message that's dear to her, and Arielle has only enough bandwidth at this hour to be either like this, or turn to complete stone, with no subtler options available. She coughs, promptly pats her chest, and has a sip of her coke. She tastes a little flavour, but the dominant things that hit her are the drink's chill and fizz. Arielle brings her elbow to her mouth, and coughs again, feeling her mouth and throat combust.

Maria tilts her head a little. She says, "I think the nearest thing people can get to "practicing", is by receiving love and presence from their family and their friends. They can't pull that out of us, so we have to give it. We train them up by loving them and helping them, and loving them especially when they're not even asking out loud for love. We let them just be ordinary, and talk about the little things. That's the only option I can think of, that's reliable. It might be a bit incorrect. But, if we did the opposite, and just counted on them being brave and rising to the occasion when they need help, I think their usual habits with receiving love may be too strong to resist. Then it makes it really tricky to ask for it, or maybe impossible at that stage. I hope that it's not impossible, but leaving it to chance is very very risky."

Maria, Arielle, and Peter get their meals shortly, and they eat them over fifteen minutes. One of the restaurant staff starts sweeping the floor, and flipping stools onto the tables, for the areas of seating that have stools instead of booths. There's next to no talking during their meal, since everyone is so hungry. Peter is grateful he ordered two of his desired dish, since portions at this restaurant can be more on the minimal side, where it's less about stuffing face and more about eating until one is mostly full, not totally. Karol had told Peter the Japanese term for this eating principle, and Peter tries to pronounce it, but he stumbles. Karol also told

Peter, that people on the island of Okinawa have the highest life-expectancy in the world, and it's largely because of that eating ideal he can't say.

The trio soon get up and go, feeling much more nourished yet still tired. It's well after one. Peter comments on the clouds up in the sky, while he's turning his head and taking a deep look around him. The clouds sit up above the orange street-lights. It has been raining lightly, and there's only a little bit of wind. Arielle, Peter and Maria walk down two blocks together, feeling even more at peace in this usually-shady time of night, because of the fragrance of rainwater in the dirt. They talk about what each person has got going on this weekend. Peter says he's doing housework. Maria says she's maybe seeing other friends, or she might pick up a shift at her paid job, which is in a restaurant south of the river. Arielle says she might see her friends, but her mind is otherwise blank. She says she'll play the rest by ear.

The trio part ways after walking those two blocks. Peter and Maria go off in the same direction, back to the carpark outside Reverie where they parked their cars. They left them there because they wanted the fresh air from walking, and also to avoid worrying about parking at the Japanese joint. Arielle heads off in the direction of her apartment. When she passes through her foyer's double-door entrance, she opens only one of the doors, because the other one is fastened shut by a doorstopper from the inside. Arielle feels like she should say a goodbye to the rainwater smell, the orange lights, and the streets themselves, for being so tranquil towards her. When Arielle closes the foyer door, she puts some shoulder into it because she knows it needs a bit of a slam, to lock it into place with the other door. She may have just bugged someone who was asleep on this ground floor, but then she thinks it may only seem very loud because she's right near the door, and it may not reach the nearby apartments. She's thinking about this as she goes up the stairs, up through the still air of the old, but neatly-kept, hallway.

THE END