

Winner 
Siskiyou Prize
for New Environmental
Literature

MY DAYS
OF DARK
GREEN
EUPHORIA

A NOVEL

A.E. COPENHAVER

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My Days of Dark Green Euphoria

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A novel by A.E. Copenhaver

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For my sisters, Roxanne and Caitlin

1

In the same way some people look out over a rolling green field, feel the powerful lightness of limitless possibilities, I look out over the same field and wonder how many have writhed in pain across its sweeping bounds. A deer mutilated by a roaring vehicle, her leg swinging from the stifle. A soldier hit with shrapnel, his gastrocnemius shredded, or another, contemplating the contents of her entrails in her hands, like a mystic deciphering tea leaves. It's almost a talent, to read the subtext of the world, to look into a forest and see it razed, to see a gleaming new piece of technology and flash to its end, a grimy child in a war-torn region combing with bloodied fingers through heaps of once-shining electronics, disemboweling motherboards for precious metals.

We were trained to see this—groomed to understand production, quantify its purpose and its damage, righteously eschew it—and then organize strategic initiatives to educate, inspire, and enact change in our communities. As if this unseasonable warmth, this incongruous cold, the desperate fires, the depraved droughts, were little more than difficult yoga poses we need to hold, just a moment longer. But first, we must acknowledge the problem, they say. Turns out my whole life to date has been an acknowledgment of every problem, it seems. As if our society said, *We need someone who can bear witness to everything so the rest of us don't have to*, and my soul, enthusiastically waving its hand, volunteered. So, my martyred consciousness landed in San Francisco, California, where I stood along the darkened hypotenuse of the bathroom door's shadow, spying on my boyfriend, Danielson James. Dan.

He was shirtless in boxers, squeezing whiteheads around the

edges of his nose, and then he started to examine his back. He leaned his weight against the rim of the sink, slumped his shoulders to fit into the mirror.

As I watched Dan, a small black house spider skittered across the mirror. Dan pulled away in surprise, and then moved closer. My breath caught in my throat. The spider stopped, as if to consider her options.

Initially I thought Dan would call me in to rescue the spider with a glass jar and an old bank statement. Then I grew nervous Dan would act against how I exactly hoped he would act. He moved away from the mirror, leaned over toward the toilet, and peeled off a patch of toilet paper. I stretched my neck out into the exposed parallelogram of light from the bathroom and then back again as he returned to the mirror, as I risked being seen behind his reflection.

And then he crumpled the toilet paper over the tiny spider and crushed her with his fingertips. I sucked in air, horrified. I covered my mouth and slipped against the wall before peeking back just in time to see him open the white folds like a child opening a paper chatterbox on the playground. What might be under this flap? I was nearly in the bathroom by now, watching this scene in disgust and rage.

I couldn't decipher what pissed me off more: that I chose not to barge in and save the spider's life, that I risked the spider's life to reveal Dan's true self, that I had witnessed Dan's true self at all, or that I now knew that he was someone who killed spiders when he knew I wasn't watching. What else was he capable of, or regularly already doing, when I wasn't there?

I contemplated these various furies as I watched Dan flip up the lid to the toilet with his bare foot and toss the spider, undignified in her toilet paper burial shroud, into the toilet bowl. And then he flushed, adding insult to injury: He wasted 2.5 gallons of fresh water to dispose of a harmless spider's corpse. In that moment I despised him. He knew it would have made me happy to rescue the spider,

move her tiny articulating limbs to the ficus near the balcony, where she could better capture bugs and generally be out of the way but still helpful. But he chose to kill her. And I chose to let him do it. I knew which was worse.

And then, without any further ceremony, it was all over. Dan checked his face and neck in the mirror quickly, flipped off the light switch, and flung open the door. By the time he was walking out into the hallway, I was two or three steps from the couch. It was a Sunday morning, and all I really wanted was to sit around doing nothing, but I read a study recently about how Paleolithic people derived the majority of their calories from plants and consumed over 100 grams of fiber per day, so I would more than likely spend the remainder of the day scanning the buzz on this topic, poring over threads, consuming videos, and fighting with people in the comments. Sometimes my thumbs got sore from tapping into my phone on weekends, and I had to do little ridiculous stretches to keep them from cramping. Sometimes I would ask Dan to hold my thumbs and, as a testament to how tolerant he could be, he would do it without question, without even looking up from his laptop, really.

I sat down on the couch and tried to look casual, my heart hammering as I thought about Dan's cruelty to the spider.

"So, I got a call from work today," he said. He analyzed his pointer finger cuticle. "It's looking like a week from tomorrow."

"For how long?" I said.

"Six weeks."

"Not too bad," I said, surprisingly chipper. I forced myself into kindness lest I allow my disappointment in him to fester into passive-aggressive reality.

"Maybe we could do brunch with my mom next weekend," he said.

In the three-quarters of a year Dan and I had been together, I hadn't met his mom in person because his work schedule never aligned

with her extensive travel plans. I'd stayed in her house a few times before, bird-sitting her mated pair of macaws, Franklin and Myrtle. Once, bending over the entryway table, I examined their family photos. Sometimes she appeared as soft and wholesome as Little Bo Peep, with pastels and ruffles and thick, flouncy skirts. And in other photos she was thin and gaunt, her skin sallow, like a burned-out disco queen without any of the distracting effects of refracted light. I remember the first night I stayed at her place I found a Crockpot recipe for honey mustard-glazed ham torn from a women's magazine stuck to her fridge under a Disneyland magnet, and then, just beside it, a Hallmark card with two pink piglets wearing birthday hats and smiling in a glowing green field. I pulled the card from the fridge and read the inside: *Weee weee weee wish you a very happy birthday!*

2

Dan and I sat on the couch for the rest of the day and watched an entire season of *Fargo*. We drank wine and ate a new brand of nut cheese I found in the dumpster in the big parking lot behind Whole Foods (I flirted with the produce manager once to get a discount on slightly brown bananas, and now he texted me whenever the dumpster was full of fresh food). The tub was fully sealed when I found it, so I didn't tell Dan. I just put it in the fridge and brought it out after my third glass of wine. The excitement of eating the nut cheese and the faded loveliness of being drunk as twilight fell through the windows combined almost enough to blot out the latest headline I read while scrolling through my phone. The U.S. would choose not to participate in global efforts to slow the climate emergency. Alas, organic wine and artisanal nut cheese would never be enough.

Dan was completely out on the couch, his legs sprawled over my lap, my body pinned under him. I had no pants on. A sharp crumb dug into the bottom of my thigh. His legs caused a pleasant pressure near my pubic bone. I wanted to reach my hand into my underwear, but I didn't want to wake him.

In my favorite fantasy, Drake and I are driving through the flashing darkness of a tunnel somewhere in Europe—feels like France—in a murdered-out Tesla. Our bellies are full of roasted endive topped with whipped cashew cream and dollops of finely diced bell pepper kimchi. Our entrees—pyramids of gnocchi with cream of hemp alfredo, rosemary flecks, and white wine prepared by the world's finest chef specializing in nonviolent cuisine. We've just come from an animal welfare charity fundraiser ball that will help

us legally eviscerate the last slaughterhouse in the world. I'm sexy drunk and sophisticated. I can feel the delicate weight of antique and conflict-free diamonds catching the light at my earlobes. And that song, "Reunion," by M83, is playing. Then Drake turns it up as we near the end of the tunnel, the city lights dazzling before us. He places his hand on my knee. I know where we're going. And it's wild and green there.

On my phone, I scrolled numbly through a feed of increasingly cataclysmic headlines. Seventy-five percent of insect species have disappeared in Germany over the last twenty-five years. Sixty percent of all vertebrate animals have been wiped out over the last forty years. The ocean has absorbed significantly greater quantities of heat-trapping gases than originally estimated, escalating the timeline for our demise down to mere decades.

Then I checked my work calendar. An email from my boss, Denise, asking if I could come in early tomorrow. I set my phone down on Dan's shins. This was the problem with email. I could pretend that I didn't check my email on Sundays and arrive to work at my usual time. Or, I could fire back right now to show I wasn't sitting down on the job—that I was engaged and aware and dedicated—even while drunk and pantless on a Sunday afternoon.

A pang of anxiety quivered through me, and I was suddenly irritated at Dan for falling asleep on the couch, for being drunk on a Sunday and making me think it was a good idea to get drunk and do nothing, too.

I could have been organizing some community action to improve our world, contributing to the betterment of people, animals, and planet. Or at the very least, I could have been preparing myself for the week ahead, could have done the dishes and laundry or picked up the apartment, or, even though I had never done it before, meal prepped. I thought about all these things as I scrolled, back and forth between drafting a response to Denise and procrastinating on Twitter. Each

flick of my thumb lifted a fresh paroxysm of rage—at myself, at Dan, for the spider, for our planet. I shoved his legs off my body, angrily sober and sweaty and bloated from eating the entire wheel of nut cheese basically on my own.

“Hey, easy,” said Dan through sleepy syllables. I stood by the couch with my hands on my hips, irritated and portly as a despot.

I brushed my teeth and washed my face and slapped cool tap water over my body as I stood in the bathroom. I patted myself dry with the limp hand towel slung through a chrome ring. Dan was still asleep on the couch. I crawled into bed and put on my headphones. I found my favorite ASMR channel. A vegan cooking show—no talking—hosted by a nonbinary Korean chef who had beautiful, lithe hands. They were making blueberry pie. As they poured the frozen berries into a glass measuring cup, pressed the graham-cracker crust into the metal pan, my new reality draped itself over me, like I was an unwanted piece of furniture just covered, destined to wait until someone might decide to fetishize my purposiveness again sometime in another generation or two. Could I be with someone who killed spiders? Could I break up with someone because he killed a spider? Probably. And if that was true, then I should definitely not meet his mother next weekend.

3

At 11:49 p.m. I was still awake and wedged into a YouTube rabbit hole of such obscure proportions I feared I would never get out. I could hear Dan snoring on the couch in the living room, and due to the latest video I watched—“Eco-Friendly Boyfriend Soothes Your Climate Change Fears Away with Tapping, Scratching, Crinkling”—I hoped he stayed asleep so I could focus on this important content. Just as a beanieed guy with the lighting positioned on his mouth started whispering into a large black microphone and crunching a paper bag, the internet went out. I went to Twitter, to Safari, to my work email. Nothing would load. I let my phone fall to the comforter. I was wired and disgruntled and exhausted from doing nothing. I stood up and walked to the kitchen, hoping to find something that would both put me to sleep and help me solve all my problems, preferably right now. I spooned cool globules of homemade blueberry coconut yogurt into my mouth and stared at Dan’s feet hanging off the edge of the couch.

We had been together about nine months—my longest relationship to date. We didn’t live together, technically, as in he never asked me to move in with him. But because I didn’t have an apartment or house of my own, I stayed with him (or my mom) when he wasn’t abroad for work and when I wasn’t house- or pet-sitting.

Dan lived on the northwest edge of a Victorian-era brick building on the corner of Green and Buchanan between Cow Hollow and Russian Hill. He inherited this spot from his father, who, in his final years, rented it as a private office. I had no complaints about this place with its crown molding and explosive white light in the afternoons, its proximity to green smoothies, açai bowls, yoga studios,

and spin boutiques. This living arrangement worked for us because it was unspoken, unconfirmed, and therefore, noncommittal, just as we liked it. He worked for what I suspected was some subsidiary of a fossil fuel company, but he was never really forthcoming about his work. Also, I preferred not to know so I wouldn't have to adjudicate additional guilt around yet another problematic aspect of my existence. Speaking of which—my whiteness, Dan's whiteness. I had recently been working on finding new ways of acknowledging whiteness to show I understand the history of violence around this social construct, but also trying not to do it too often so I didn't come across as either guilty or fragile. Tricky, very tricky.

Dan was the sixth or seventh or possibly eighth “long-term” boyfriend I had since college, *long-term* meaning three months or more. I had a proclivity for falling in love with people, often indiscriminately and quickly, and then had a terrible time untangling myself from them. I never mastered how to know which parts of a person are meant to be kept and cherished, which parts are meant to be mended, and which are meant to be merely tolerated with dignified grace. I understood it was some combination of these actions, but most days I felt so far away from getting it I imagined how freeing it might be simply to remain single forever. Was I even doing any of this right?

I put the empty jar into the sink and filled it with water. Dan's snoring softened behind me for a moment. I crept toward the router in hopes that my looking at it in the darkness might make the internet come back. I moved through the apartment, stepped across the glowing geometry of the floor as the night-lit city shone through the windows.

Dan was just all right. In the back of my mind I courted a vague understanding that he wasn't as sexually generous as he thought he was, but whenever I thought about tallying up the data points I felt guilty for thinking about these superfluities when others were being

raped and the whole world was either on fire or underwater. He wasn't a denier, luckily, but recently he'd been testing out some key phrases from the climate nihilist's playbook, which, frankly, was worse—evidence of white people deciding a problem white people created was now too big and overwhelming to be solved. “Nothing we can do about it anyways,” replete with the *s* on the end of *anyway*, was his latest line, or, “Humans are a plague on this Earth.” I was on high alert for eco-fascist buzzwords.

Sometimes Dan participated in Meatless Mondays, but most of the time he reduced this socially acceptable nod to environmental conscientiousness by celebrating a single meatless meal, which seemed to be happening less and less. I practiced my graceful tolerance of his efforts, expecting that if we stayed together and the years piled up, I would have an increasingly positive influence on him.

No longer in my twenties, as in, no longer envisioning myself a captain at the helm of a very tall and gorgeous ship rigged with an unerring sense of my own cleverness and desirability, I slyly sidestepped from “fall madly in love with soul mate” to “locate and secure a half-decent human being to cook dinner with sometimes and who doesn't interrupt me when I'm sharing a scientific anecdote.”

Flirting in my thirties, I tempered my attempts at sensuality by reminding myself how I regularly ate discarded food from dumpsters, how long I could go without washing my hair, and how, if I was being transparent, I regularly turned my underwear inside out when I was too lazy to do laundry. And this unsophisticated yet beneficial maneuver—my peers might have called it a “hack”—legitimately pleased me: less personal energy expended doing laundry, double the underwear reserves, far fewer resources required to source and heat the water, to make the soap, to wash my underwear. This could all just corroborate my loss of vanity, but I preferred to think of it as a maturing, as a grand acceptance of my own existence and all the granular actions I could take to mitigate my own impact on the

planet. Sometimes, though, it was hard to feel acceptable, let alone sexy or attractive, with the prospect of starting one's day with a stale, crunchy gusset. At thirty-one and a half, I suspected I had completely missed the alluring ripening of my womanhood and instead was headed straight toward what felt more like a rotting.

While capitalism still dragged the festering carcass of its kill across our planet, I was obligated to monetize extreme frugality, to ferret out homes and pets to take care of, to watch direct deposits of \$45 a day for no pets, \$75 a day for pets settle into my bank account. There was nothing noble in such monetization, but my generation's ability to capitalize on their lives did ring of a certain resourcefulness. We were operating in the same tradition as Depression-era survivors who hid money in cans in their gardens, or in wads in their mattresses, leaving generations of grandkids flummoxed as they tried to make sense of the handwritten maps revealing their predecessors' hoarded spoils. Navigating life itself had become the means of making money. Going on a diet because you hate those unsightly muffin tops? Start a YouTube channel. Crippling student debt and you're on a journey to make it disappear? Blog it. And then, once you've charted every mocha missed and every pizza delivery avoided and freed yourself of debt, pitch your blog to an alternative lifestyle publishing house. Share Instagram-worthy shots of your single fern in an upcycled coffee can, your thrifted Calvin Klein jeans, your zero-waste makeup routine, your vintage Tupperware collection. Get a donate button on your website for when you livestream your latest spring cleaning hacks and online banking tips. Optimized optimization required passive income, and house-sitting for others was as close as I had gotten.

I wasn't interested in cultivating a following, though. Quite the opposite. Like people with eating disorders hoping to weigh in at a fresh eighty-three pounds, I longed for carbon neutrality. More so, I wanted to disappear, to dematerialize with such lightness, with a carbon footprint so anemic someone might not know I had ever

existed. This longing for ecological sublimation was more aligned with composting, or photosynthesis, or even mycorrhizal symbiosis, than with suicide—because in no way did I crave death or dying. I wanted to live, to thrive even. It felt more like wanting to exist and to feel as free as possible, with no extraneous responsibility, obligation, or emotional trauma. Without the burden of acute consciousness, I guess. Maybe I longed to be a plant, my entire existence promoted to the highest, most noble rank of evolutionary expectations: swallow sunlight, welcome water. I longed to cross the finish line with nothing. Take only pictures, leave only footprints—but even footprints were pushing it, for me. I wanted to complete the ultimate vanishing act. And in this particular situation I had created for myself—house-sitting and scavenging on the middle-class experience—I didn't have to miss out on anything.

4

I held the router, staring into the little holes where the lights should have been like it was a Magic 8 Ball.

“Cara,” said Dan behind me. “What are you doing?”

“Hi—sorry. The Wi-Fi is down.”

“Here, let me.” Dan stood up from the couch and took the router from me. He set it back down and then crouched to unplug it from the wall.

“Give it a minute.” He walked to the bathroom after kissing my cheek. He didn’t close the door. He peed into the toilet.

Both my mom and Dan couldn’t decide if I was brilliant or lazy (or both) for subsisting entirely on the leftovers of other people’s lives. I rarely had to buy food or sundries of any kind since I was welcomed by my clients to use their products, eat their food, drive their cars, so that nothing went to waste. *Help yourself to whatever you can find!* they all wrote to me on their various forms of notepad. One client wrote on the cardboard insides of old cereal boxes, something I found particularly refreshing.

With no property, but also no rent, mortgage, or car payment, I chose to believe my scheme was brilliant. Because I also carried around \$47,349.42 of student debt from my last two years of college when my scholarship ran out. I’d whittled the loan down from about \$87K. This plan of living inside the homes and lives of others began in college as a way to make some extra money, but now, in addition to my full-time office job, it meant that I was able to chip away at my debt while not really having any added environmental impact. The homes already existed. The cars already existed. I just happened to be using them.

Maybe my life would be pieced together with clues from faded, handwritten entries scrawled sideways on fridge calendars: *Europe—Cara house-sit* with long lines across all the squares showing the duration of my time in the house.

And when I stayed in their houses, I perceived the tendrils of their lives reaching far into the world. I would lie on their couches, their king-size beds, their porches, and try to imagine what it must be like to be them, to have memories across the globe. There were days when I considered never getting to see any more of the world than I already had. Traveling by plane was just too costly, emissions-wise, and I had more and more trouble rationalizing my own personal development—to travel, to hear other languages spoken, to watch the toilet swirl the other direction, to think about how I was on the bottom of the planet looking down into the universe—against the toll on the environment.

I remember once, on a domestic flight to my grandmother's funeral, I asked the flight attendant if I could fill up my water bottle instead of drinking out of those plastic cups.

She said, "Certainly, sweetie," and then filled up a plastic cup and handed it to me.

"Oh," I said, "I was hoping you could just pour the water into my bottle here. So I could avoid the plastic."

"I'm sorry, miss, but we're not allowed to fill up personal containers of any kind. You're more than welcome to pour this into your bottle, though." She smiled at me like she was in a 1950s propaganda film. I remember drinking from the plastic cup and sulking while I judged the lack of racial diversity of the people depicted on the in-flight safety card.

Dan put a hand on my ass cheek as he crouched again to plug the router back in.

"Tell me if those lights don't go green," he said as he walked to the kitchen. "Do we have any Advil? Wine did me in."

I found the Advil in the bathroom and rattled it as Dan gulped a glass of water. I wondered how one could purchase zero-waste anti-inflammatories and pain relievers. Was the most fundamental version topically applying the sap of some tree endemic to the Amazon?

“How many do you want?” I said. I didn’t think I would ever get to see the Amazon—mostly because I imagined none of it would be left by the time some zero-emissions flying technology could get me there.

I read an essay recently about a climate scientist who no longer believed it was ethical for conservationists or environmentalists to fly—for any reason. I read that essay, sitting in the San Francisco Public Library looking out over the Civic Center lawn and watching a homeless man adjust his sleeping bag, then pull his hood down tight over his face as he turned from one side to the other.

“Four,” Dan said, walking up behind me in the bathroom. “Why are we awake?” he said after a noisy swallow. “Let’s go to bed.” Dan walked to the bedroom without waiting for me. I looked back toward the router. It was green again.

5

“Be there in a sec,” I said. I looked at my phone. The video had loaded. I wanted to hear the Eco-Friendly Boyfriend soothe my climate change fears away with the crinkling and tapping. It was almost 1:00 a.m. I bargained with myself. You can listen to the video if you do one thing to make the morning easier. I decided to pick out my clothing. Dan was snoring again, already.

I walked to the bedroom, where I kept my clothes in a large, ugly secondhand dresser. I was truly out of underwear. I rummaged around in the drawers until I found a pair of bikini bottoms. I’d done this before, as a middle ground between the shame of pure filth and the exhilaration of commando. I would tuck the little flirty tassels at the hips into my work pants and finger the dents in my skin made by the tight bundles as I sat at the front desk when no one—especially Charlie, my self-righteous, older coworker—was looking. The way Charlie looked at me, a diminishing maneuver with her eyes, I knew she thought I was a bit chubby.

I was not immune to body shaming. But I was morally opposed to eating disorders. Sure, I tried it. I had puked up brunch with the best of the cool girls as needed to bind some unspoken social pact. But really, consuming food and then rejecting it before one’s body had a chance to assimilate the nutrients—it was an insult to evolution, to our humanity. That’s not to say I couldn’t regularly grab disappointed handfuls of my stomach, squeeze it into itself, question it—*whyyy do you have to be so disgusting?*—and then devour bags of scavenged cheesy popcorn in protest while instantly feeling ashamed for shaming myself. Of course, my guilt was compounded because

that empty plastic bag would last half a millennium in our natural world. And all it would signify in geological time was a moment in the Anthropocene when some pathetic *Homo sapiens* foisted chemical-laden junk into her face.

I laid the bikini bottoms on the back of a chair and topped them with a loose beige blouse and a pair of navy-blue work pants (Banana Republic for \$5 at Goodwill), a bra, and two mismatched socks, one of which had a hole so my pinky toe stuck out.

For as much as my personal hygiene may have appeared to be lacking, I maintained my own professional values by working at an environmental nonprofit. I occupied a cobbled-together, catch-all position of administrative assistant, the twenty-first century's safe-space, gender-neutral, equal-opportunity version of a secretary.

Like so many others, I was welcomed to working adulthood by an economic collapse so devastating some people stepped off the tops of buildings instead of driving home. This event, compounded by the usual unhewn decision-making skills of one's early twenties, basically prevented me from earning a real, albeit entry-level, position with benefits and a retirement plan, until I was twenty-eight. I couldn't seem to make the jump from unpaid internships to paid work, so I waitressed at a Chevy's while continuing my house- and pet-sitting. Sometimes I couldn't take on another unpaid internship when it came up because I had to make money. Finding creative ways to spin *server* and *house-sitter* on my résumé after graduating magna cum laude from the University of San Francisco was less than affirming.

Satisfied with my work preparations, I climbed into bed, the Eco-Friendly Boyfriend whispering, tapping, and crinkling through my headphones. I spooned Dan. Heat from his back radiated against my cold, clammy body. Then I remembered I was angry with him for killing that spider. I reached down and pinched a sliver of skin from the back of his thigh between my fingernails, harder and harder. When he started to flinch, I stopped and pretended to be asleep.

6

House-sitting was how I met Dan, actually. He placed an ad online, and I responded. I sent him an email with a link to my one-page website and my Instagram where, between photos of my zero-waste vegan home remedies, I included pics of me smiling with people's pets, watering their gardens, and trustworthily fetching their mail.

Dan responded to my email quickly and said he wanted to meet me. He dropped a pin at a coffee shop in the Mission, and we met up. I brought my reusable to-go cup—a short, thick, insulated metal mug so scratched and battered it looked like a pirate had been knocking it around the galley of a ship while swilling grog for the last decade. I had an equally scratched-up purple carabiner so I could clip the mug onto my backpack. I took the bus, not uninterested in the prospect of meeting a young guy managing his mom's property.

On the day I met Dan, I was battling vicious video footage recently released online by an activist arrested under the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act. When I wasn't helping attorneys and campaign coordinators and strategic engagement officers feed themselves with the magic of office delivery services, I was cauterizing my emotional reserves with the latest undercover investigation footage from factory farms. I could not stop hearing the screams of the animals, their sputtering, the almost mechanical pleading as they choked on their own blood, and then the laughter of the workers, the perpetrators, who were themselves marginalized and subjected to unsafe, illegal, and undignified working conditions. *Feel the intersection of these oppressive systems*, whispered the Eco-Friendly Boyfriend.

Since my therapist determined I had intrusive thoughts, the thoughts themselves seemed to intensify, as if given validation and permission to take root, to blossom throughout my psyche, engorged with a sumptuous rage that rattled through my rib cage and, confusingly, aroused me to the point I wanted either to furiously masturbate or fuck whoever was closest. This feeling swelled, and I hoped I could manage it without turning my intrusive thoughts into intrusive actions spurred by the horrors of, for example, how our species was making the planet uninhabitable. Ocean acidification. Seventy-four billion domestic animals killed every year for humans to eat. Eight hundred million people starving to death annually. Genocide. Albatrosses with bellies full of plastic. My helplessness, my screaming urge to relieve the suffering, the enormity, the complexity of it all, this global catastrophe unfolding around us at all times, all were undermined by flippantly punctuated memes of cute kittens, ads for lip plumpers, GIFs of people shaking their bellies, a toddler twerking. On the bus heading to meet Dan for the first time, I had clenched the chrome safety bar in the aisle so hard it looked like my knuckles would pop through my skin. My guts roiled, pressing against my jeans. I thought about feeling those dents in my skin from the bikini bottoms, a palliative, compulsive Band-Aid.

By the time I got off the bus, I walked into the coffee shop like a bull let loose through the streets. If I could have snorted, pawed at the ground, I would have. I slammed my mug down on the counter. I ordered an extra-hot chamomile tea with some ice cubes when I wanted quadruple espresso shots chased with a smear of coke along my gums. I wanted to inhale all the energy, steal it from anywhere, shrivel my adrenals into raisins, so in my fury I could chart a course to heal the world. Manifestos. Anarchism. Resource-based economies. Think tanks. Earth liberation. Urban farming. NGOs. Conservation partnerships. Animal liberation. Guerrilla gardens. Livable income. World Heritage sites. Decentralization.

Total liberation. Let's fucking *do* this.

The barista's nose piercing looked infected. The personal cup discount was a generous 25 cents, and this took the edge off slightly. As I turned to look for Dan, my rage softened into a vague, unruly horniness, probably thanks to the relaxing aroma of the tea. Floral with notes of ... sage.

Dan explained in his email that he would be wearing a gray puffy jacket. I found him sitting at one of the barstools facing the window. I sat down next to him and set my tea beside his white ceramic cup, filled with the artful loops of an espresso crema design. He was consumed by his phone and hadn't had a sip of his coffee yet.

"Oh, hi, you must be Danielson," I said. I held out my hand and was thankful I hadn't touched my skin dents on the bus.

"Dan. Just Dan is fine. Sorry, distracted by work," he said, clasping my hand. He hadn't made eye contact with me yet, and that unsettled me, made me feel like he was shifty. I sipped my tea. The ice cubes melted instantly. The word *calving* came to mind, as in Arctic glaciers *calving* into the Gulf of Alaska as our planet's global average temperature increases. I thought of the Keeling Curve, took comfort in the resigned terror implicated by its predictable incline. I don't know why I ordered extra-hot tea with ice cubes in it.

"So," he said, putting his phone down. "I'm leaving the country tomorrow for work and have to find someone to take care of my mom's place. And her birds."

I didn't like birds. I didn't want any harm to come to them, and I understood birds' vital role in the planet's ecosystems, of course, but I didn't want to spend time with them. They smelled, they shed, they shrieked.

"I can start tomorrow if you need." I shot him my sparkliest smile, hoping to get across my point. That I just wanted the job and that we didn't have to make this serious, and maybe would he like to finger me in the bathroom. He did not return the smile. Unimpressed.

Disengaged. Impatient. I wanted to try harder, but I didn't know why. His phone buzzed, and he picked it up. I stared out the window, waiting for him to finish.

"Don't you have to check with your family or anything? I understand this is short notice," he said as he scrolled through the calendar. "Sorry," he said again. "I'm leaving the country tomorrow. For work." Clearly, he wanted me to ask him about his work. So I didn't.

"I'm a professional," I said, smiling again.

He didn't smile back and just looked worried and anxious.

"Do you want to get out of here?" I said. He didn't know I was asking philosophically, existentially, if he would like to escape the trappings of our generation's guilt, our burden, our absurdity. He also didn't know I was purposefully using the language of some wild, possibly desperate person you'd meet at a bar. Just in case he felt inclined to see me as such and would like to participate in some high-risk behavior with me later. There were options. I was open.

We ended up going back to his mom's place—he drove himself; I took a cab. He said, "I understand completely," and held up his hands as if in surrender. In the darkening sunset of Daly City, he showed me where the hide-a-key was and where the bird food was and where the breakers were and how to jiggle the toilet flusher in case it ran. He referred to his mom as Millie. He explained where Myrtle and Franklin's paperwork was in the unlikely event anything were to happen to him and Millie in their separate travels. The macaws were to be sent to a special sanctuary in Florida.

"They could live over eighty years and will likely outlive Mom," he said as he ran a finger along a bar of their spacious cage. He pulled his finger away quickly when one of the birds' beaks neared. The way he said *Mom* made me feel like he was a cousin or someone who didn't see the need to distinguish between whose family members we were referring to.

I nodded and planned never to interact with the birds. I would fill their food and water bowls and ignore them. They eyed me from behind the bars. Luminescent blue feathers contoured their faces.

He pointed to the liquor cabinet and said, “The perks are in there.” He smiled then, as if he’d made it to an imaginary finish line where celebration was permitted. He planted his palms and leaned on the kitchen peninsula beneath the brown cupboards. Suddenly I realized he was almost embarrassingly tall, maybe six four or five, with dark hair, and probably a younger version of a past generation’s “ruggedly handsome.” Though I was put off by his constant phone checking and general lack of charisma, I worked hard not to find him physically attractive. Given the state I was in when I met him, I gleefully imagined him pouring me drinks from his mother’s liquor cabinet, crushing Adderall and snorting it off my ass as he told me he wanted to quit his job and start a commune with me.

So far, the commune hadn’t happened. Or the drinks at his mother’s house. I didn’t take it personally that I hadn’t met her yet because I had spent enough time in her house to feel as if I knew her. And I knew I wouldn’t like her.

And in the end, end, end, end, end, d, d, t, t, t, t, said the soothing Eco-Friendly Boyfriend through my headphones, you will know you did your very best, t, t, t, t.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A.E. Copenhaver is a writer, editor, science communicator, and climate interpreter who has worked in the environmental and nonprofit sectors for almost a decade. She has ghostwritten book chapters about cities plagued by factory farming, air pollution, and automobile traffic, and she has written about migrating white sharks, threatened sea otters, and depleted Pacific bluefin tuna. In recent years, she's been exploring how best to contribute to the global transition toward compassion and justice for all people, animals, and the living world. She holds degrees in English and environmental studies from Santa Clara University, and in 2009, she earned her master of arts degree in culture and modernity from the University of East Anglia in England. She moves back and forth between Eugene, Oregon, and Carmel, California.



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