

Fiction

All You Really Need Is a Light Jacket

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The term Mantis comes from the Greek, meaning “prophet” or “soothsayer” and refers to the customary posture of the insect—standing and waiting on its hind legs, motionless.

These white trees. My city frozen, powerless, I position myself by the kitchen window watching the limbs in their clear shield of ice crash to the street, pray they don't land on my car. This is my reality TV. Last night I lay awake listening to the rain, hard with ice, clicking uneven rhythms on the roof like someone typing at a keyboard. I woke up this morning just in time for my electricity to go off.

Mud minnows are capable of burying themselves in riverbeds by digging out spaces with their tails. They can remain underneath layers of mud for days, sometimes weeks, if necessary.

I wear, in order: a tank top, long underwear, a pair of leg warmers from an ex-hockey player, sweatpants, two pairs of socks, slippers, thermal shirt, a fleece, hooded sweatshirt, gloves, and one of those hats with fuzzy earflaps normally reserved for leaders of dog mushing teams in the Arctic. I can barely move. Yoga is out of the question today. I lay on my futon under two down blankets, under an afghan, in my sleeping bag. Somehow my toes are still cold. My eyes are cold. I close them.

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The naked mole rat, a burrowing rodent, is so well adapted to its environment it can move backwards and forwards at the same pace and has only a few fine hairs scattered over the body.

The human body, especially the female's, is not meant to be cold. Taught to shave everything until we are so hairless and sleek we slide like garden hoses through the hands of men. There were a few windblown semesters in college when I was opposed to shaving off body hair, but now I see it as a way to help me slither out of hugs that last too long.

The marine iguana is unable to move effectively when cold, thus making it vulnerable, aggressive, and clumsy.

It is hard to perform these tasks wearing gloves:

1. Brushing your teeth
2. Turning pages in a book
3. Spreading cream cheese on a bagel

The white-tailed mongoose is the only one of its species that is nocturnal.

My days having reversed themselves, I'm in and out of sleep all day, awake all night. Like a t-shirt pulled from the dryer, my life has turned inside out. I wander around my studio apartment, which doesn't take very long, and think about Missouri. It is like the South, I decide, but with winter. Extreme temperatures and an uncanny amount of Republicans brought together in an economically-depressed Midwestern state people only remember when we are on CNN for being home to something ridiculous, like a tiger attack or John Ashcroft.

"Where do you live again?" my family, whom I've known for years, asks. "Minnesota?"

The three species of monk seal are the Mediterranean, the Hawaiian, and the West Indian, and are separated from each other

by the oceans. They used to travel great distances but have become sedentary, now staying close to their shores to bask.

My three sisters are scattered around the world in Ohio, South Carolina, and Korea. We try to drift to the same place at least once a year, but it's hard now that we're older and have jobs, routines and husbands.

"They should come visit you," my mom said to me over the phone. "In...Missouri?"

"Here?" I asked. "Why?"

Moorhens, a rather skittish water bird closely related to the coot, feed mainly on roughage and fallen berries, but they also climb branches to pluck fruit that cannot be reached from the ground. Sometimes they will eat small animals like beetles, flies, and snails.

I was lured to Missouri by the promise of mild winters. "They're great!" everyone chirped. "All you really need is a light jacket." Having grown up near Cleveland, the city built on lake-effect snow, this sounded dreamy. Come January, however, I am holed up in my apartment gnawing apples down to the core, cursing myself for having a freezer full of fish sticks, frozen pizza, Popsicles. I drag a chair across the kitchen floor so I can stand on it and peer into my cabinets to forage. I find Tylenol, rice vinegar, a half-empty jar of peanuts.

When I go to bed again, I wish for whiskey. Wrapped in my burrito of blankets, I think about salsa. Hot, lip-burning salsa. I know I am in love with someone when my mouth burns after we kiss. Years ago, when I realized why I wanted a boyfriend (for warmth), I started viewing men as jackets. In a hug, I tried them on. How does this feel, I asked myself, moving my hands up and down their backs. Sometimes they thought I was trying to steal their wallets, but I didn't know how to explain myself. *No, no, no, I'm just trying to tell if you'll keep me warm in the winter. You don't happen to know your BMI, offhand, do you?* I love the ones

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who make it easy for me, unbuttoning their jackets and spreading them open, as though they have splayed themselves, like moths with their dead wings pinned back to white fabric.

The menhaden, a member of the herring family, has a large, scaleless head and a dense body. Their diet consists mainly of phytoplankton (algae, flecks of vegetable matter) and none of their fins have spines. Because the shoals the fish gather in are massive, often exceeding a million fish, researchers argue over the exact amount of menhaden in the sea.

A few weeks ago I went on a date with a short, balding, straightedge vegan. I asked him to pick the restaurant because I couldn't think of anywhere to take a vegan in Missouri who doesn't smoke, drink, or eat eggs except the vending machine outside ACE hardware.

I didn't go out with him again because the only question he asked me all night was what my favorite era in history was. I said the 80's.

During the day the moray eel takes cover in cavities and crevices, only emerging if disturbed. It feeds when it comes out at night.

The university where I work closed for two days. I want to go outside, to drive, just to see the warped trees, bent and still under the weight of their ice. The outside world shrink-wrapped, I wait until night, lying on my futon most of the day having absurd dreams, brief and vivid. In one of them I learn to fly and in mid-air hug an owl.

Deep within my cocoon, I hear a tinny, thrumming sound. In my state of semi-hibernation, I dream about the trans-Atlantic flight of the monarch butterfly, *escape*, buzzing against my windows, but when I lift one of my earflaps I realize it is my cell phone vibrating on a metal chair across the room. I ignore it, but people continue to call and make sure I'm not dead which makes

sleep impossible, so my 15 pounds of layers and I sit up, lurch to the phone, turn it off, lurch back and re-wrap.

After dark I get in my car knowing I shouldn't. Before the temperature rises I have to see these crystal trees, branches coated in glass like they won't melt, but instead break or crack when the sun comes out tomorrow morning. Stopped at a red light, I cannot stare hard enough at a leafless hunch of trees in the CVS parking lot, their delicate, crushing beauty shining in the sweep of passing headlights.

My craving for hot food intensifies. I am so hungry places I've never been to appear warm and exotic: Dunkin' Donuts, Taco John's, Lane Bryant. I enter the stream of cars in the 24-hour McDonald's drive-thru, fantasize about cradling a McChicken in my hands.

Mongoose are usually only seen in pairs when breeding. For the most part they are loners.

I was never afraid of dying alone until I moved here and looked around. This is not to suggest I haven't had options. Sure, I've gotten my share of phone numbers at the local Goodwill, but something about the way they scrawl their contact information on the back of a receipt with a highlighter and pedal away on bicycles doesn't exactly say "long term" to me.

For Thanksgiving, I bought a 1974 Funk & Wagnalls Wildlife Encyclopedia, MAN—MUD, at Goodwill. According to a faded stamp on the inside cover, it was from the Helena Elementary Library in Montana. The cover featured two marmots feeding on herbaceous plants and another stamp reading *Discard*.

"Where did you find this?" the clerk asked, turning the book over in her hands, looking for a price.

"It was on the floor," I said, pointing.

She charged me 99 cents, which was a steal for all the information I've harvested as I am burrowed away in my apartment during a bout of snow days, watching the weather turn to cream.

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Flocks of mouflon, the only European wild sheep, have thrived in unlikely places due to their minimal needs. Their home range extends just far enough to provide a resting place, food, and water.

The next morning I layer up and go out for an ill-advised walk. My favorite sight, even more so than the trees, are the power lines sagging with tiny, symmetrical icicles, like rawhide fringe on the hem of a cowgirl's skirt.

I moved to Missouri without thinking. I had no attachments, no biases, and no other job offers, so I didn't have to think. Just another state in the union, I figured, and I like living within walking distance of the Missouri River.

The panting moray eel swims with its mouth open because it needs to take in a continuous flow of water in order to breathe. This is the best evidence for refuting legends of morays holding men underwater.

I develop a sinus infection and can't inhale through my nose. I pace around my room, lips always parted.

Before mealworms were studied and understood they were considered a pest in flour mills and bakeries.

All of my friends in Missouri are my colleagues in the English department. I am one of the few at the entire university who is single, under 30, and childless. When I find people who have time to entertain me, I cling to them, carefully. I say I plan on showing up at their houses with a loaf of beer bread, a pan of homemade macaroni, and spoon-feeding them carbs.

It took me a while to adapt to a solitary lifestyle because I never had one before. I had never moved to a place where I didn't know anyone, never lived by myself. I still haven't mastered grocery shopping, but the food industry is against me. Produce is the hardest because it isn't grown or packaged with the single person in mind.

Midges, mosquito-like flies, dance together on summer evenings to attract their mates.

The other two women in the department who are single are not from America. Nadège, who is from France, suggested we take a Zumba class, go dancing in Kansas City. Karina, who was born in Argentina, has never driven in snow. I love hanging out with them, listening to their accents, their beautifully imperfect English.

“May-gon, how cold does it get here?” Karina once asked me when we were sitting in her car, waiting for the windows to defrost. “Tell me the true.”

The traditional, migratory paths of monarchs are unparalleled. Every autumn, those in the north gather to fly south.

Maybe I will move to Florida, I think, holding my cupped hands to my mouth and exhaling. I would miss the change of seasons, though. As cold as I am, I know that is true, but I wonder how long I can live alone in Missouri.

It is easy to fall into routine. I could live here for the rest of my life if I let myself, if I forget what I want.

Chinese mitten crabs swim hundreds of miles to mate, once, in the fifth or sixth year of their life. After the larvae hatch, both male and female adults, tired and heavy with barnacles, drift away to die at sea.

I was in love one time. So in love, in fact, I started to believe in heaven, which I never had before. Sifting through a box of photographs with a blanket draped over my shoulders, the one activity left to do in my apartment that doesn't require electricity, this thought makes me laugh. I hold a picture of the two of us in my gloved hands. He is married now and lives somewhere on the east coast, but in the picture we are hippies smiling by a river in West Virginia. I am wearing Birkenstocks and have thick, curly

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hair down to my pelvis. He has his arm around my shoulders and we look young and high. Both of us poor and in graduate school, we did a lot of hiking and smoking pot next to waterfalls.

Once we got jumped in the woods by two shirtless rednecks. They started punching him and I lost it, threw myself on top of him like a woman leaping onto a funeral pyre.

How things have changed. I wouldn't be caught dead in Birkenstocks these days.

Some animals are mysterious because of where they live, and while they are often resistant to classification, like the secretive mesite, a forest and scrub bird that gets shuffled into the mutton-stew-like order of cranes, rails, and finfoots, they seem more unusual because they live in a place no one thinks to visit. The mesite, however, is a true oddity. Leading a life without competition its species never proliferated and lost the power of flight. It does build stick-nests in the low branches of trees and has well-developed wings so for all we know it is able to fly, but doesn't.