

Out of Gas

I didn't think I was playing Outsmart the Gas Tank, but I guess I must have been. I was driving to the housewarming party of my ex, her new partner, and my kids. They've moved into a redone midcentury house in a suburb. There's a pool in the backyard. They have dogs. The kids have big carpeted rooms to do full teenager-sprawl in. The kids have talked about the new place a lot. They've texted many photos of the dogs, of course with glimpses of the house in the background. I've zoomed in on some of the photos. I see things I recognize, like the green chair and Lena's mom's yellow plates. I know it's petty of me, but I hope that everything about Lena's—Lena and Doug's—place looks smaller and shabbier in person, like celebrities do. I have big opinions about houses; I know Lena does too. After leaving the monstrosity of a house we lived in, Lena probably loves that her new house is one story instead of three, and that, among many other conveniences, she can hang art from the walls like a normal person without

first having to stabilize the oil paint on top of the plaster on top of the burlap on top of the plaster and lath.

I decided I should come to this housewarming thing, for the kids. Show up. Normalize. I dumped about it to my friend Mary, who doesn't have kids but is a wise observer of adolescents, as the French teacher in the classroom across the hall from my AP English classroom for the past six years. Mary had spent plenty of time with Lena and the kids over the years, but she'd always been "my" friend. She surprised me by offering to meet me at the party, happy to build a stop-by into the long Saturday bike ride she was planning anyway. So I had an ally. I was set. But then, some of my deeper feelings must have had a private little conversation I couldn't hear, the conclusion of which was, "We'll let the gas tank handle this one."

You can make any words you want. You just produce them, with your larynx and tongue and teeth. *Sure, yeah, no, it wouldn't be weird. I think it would be good if I came.* And then, when you are on your way to enact the inane prophecy you put in motion weeks before, through the words you produced, you feel a heaviness about your vehicle, a weakness to the accelerator. It's like your car is having a cardiac event, on your behalf. It happens just after you have passed an exit that would have led to a wonderland of gas stations. You pull over onto the shoulder. You pull out your wallet and find your Triple-A card and it is, somehow, not expired, and you pick up your phone and tap numbers on the keypad. You're between exits. You're easy to find. Yes, you are someplace safe. No, there was no accident or vehicle damage. You just ran out. Of gas.