

# THE FIFTH

A love(s) story

by

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Quads are notoriously unstable.

—Dr. Elisabeth A. Sheff

**the temporary arrangement**  
(july)

# eloy

## getting pumped before the pizza comes

There's only one door on the fifth floor. She told me to knock but with the awful noise my VW makes, she must know I'm here.

I hate spiral staircases. Looking down at the steps makes me queasy, but if I don't look down, I trip. And carrying a box almost as wide as I am while climbing them raises the difficulty level—even though I'm not all that wide.

I had forgotten the security system on the ground floor wasn't working, so I buzzed for fifteen minutes before I tried kicking the door—my cell was dead so I couldn't call her to let me in and putting the box down didn't even cross my mind. Said door came ajar with a click that echoed the entire length of the hallway. Sigh.

My knees hurt enough already, so when I get to their door, I bend over to put the box down instead of squatting. Worst-case scenario, I put my back out and give up on moving.

No need to knock. She knows I'm here. She should have come to let me in. Clearly, she's enjoying the anticipation, tingling with the anxiety and excitement of *who knows how this will go but right now everything is still possible so please let me imagine it for a while longer*. If we were meeting at the station, she'd have her nose in a book and wouldn't look up until I cast a shadow on the pages.

I told her to give me a key. I said *it'll be easier that way, Alice*. But she insisted on being here. So she could wait for me. So I would have to knock.

There are about thirty boxes left downstairs, another batch back at the other apartment. I'm going to die. I'll die for sure. I peel my t-shirt away from my stomach and flap the material to fan myself as I go down the stairs. I look at every step this time.

I'm here because of Emily. I can still see her, crying as she did the dishes. Why can't I remember her exact words? She must have said something like *I'm leaving* because in the morning, she was gone. I definitely couldn't afford the three-bedroom on my own, even in Sherbrooke. We had to sublet. I texted Alice (*I need coffee*), we went for a beer, I wrapped up with *I don't have any furniture anyway, just a bed, everything else was hers*, and the next day, she informed me she was in talks with her roommates about offering me a room on the fifth floor. I don't think I asked, but if I did, I must have said it would be temporary.

Sometimes I make things happen without realizing it. Maybe it was me who drove Emily to leave, in the end. Maybe she can't take all the credit for the decision. Maybe she was (finally) willing to risk living without me because she couldn't stand my apathy and detachment anymore. I think (I imagine, I suppose) she really wanted to leave, that she wanted to for a long time. But I'm pretty sure she would never have budged if it hadn't been for the rats. All those rats in the basement. I remember now: the crying-while-dishwashing incident happened after the exterminator's visit. *I can't handle it, Eloy. I can't live here anymore.*

At Alice's, there are cats instead of rats. I predict I'll get along better with them than her roomies. She avoided the

subject, but I would understand them preferring someone else, anyone else. Someone who, at very least, wasn't Alice's first boyfriend (and therefore her first ex). She must have made them promises. They must have taken pity on me.

Either way, it's temporary.

I could have looked for something else, a place to myself. But this worked out too well, with the fully equipped kitchen, the furnished living room, the ridiculously low rent. A four-bedroom place isn't much space for five adults, but there's hardly any expenses. I'm here now; might as well go with it. Carry another box up, and another, and another. Fifteen round trips to the fifth.

I'd rather stay downstairs in the heat, put up with the greasy hair and dripping armpits. Hey, I'll be going up with a box when the pizza guy shows up, so he'll be forced to knock instead of me. Perfect.

Outside, there are big oak trees on either side of the entry to the building. I pick the one on the left and sit in the shade, watching my beater's hazard lights flash.

I've barely rested my back against the trunk of the tree when the building door opens. Alice has decided I need help. She so loves to anticipate my supposed needs that she came down. With iced tea.

*What did I do to deserve this? She doesn't have to be so... nice.*

Try as I might, I can't remember ever *wanting* to be in a situation like this. It'll go okay with Alice, despite her tendency to make sure everyone is okay all the time. As for the three others, all I know is what she was prepared to tell me. *Camille is home a lot because of her work, but she's very, very discreet. Gayle makes the best dessert in the city, just you wait. Simon can*

*sort of get on your nerves about cleaning, but just stick to the chore schedule and it'll be fine....*

I'll put up with them. Which doesn't mean respect will follow.

She'll sit down. I'll sigh. She'll smile at me. I'll look down and drink my iced tea, resist the urge to pour the pitcher over my head, thank her, carry some more boxes.

She sits closer to me than I would have liked, but first she takes the time to get comfortable by spreading a picnic blanket on the lawn.

*You didn't knock* is what she says, brow furrowed, while handing me a glass.

She's a funny one. She thinks things happen like they do in her head, where I'm here and we're *friends*. She's always wanted that, for us to *be friends*. I feel bad, asking this much of her. She probably thinks I'm not asking enough, that I'm mean, insensitive—yeah, that's it, insensitive. I'm living here until. Until I find something better.

I think about it all the time. I try to be patient—I try way too hard—and usually succeed. And sometimes when I start thinking about it, I panic.

I finally force out a response: *Hello, Alice.*

She smiles. *You're a cute one, you. Everything okay?*

No, it's not, but I don't say that. No big deal, this too shall pass.

I go to drink the iced tea, but my aim is off. I pour it all through my beard.

# alice

## thinking deep thoughts before he arrives

For the third time since the sun decided to wake me up at six o’fucking clock in the morning, winning the war with curtains I should’ve replaced a long time ago, the no-pressure shower head trickles glacial water down the length of my back.

I sigh with contentment.

It’s not quite nine and everyone else is still asleep—except Gayle, as per yoozh. Eloy’s not here yet. I’m back in the shower because I’m hot. The living room is just as much of a sauna as my bedroom. The timid gush of chilly water reminds me I’m intelligent and intelligible; a human being, not a walking dishrag.

Might as well stay in here. Cold water is practically free, and who cares if my teeth are chattering? My knees were already shaking anyway.

His arrival—*more like “his return”*—reminds me there was a time when I tried having Just One™. One at a time. Like you’re supposed to. I’d forgotten.

I’d paired up with Just One™, a Monogamous-but-not-Monosexual, and I was one of those too, or I thought I was. I thought we were two of a kind. We were head-over-heels, it was True Love. Head-over-heels, as in *words can’t express how much I love you, people say they’re in love but they have no clue*

*what it means because no one could possibly love each other as much as we do, other people are doing it wrong, other people are losers.*

It was hopeless. Our love snobbery oozed from every pore.

And then, shenanigans. Someone else came along and I fell head-over-heels again—a different head-over-heels of course, but no less intense, so I wanted them both and tried to have them both. Without telling them. What a great idea.

Soon, instead of having Just One™ times two, I had none at all. You can't mess with the trademark, but I didn't understand that yet.

Even worse, the second one wasn't up to par. Actually, people were always reminding me of it. That he wasn't worth the trouble. As if I didn't know.

My hair doesn't need washing, but I tip my head back and wet it anyway just to take the cold with me when I get out, to keep it on my head a little longer. My skin dries too fast.

Whether it's a novel or a film, it's always the same: you're supposed to choose. You absorb that. *I* absorbed that. I thought I needed the ease of a relationship and the excitement of cheating. All I had to do was not mention my partners to anyone. That's how it is in the fairy tales. I just had to do the same in real life. I wish I could say I read the wrong stories, but the right ones, the ones suited to my endless supply of love, weren't exactly available. That's always the problem, the lack of available options. That and limited time: you can't read *all* the stories.

The ultimate curse.

I debate whether to wash because I already did, just after I was forced out of bed. I have no problem with the feel or smell of

my own sweat. I only took a shower because I couldn't take the heat anymore but since I'm here, I might as well soap up again. I have nothing else to do but think....

...Oh, wait, Eloy did this too, just before we met for the first time. He took three showers before I got to his place, to escape his parents and little brother. It was the only way of getting any peace and quiet in their little house in Saint-Eustache, he told me later. That was before his parents went back to Témiscamingue, before we were old enough to see each other without them breathing down our necks. He also told me, when I questioned his choice of wearing jeans in that heat, *I don't wear shorts.*

Maybe I shouldn't have insisted he come live with us. Nostalgia, pity, all that shit—they got the better of me. He said he was looking for a place *just for a few months, just until I find a job* and already the next day, I was discussing it with the fifth floor Family.

No, I shouldn't have insisted because now if it backfires, it'll be my fault. But really, how could it go wrong? He's not judgy, he understands, he wants to fit in, I just know it, even though he never said it in so many words.

But it's not like he's the most transparent guy, so maybe I shouldn't put my faith in him. Too late, he's on his way here. There will be a bed in his room, another towel in the bathroom and another place at the table. There will be five of us. Too bad. Four's a good number, a square number, literally. Four corners, four sides. Although we're less a square than a triangle with a line extending from one of the corners that's kind of unrelated to the rest—a nameless polygon.

Four was good, but I'm incapable of saying no to someone I love. Or rather, used to love. Someone I loved a little less over time. Well, not really *less* but differently. Actually, I never really

stopped loving him. So, I still love him, but not in the same way, you know?

I couldn't say no. Plus, he fits in well. He will fit in well. Just have to give him some time.

No matter how much I concentrate on each swipe of soap over my body's endless peaks and valleys, I can't help thinking about him moving in—angsting, that is, over the concept of him being here. Showers are too routine. I should have taken a bath, balanced a computer on the lid of the toilet to watch a movie, but that would have meant cleaning the tub—too much work. I was hot. Still hot, actually.

He's not even here yet and I'm already imagining the inverted triangle of sweat on the back of his t-shirt. If it weren't against the law, I'd definitely be topless while helping him with his boxes—it's so unfair. I could always encourage him to take *his* shirt off instead—*It's legal for you, so why not take advantage?*—even though he'd never take it off willingly. No one should ever glimpse his skeletal body carrying boxes, those non-existent muscles flexing under milky-white skin.

And yet, I find him attractive. Okay, the last thing I need is to start fantasizing. I'm hot enough already.

I finish by soaping my crack, fishing out the stray hairs that washed down my back and lodged there when I was wetting my head earlier. The clump of hair doesn't go down the drain. I stick it to the tiles, hoping I don't forget it there.

The iced tea must be ready, but if I get out of the shower, I run the risk of bumping into Simon and being assailed by his judgments—*you're too nice to him or so, when are you going to sleep with him?* or, best-case-scenario, *eww! Where'd you find that towel?* Might as well give it a shot anyway. Maybe Simon will still be in his room and Camille will sleep until ten.

Even though we try hard to keep the place cool by keeping the windows shut and running the portable air conditioner, the kitchen is humid with the scent of freshly baked cookies. Gayle greets me with a sticky hug that I want to disentangle from ASAP—with both of us wearing undershirts, our arms slide against each other, as greasy as the cookie sheets. Still, I'm grateful. In her arms, I may drip sweat but being there calms me.

I'm so excitedly anxious, I'll jump ten feet in the air if he knocks right now. Gayle opens the fridge and hands me the iced tea. I lean over it and stir, arrange everything on the tray and taste again: perfect. I'll go back outside and wait for him like a groupie. I'll sit on the garden wall with my legs crossed and everything. Cute, eh?

Simon's waiting to be proven right, I just know it—*It didn't go well with the last cis-dude roomie, I don't see how this guy would be any different.* I know Eloy is Simon's type, even if he'd never admit it—when I showed him a photo of Eloy, he swallowed funny. I shouldn't try to convince or comfort Simon. He doesn't need to hear how good looking and nice Eloy is either, so don't mention it. Don't enable.

If they wind up sleeping together, I can brag about sparking some slash fiction between my ex-boyfriends. If Simon knew that had crossed my mind—even if it was just for a fraction of a second, tops—would he hold it against me?