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For Julianne

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You pull up to the hospital. Tell yourself it will only take a minute. You'll say hello. You'll leave, you'll never come back. You turn off the ignition. You get out of the car. And you know how it will look inside:

The doors have a tendency to be made out of metal, and smash when they close. Make you wince and make your ears ring. They have a tendency to block out noises. Any noise you can think of. Screaming. Crying. Laughing. Talking. The emotions, behind walls, are different. They have different tones, different meanings, their voices lack a concept of time and space, order and construction. It's lost on reality. Lost on the sane. Lost on you, no matter how you categorize yourself. Nuts, creative, manic, depressive, manic depressive, insomniac, eyes slightly tilted, embodied by something other than an actual human being, your priest said you were the devil, your parents thought you unmotivated, or if you're just lonely, bored, sorry for yourself. There are requirements for this place. Requirements that fit all and none of the above.

It's not hard to remember how she began to make her descent. She was slow to begin. The words wouldn't form at first, drooling on her thin pink lips, scattered in her head. Eyes bloodshot, looking as if they were searching her brain, scanning it for precise measurements, observing like question and answer.

"See, I have this theory about God. He's real, but not real. He's there, or he was, but he's inside us. Not up there. I've come to this conclusion after thinking for a long time. It's been in my head for weeks."

"Have you heard of Neo-Platonism?"

"What?"

"Neo-Platonism."

"Neo-what?"

"Never mind."

"It's like this: we're here, on this earth, carrying out what God wants us to do. We are what he is, we do what he sends through us. It just comes to me, racing through ... such a rush...like I'm here. I'm gifted. He gave it to me."

The words that had begun, poured out over fountains and cascades, like dominos and smacked each other as they fell, toppling, slurred. You watched her

because you couldn't understand. You watched because it wasn't what she's saying, but how she said it. She thought she created Neo-Platonism. She actually thought it should have been named after her. She actually couldn't pronounce it. Not listening, not wanting to listen to anything but the brain, scanning it for precise measurements, observing like question and answer. Rambling. Droning. In the dark.

You are accustomed to zoning out. Everyone does it. In class, at night when you can't sleep, when your grandmother is lying in a casket, when you hear that you got a job, to think, to get out of reality. It's an escape, an adult way of playing with action figures and dolls, climbing a tree and sitting there. Just.block.out.the.voices. That was the beginning of it. She was zoning out. She did it a lot. On some days, she'd see you. Actually see you. Talk to you. Listen to you. Communicate. Other days there was a wall. As it is said, "laying down the bricks," thick and lots of paste. Maybe, "Hi," but she wasn't saying it so much as processing it, forcing it out. She looked tired, she was just zoning out. You had done it before, hadn't you?

The time you told her about troubles with your girlfriend. She looked up at the ceiling, "If someone had said that to me I would have shot them. That's ridiculous. Don't listen to her."

"But she seemed sincere..."

She scrunched her face in disapproval.

"...I don't know. It doesn't matter."

She laughed, "It doesn't matter. Not really. I'm not judging you, just her. Read her actions I suppose, they are much stronger than words...don't you think?"

"I think I should stop trying to read her altogether."

That was when you saw the pills. In a large purple container, divided by colors, shapes, sizes. You thought...no, you couldn't think. They were just there. Like bad television reception, just appeared, buzzing.

"Oh, those. They're a pain in the ass."

You had leaned forward, you had kissed her anyway. You broke up with your girlfriend a week later.

You had met her over last summer. Every night a group of you would sit on top of the market building watching the outdoor movies, or out in a field, mosquitoes bit your ankles and dirt stained your bare feet. Don't recall the conversations. Usually pretty pointless. Usually rather amusing. Out of the ordinary. The things people talk about when they already have inside jokes and are trying to find clever ways to use them. You would try to paint the smiles and leisure in your head, knowing it wouldn't happen again. Maybe there were never enough pictures to capture how she could form a cute half smile on her face. She would shrug, her skinny shoulders rose up and down, her heavy black mascara made her blue eyes always look so insistent, so blunt. Maybe it was the summer heat that makes everything so much more intense, the senses so much more acute. Every beach smelled like a sewer. Every flower smelled like her bitter perfume. She was clear back then. Her fragments weren't so fragmented. Sentences made sense. She didn't claim to be a philosopher, didn't even believe in God.

“There’s no one up there.”

There is that picture she drew hanging on your wall. Don’t know why you kept it. Every time you look at it, you feel this dark place in the back of the skull. Like a pounding, a smashing and fracturing of bones. Makes you sick, like you’re trying to hold onto a dead corpse or a nightmare that traumatized you when you were five. You slept with the lights on for a week. It’s just innocence deadened. Something that should affect you, maybe she should have more than she did. The things she left were ashes you wanted to throw into her favorite river, the one with the rope swing, when the metal doors slammed behind you. It’s anticipated. The wanting. The need to escape. The white halls. The sterile elevator. Eight floors up.

During the summer she had said, “I can usually say things that are in my head well. I’m really good with words,” she was slouched over her coffee in a café you had had specifically chosen. It was always crowded. “When I was little, my dad used to make me read Edgar Allen Poe and look up all the words that I didn’t know. He did that with Kerouac too...”

You nodded. There weren’t words. No words for her posture, the way her coffee cup shook when she picked it up. Jittery. Bitter. You can imagine it spilling over, her white hands soaking in the smell of roasted burnt coffee. Rather, it sits in her vibrating hand. Hands. Together. She knew she couldn’t hold it with one. The blunt eyes thinking of what to process next, what words to construct. Then, you would have understood. She was trying to think like Kerouac. She was thinking of how she wanted to kill her father. She was thinking the sun was too bright. She was convinced that God was sending messages through her.

Three months ago. Maybe yesterday, three months ago yesterday. She had left a note on your car. In the morning, it was sitting out there with a flower. A tiny picked flower. You smiled. A weird smile. Weird because there had been nothing to smile about. Maybe sometime in this week a year ago she had been sitting. Big black boot scratches on her heels, on a beam of that house, the one on your street that wasn’t finished. Laces untied. Hair untied. Red and all over the place. Looking out into the night. But peaceful. The last time she was peaceful...?

It’s in your psychology book. Look it up. Next to multiple personality disorder or neurotic depression. That chapter. The one that explains in cold words what the symptoms are and what the author thinks it’s like to hear tiny little voices in their head. Schizophrenia. Hate the author because he is trying to educate the y-generation through a text book. In words. Reading it is like watching her think. Scanning the brain for precise measurements, observing like question and answer. When you walk through those metal doors with their tendencies to keep reality out, you’ll regret every time you used the phrases around her. That’s insane. That’s crazy. You’re insane. You’re crazy. You want God to shove them down your throat and make you vomit them up. Give you a disease. Make you understand. And when you leave you have to deal. cope. forget. You’ll do the best you can to ignore those that you recognize behind the doors. They are

people you went to high school with, someone's grandmother, grandfather, child, you, your lover, your best friend, your old teacher.

She could spell perfectly, precise, no mistakes on the days she had zoned out. When her eyes were fake and plastic, bloodfilled, the words would be so perfect they would stick like sharp knives. The sharp edge on a shark's tooth. She used to have one of those, threw it away when you saw her poetry. About. Sharp. Edges. Would look closely for safety pins, scissors, pointy house hold objects. In her room. On her clothes. Watch her arms. They had marks, you knew, you saw, obvious, deep. The days she saw you with her eyes, knew you, would screw up grammar. Would spell wrosd wornq all day lng. She needs an exorcism her math teacher said.

She tried to quit smoking around you. It reminded you too much of black flesh and dying babies. Pumping in. Pumping out. Toxins. Didn't ask if it was a lie, what was a lie. Didn't ask if she ever went back to the habit. Didn't bother. It didn't matter. She smashed the wall when you said it. It was over. There was a hole. Her mother covered it up with a portrait that she drew of you.

There were specific times she should have told you. When you said that's insane, that's crazy, you're insane, you're crazy. She should have told you in that field. On the house beam. While you were kissing her. Over the pills. Droning and drooling on words, phrases, fragments. Incoherent. Silent. Coffee spilling all over her legs and knees. Should have written it with knives all over her arms. Should have included it in the note on your car. Should have known when you saw that picture you kept. A nightmare of twisted veins pumping blood over trees. Purple oceans drowning human beings. Black-eyed beasts. A horse without its legs. An oxen with eight horns, stabbing a girl. Girl. Her.

"Look at this."

"You showed me this one a month ago..."

"I couldn't have. I just drew it."

Backwards.

"I wasn't with you last night, I was at work."

You squint your face, "No, you were at work Monday night. Remember? We watched a movie last night."

Forwards.

"I haven't smoked a cigarette in three weeks."

"I thought you smoked one an hour ago by accident."

By accident time moves backwards. No, forwards. By accident that the dialogue slips in. It was silent when she wanted it to be. There were echoes of silence. No such thing, but there were. You could hear the silence. About to erupt. Every two seconds. Everyday. Everyday after that day. In your bed with her you could hear her silence. She.Was.Never.There.

The pills came from doctors. There were several. Didn't ask, but you knew. It was all hit or miss. An experiment. Try these pills with those pills. Those pills with these pills. The pink ones and the triangle ones on this day, black ones and white ones,

ones that were so tiny that they slipped out of her hands and down cracks. Wasn't any different. These ones will make her drowsy, others will make her dizzy, some will just make her sleep, some will put her in a happy place where she can't communicate with people. It's the way to fix people - dope them up. Comatose. Her blueblunt eyes weren't anywhere, her head wasn't anywhere, fragmented, absorbing in sitting and staring. Nervous habits made her go back to cigarettes. Spilling ashes on her jeans. Crushing the cigarette butts underneath her big black boots. Laces untied. She always hated wearing the size that fit her feet best.

You remember a side-profile of her on the first day of Autumn, when the light was just perfect, silhouetting her cheek bones. She was laughing, or so you'd like to think. She was outside, or so you think. The musky smoke rising off of her hair, her knobby knees slightly separated. That day you wanted to be inside her, feel her sweat and her bones, her skin and her breathing against yours. Her timing was on, her emotions intact, she knew was aware of herself. That day, and perhaps no longer after that.

You remember a night, maybe weeks.days.months after when she was sitting beside you in the car, when she began muttering things under her breath. Spitting, raving, wasn't even quiet, normal tone but abnormal voice. It didn't even sound like her. Lower. Sounded black. No brown. Some color other than tan, skin, flesh. Red, it sounded red. Something about BaconAndFriedMusclesOnASkilletWithProphetsThatWere ProphesizingHerDemiseAndBlackHoodedPolicemenSpies.TheFaint.TheFury.Noise.BlackNoise. You said her name. Spoke it twice. No response. Just FishesThatGetTiredFromWigglingOnDesertedIslandsAndSkeletonsThatMakeNoiseInMyHead. You drove into her driveway. She gave you a kiss on the cheek. She smiled. She left. You watched her go into her house, open the door, her hips waving back and forth while she walked, her hands slipping on the door knob when she tried to open it. You sat in the car for fifteen minutes. Shaking.

Her favorite color was green. Not bright or light green. Not puke green. Dark, intense, Kentucky summer grass green. The grass you don't want to step on because it looks too perfect. The type of green you can focus on. Bright greens made her fidgety, nervous. Puke green made her think of insomnia. She liked to focus. She thought she was focusing all the time, even when her face was twitching, thinking about how James Dean was smart to die young. People wouldn't have to see him grow old. He would have made an unattractive old man, she thought. She thought that cigarettes made her focus more, made her look pensive. Had a distinct way of holding a cigarette as if it were inspiration. Salvation. Always laughed at movies when someone died. Anyone. She hated movies that tried to make death real. Rolled her eyes at the glamorized pain. Fucking actor was paid money to die.

The phone rang the night before you had left for the hospital. You picked up your car keys. Calm. It was to be expected. Broken mirror glass in her room. On her floor. Across her dresser. Reflecting light. Blinding the police. Making her laugh.

Poetry.about.sharp.objects. Something about that they said. She had said something like that. Her mother's phone voice was monotone, expressive agonized machine.

And now, on the eighth floor of the hospital you ask her, "Do you remember the first night we kissed?"

She stops, injured and cornered, "No, I don't."

Her favorite music was the type that no one hears on the radio. She liked gritty independent guitar strings breaking, raspy and black-lunged singing. Wasn't too loud, let her concentrate. Focus. Expressive, she said. Whiney, you complained. Turned it off and imagined her shaking, addicted to the black noise. Every note of her favorite song, every lyric, festered in your brain like fermenting yeast, marinated meat. She thought that Socrates must have been an arrogant fool. She was intimidated by a dead man. She was intimidated by small things. You would lead conversations. It would make her feel ignorant. You liked novels. She claimed they were confusing and overdone. You would lay behind her on your couch, smell the back of her neck, and inhale her, feeling her close her eyes, listening to her breathe.

There was a night when there was nothing to do. The streets were empty. Your heads were empty. There was nothing to be said. Nothing to be done. You'd smash your foot on the pedal. You'd race her out to her lake, the one with the rope swing. Come back to her house in the pouring rain, rope burns all over your legs and arms, your heads elevated from intense rushes of water inhaling your toes, sucking in your legs and your body, flushing up your nose when you forgot to breathe out, coating your hair in lake dirt and musk. There were other nights when there was nothing to be said. Nothing to be done. Drove with her just to drive. Late night runs to the gas station. Watching lightning on the roof of your car parked in the unfinished neighborhoods, drinking beer, throwing rocks down the hill.

The hospital parking lot costs money. You have to pay by the hour. The hospital. After the phone call. Large, plaster, plastic building. Feet and toes grip the floor inside your shoes inside the elevator. Not thinking of her black noise music. Her intense green. Her cigarettes. Her assumptions. Not trying to think of her while colliding upwards toward her. An uncontrollable force. You think of the portrait that she drew of you, the one over the gaping hole she had smashed. When.You.Said.It.Was.Over. You think about her speakingintongues and shaking. You think about the expressive machine over the phone. That and Neo-Platonism. God was in her too.

She attempts to continue the conversation, "Maybe this is too soon to say..."

"Say what?"

Her eyes rolled up. Looking at the ceiling. Picturing a dead James Dean, "I love you."

You know immediately you will regret not responding. Nonetheless, you don't. Can't. Not anymore.

There were times when she was right and you were wrong. You were right and she was more than wrong. When she stopped taking the pills. When she shredded the flesh on her arms. When she punched the mirror. When she didn't remember punching

the mirror. Didn't remember shredding her flesh. Didn't remember when. Where. Why. Why? Who?

"Why?" you ask.

"Someone told me to."

"Who?"

"Her...I don't remember...who."

The doors are big, metal, a barrier. There is an intercom and a voice. You have to speak to it. Have to tell it your name. Tell it you came to see her. Wish you could tell it why your voice is shaking, that you were listening to one of her music mixes on the way over. Tell it that she's not crazy, she's not insane. You didn't mean it. And you still know it. Know it. You've seen her disheveled walking, her eyes, probing scanning, like question and answer. Drowning in a poison sea of people that were trying to hurt her. She is sitting calmly. There is some lady screaming about how her barn is burning, some old man eyeing you, some teenager with tattoos on her face. It is ludicrous you tell her. You tell her that she has bandages on her hands. Mirror glass. Crying, screaming, shouting, it seems drowned out by wallpaper paste and thick walls. She is sitting calmly. No cigarettes. No coffee. No, nothing. Nothing at all. Attention. Switch modes. Backwards and forwards. Forwards and backwards.

"I've been here for a week," she says.

"You signed yourself in last night."

There would be strained separations in between phone calls. You would grow up. She would forget to take her pills. You would read more. She would smoke a pack a day.

She'd call, "Guess where I am."

Call again, "I'm in the hospital."

It began with words, drooling and impending on her lips, like they had weight. Like she invented Neo-Platonism. Keys in the ignition. Doors. Always leave. Don't leave. Stay five more minutes. Past visiting hours. Get me out of here. IWasSomeoneElseBlackedOut.She.Her.IamDead.IamCorrodingInToAPuddleOfMolten...Molten...OhGodIt'sRainingNeedles.PinsAndNeedles.TheyAreAfterMe.ISwearToGodTheyAreGoingToKillMe...What? Who? What? TheNoise.TheBlackNoise...

The doors slam behind you so that you can go home and do your homework. No more images of her listless and pacing. Walking and breathing. Every breath an effort, every step coincided with a convulsion of her hand or her neck. Sometimes only sometimes. In between her talking. In between you wanting to die to keep her from being lost. From losing her to who? To what?

The previous summer there was a mosquito buzzing around her head. She kept on waving her hand around frantically, trying to smack it away. She brushed her hair out of her face, squinted against the sun. Looked up at you and then back down to the paper. Dark red fingernails clasped around the black sketch pencil in her hand. The side of her hand rubbed against the lead. It smudged off onto her pale skin. You could feel the spaces. Her pauses. You smiled. She told you to relax your face and be still. The

wind blew the edges of the paper up. The small silver cross hanging around her neck moved back and forth. Forwards and backwards. Shoulders and arms in sync with her hands. Wafting movements onto the paper. Hunched over the picnic table. Biting her bottom lip. Focused.

“Hold still, silly.”

Unopened

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The moon floated in the sky, like a man who grew so tired that he fell asleep in a swimming pool. Below it, a small girl stood on a patch of green grass doing nothing but gaping at the sky. For that night, the moonlight ached through the cloud cover like a bunch of tears from the ducts of an old man's head who pretended that his mind was not a bunch of lonely, unrelated thoughts.

The girl was overwhelmed with the import of the great celestial body. It seemed to bob in the firmament, like a slumbering jellyfish that had tucked its stinging limbs in for the day. It reminded her of how little she felt...how utterly useless. Her Pa slaved away all day. Her Ma kept the house in mediocre order and did her best to raise the small girl. What did she do? She could do so little with her small body that was so full of aching from the accident in the stable.

How could such a delicate dwarfish form contain so much agony? Every bone in her groaned. The only thing that made the pain bearable was the aching in her heart which dwarfed the throbbing in her skeleton. She was of no use to her family...and she knew she was of no use to her friends, for she had none. The poor child could not go out to play because of how a horse had sundered her body and jarred it to its core with one thoughtless kick. Friends were only her friends for activities and now that she had no common behaviors with them, they could not care less about her.

The moon was just as alone as she was in her insides. And that was how she thought of them. A young girl has not yet learned about anatomy or emotions...she had only insides. And yet at the same time the moon made her feel even lonelier because she wanted to commiserate with it so badly and pour out her insides to it and tell it that she was just alone as it was on starless nights in winter when not even the wind is felt on human skin...when nothing is happening.

She wanted to reach up and out to the moon and touch it. The one perfect, fine thing in this universe that did not make her feel like a tiny freak with a great furrow in her head, where a hoof had shocked her so with its indifferent might. It was an impure hue and she did not understand why that mattered to her. It just reminded her of the bloodstain on her dress the day she was sent hurtling across the stable.

The dress was never the same. It was off white...it was a deviant in the spectrum of light that only wanted to return to its rightful place, but could not do so. It was lost, as she was lost to the hearts of others. No one cared for her in a way that mattered to her. No one valued her for what she was.

To her parents she was a liability.

To her friends she was the question mark at the end of this sentence: "Can so and so come out to play?"

To the one little boy she liked she was not important anymore. He never told her why.

She was just a performer, for a show that did not exist, on a dirty stage.

Once she could not fulfill the roles people did not want her anymore. She was not fun. And fun is all people want, she thought. No one will suffer you if you are suffering. "People want smiles all the time," she thought. That idea made her frown.

She wanted the moon in her hands. She was so tired of having nothing to hold...to interact with. And she was so tired just standing there in the cold. For the cold made her bones cry out. She wanted to reach up and out for the moon and take it from the sky. If she ever got that far she would cradle the moon in her soft unblemished hands and hold it up to her cheek so that she could feel its gelid, icy surface on her warm cheek.

"Oh the cool, cool moon," she lamented.

At a foolish moment, she did extend her arms to the azure height in an attempt to fulfill her wish. She came away with nothing...as she always did. Though she knew she would never touch the moon in the way she wanted, this was not what bothered her most. It was that when she reached, the entire affair reminded her of how small she was. She was so faraway from what she wanted, and compared to others not even close.

By the time this thought sank in, tears rose from the corners of her eyes. The girl spent that night crying hot, hot tears under the cool, cool moon that would never touch her on the cheek.

Meeting Hazel

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Hazel matched the wallpaper. Frayed at her edges, wrinkles, greyish, worn. Even her smile reflected her apartment, teeth stacked against each other like the books and yellowed newspaper piled on the kitchen counter. It had been a while since anyone had been over.

The fact was that she never let anyone in. It had been six years. The last person that was inside her home was a door to door salesman. Selling life insurance. She pointed him to the overstuffed chair with the pink and yellow flowers, faded. He pushed the unopened mail to the sides of the chair. Oily smile as he sunk into uneven stuffing. 'Do you have life insurance?' he asked.

He was there for forty-five minutes. 'Depending on your needs, and,' he coughed, 'there are different types and combinations that that can match your requirements.' He went over them all- term, whole, universal, variable. She let him talk, never interrupted. She nodded once in a while. Then she sent him on his way.

No one had been back inside since.

It's doubtful that it had anything to do with the life insurance salesman, although some might say that she got upset by his reproachful looks, his half shut eyes scanning over her piles of things. But she just didn't have any other visitors for quite a long time after that, and by the time someone did knock on her door, three years and four months later, she chose not to answer. She sat real quiet, breathing, and sipping her tea from a chipped, blue, coffee mug.

That mug, the one with the - BankOne Welcomes You - printed on it, she got as a gift. It, like many other things she owned - the toaster, cheese cutter, the cup with the painted pink flamingo for a handle-- all were gifts. She would have no trouble telling where she got them, all stamped with the company name. She drove all over the county opening up new bank accounts. In the morning, she read her paper. Not for the news, but for advertisements. She would look for what bank or company had a gift offering.

Some days she could find no gifts at all.

Those were the days that Hazel regretted the most. She had lots of regrets. She regretted that she had ever married, she regretted that she had never remarried, she

regretted her relationship with her son, she regretted that she had cheated at her last employer on her time schedule, and most of all, she regretted she got caught and lost her job. That was fifteen years ago, and she hadn't worked since. She regretted that also, the fact that she hadn't worked again.

Since her forced unemployment, Hazel had lost interest in most things. But maybe that wasn't really true, maybe she never had interest in anything to begin with, and it just became more obvious when her days were empty. The television was on most of her day, although she didn't watch it. She found comfort that it droned on in the background.

She also read the obituaries.

One morning she recognized a name of an acquaintance. Marylou Baisley. She had known her slightly. They had both worked for the company that fired Hazel. If she hadn't recognized the name, she wouldn't have known her from the picture printed with the obituary. Marylou looked glamorous, her hair dark, long and curled up just so. Her chin rested playfully on her hand, eyes looking sideways as if she had a secret. Teasing smile. Bare shoulders with silky looking top.

Hazel remembered her with short coarse grey hair, eyes unpronounced, double chin. She had always worn a black nondescript pair of baggy pants, covered with a long type of Mumu that hid her shoulders and belly.

Strange to print a forty-year old picture of a dead woman.

Hazel went to Marylou's funeral. She didn't mix with the mourners, although she thought she recognized a few of the individuals from her former work days. But no one recognized her. She stayed at the back, listened to the ceremony which was held at the gravesite. It was a lovely day, cool with a touch of ice in the air, but only enough to tease. She left as soon as the body was placed in the earth. 'From ashes to ashes, dust to dust,' she heard as she walked to her car.

From that day on, she spent less and less time searching out gifts. Instead, she went to funerals. She didn't need to know the mourners nor the deceased. She found something satisfying in the mourning, in being with other people, in being a part of something so much part of life. At first she sat or stood at the back of the mourners, but as she became a regular, she began to mingle with the others. 'A shame, isn't it? A crying shame,' she would say. 'Sad, but at least he did not suffer,' they'd answer. 'A lovely woman,' they'd say. 'Yes, she lived her life fully,' she'd respond.

Interesting the way there was so much good to say about the dead.

Hazel Morningstar, 46, died peacefully after a short illness. She was the loving daughter of Sophie and Marvin Thompson, loving sister of Herman Thompson, best friend and partner of husband, Jim, and caring mother of Scott and Joan. Always full of life, a kind word for everyone, her beauty, humor and strength were apparent to everyone she encountered. She loved learning, teaching, filling her days with activities and people. She will be sorely missed by those of us who loved her most, and by all of those whose life she touched.

She stared at the obituary. It was strange to see her own name in print, and even stranger to see it in the obituaries.

Of course it wasn't her. This Hazel was seventeen years younger. Seventeen years younger and deceased. 'A short illness,' she read out loud. Seventeen years younger but a life that seemed full. Hazel dressed with extra care to attend Hazel's funeral. She carefully applied make up, something she had not done for the other funerals. She wore pearls. Her mother had told her. 'Hazel, you must always be prepared with a black dress and a string of pearls.'

Once there, she hesitated to mix with the mourners although there were many. It was eerie seeing her name on the funeral home listing. Every time she heard her name mentioned she'd turn to answer, to listen. 'A fine woman,' she heard. 'Hazel was full of so much joy.' 'Hazel told the story about the family's trip to Montana. Oh, we laughed until we cried. Our sides were splitting.' 'Those are her children, sitting up front.' 'Life won't be the same.'

It was a lovely funeral.

Leaving the funeral, she began driving. Her mind kept returning to Hazel's children, sitting upfront, all dressed in black, and then standing at the gravesite, their father just to the front of them. She had watched as they each picked up a handful of dirt, and dropped it on the casket. The boy, looking older than his sister, put his hand protectively on her shoulder as she sobbed.

They had all been to Montana.

Just then, Hazel became aware that she had driven past her street. She wasn't sure how long she had been in the car. She didn't recognize the neighborhood. Windows were boarded up or had bars on them. The buildings were close to each other and to the street. There was a uniform brown to the surroundings. Black graffiti interrupted the sameness of the environment. She stopped at a red light. A man with a bucket approached from her left.

Without looking, Hazel drove through the red light.

She took her hat off when she got home. She walked into her back room. She leaned over to straighten up a pile of papers, picked up some unopened mail, a book off the floor. She threw the old mail into the trash next to her chair. She picked up the phone, dialed Tom, her son.

'You have reached the home of Tom Morningstar. I'm not here right now, but if you leave your name and number after the beep, I'll be sure to get back.'

Mrs. Latham

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"It's a disease," she tells me, chowing down on a Ziploc filled with Oreos poking out of her handbag. "Dr. Matthews is really helping me though. I think this time I might finally lose the weight."

I nod politely at the 350-pound plus woman sitting across from me, trying to ignore the mass of crusty cookie crumbs in the corners of her mouth. I wonder if I am as much of a lost cause as this broad. I also wonder why she just doesn't get the surgery and be done with it so she can look like everyone else around here.

"So what are you here for?" she asks me. Stunned, the receptionist looks up from her desk to come to my rescue.

"Mrs. Latham? I need to verify some of your information please."

"Excuse me," I say to the Oreo lady and walk over to the front desk.

Smiling, the receptionist whispers to me. "You'll have to excuse Miss Monahan. She means well, but she doesn't really catch on to social cues very well in the waiting room."

"I thought that was inappropriate, but then again I'm not well-versed on psychiatric waiting room etiquette."

"I understand. Dr. Denby will be with you shortly. He's excellent."

"That's what I've heard."

"Oh!" She glances to her computer. "We don't have your referral on file, might I have the name and relationship?"

"Pilar Parker. She's a friend of mine," I sigh, awaiting her reaction. As if the mention of the famous actress was nothing, she quickly types away.

"Thank you," she smiles as Dr. Denby emerges from the door adjacent to the desk. He is smaller than I imagined, standing at about five foot four with sandy brown hair and a moustache to match. He wears a happy grin and an argyle sweater.

"Mrs. Latham?"

I start to feel sick. I never wanted to be the kind of woman that goes to see a shrink, but I don't know what else to do. I am unhappy in every sense of the word and it took all of my strength to admit that to myself. Pilar suggested I see Dr. Denby

because he is “simply fabulous and will help you sort through all your negative energy.”

That’s a lot of shit to sort through.

We walk through to Dr. Denby’s office, which is surprisingly comfortable. I had pictured mahogany bookcases filled with intimidating psychiatry journals and a brown leather couch where many a man had cried out his darkest secrets to the doctor, but instead I am seated on a red La-Z-Boy and given a glass of Chianti.

“Thank you.”

“Most first-timers could use a drink to ease their nerves. I just aim to please.”

Dr. Denby sits on his chair and crosses his right leg over his left knee. Normally when I see a man in this position it makes me cringe for some reason, but it seems perfectly natural for Dr. Denby. “So the most basic question I can ask is what brings you here?”

I take a deep breath and every thought in my head explodes out of my mouth. “I hate Los Angeles! I moved here to become a screenwriter and I got a decent break but I haven’t sold any screenplays recently, which gives me tremendous feelings of inescapable failure. I was involved in my first produced screenplay a fair amount as it was an independent feature and I knew the director quite well. That’s how I met my husband. As you may or may not know my husband is Remy Latham who at the time was a budding actor with very little fame, which is obviously no longer the case. I resent my husband because he never spends time with our children or myself since he will take on about 3 films a year, often on-location. I hate dealing with the photographers every time I go out, especially with the kids, and the constant speculation in the media about my family is driving me crazy. I want to move somewhere else but Remy refuses. I don’t think I love him anymore but I can’t bring myself to get a divorce even though that’s probably what we should do. I’m unhappy. That’s it in a nutshell.”

Dr. Denby shoots me that analytical psychiatrist gaze and it hits me that even with a recliner and booze I am still in a doctor’s office being assessed. I feel exposed, wishing I took my time in revealing all of my issues.

“That is a lot to be dealing with, Mrs. Latham. I think Mrs. Parker was being a good friend when she referred me to you.”

“She knows that I am sad. I don’t mean to be such a downer, but I can’t seem to help it anymore. I feel like I lost the person I used to be.” My voice cracks as I say the last sentence knowing it’s the truest thing I have said about myself in a long time.

“What about your children?”

“What about them?”

“Do they make you happy?”

I smile thinking about Portia and Jackson. I try to make their lives as normal as possible, but it is difficult due to where we live and Remy’s fame. They expect the cameras when we go out for dinner or go shopping. It’s the only life they know.

“Yes, my children make me happy. But what they are exposed to makes me upset. I wish we had more privacy, which is why I would like to move.”

"Where would you move?"

"Actually I would like to move back home. I think it would be better for the kids. For me, too."

"Where's home?"

"St. Paul, Minnesota."

It is freezing in Minnesota at the moment. A good old-fashioned Midwestern winter would be nice. It's fucking February and the sun is constantly shining in Los Angeles. It's unnatural and I think it makes everyone in this town strange and out of touch. Try shoveling out your car from under a few feet of snow. That will build some character. My kids have hardly been in their winter coats and I know that I spent most of my youth inside of mine.

"Does your family still live in St. Paul?" Dr. Denby asks.

"My mother does. I know she misses the kids. I take them there a couple times a year, but most of the time she wants to head out this way for the weather, which is understandable. I prefer going home though."

"What does Mr. Latham think of St. Paul?"

"Remy thinks anywhere outside of L.A. is pretty much uninhabitable. He's always lived in the area and probably always will."

"But you said he works on location."

"Oh sure. He loves living in L.A., but Remy likes to travel. That's something we still have in common and it's when we have the most fun together as a family. We try to take family vacations when we can, but they seem to happen less and less these days."

"What kind of vacations do you take?"

"Sometimes we would just go away for the weekend. Go skiing or camping. That happened a lot when we were first married. When the kids came around and we had significantly more income, it was longer vacations to Europe or Mexico. We went to Australia one year and had a blast. Remy was filming and we came along."

"Why not continue to go with Mr. Latham when he's working?"

"The kids are older now, they're in school. Jackson is in second grade and Portia just started kindergarten. When I do bring it up I get the feeling Remy doesn't think it's a good idea for whatever reason."

"Mrs. Latham, do you talk to your husband?"

"In the most basic sense of the word, Remy and I talk. But we don't talk like we used to. We haven't talked like that in years."

"When you say 'like we used to,' what does that entail?" Dr. Denby switched his crossed legs.

"Laughing is the first thing that comes to mind."

"You don't laugh together anymore?"

"Nothing's funny anymore. Not between us anyway."

"Are you still writing, Mrs. Latham?"

"Not as much as I used to. I'm hoping to get into a new schedule now that Portia is in school for half the day. It was difficult to write when the kids were so little, but I need to do it. I love it."

"You said something about feeling professional failure earlier. Can you elaborate a bit?"

"Well if I don't sell any screenplays, I'm not earning am I? My husband is the only one bringing in money with his career. Seems like a failure to me," I scoff.

Dr. Denby pauses thoughtfully for a moment. I notice that his argyle socks match his sweater. "It seems to me that you felt you had to trade in writing to be a good mother. And perhaps that was best for your family. Like you said though, the kids are getting older. I think it might be in your best interest to start writing again."

"I think so, too," I wholeheartedly agree. A silence fills the room and puts me at ease to collect my thoughts. I already know I need to start writing again. I already know that I am a good mother. I didn't come to see Dr. Denby to validate me in that way. I want him to tell me what I think I might already know.

"What do I do about Remy?"

"Mrs. Latham, I can't possibly make an assessment on the state of your marriage in one session and without meeting your husband as well. I'm here more as a vessel for processing your own thoughts, not to dispense the directions to your life."

"Remy won't go to couples therapy. I already suggested it. He thinks it's a joke."

Dr. Denby purses his lips and nods slightly. I already know what he thinks. I know what Pilar thinks, too and my mother. I know what I think, but I can't even believe it.

How did I get here? I have been Mrs. Latham for so long I'm not sure I know how to be anybody else. I thought I would always be Mrs. Latham, but doesn't everybody when they get married? I have been trying for years to dig inside myself to find the way I used to feel for Remy.

He isn't making the same effort for me.

"That's all we have time for today, Mrs. Latham. This was an excellent first session. You have been very open and that is the best way to sort through one's life to make it the best it can be. If you would like to schedule another appointment, Candace will set that for you at the desk."

"Thank you, Dr. Denby. Have a good afternoon."

I exit his office and walk down the corridor to the waiting room alone. I knew this was going to happen and it's probably why I've avoided going to see a psychiatrist for so long. As I enter the waiting room I see a bespectacled woman reading a tabloid, featuring Remy's undeniably handsome face on the cover with an inset of the children and myself playing at the neighborhood park. *The Lathams' Charmed Life*, the nauseating headline reads followed by, *inside the actor's practically perfect family life. Plus, is a new Latham on the way?* I assure you there isn't.

I bet many women are envious of the life they think I have. Young girl from Minnesota with a penchant for writing meets the man of her dreams on the movie set she helped to create. Riches, children and romance ensue. It sounds perfect. It sounds like a dream. As I age I have learned that the only people who really know what's going on in a relationship are the people in it.

I walk past Candace's desk and the other patients in the waiting room to head out the door.

I'm not waiting anymore.

Tom's Crew

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The simple story is that I needed a job. I had an anxious moment when I wondered whether it was better to work at my father's office. But I went in anyway. I sat in a lime green vinyl chair and handed Tom the help wanted sign that I had taken from his front window. That was the extent of my application.

Tom was a small man. His skin was a little pale but he had fierce, Prussian blue eyes. He wore his brown hair with a slight part left of center.

"I'm Tom. Did you like Top Gun?" he asked me.

"Well, it's been a while since I've seen it, but yeah."

"Do you like Nicole Kidman?"

"In what way?"

"Think she's hot?"

"Yeah. I think Rebecca DeMornay's hotter." I shrugged.

"Stand up," he told me. I had no frame of reference, but I knew the interview was going well, bizarre though it was.

I did.

"Grin."

I did.

"You got the job."

I did.

Tom's Crew cut grass. Tom, the owner, had heard of these two brothers who cut grass over in Muskegon during the summer to pay for college. They made so much money that they never did go to college. Tom thought that was a great idea and tried it himself. Tom almost looked like Tom Cruise. He must have thought it funny to name the business Tom's Crew. "Let us give your lawn a Crew cut," ran the ad in the phone book. The ad featured a little green man on a riding mower.

Tom bought this old, run down, one island gas station to use as his base. It had wooden siding painted brown and the signs all showed rust stains. The large plate glass window where his help wanted sign had been needed to be cleaned. There was a repair bay that almost always had a mower in it. The door to his office was behind the glass cased countertop. There were chips for sale and soda pop and milk. A unisex bathroom was identified with a black magic marker. He didn't care about selling gas to

cars. He'd open when he got there and close when he got hungry. Anyway, gas stations don't make much on gas. They make money on milk and junk food.

I said I knew something about small engines which was true. I said I'd had a year of college which was almost true. Mostly, I was looking for a job and he was looking for someone who could repair engines, pump gas, talk with customers, and ride a mower. He hired me. He liked the way I grinned. He said people will trust my smile.

"Any questions?"

I grinned. "One. Do you know anybody that might rent me a room?"

Tom sent me out to buy OSHA boots. We had to wear khaki pants or shorts so I bought some of those too. He issued me three shirts, the kind with snaps down the front and the oval name over the heart. Mine read "Tom." They all read "Tom." Tom introduced me to the chief mechanic, Luis.

Luis was an illegal alien Tom was paying under the table. He was a good mechanic, but overworked ever since Tom decided to add "We repair small engines!" to the advertising. Luis had an extra bed I could have if I'd chip in for rent.

"Eef you use a tool, put it back. Eef you fix an engeene, put eet over there. Eef you write an order for a new engeene, put eet here." He gestured with hand waves that got the point across in the small, pale yellow repair bay. His system was simple and direct.

"What about that mower?" I asked, nodding to a gun metal gray push mower.

He shook his head, arms akimbo. "That mower ees efucked. We esell them for parts."

Tools are on the bench, oil is under the bench. Always wear glasses when sharpening blades. Maintain our mowers first. Very simple and direct. It was May.

Luis trained me on pumping gas. We offered full service at self-serve prices as an incentive to motorists. Pumping gas isn't as easy as I had thought. Luis showed me how to stand, left leg straight, right leg bent, pump with the left hand and lean on the car with a rag in your right hand. Look around, like you are in a hurry to get the job done.

Always check tire pressure and ask if they want you to check the oil. If they do, they are a quart low. Recommend Quaker State because we get three cents more a can. Squeegee the windscreen from the driver side. That way, you can get a free cleavage peek at women drivers. Summer time in a tourist town? Lot's of women drivers in bikini tops. I grinned to myself. Tom's Crew was located on the only street out of town. To get to the beach, or even to get up to the bluffs, people had to drive right by the station. There were a few large homes up in the bluffs that were built by lumber barons. Now, they served as summer homes for wealthy people, including a few professional athletes. I started to think about seeing one of my favorite hockey players with his two girlfriends but I snapped out of it and looked at Luis. He licked his lips.

I met Tom's Crew at the end of the day when they drove in. There were three teams of two people, Stan and Wes, Bob and Steve, and Quinten and Trent. The three

trucks roared into the field behind the station in a way that reminded me of a sloppy form of synchronized swimming. They were all covered with sweat and grass. It was nice to meet me. My presence meant that, starting the next day, somebody would get a day off. They were going to Tom's place to watch "The Outsiders" that night. Stan, who shook my hand first, looked like Ponyboy.

I met Luis at his place after fetching my stuff. Luis's place had freedom written all over it. The air was warm and stagnant. He hadn't dusted, ever. Couldn't have. The baseboards had a grey line of dust on them. He probably saved a small fortune on brooms and cleaning supplies. Still, the place was orderly. There were three rooms, all the same pastel yellow as the repair bay. A main room with a kitchenette and appliances from the fifties, a bedroom that featured a bed with no headboard and a pile of his clothes, and a john with no door. Luis had hung ugly plastic beads, reddish-purple alternating with purpley-red, from the bathroom doorway more for ambiance than privacy. That was Luis – orderly, but in a lazy way. I couldn't help stereotyping him. He acted stereotypically.

Turned out that the bed he had for me was a couch. It was fine with me. It wasn't my bed, and the springs were all but gone, but at the time, I couldn't have cared less. I threw my bags in a corner and followed Luis out the door.

He drove to Tom's house. I don't think he looked at the road once. He fiddled around with his cigarette and the radio. He simply trusted himself that the car was pointed down the road. I asked him how he got a driver's license. He said he had three of them.

They were two beers ahead of us and teased Luis about it. Luis produced a baggie as an answer.

"Oh yes, pullover weed!" said Stan.

Wes explained, "Pullover weed is that stuff that, if you're driving a car while smoking it, you have to pull over to try to remember where you were going."

I nodded. "Well, I'm not going anywhere." They all laughed with me.

The gang talked about the day. Nothing like smoking grass after cutting grass, they said. I sat silently.

"Hey, Luis. This stuff dangerous?"

"No, mi hermano."

Tom spoke up without taking his eyes off the movie. "All that bullshit about pot turning people into criminals is bullshit. Who believes that bullshit? Can you see some stoner trying to mug a guy? Stoner not gonna mug no guy."

"What if the guy was carrying Oreos?" asked Stan. We laughed so hard we missed some of the movie and Tom made us rewind it.

The conversation turned to Tom Cruise. Except it wasn't about Tom Cruise. It was about what it would be like to be Tom Cruise. Sleeping with Nicole Kidman, driving a Porshce. Tom assumed Tom had a Porshce. Tom pronounced Porshce

without the final "e" which drove me nuts. We toasted Tom, real Tom, at the end of the movie. It was part of the ritual.

Luis woke me up very early the next morning. I squinted in denial. What time was it and why did we have to get up so early?

"Deed you feel up the mowers with gas?"

"No."

"Deed you check oil and tires?"

"No." I sat up.

He grinned at me. "Me neither."

I followed him out the door. We walked the five blocks to the station down a shady side street. Luis had the key. The crew, except Bob and Steve who had the day off, rolled in silently within the hour and drove off in pairs in freshly filled trucks with freshly filled mowers.

Tom didn't get there until almost ten. He went straight to his desk and drowned his hands in the papers. I watched him for a while. He cranked through a column of numbers on the back of a manila envelope. He had a calculator, but the paper wheel was empty. Like everything else about the station, it was stained with grease and grime. I guess I stood there for too long because I heard my father's voice again.

"Do you have anything to do?" he asked.

"Well, no. No customers, nothing to fix." I shrugged.

"Ok, you can sweep the floor up," he said.

The room wasn't that big, so sweeping didn't take long. Still, I felt foolish because the place was a dump and the bare, concrete floor was the cleanest thing there. His glass cases were grimey from fingerprints and motor oil. The ceiling tiles had dust near the airducts. Clear glass refrigerator doors actually had nicotine stains. Maybe they weren't nicotine, but the doors weren't clean, either.

Tom's phone rang. Tom had been waiting for the call. He motioned me over. He hadn't done a lick of work all day but he had dirt under his fingernails. "Do you know where this is?" he asked.

"Yes." I recognized the address immediately. My parents' house was on that street.

"You drive."

We went around to the remaining truck and trailer. I could have driven with a blindfold on. I hadn't been gone for two days and the street already felt distant. Mature shade trees protected neatly manicured lawns and recently paved driveways. The houses were aloof as if they were above the hurley and burley of the real world. Tom spent the ride fiddling with two headsets. He handed one to me and said they would keep us hooked up over the noise of the mowers.

We let down the ramp and he climbed aboard the first mower. It had decals all over it and the word "Maverick" was painted on the back of the seat. He looked at me, "I feel the need."

I spread my hands and shook my head not understanding him.

"The need for speed." He looked just the way my brother did on Christmas when we were kids. His mower opened up and he took off up the driveway. I started mine and went after him. I saw Mrs. Carpenter on the steps of her tall Tudor house talking with Tom who was explaining the invoice to her. He waved me onto the Carpenter's lawn after a second or two. It was the best lawn in the neighborhood, rich in color and texture. Once as kids, we tried to make a shortcut to school over it which brought all hell down on us. I would have run right over the flowers that bordered the West side except that I didn't feel like talking to that old biddy right then anymore than I did when I was a kid.

I knew she was watching me, trying to figure out where she had seen this young man before. I stared straight ahead or looked away while turning. After a while she gave up and went inside.

Tom and I mowed all that afternoon. We covered three houses on my old street and still found time to get a hot dog and play "Mortal Kombat" at Sudsy's. I thought I'd had a pretty good day, but Tom called me into his office not five minutes after we returned to the station. When he told me to sit down, I had a familiar feeling of apprehension.

"Ok. Here's the thing. The thing is, you idle the mower engine too high. You gotta cut it back. And your lines aren't straight. You have to have straight lines, from East to West."

"Are you serious? What about going in a circle or diagonally?" I asked. My own father had wanted a different pattern every time. Once, he took over in the middle of the job because I was using the same pattern as last time.

"I'm very serious. There's a right way to do things and a wrong way. If you wanna work for me, you'll do it the right way." He drew several maps of people's yards to explain how to mow a lawn. He said he was a little disappointed but quickly added it was okay because it was my first time. I caught him referring to a Tom Cruise movie only once, but I think he did it more than that. After an hour of this, he let me go wash up for the nightly movie.

Within a week's time this had become the new routine in my life. I would mow in place of the crew member who had the day off. I would fix mowers or snowblowers or whatever was in the shop when Luis had the day off. I would talk to customers and clients. And I pumped some gas now and then always sneaking peeks at whatever cleavage presented itself. I learned to leave a streak at eye level so that the woman would ask me to clean the windscreen a second time. Whatever I did, Tom would correct me. It would be more of a scold than a correction because he never showed me how he wanted anything done outside of mowing. Tom would simply say I was doing it wrong. I learned he did this with most of the guys. At night, we would meet at Tom's house get buzzed and watch a Tom Cruise video. Conversation would always turn to Tom Cruise and his life and his car and his wife.

If the movie was "Cocktail," we'd try to drink the drinks Tom made. Wes would get all mopey over Elizabeth Shue until Tom shut him up with a long diatribe about the obvious beauty of Nicole Kidman. No one thought Kelly McGillis was hot, but "Top Gun" was the movie we saw most often. I noticed the crew quoting last night's movie on the next day's shift. It was a practiced ritual.

It wasn't until we saw "Risky Business" for the second time that I found myself joining in. Quinten had been teasing me to shut up that night. It was his backwards way of trying to get me out of my shell. By the end of June, they were all pretty convinced that I wouldn't ever offer an opinion on any of the fine young ladies who starred opposite Tom. Suddenly, I said: "I'd like to do it on a train with Rebecca DeMornay."

Tom just about pissed his pants. "Must I remind everyone that the object of Tom's affection is Nicole Kidman?" He was ripping the label off of a bottle of beer and tossing the shreds onto his floor. "The prize is Nicole Kidman. That's who Tom married. That's all you need to know. Rebecca DeMornay isn't good enough to shave Nicole's peach fuzz."

"I like blondes," I shrugged.

"Nicole could play a blonde." Tom interrupted. He looked at me as if staring at me would help convince me of Nicole's acting talents.

"Right. She could dye her hair like..."

"You fool. If she dyed her hair, she'd be a blonde!"

God Bless Stan for jumping to complete my thought. "What about that one movie, wassit?"

"To Die For," said Wes.

"Yeah, To Die For."

Tom paused. "Are you guys trying to ruin me? The idea here is that we all look like Tom Cruise. The name is Tom's Crew. It's all about Tom. Tom thinks Nicole's perfect, so we think she's perfect. Get it? We say what Tom says. Get it?"

The conversation went downhill from there. On the way home, I asked Luis if Tom really thought he or I looked like Tom Cruise.

"Hey, man. Wha do I care? He puses me."

July was a hot month in more ways than one. To celebrate Independence Day, we watched "Born on the Forth of July." We rarely watched that movie because real Tom is in a wheelchair which depresses Tom. Trent quit after a long row with Tom over the right way, the Tom's Crew way, to handle clients. Apparently someone complained about the orientation of the tracks. I'm not sure that's the right word for it. Anyway, Quinten was going East-West and Trent was going North-South. Tom got on Trent's case and that was that. I never did get a day off all summer.

No one seemed to care that Trent was gone. The crew carried on as if Trent hadn't been there in the first place. I thought Quinten might be pissed so I asked him about it. He simply said, "That's life." That night we watched "All the Right Moves."

Trent had been a Lea Thompson man. No one said a thing. Not even during the "I didn't quit" speech.

Sunshine hit my face and woke me as it had every morning since May. I walked heavily into the bathroom. Luis followed me in with his eyes. He was lying on top of his sheets in his underwear. His apartment was very hot at dawn. The air was stagnant and I could see dust floating on the sunlight streaming in through the blinds. Luis and I really hadn't talked at all since Trent was fired. Between the nightly movies and my daily grass cutting assignments, there hadn't been time.

"Why are you workeeng here, man?" He asked.

"I'm kinda taking a dump here." I stared back at him through the beads.

"So? Your mouth don work on the toilet?" he pulled out a cigarette from the in his pants, which were on the floor.

I gave up right away. "All right. What do you want to know?"

He got up on one elbow. "eSeriously, why are you workeeng here?"

I shrugged. "Cuz Tom needed help and I needed six bucks an hour."

"Man, your parent's are reech."

"I don't want my parents money. It comes with too many strings attached. I'd have to go to the college they went to for one thing."

"Yeah, but couldn't they get you a job? You don't have to work for Tom."

"Yeah. What's his deal? Why'd he get huge on Trent?"

"Cuz he's a jerk. Man, you theenk I like workeeng for eem? I'm ellegal. I'm stuck. You ain't"

"What about Stan and..."

He waived me off. "They're too stoopid to care. So what ees eet? Why don't you get your old man to get you a job."

"I don't want anything from him."

"You're efool."

"Why? I like this job."

"Could do behtter."

"You're starting to sound like my father."

"Well, your father ees right. Go back to school. Don't be a dummy like me."

"Dude, I do not think you're a dummy."

"I got no college. I got no future."

We both showered and dressed and walked to work, talking all the way. I admitted to him that I liked the thought of this kind of work. I always liked the smell of gasoline and fresh cut grass. I could get plenty of both in this job. He asked me what I liked about those smells. I said they smelled like responsibility. I had always associated them with the grown up world as a kid.

"Eef you want responsibility, go to college and learn what to do with it. You wanna end up like Tom?"

"Well, no." I looked around. "I don't but I don't want to go back to college either. I just didn't get into it. The people were tools."

"You don't have to go back there you moron. Take a few classes at community college. You build up a few credits then you transfer when you figure out what you wanna do."

I knew as soon as he said it that Luis was right. Community College hadn't been an option for me when I was at home. But now I was free to make up my own mind. I wasn't going anywhere I wanted to go without college and I wasn't going to stay at Tom's Crew. If I had a moment of clarity, I owe it all to Luis.

After that, I felt more at ease around the guys, but less at ease with Tom himself. Tom would chew us out by day when our orientation didn't match or if dirt was on the floor or if there was some other infraction of the Tom's Crew way. One time, Tom sent all six of us out to attend to a jeep because he didn't want us being lazy in front of a customer. Tom himself did not lift a finger. He rarely did and I never figured out how his fingernails got so dirty.

Luis would save us by night with the finest grass anyone had ever cut. I never knew where he got it or which way the money went, but I didn't want to know either. And there was plenty of beer. Gas and grass by day, grass and gas by night. It took me all summer to figure out just how much I could smoke or drink without being too hungover. It was never enough to escape Tom.

I came to dread "Days of Thunder" night. Even I had to admit that Nicole looked great, but the movie made Tom go on and on about Nicole. The movie isn't all that good to begin with. Add to that Tom's never-ending views on the life of Tom Cruise and it wasn't hard to see why we needed the beer and the pot. I finally told Tom I was sick of hearing about Tom and Nicole and their wonderful life.

"How can you possibly know anything about their life? They probably never see each other." I blasphemed.

"Ok. You're gone. Get out of my house." He pointed to the door while everyone else laughed. "No. I'm serious, get out. Don't you people get it? We are Tom's Crew."

"Dude. We get it. It's not that funny." I said.

"It's not supposed to be funny. It's clever." Tom's eye grew red and his face became flush.

"No, it's not." I stared back at him. The laughing had died down. Everyone was looking at the floor for a place to hide.

"Is that what you think? What else do you think?" He bobbed his head trying to burn off his rage.

"For a start, I'm sick of you yelling at us for leaving an invoice in a truck at the end of a shift. I haven't seen you file one piece of paper yet. And you could sweep the damn floor yourself. At least tell us to clean the whole place – it's filthy. The whole place just feels like we're playing business man."

"Look who knows so much about business. What other pearls of wisdom can you share with me about how to run my business?"

"You want the truth?"

"I think I'm entitled!"

"You can't handle the truth!"

Everyone burst out laughing, even Tom. I thanked God for the chance to get out of that conversation. But it proved my point that he wasn't a serious business owner when the crew spent the next day, a Sunday, racing the mowers around the field behind the station like Tom in "Days of Thunder." Disgusted, I manned the pumps all day.

Tom took the next week off for some reason I can't remember. Oddly enough, Luis and I were left in charge of the station. I guess Tom trusted me with the money more than anyone else. I spent a lot of time scratching my head.

Every time a car would pull up, I'd hear Luis say: "Hey go get thees one OK?" Luis hated to pump gas because he smoked. Pumping gas meant he'd have to wash his hands just to be able to light up. Washing his hands wasn't Luis's strong suit.

I jogged out to a Porsche. It was Nicole Freaking Kidman, larger than life. She really looks as tall as people say. She wore a flower print sun dress. I stood as I had been trained leaning on her car and pumping her gas in silence. I checked the oil and the tire pressure but failed to clean the windshield, so I didn't get my cleavage peek. I remember that day was sunny and dry and warm. There wasn't a mark on her car.

"Will there be anything else, Ms. Kidman?" I asked. Inside, I was shivering.

"Nao."

She seemed surprised that I had recognized her. She gave me the look she gave Val Kilmer in that ridiculous Batman movie. I wanted to melt. I wanted to scream. I wanted to get in her car and go wherever she was going. I wanted to tell her I'd be her pump boy or whatever she would want to call me. I'd have worked for real Tom, too. I wanted to jump up and down like an idiot. I did the next best thing. I stood there like an idiot. I stood there long after she had driven out of sight. Now that some time has passed I can tell you her money smelled better than everyone else's. It smelled like fresh bread.

I never did tell Tom. Screw him. He should've been there. I quit the day he got back and took Luis's advice. But I saved one shirt, which I still wear whenever I cut my lawn.

The Button Burial

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It was Black Friday, the day of shopping madness, that American invention where soccer moms and plumbers alike wrestle over toys and electronics. That day where “sale,” “clearance,” “savings,” and “mark-down” flash with the fervency of neon lights planted in the heart of a red light district. Greta Wegmüller, age seventeen, saw those words and lunged, although armed with different motives than the typical insurance salesman or nurse.

Her morning began at the birth of cock crow, sometime around 5 a.m. Greta snatched her mother’s car keys, jammed them in the ignition, and took off to the nearest mall, 2.3 miles away. Her journey to Mecca had commenced. She played no music nor did she listen to the news. Her car radio was off and the windows were closed shut. Noise and wind would not distract her from her mission. Nothing would. She would use every coupon crumpled at the bottom of her pockets.

Greta swerved into the parking lot and zoomed into one of the few empty spaces. Not caring that she had parked crookedly, she turned the car off and left the warmth of the driver’s seat. Her face burned and her fingers tingled as she jogged across the lot. Every nanometer of her body was excited. And when her right foot touched the floor of the closet department store, her thrill spread even further until it enveloped her entire being in a weird, invisible aura.

“5, 999, 999,” she muttered and for the rest of the afternoon, she owned the store. First she darted to the junior’s department and then dashed to every other clothing department after that. Then she hit the next store. And the next. And the next.

For hours afterwards, Greta wandered through the mall in a trance. She was a tall, blonde, and willowy zombie, swinging around a bunch of bursting bags with trendy names printed across them. Each of the shopping bags contained a stack of buttoned sweaters and buttoned shirts and even a pair of jeans with buttons adorning the ankles. Every article of clothing contained buttons because collecting buttons had not so simply become Greta’s passion.

You see, every time Greta looked at a button, someone looked back at her – just not anybody but a Jew or a gypsy or an effeminate man any passerby would’ve guessed a homosexual. A Holocaust victim, somebody forced to endure the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, always gazed back at her shining blue eyes and her small,

upturned nose and her soft, porcelain skin. They gazed back at her Aryan perfection with the most poignant envy for being beautiful and Protestant and heterosexual. They gazed back at her and asked why *she* should inherit the world.

But Greta could never answer why she and not they. She was a hopelessly confused and guilty girl. She figured she had to redeem herself somehow.

Greta began seeing the faces when she was twelve. She was folding her laundry on a quiet Sunday afternoon, nothing extraordinary by any means. Her mother always taught her to be neat and thorough. Greta began by tying socks and sorting underwear and then proceeded to pulling out her sweaters from the laundry basket. After she tucked the sleeves behind the first sweater, she laid it out on her bed and admired the pretty cashmere. Then she fingered the smooth, wooden button sewn at the neck and smiled but only an instant later, she gasped.

A pale and emaciated man with chiseled cheekbones, a wiry nose, and eyes that bulged from hunger stared at Greta. A bit of a tattered gray cloth, like the edge of a jail uniform, grazed his skinny neck. Mesmerized, Greta stared back until she thought to ask, "Who are you?"

The starving man replied with an air of not caring at all, "Nothing more than a Jew." He paused, waiting for the words to sink into Greta's mind. Then he bore his eyes straight into hers. "Can't you tell? You see my nose, don't you?"

Greta only shuddered.

"It's rather crooked, isn't it?" the man asked, "And these eyes...these eyes of mine are much too dark. That's what the Nazis say, anyway. I'm a banker, you know, and—"

Greta clasped her hand over the button and turned away. She couldn't look at it anymore. A moment later, she ran to the bathroom to study her reflection. She almost hoped to find that her nose was crooked and that her eyes were dark. No such luck. The girl ran her long fingers over her delicate features in the mirror.

"Hitler would have been proud," her grandmother told Greta the night before when the girl's grandparents babysat her. The old woman stroked her granddaughter's chin and beamed. She actually beamed.

Greta Wegmüller hated Nazis but more so than most other decent, feeling beings. That's because she had a personal connection with them, an undeniable blood connection. Both of her grandparents had been Nazis back in World War II. Her grandmother was a good German housewife and the mother of seven plump children—all blond and doll-like who she first starting birthing at age sixteen. Her grandfather worked in a concentration camp.

After the comment about Hitler approving of her looks, Greta squirmed and gulped. Her grandmother's hands were almost as cold as the woman's odd demeanor.

"You know, we used to bake the Jews and turn them into buttons," her grandfather explained and later that evening. Then he sipped his bourbon. He showed no guilt, no remorse. His eyes remained as still as glass. The man only placed down the glass and lit a thick cigar, which he contently puffed.

"Oh, Claus! You tell her about the good times! Did you hear that, Greta? Buttons! Like what you wear on your clothes, yah! Buttons!"

Her grandmother pinched Greta's cheeks and chanted, "*Take hold of kettle, broom and pan/Then you'll surely get a man!/Shop and office leave alone/Your true life work lies at home.* That's what we German women used to sing, back in the good old days when we turned those ugly Jews into lovely buttons."

Greta blinked, only because she was too terrified to fully flinch.

"It's such a nice song. Won't you sing, child?"

"I'm too young to marry," Greta stated rather flatly.

"Now, yes, but you're twelve now. In just a few years, you'll find a nice, pure beau. Now sing with me. The words are very simple!"

"No, Grandma. That song's from a bad time in history. I learned all about it in history class."

"A bad time? You ungrateful little Jew!" Then the woman slapped Greta and ordered her husband to go home with her. Greta ignored the red welt across her face and tried to fall asleep but her thoughts kept returning to everything her grandparents had said about Nazi Germany that night. Their words, not the welt, hurt.

For two weeks after Greta's first strange button sighting, she refused to wear anything containing a single button. Greta shirked the unfolded clothing remaining on her bed and raided her mother's closet when she ran out of clean, buttonless laundry.

"I had no idea you liked my clothes so much, Greta," the girl's mother exclaimed toward the end of the two weeks, "Why don't I give you a few pieces to keep? You're old enough to take care of them and you have enough room in your closet."

The girl smiled and nodded. The longer she could go without wearing the buttoned shirts and sweaters, the better. She was afraid to see another face peering at her.

Greta's mother turned to her closet and kneeled to inspect a large, plastic storage bin on the floor. When she removed the bin's lid, the stench of mothballs overwhelmed the room. Greta backed away. The girl's mother shifted through the old garments and finally pulled out a small jacket.

"How about this?" she asked.

Greta shivered slightly upon seeing the jacket's shiny buttons. She caught a glimpse of another Holocaust victim and immediately looked down at the floor. "Um, no thanks, Mom. It's, er, not really my color."

"But it's blue. It'll look lovely with those eyes of yours. Why don't you try it on?"

"I, uh, it doesn't, well, it's not..."

"Oh, it's not in style, is that what it is? Ha, I sometimes forget what it's like being your age."

Greta nodded excitedly. Now she had an excuse her mother would accept.

"Tsk, Greta, one day you'll learn that it's about wearing what looks good, not what's in fashion. Maybe twenty years from now but eventually."

Greta didn't react to her mother's ritual fashion lesson. The both of them just

lingered there, awkwardly, until the younger of the two imparted "I have to go do my homework now!" much too enthusiastically and then abruptly left.

But instead of racing to read *The Devil's Arithmetic* and completing pages 67 and 70 of her math workbook, Greta dove into her room and began plucking the buttons off all her shirts and sweaters. Dozens of sad, empty faces stared back at her.

"Mean buttons," she muttered as she tore them off anything in her room containing them, "I can't bear to look at them." She squeezed shut her eyes and felt around for the buttons and tossed each one onto the floor.

After Greta had removed all of the buttons from her clothes, she scampered downstairs and rifled through the kitchen for an empty coffee can. She found a giant one in the recycling bin, grabbed it and ran back upstairs. She scooped up all of the buttons from the floor and dumped them into the can, satisfied by the pour of *clinks* and *clanks* that followed.

"There," Greta exclaimed as she pressed the lid onto the can, "You can't haunt me anymore."

The sound of a hundred little screams pierced the air. Greta shrieked and rolled the can underneath of her bed. "I didn't kill you!" She sprinted downstairs to start her homework. If only her English teacher had assigned another novel.

When Greta began walking around in her buttonless shirts and sweaters, her mother soon noticed and was irritated.

"What have you done? Do you have any idea how much that cardigan cost?" her mother scolded Greta one morning when she came downstairs for breakfast.

"Oh," Greta stammered, "The buttons were, er, b-b-bothering me."

"How can anything from Nordstrom bother anybody?"

"They –"

"I don't want to hear it! You can't just go around destroying your clothes. Don't think I didn't see the other sweaters you ruined. Your father and I work hard and pay good money for your clothes. How many times do I have to lecture you about this? I mean, last year you got paint stains all over your entire wardrobe, even those Ralph Lauren jeans! So I went out and bought you all new –"

"I'm sorr –"

"Look, just don't do it again, Greta, because I'm not buying you new clothes until you outgrow them. Leave your clothes alone." Her mother took a swig of coffee.

Greta nodded and poured herself a bowl of cereal.

"Tsk, don't eat that, I have eggs and bacon for you on the table."

The next morning, Greta came downstairs in another buttonless cardigan but swiftly took her ski jacket from the coat hanger to conceal what she was wearing from her mother.

"Morning, Mom."

"Good morning, Greta." Her mother was beating eggs. The coffeemaker gurgled in the background as sausage fried on the stove. "Aren't you hot in that jacket?"

"Oh, no, I, uh, feel kinda cold."

"Really?" Her mother put her whisk down. "Here, let me feel your forehead."

Greta backed away, scared of her mother noticing her cardigan peaking out from her jacket. "I'm not sick."

"Then what's the matter? The thermostat's set at seventy."

"Er, period chills, I guess," Greta muttered.

"Ah." Her mother picked up the whisk again and continued beating the yellow goop in the bowl.

Greta wiggled around, feeling too warm. She gulped down the glass of milk set before her on the counter and turned to the newspaper. She searched around for the comics when her mother asked her what kind of omelet she wanted.

"Ham and cheese, please, Mom."

Her mother studied her for a moment. "You're bright red, Greta. Take that jacket off, you must be burning up."

Reluctantly, Greta wormed out of her jacket.

"Greta! You took the buttons off of that one, too! Not the Saks cardigan, for God's sake!"

"They were—"

"Your grandmother gave you that cardigan!"

"I—"

"Tsk, no respect," her mother muttered, "Absolutely no respect." She threw a clump of ham onto the pan. "I really don't understand what's going on with this girl..."

Despite her mother's grumbling, Greta's fear of buttons persisted for the next few years, right through her senior year of high school. There was nothing Greta could do. Out of frustration and embarrassment, her mother eventually dropped the subject. She no longer pried and no longer bought Greta buttoned garments.

Even Greta's teachers at G. Hershey High knew better than to wear their sweaters and Oxfords during the periods they taught Greta. After all, they all remembered Greta's meltdown during her freshman year. The whole school did.

On January 30, only days into her second semester of high school, Greta was taking a trigonometry exam. As usual, she was the youngest student in her math class. She was at a point in her life where her fear of buttons had so greatly intensified that she habitually gazed at the floor and avoided studying other people's clothes.

Greta sat at her desk and scribbled out the steps to her problems. She was an exemplary math student. In fact, she was an exemplary student overall and was an excellent test taker. There was no reason for her to be nervous. Until, of course, Mrs. Lyford stepped up in front of her. Nobody knows why Mrs. Lyford approached Greta nor is anyone sure what she whispered to Greta. All anyone can confirm is that when Mrs. Lyford spoke to Greta, Greta looked up, stared at the buttons on her teacher's sweater, and screamed. Every student in the room stopped working. An instant later, Greta backed away from Mrs. Lyford and fell out of her chair onto the floor. Half of the class smiled or laughed while the other half sat there, stunned.

"Greta," Mrs. Lyford spoke very slowly, "Are...you...okay?"

The terrified girl curled up on the floor, hands pasted over her eyes. "I saw him! I saw the man – the Jew!"

"What are you talking about? There is no man."

"Yes, there is, inside your button!" she yelled, "There is a Jew inside your button!"

The room fell tensely quiet. Mrs. Lyford seized Greta's wrist and whisked her up. "We're going to Dr. Amsel's office. I don't know what's gotten into you."

"I saw him, I did!" the girl insisted while her teacher escorted her down the hallway filled with the stink of bleach.

Click. Clack. Clickety. Clack. Mrs. Lyford's heels pounded the yellow linoleum floors. They were the same floors that reflected Greta's whimpering echoes.

When the couple reached Dr. Amsel's office, Mrs. Lyford bypassed his secretary and rapped on the principal's office door.

"Earl! Earl, I know you're in there!" Mrs. Lyford screeched, "Even *your* lunch breaks don't last until 2:30 p.m.!"

The door creaked open and a dumpy, bald man popped out his head. "Stop your shrieking! What IS your problem?"

"This," Mrs. Lyford stressed and pushed Greta forward, "is my problem. She started screaming something about Jews in the middle of a test! I don't understand it, she's always so well-behaved."

"No need to talk about the girl in the third person, if you as a *math* teacher know what that is."

"Really, Early, just talk to her and do something. I need to go back and make sure my students aren't cheating on their test!" She whipped around and marched back down the hall.

Dr. Amsel and Greta stood facing each other. Then the principal beckoned the girl into his office, where they both took a seat.

"Well, come in, girl. What's your name again?"

"Greta," she squeaked.

"Ah, Greta...Greta Wegmüller?"

"Yes, sir," she squeaked again.

"You're a very good student, so I hear, a very smart girl."

"Thank you, sir."

"No need to thank me. You earned those grades, didn't you?" He paused, "But could you explain what happened in your math class today?"

She started with "Well..." but never finished.

"Mrs. Lyford said something about Jews. You know we don't tolerate anti-Semitic comments at this school. We forbid offensive remarks of any kind."

"I have nothing against Jews, sir, nothing at all. Just the opposite, really."

"And yet---"

"There's this curse."

"Curse?" He raised his eyebrow.

"I have this curse. I can't look at buttons b-b-because...when I do...I see faces. I see the faces of Holocaust victims. My grandparents were Nazis. And my grandfather worked at a concentration camp. He distributed, or rather didn't distribute, food. And now every time —"

"But why buttons, Greta?"

"Because my grandfather said they turned the Jews into buttons."

"Ah." Dr. Amsel examined the small furrows in the girl's forehead, the furrows of sincerity. "Have you seen a doctor about this?"

"No, this is the first time I've told anyone."

"Why not your parents?"

"They'll just think I'm complaining about my grandparents again."

"You complain about them often?"

"Of course. They're Nazis."

"I see," Dr. Amsel sighed, "Here's what we'll do, Greta. I'll set you up for an appointment with the school psychiatrist and you'll talk to her. You'll tell her what you've told me. In the meantime, go back to class and finish taking your test."

Greta nodded and got up. With the grace of a surgeon turned ballerina, she pivoted on her left foot and returned to class. Her test and curious classmates awaited.

When Greta came home later that day, she immediately rushed up the stairs to her room. She jumped on her bed and logged onto her laptop. She started typing in bold font: NEED A MATH TUTOR? CALL GRETA WEGMUELLER AT 581-236-8723 FOR HIGHER TEST GRADES NOW! ONLY \$15 AN HOUR! QUALIFICATIONS: 4.0 GPA, EXPERIENCE IN ALGEBRA THROUGH TRIGONOMETRY, WINNER OF THE HENRICH COUNTY MATH OLYMPICS FIVE YEARS IN A ROW, FRESHMAN MATH LEAGUE PRESIDENT AT G. HERSHEY HIGH. Five minutes later, she had printed 50 copies of the flyer, not too concerned about the lives of trees.

Greta woke up early the next morning and from there, everything seemed to move at 4x speed. She studied her reflection in the mirror as she did every morning, specifically focusing on her arctic eyes. After a quick shower and even quicker breakfast, she sprinted to catch the early bus.

"Morning," the bus driver said.

Greta nodded and breathed, "Good morning."

Only two other students sat in the bus. She slid into a seat and repeated "600" over and over to herself. That's how many buttons she'd collected thus far. But that number would soon grow much bigger.

The janitor was just unlocking the front door of the school when Greta hopped out of the bus. Her plaid skirt swished back and forth with each of her steps toward the building. Never before had she been so determined. The moment she walked into the school, she taped a flyer to the nearest wall. Thirty feet later, she did the same. She snaked around the corridors until she had taped up every single flyer.

After school, Greta caught the bus to the closet thrift shop. It was an ecumenical thrift shop, headed by two local churches mostly with the intention to provide gently

used items to the poor at a low price. So they accepted every and any donation, regardless of age or quality. The churches put what little money they received for each item toward the parish school. Greta thought it was perfect for her purposes.

Even though she detected a trace of vomit and urine in the air when she entered, Greta remained her usual polite and reserved self. She was only here for the buttons.

"Excuse me," she called at a volunteer donning a navy blue apron, "how much are these shirts?"

"Everything on that rack is \$0.75. We're having a sale today, you know. Those sweaters are \$2 and the jeans are \$3. Shoes are fill-a-bag for \$2.50. Everything else is priced as marked."

"Thank you," she muttered and inspected the racks for buttoned items. After choosing a pile of garments, she stepped up to the cash register, placed a \$20 bill on the counter and left without ever speaking to a clerk. Nobody saw her.

Greta got to work as soon as she came home, popping buttons off everything she bought and then tossing the buttons into the can below her bed.

"700," she whispered.

The next day, someone's mother called Greta about tutoring. She went over the Pythagorean theorem with the boy for an hour or so, took his cash, and bolted to the thrift shop. Again, she bought buttoned clothes.

For the next couple of years, she spent every dollar she earned on collecting buttons. But Greta didn't stop there. She went to the craft store and bought scores and scores of bags full of buttons every time they went on sale. At some point, the girl even began raiding the lost and found in the school cafeteria. She was the first person to respond to an ad in the newspaper about a family giving away a bunch of their clothes for free. Each time one of the city's non-profits drove clothes to a park known for its lingering hobos, she rummaged through the heap with only one object in mind. Greta even stored a pair of tiny sewing scissors in her wallet so that whenever her mother took her shopping, she could discreetly remove the extra buttons attached to the inside of coats and blouses. Nobody ever caught her.

Greta obsessed over collecting every single button in her power. She only wished she could rip them off the clothes of classmates, family members, and strangers. But even she noted the taboo.

As her collection expanded, Greta had to become more creative with storage. For the first few months, she hid the buttons in cans and boxes under her bed but she soon ran out of space. Then she began stuffing buttons under her mattress, under her floorboards, and in her ceiling. When she spotted a hole in the wall one afternoon before her parents came home, she picked at it with a knife, bit by bit.

"Fuck this," she murmured and smashed the hole with a hammer.

The girl removed a few of the cans from under her bed and stacked them inside of the wall. A quick trip to her father's workshop in the garage and a couple of squirts of putty later, the hole disappeared to the unsuspecting eye.

Greta's mother pretended not to notice her daughter's button mania. She

pretended her daughter wasn't tearing up holes in the ceiling, the floors, or the walls. She was in denial, far too ashamed to drag her daughter to a doctor. Besides, she didn't fully grasp the depth of her daughter's obsession – and even if she had, she didn't understand her daughter's motive. Greta's father, who nearly always worked outside the house, never noticed Greta's hoard and the girl's grandparents were completely unaware. Only Greta knew the full range of her obsession. And yet she never once requested emotional or psychological help. The girl had a quest and she felt obligated to carry it out.

This obligation compelled her to work and work, for she couldn't get every button for free. While most of the teachers and students at her school assumed that Greta enjoyed tutoring purely for the sake of teaching others, only Marshall guessed at something much more sinister. Marshall was a tall, baseball player who had known each other since pre-school. They had never quite been friends but, since they attended all the same schools and their mothers belonged to the same book club, they inevitably bumped into each other from time to time. And now that Marshall was failing his Algebra II class and sought Greta's help, the two students met every week during the first semester of their junior year.

During one of their regular sessions, Greta was pouring over Marshall's syllabus when he spoke. "Why do you tutor so much?"

Her eyes remained on the stapled pieces of paper. "I'm saving up."

"Saving up for what?"

Greta cleared her throat. "Turn to 78, please."

"No, Greta."

"We have to get started. I have another client at 5 p.m."

"Man, you have a problem. You're a fucking workaholic."

"Problems one through seven."

"Don't you ever have any fun?"

"Ah, you're studying polynomials."

"You take yourself way too seriously."

Greta pierced the boy with her cutting gaze. "Not myself but the *past*. Now if you're not here to study math, we can end and I'll give you a refund. But I have other students coming in this evening."

"Take a break. Last time I checked, you didn't have any friends. You ever wonder why, Greta? People talk about you all the time. It's like you can never relax. It's like you're always after something. It's like you're always running or something."

Greta gathered her books and stood up. "If you only knew. Good bye, Marshall."

Marshall stood up, too. "Greta," he exhaled as if he had been holding his breath for a long time, "I want you to come to the winter formal with me."

"I can't. I'm going shopping with my mother this weekend."

"That's a lame excuse."

"No, it's not lame. It's important."

"Okay, fine, you know what? Go shopping with your mom. What do I care? I just wanted to be your friend."

"Thankfully, you see it my way," she responded coldly. With a flick of her tote bag strap over her shoulder, she left Marshall alone at the library table with his math textbook.

Greta never tutored Marshall again.

Exactly a year later, Greta meandered throughout the mall, oblivious to the crowds that nearly engulfed her slender build. They chattered as noisily as any flock of birds and yet she barely heard them. They reeked of perfume samples, cinnamon buns, bubblegum, and institutional soap yet she barely smelled them. In fact, Greta was so unaware of their presence that she bent down in the middle of the mall's main corridor to pick something she felt brush against her shoe. She never even considered that she could get stomped to death.

Greta inspected her finding. It was a tiny black button that would've been insignificant to anyone else. But Greta sensed it there on the floor. She not only sensed it but she coddled it when as it flaunted its cadaverous face.

"Six million," she whispered so quietly that the words evaporated almost the moment the syllables slipped out of her mouth. It had taken years to get to this point.

Then Greta strolled to her car in a stupor. Instead of revving up the engine right away, she strapped herself in the driver's seat and chuckled. The chuckle swelled into an enormous laugh that shook her ribs. Soon the laugh pervaded the car. Anyone walking past would have seen a beautiful blonde girl laughing so hysterically that she felt no pain when she hit her head against the steering wheel. She kept on laughing until it drained her body. The laughs slowly died and Greta placed her head on the wheel for a brief recovery. It was time to go home. It was really time to go home.

And when Greta did arrive home, she stalked to the backyard and dug. She dove her shovel into the earth and dug. She continued digging even when her parents came home past sundown.

Her mother entered the house and called Greta's name several times. The woman stepped into the kitchen to put away some groceries when the sight of flying clay caught her eye. She dropped the carton of eggs in her hands with a sloppy *thud* but did not move.

"What was that? Are you okay?" Greta's father asked and hurried to the kitchen, where pools of yellow surrounded his wife's feet. "What's the matter, honey? What are you looking at?"

Greta's mother said nothing. Naturally her father moved closer to window.

"What the hell is she doing? What's that big fucking hole for?"

"L-I-leave her al-lone."

"No! I want to know what this shit is about! That's our yard!"

"Leave her alone!"

"Well, do you know why she's digging this fucking hole?"

"I...I think so, y-yes."

"Then tell me."

"She'll...tell...you."

Greta's mother threw herself into her husband's eyes and wept. After substantially soaking her husband's shoulder, she backed away, "But you can't ask her. She has to come out and tell her yourself." She wiped the new stream of tears flowing down her cheeks. "Now, please go help her dig."

And he did.

He took hold of a shovel from a garage and headed to the backyard where he and his daughter dug in silence. An hour or two later, Marshall knocked on the front door of the house. When Mrs. Wegmüller came to the door, she simply said, "She's in the back," and retreated to the kitchen. When Marshall saw Mr. Wegmüller and Greta digging, he went to the garage for a shovel and began digging, too.

Greta did not come into the house that night because she did not plan to rest. Eventually Mr. Wegmüller went inside but Marshall stayed with Greta. Her adrenaline rush eventually faded and she toppled over with exhaustion. She and Marshall slept in the backyard. Four or five hours later, they rose again and dug some more. They spent the rest of their Thanksgiving weekend gripping their shovels. On Monday, both Greta and Marshall skipped school and by the end of the evening, they had carved the full yard into a crater.

At last, Greta pulled the tiny black button from her pocket and released it from her grasp. It landed at the bottom of the hole with no sound.

"So the last shall be the first and the first last," Greta mouthed.

Awakenings

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Oliver says women are the reason he's not a professor of mathematics anymore, though I never quite understood why. Now, instead of teaching numbers, Oliver shows people how he can tear great holes in his thighs and produce live ducklings from the wounds. For a few minutes after, they waddle clumsily around his feet as if they miss the warmth of being inside him.

I don't have a talent like Oliver's. My function, as Master Phil has put it, is to provide atmosphere for the crowd. I let them know, the minute they pass through the gate, that this is a place of unnatural wonders. A blink of my single green eye tells them what they can expect of Master Phil's Carnival.

Gates open at nine each morning. They close at ten, when the only lights on the grounds are the freestanding torches along the main boulevard and the red glow coming from inside the tents. Master Phil's identical daughters sit in the booth, one at a time, taking money and dispensing maps. His daughters are a riddle I cannot figure out, no matter how I try. I rarely see more than five of them in one place, though I can remember being given at least seven names, each beginning with the letter E, to remember. Emma, Emily, Esther, and Enid. Elizabeth, Ellie, and Erin. They go out of their way to avoid me. When they can't get away, they usually make sure I know that they want to.

Little is required of me throughout the day. As long as I make several passes through the grounds, stopping when a group wants to stare, Master Phil is happy. Sometimes he walks with me, and he tells me about the past. His stories are interrupted often, as we pass people on their way to see Fat Charley or Carl the Convincing or The Head-Standing Man. Master Phil doesn't let a single person go by without asking if they're enjoying themselves. Handshakes — one of the secrets of his success.

"Your mother was the most hardheaded woman I've ever known," Master Phil says. "Forced me to observe the strangest holidays."

I want to ask more about her, but a mustachioed man with black hair perfectly parted on the left side walks out of Oliver's tent, fists balled, squinting and grinding his teeth. As soon as this man sees Master Phil, he starts yelling and pointing his long

finger. All I hear is Oliver's name and a string of curses before Master Phil shields me, tells me to make sure Edna has enough maps to last the day.

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Of my friends, Madame Ochoa has been traveling with Master Phil's Carnival longest, but she prefers the foretelling of the future to the retelling of the past. Her stories are vague, usually – full of unknowns and possibles. Pirate Wenk's stories, on the other hand, are rich with detail and action. He is a lover of knives and a lover of tales, and he is pleased to showcase either when he has an audience.

Pirate Wenk is in the middle of a show, so I stand just outside the open flap. There is a young woman seated in the back row. She turns her head, and her red hair bounces energetically over her shoulders. Her hair is almost glowing in the shadows of the tent, like it contains the essence of fire within each strand. I want to touch it, to see if it burns. The young woman looks at me, but she doesn't stare. She looks at me like she might look at anyone, and then she smiles. I begin to smile back, but a speck of dust or debris lands in my eye, and I rub at it until my cheeks are moist and my green eye has likely turned red. I blink several times, to the delight of a couple of passing children. When I can see clearly again, the young woman is watching the pirate. All I can do, until the knives stop flying and the hands start clapping, is watch the back of her head. It is a very red sort of red, this young woman's hair. Like apples or cardinals or Oliver's blood.

Between each show, Pirate Wenk takes great care in shining and sharpening his blades. He won't let me help, but he doesn't mind if I sit and watch. He enjoys the company.

"Yeah, I knew yer mother," Pirate Wenk says. As he speaks, he rubs at a foot-long blade with a piece of dirty cloth. Splitting his concentration so, between the task and his memory, causes him to speak haltingly. Gaps open up between words, sometimes lasting for five seconds or more. "What is it yeh'd like to know?"

"Anything you can tell me."

"She was great – for a broad. Never tired of my sea stories. Used to favor me, yeh know." He finishes with the foot-long blade and exchanges it for one with vicious serrations along the edge.

"Why did she go?"

"Oh – yeh know how it is, boy. Somethin' catches yer eye, somethin' that really strikes yer fancy, and all of a sudden nothin' else matters. Happened to me once." And Pirate Wenk launches into one of his sea stories – the ones that begin with 'When I was in the Navy...' and end with a beautiful woman or a fabulous treasure or a tremendous beast. He must not have been a very good pirate. In almost all of his stories, he ends up shipwrecked somewhere.

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The world outside our fence appears both threatening and inviting. Sometimes, when I can see the outline of a city, with buildings tall as mountains standing as black pillars against the sunset, I want to leave Master Phil's Carnival and find out what it's

like to look up from the foot of such buildings. To walk between them, lost in a labyrinth of brick, a galaxy of lights, a sea of people. But the people. It is the people that seem most threatening to me. They stare, mouths hanging open, teeth jutting outward, fingers pointing, when they see me within our grounds. If I were to invade their world, they might treat me much worse. They might hurt me.

Morning is the best time to take in our surroundings. I sneak from my bed in the trailer I share with Bruce, the Human Prism, whose shadow is a brilliant rainbow of colors at all times, to watch the eye of the heavens open after a night of sleep. I feel at all times that I face the universe alone. In this one moment, when the sun just breaks over whatever horizon happens to be between us, I feel the universe is facing me. I blink my eye when the sun becomes too bright, and the moment ends. But I feel I have somehow been recognized, and that is enough to get me through the day, during every other moment of which I will feel insignificant. That is my function – to provide atmosphere, to fade into the background of our grotesque family.

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Esmeralda is waiting for me outside the trailer when I return, admiring Bruce's shadow. Master Phil's daughters fantasize publicly about him. One – or several – of them has lately been in his bed a few nights a week.

In the background, Josephine's calliope calls over the grounds, as it does every morning.

"A girl was asking about you," Esmeralda says, "when I was working the booth yesterday."

She's talking to me, but her eyes keep darting toward Bruce. He's smoking a tan cigarette, standing away from the trailer so his shadow, shimmering in the morning light, stretches out over the ground.

"Asking what?"

"Questions," Esmeralda says.

"She's interested in you, dummy." Bruce stamps out his cigarette.

"She wanted to know your name." She laughs, but it comes out sounding false, and I think she's doing it for Bruce's benefit. "She called you the one-eyed kid."

"What did she look like?"

Esmeralda shrugs. "I dunno. A girl. Tall, skinny, red hair. Freckles, too. All over her nose."

Now she has my attention – who could it have been but the young woman from Pirate Wenk's tent? – but Bruce chooses this moment to wander off. With Bruce gone, Esmeralda has no more interest in hanging around our trailer, and she scampers away before I can ask anything else.

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We gather behind Master Phil's trailer once the grounds have been cleared and the gates locked for the night. Carl the Convincing starts the bonfire, as he's convinced everyone who thought otherwise that his fires burn brightest and hottest and longest. Most days, I look forward to sitting with my friends and listening to their stories. I like

hearing about the people they were before they came to Master Phil's Carnival, because these stories teach me about the world outside our grounds, but tonight my concentration is more broken than usual. I spent the day thinking about the red-headed girl and what Esmeralda said, hoping she would show up again. Every crowd that passed by, my eye was searching and sorting the faces. But she didn't come.

Madame Ochoa is gliding around, as she does, swirling her robes. She gives out horoscopes when she passes by, which is about as conversational as she gets. "Pirate Wenk!" she says amiably. "Choppy waters ahead! Batten down the hatches, or you may find yourself capsized and sinking fast! Master Phil! A voice from the past will ring out again!"

Veronica—or Veroniconda, as the sign outside her tent proclaims—is sitting with The Head-Standing Man, so she can look him in the eyes. She has a cup of Fat Charley's blackberry wine. Another, with a straw, sits on The Head-Standing Man's cart. "It isn't as though I wanted to, you understand, but the natives were becoming quite agitated. My only recourse was to release the monkey. Cost me my grant. And, of course, the research went out the window." She lifts The Head-Standing Man's cup so he can suck wine from the straw. As he drinks, she awkwardly nudges her thick glasses up the bridge of her nose. "What I didn't get at the time, you understand, is the monkey had ingested a piece of their idol. The pinky toe, as it happens. Of course, I didn't acquire this information until it was too late to salvage the project."

Oliver, who never drinks by the fire, is talking with Roger Castle. "Don't call it that," he says. "It's not a fetish—it's a fact. Married women are more experimental." As Roger listens, his bare feet are nervously burying themselves in the dirt. His talent presents as a nervous tic. If he does not make an effort to stop their movements, only his head will remain above ground. By the end of the week, when we pack up the tents and fences and trailers, the ground where Roger's tent stood will be pocked with five-foot holes.

I wander among them, no more connected to the fire and people and conversations than a firefly, pausing here and there to catch a few sentences before moving on again. No one pays me any attention. No one asks me for my story. What could I tell them that they don't already know?

My first memories are of Jilly, a contortionist who wrapped herself a little too tight and suffocated in the middle of a performance. One day, when I fell and scraped my cheek, she bent over backwards and scabbled about, singing, to cheer me up. Jilly was the closest thing I had to a mother, and she died before I knew enough to ask the really important questions.

I lie awake, trying to ignore the giggling in Bruce's bed, thinking of Jilly. She was the only person to comfort me when I was hurt, the only person to care that I might feel alone. Jilly never treated me like scenery.

When I finally fall asleep, I dream of Jilly walking on her hands. Her face has changed. Her eyes, big and loving and deep, have merged into one. With her foot, she beckons me, and I follow her through the gate and away from Master Phil's Carnival.

There is a lull in business midweek, but this is common. This is the space between the excitement of being in a new place and the excitement of leaving again, and it affects some of my friends differently than others. Fat Charley spends hours at a time standing in the middle of his tightrope, staring off into the distance. The tightrope sags dramatically under his weight. Crowds gather below him—never directly below, of course—waiting for him to lose his balance and tumble over, but Fat Charley never wobbles.

Pirate Wenk drinks between performances, until his knives are straying dangerously from their marks. Eventually, when the blades graze her bare shoulder, Pirate Wenk's lovely bathing-suited assistant storms out, and Pirate Wenk has to close his tent for the day.

"Taste some blackberry wine," he says. "Chuck's outdone 'imself with this barrel."

"No thank you."

I don't plan on staying long. The only reason I am hiding in Pirate Wenk's tent is to escape three rotten boys who have been tossing popcorn kernels, attempting to land them in my eye. But with no more performances, and his assistant retired to her trailer, the pirate sees in me an audience, and he will not let me go without first hearing a story.

"When I was in the Navy," he says, "summer of '46, I was promoted to captain. 'Twas a small vessel, yeh see, no more'n a hundred feet from bow to stern. But could she ever move!"

I listen from the front row of the tiered seating, knowing that if I excuse myself, he will continue the story the next time we meet. No matter how long the interruption lasts, the pirate will resume as if only a few seconds have passed.

"Dead o' night, a storm comes up out of nowhere. We're fightin' the wind best we can, yeh see, but mostly we're hangin' on for dear life."

As he talks, Pirate Wenk produces a velvet pouch from the pocket of his jacket. I've seen the pouch many times, but I've only caught rare glimpses of the shining gold within.

"When I woke up, both night and storm had passed," he says, "and I was alone on the shore of an island. Ne'er heard tell of it before, and ne'er was able to find it again after." In his story, Pirate Wenk—then Captain Wenk—staggers away from the beach in search of food. He finds a flock of sheep, slaughters one with his bare hands, and roasts the meat over a small fire. How he is able to make fire is unclear.

"It was the smoke that attracted the monster, yeh see. Rightly thinking someone to be roasting one o' his prized herd, the monster come runnin'." Pirate Wenk takes a coin from his pouch and flips it in the air, catches it, and flips it again. "Now don't take this the wrong way, yeh see, but the monster was a horrible one-eyed giant. Took me

by surprise, he did, and next thing I knew, he had me in his cave-den, and he was getting his stewpot and fire ready – a punishment befitting the crime, yeh see.”

Here, as with most of the pirate’s stories, he lauds his own cunning and strength and heroism – all of which were put to use in order to vanquish the giant.

“Don’t take this wrong,” he says, “but I found a long stick and poked out the monster’s eye. Then, using his own furniture, yeh see, I tripped him, and the giant tumbled into the fire.”

Following the monster’s defeat, Pirate Wenk searched the cave-den and found a wealth of gold coins.

He flips the coin toward me. I see it flash for a second in the air and make a grab, but I have never been talented with my hands. The coin lands in the dirt.

“I knew those who eventually rescued me from the island would want a share, yeh see, so I hid it where I knew ‘twould ne’er be found.” He slips into the pouch and comes out with another coin, which he holds between thumb and forefinger for me to examine.

“Where did you hide it?”

“In my gullet!” With a quick motion of his hands, he strips the gold foil from the coin, revealing its true material to be chocolate. Then he flips the coin up, catches it in his mouth, and chews loudly behind a sickening grin. A drop of brown goo leaks from the corner of his lips, but he does nothing to stop it dribbling into his beard.

That same day, the young woman with the red hair returns to the Carnival. Somehow, though I have been thinking about her at intervals throughout the day, the vivid sight of her hair takes me by surprise. It appears slowly, a strand at a time, with the parting of a thick crowd. I can’t help but think of daybreak, of the eye of the universe resting on me. Her hair is as captivating as any sunrise I have ever seen.

I hurry through the crowd, which dissipates as I enter, as if I have popped a bubble. We are alone, as much as any two people can be alone in the fresh air of the grounds, when she turns around and sees me.

“Yes?” she says.

But I can think of nothing to say to her. Her face, framed by that frizzy sunrise, fills up my brain until there’s no room for anything else. I can’t even try to think of something to say. Everything in my head has shut down.

One side of her mouth curves up, and her eyes narrow playfully. I have endured all manner of looks, most of them unpleasant: looks of amazement; looks of disgust; looks of casual intrigue; looks of pity. No person ever looked at me playfully. It’s as if she can’t see the very thing every other person refuses to look beyond.

“C’mon,” she says. The grin remains. Her ocean blue eyes glint above her freckled cheeks. “What do you want?”

The question comes out of my mouth without first crossing my mind:

“How can you look at me like that?”

She takes no time at all to think before responding, "I couldn't imagine looking at you any other way."

The way she says it, it sounds like a simple thing. It sounds like something that shouldn't matter a bit to anyone. But it matters to me. There is nothing simple about the things that get stirred up inside me when she speaks these words: 'I couldn't imagine looking at you any other way.' I'm not sure exactly what she means by it, but it causes something strange in my stomach, as if the feeling in my chest is something physical and my guts have to rearrange themselves to make room for it. I feel sick in the most wonderful sort of way.

The redhead, whose name is Kayla, returns the next day, and we sit through every performance together. When we leave each tent, she is full of questions about the spectacle my friends put on. She wants to know the secrets, and I tell her there are none. Oliver does not fool the audience into believing he can birth ducklings from his thighs: He actually produces live birds. The trick, if it can be said to be a trick, is Oliver's nerves from the waist down are dead. He feels no pain.

Veroniconda does not fool the audience into believing she is swallowed whole, several times a day, by her massive boa constrictor: She is actually swallowed. In her previous line of work as a biologist, she carried out extensive research on snakes, and in the process she discovered a tickle-point in the throat which causes the serpent to regurgitate whatever it has swallowed.

Between performances, when her wonder has faded, Kayla is full of questions about me.

"To join this carnival – did you run away?"

"No. I've always been here."

"Where are your parents?"

"My mother left after I was born."

"What about your dad?"

This I do not have an answer for. I've wondered about my mother since I was old enough to realize Jilly the contortionist was not her, but I've devoted not a thought to my father. Surrounded by male figures, I suppose I never felt lacking in that regard – certainly not in the way I felt about my mother.

Kayla moves on. "Do you like it here?"

"I do."

"You don't get sick of all the creeps gawking at you?"

"Sometimes."

"Ever think of leaving?"

"Every morning."

"Think you'll do it?"

"Where would I go?"

The questions stop here, as Pirate Wenk's performance is about to begin. There are only two days left before we will pack everything up and move along, and the

prospect of new surroundings has him in a cheerful mood. He has not been drinking today, and this has his assistant looking her old, chipper, self.

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As the sun touches the horizon, spilling itself in deep reds and violets over the arc of the world, Kayla shares with me her story. She wonders out loud how I can be interested in her life. Compared to mine, she says, her life is exceedingly dull.

"It's like we've been admiring stained glass windows all day," she says, "and now you want to see the regular ones."

It isn't like that, and I try to tell her, but I don't have such a colorful illustration to aid her in understanding my reasons. Kayla just shakes her head and tells me the things about her she thinks are the most interesting.

"I live with my brother and his girlfriend," she says. "She wants me out of the apartment, but Jess — that's my brother — he won't have it. So she treats me like shit whenever he's not around. That's why I came to the carnival the other day, to get away from her."

"To look at the stained glass windows."

"Exactly," she says, "because the windows in my life are cracked and dirty."

"My parents kicked Jess out of the house when he turned eighteen. Two years later they did the same thing to me. Staunch practitioners of the sink-or-swim methodology, they were. My brother's swimming. I'm doing my best to keep my head above water."

I want to ask, to insert the question into a suitable gap in her speech, what it was like to grow up in such a small family, but I don't think that question really asks what I want to ask. I don't think she'll be able to give me the answers I want. All I want — it seems at once simple and hopelessly complex — is to know how it feels to sit down with a group of people and know everything about them. To share a background with someone else, to have another person in the world who knows exactly how you think and feel, because they have been taught to think and feel in the same way.

It would be unfair for me to expect her to describe how it felt to grow up in her situation, knowing I could never describe how it felt to grow up in mine. The few words that come to mind — lonely, quiet, dark — cannot encompass it.

"I wait tables at Café Dharma. That's my job. I've been saving everything I can, so hopefully I'll be able to get my own place in a year or so and sign up for some classes at the community college. That is, if Tiffany the über-bitch doesn't convince Jess to give me the boot. If she does, shit — maybe I'll run away and join the Carnival."

Kayla's joking — even I can hear the sarcasm in her voice — but that doesn't stop me from responding seriously.

"You don't want to do that."

"No," she says. "That's the last thing I want to do."

I walk her to the gate. In the booth, as she counts the money for the day, Ember snickers at us. But I don't care. This is the first time I've had something, anything, that

someone else did not have – not including my eye, the very thing that separates me from everyone else. Let her laugh.

An invisible boundary runs through the Carnival's entrance, a continuation of the fences on either side of the gate, which signals the end of our grounds and the beginning of the world around us. I stand just inside this boundary, and Kayla faces me from just outside it.

"So, do you want to check out my dirty windows?"

That playful look is in her eyes again, that look with which I am so unfamiliar, and I nearly agree to leave with her. I want to. The feeling is much more powerful than that vague longing I feel every morning, and I think I finally understand what Oliver means when he says how difficult it is to refuse a woman.

"I can't leave the grounds."

"I didn't think so. Too bad. I can just imagine the look on Tiffany's face when we walk in the door. Priceless."

"Will you come back tomorrow?"

Kayla answers with a smile, and she leaves me wondering if it's the last time I'll see her. The longer I stay at the gate, watching her walk down the stone path toward the city, the more I find myself thinking I should have accepted her offer. Certainly no person in Master Phil's Carnival will ever look at me like that. Not like that.

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The next morning, I'm at the gate before any of Master Phil's daughters, looking away from the widening eye of heaven, hoping to see Kayla return. Last night, after the rhythmic creaking from Bruce's bed ceased, I found I could not sleep. This was what my life had always been and would be until the day I died. Lonely, dark, quiet. Kayla was my one opportunity for escape. If she asks me again, I decided, I will not be so foolish as to decline her offer. I will go.

The first cars of the day arrive and park in a line before the gate. The people who disembark from these vehicles look to me for admittance, but I ignore them. Maps has never been my station. By standing near the gate, letting these people stare all they want at my eye, directed as it is toward the city skyline, I am fulfilling my obligation as specified time after time by Master Phil.

The sound of footsteps approaching from inside the grounds is the only thing that can pull my gaze away from the stone path and the city beyond. Master Phil and Elaine are walking together. Elaine is wearing the expression of malicious glee that Master Phil's daughters so often wear when they can't avoid looking at me. As for Master Phil, his expression is unreadable, beyond the fact that he doesn't look particularly pleased.

"C'mon," he says, directing a genial wave at the crowd. "Talk to me."

That Master Phil might be agitated, that I might have done something to make him so, does not occur to me. As scenery, as background, what could I have done?

"Last couple of days," he says, "you've been downright invisible. Don't know if I've seen you make more than two circles through the grounds. Elaine tells me you've been hanging out with a girl, is that right?"

"Yes."

At the mention of this girl, my eye flicks back toward the gate.

"She coming back today?"

"I don't know."

"If she does, let her know you've got a job to do. I don't mind you making a friend here and there—and if it's a girl, why, all the better—but you're expected to be visible. You add something to my Carnival that no one else can. I need you out where the crowds can see you."

"Yes, sir."

He pats me on the head and makes for a group looking collectively at a map, obviously unsure of where to begin. In the distance, Josephine's calliope pipes up, signaling the start of our last day in this place.

By this time tomorrow, we all will be gone.

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Master Phil's concern turns out to be unnecessary. Though I search through every crowd, hoping to see the light of her hair break through the parting of the each couple, my hopes are defeated time and again. I do not blame Kayla for failing to appear. She has her life, which can't be expected to stop because a Carnival comes to town.

Since I can't see her, I find myself trying to imagine what she might be doing at various times throughout the day, but I haven't the slightest idea what she might do. Even the vague description of her job—waiting tables at Café Dharma—means nothing to me. What does a beautiful young woman like Kayla do for fun? For money? For relaxation? Here my ignorance, which was something I considered only briefly, only when I was alone, is finally unveiled and revealed for what it has always been: a great and windowless wall, which surrounds me as tangibly as the fence surrounds the Carnival grounds.

When I see Master Phil again, he nods happily at me. I have done nothing more than wander the grounds in a dazed stupor, blinking my eye and sighing and putting one foot in front of the other. Nothing more. This is all he expects of me.

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Darkness comes reluctantly over the Carnival. The torchlighters carry fire on thick beams, shirtless and glistening in the flickering ochre light, to the freestanding torches positioned around the grounds. I walk among them, treading the same path I have been treading all day, heedless to the weak rain of sparks escaping from the fiery beams. This path takes me near our trailers at the edge of the grounds, down the main boulevard—beaten by thousands of feet—back up a secondary drag to the trailers, and the circuit begins again.

I've just reached the trailers when the first three shots ring out. I recognize the sound immediately. Once, years ago, we had a blind marksman named Nicholas Miles traveling with us. In the course of his performance, he fired over his shoulder with a small revolver and destroyed six jade bottles in a line. He was one of our star attractions until Master Phil found out, by a misstep on the part of the marksman, that Nicholas Miles was not blind at all. Master Phil showed him the gates, told him never to return.

If not for Nicholas Miles, I might now be confused about the ominous staccato explosions ringing out in the darkness. I might be confused, but I am certain my actions would be the same. Hearing that specific sound, whether I knew the origin or not, would strike the same apprehension in my heart. It is a dark sound, the sound of pain and demolition and murder.

The shots come one after another, quick, one-two-three. I reach for the nearest doorknob almost without thinking. Fear controls my body, makes me stumble into Master Phil's trailer, close the door, and slide under his bed. The darkness inside is nearly perfect. The silence is broken only by my hitching breath.

There are boxes, blankets, pillows, and other unknown forms under Master Phil's bed with me. I snake behind them, leaving just enough room near my face that I can still see the door. Silence and darkness and a hiding place: These things combine to calm my breathing, though my heart pounds steadily on. I feel relatively safe.

Then there are two more shots. A pause. Another shot. These are louder than the first three. Whoever is holding the gun is moving through the grounds. Moving through the grounds, firing. Another shot.

My effort at hiding may be in vain, if the hand holding the gun throws open the door to Master Phil's trailer. If it grows any louder, my heartbeat will be clearly audible. In my own ears, the sound is already as loud as the gunshots.

There is a scream, so near it seems to be coming from just outside the trailer, and a shot cuts it clean off. More shots follow, too many to count, and I cover my ears and close my eye. More screams, too – men and women, from the sound. Running feet thump on the ground outside. Whose feet? Is Pirate Wenk out there? Veronica? Fat Charley? If they're not running now, they're either hiding or bleeding or dying. Or dead. The thought clamps my eyelid down tighter, causing a colorful flash in my personal darkness.

The door comes open suddenly, and it is a wonder that I don't gasp and give myself away. I hold my breath and crack open my eye. Through the space between Master Phil's boxes and blankets, I can see a silhouette in the doorway: black in a rectangle of gray. Beyond, in the sky, the stars are brilliantly twinkling. The silhouette gropes with a shadowed arm for the light switch and, finding it, fills the trailer with sharp artificial light. I recognize the gunman instantly. It is the angry man, the man with the moustache and the black hair – once perfectly parted on the left side, now hanging over his forehead and in his eyes. He looks to one side, then the other, with the gun held ready. Apparently satisfied, he turns away and lets the door swing closed.

“Oliver!” he says, in a voice like raging thunder. “Come out, you wife-stealing son of a bitch!”

For a second I can hear the man’s footsteps, but then I hear nothing. No screams. No shots. Just the hammering of my heart in my ears.

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After a while, when I am calm enough to shift my position – though not yet ready to set foot outside the trailer – I turn my head, wincing at the stiffness in my neck, and find myself staring at a wooden box not much larger than my foot. There is a latch, one that would have accommodated a lock, but the latch is open. I shift onto my side and lift the lid of this box, seeking only to occupy my mind with something that is not violence or darkness.

The box is full of pictures – so full that a few of them slide out onto the floor when the lid opens. I shift again, holding the pictures in the light.

The very first image is of Master Phil standing with his arms around a woman. Long hair, brown, flowing to just below her shoulders. The woman’s face is buried in his neck. She’s wearing a white shirt, which has risen in the back to show her pale skin, and brown pants flared at the bottom. Master Phil’s cheeks and nose are a purple hue, and he is smiling like I’ve never seen him smile before.

The second shows him with the same girl, if the hair is any indication, though she is wearing jeans and a light blue shirt. This time they are sharing a kiss. Master Phil’s eyes are closed. Her face is turned in, so I can’t see much of it. The sharp curve of her chin, the peak of one pink cheek.

It isn’t until the fourth picture that I can see her face. Her smile is as broad as Master Phil’s. Their arms are interlocked. His eyes are on her. Her eye – her one eye, green as grass and bright as day – is on the camera. This woman who can only be my mother – she stares out of the photograph at me.

The rest of the photos in the box are similar to these few. My mother and Master Phil together. Some of my mother alone. Toward the bottom of the box, a child appears in the images, cradled in its mother’s arms. The very last in the collection is a close-up of their faces, taken from the side. My mother has touched her forehead to her child’s.

This child, too, has just one eye. In most of the photos, the eye is closed, but in this last image, the eye is wide open. Mother and child gaze into one another. From the look on her face, she might be content to cradle this child until the end of time.

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I don’t know how many hours pass before I decide to crawl out from under the bed. I’ve returned all the photographs but one to Master Phil’s secret box. The last one is in the back pocket of my jeans.

Daylight fills the windows of the trailer. At some point in the night, I must have dozed off, though I don’t remember doing so. I pause at the door, listening and wondering what awaits me outside. That Master Phil never retired to his trailer is a bad sign, for sure. How many other trailers were empty last night? If the bullets ended up

where the black haired man wanted them, no telling what horrors await me outside the trailer.

I open the door and step out, moving as quietly as I am able. The sun is still low in the sky. If the night had passed normally, without incident, we would be packing up at this time. Now it feels like Master Phil's Carnival has come to its final resting place.

At the end of Master Phil's trailer, I see the first body. Her face is in the dirt, one arm is stretched out above her head, and her blonde hair is parted in the back around a black and bloody hole. Just inches beyond her reaching fingers, her thick glasses rest with their lenses against the ground. This is Veroniconda, Master of Serpents. The dirt around her head is crimson.

There are bodies all along the main boulevard, mostly lying in the same position. The gunman caught them running, one by one, and sent them into the dust. Some I recognize, some I don't. A few, from the look of their clothing, were visitors to the Carnival, but most appear to be my friends.

Madame Ochoa in particular makes a magnificent corpse. Her arms are outstretched, and her robes look like enormous wings. The look on her face is one of glee, not of pain, as if she is soaring over all of this rather than lying in the midst.

Josephine appears to have been caught unaware: Her body is slumped over her calliope.

The torches remain lit, fluttering in the morning breeze. They might be the only things on the grounds, aside from myself, that have not been extinguished. Still they flare, ineffectual in the daylight, waiting for the torchlighters to put them to rest.

I experience all of this as if I am not a part of it, as if I am not walking among the dead. When Jilly, the contortionist who took the place of my mother, accidentally strangled herself, I could not stop the tears from coming. For days, it seemed, they poured out of me. These were not tears just for Jilly, I later understood, but also tears for my mother. Because she left before I could fully grasp my loss, I had never shed a tear for her. Following Jilly's death, I thought more of my mother than I ever had before, and I cried and cried and cried.

Now that I have lost everything else, why am I not weeping? How can I continue walking past these empty bodies without stumbling and breaking down? I ask myself these questions even as I step over Pirate Wenk's assistant, whose leg is extended at an extreme angle into the boulevard, like she was murdered in the middle of an extravagant dance number. I ask myself, and I receive no response.

At the open flap of Pirate Wenk's tent, I hear signs of life: a rasping breath, a cough, a groan. These sounds break through the shell around me, drag me back to the scene I have been hovering over, and I tear away from the main boulevard into the tent. The light inside is dusty orange, and a smell I don't recognize is thick in the air.

Pirate Wenk is lying on his side in the middle of the tent, a long knife grasped in his hand. I imagine he was preparing to fight back, though the gunman might have caught him in the middle of a performance. If this were a story, perhaps beginning

with the words 'When I was in Master Phil's Carnival,' I know it would have been the former.

His eyes register my entrance, and he blinks.

I drop to my knees beside him.

"Can I help? Where are you hurt?"

Pirate Wenk shakes his head.

"Everybody's gone, Pirate Wenk. Everybody."

He closes his eyes. Coughs. In a voice utterly lacking Pirate Wenk's usual strength and bravado, he says, "Take the knife, see. The pain is too much."

The pirate shudders, tries to swallow, and begins coughing again.

"Take it," he says, when the coughing fit has passed.

I take the knife. In his hands, the glinting blades were powerful things, capable of striking in a flash. In my hands, it feels heavy and unwieldy. I could inflict no more pain with this knife than with a twig.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Cut this pain out of me," he says. "Make it stop, yeh see?"

"I can't."

"Edgar, yeh have to. I'm dyin' already. Make it stop."

Wincing, he brings his right hand up from behind his back and points a trembling finger at the top of his stomach. The point he indicates is inches from a hole in his shirt, which is surrounded by a dark wetness. "Slice," he says, and he runs the finger down the middle of his belly. "Here to here. Then run away. Get away from here."

I can only shake my head. Now the tears are beginning to come. They slide down the bridge of my nose and drip onto the ground between my knees.

"Please, Edgar."

He bares his teeth, and pain flashes in his face. It is this flash that forces my arms into motion. The pain is so clear in his features that I can almost feel it myself. My hands tighten on the grip of the knife, and I plunge the blade to the hilt in Pirate Wenk's stomach, right at the spot where he pointed. I turn my face away, waiting for the tide of blood to wash over my hands.

But it doesn't come. The blade is buried in his belly, but the blood never comes.

The pirate's voice surprises me. "Now slice!"

I pull the blade toward his jeans, slicing his flannel shirt and popping buttons off as I go, and now the tide rushes out. But the color is wrong. Instead of the red I've seen so much of today, I see gold. Coins innumerable spill from the wound I've created, shining in the pale light and tinkling musically over each other as they fall to the ground.

Pirate Wenk gives one last sigh, and the tension leaves his body.

I never believed his stories, not even when I was younger, but this time Pirate Wenk was telling the truth. With the blade in my hands, and gold coins still tumbling from my friend's stomach, I lose myself in tears and laughter.

-

I can't account for every person who should have been on the grounds, but the last living person I saw was Pirate Wenk. No other person so much as stirs when I walk by. Though I do my best not to look at their faces, it is too often unavoidable. I see Fat Charley, a few of Master Phil's daughters, and my old roommate. The thin shadow cast by his body is gray – not the rainbow it used to be.

I'm leaving behind my tears. In Pirate Wenk's tent, I cried enough for every lost friend and family member. Though few of them ever welcomed me, and fewer cared to notice I never did feel welcome, Master Phil's Carnival and the people who made it what it was are all I have known. The thought of leaving it behind is at once exhilarating and dreadful, but it is the only thought in my mind.

The coins are in a pouch, slung across my shoulder. I've got one in my hand, and I flip it like Pirate Wenk used to do. It feels heavier than the chocolate coins the pirate carried with him, and it glitters like magic in the sunlight.

When I come to the gate for the last time, and look down the stone path toward the city, I wonder if I'll be able to find Kayla. I don't know her last name, but I do know where she waits tables. With any luck, that little bit of knowledge will be enough. I'll go to Café Dharma, and when she sees me, her eyes will narrow playfully and I'll know, without either of us saying a word, that I'm not alone anymore.

Spirits of Christmas

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Breaking up is hard to do, everybody knows that, but it's harder for some of us than for others. For some, it comes easily, like a natural-born gift from the Gods of Cruelty.

Most understand it's not right to break up on a holiday, because holidays mean parties, festivities, occasions of merriment ideal for coupling. So what are the chances of breaking up on Christmas Eve, when visions of sugar plums might well dance in one's head? They have to be astronomical. *Nobody* breaks up on Christmas. It's useless, though, to argue with reality, and here was Harold (Hal to all) standing outside in the cold, fierce wind, at a bus stop (in, of all places, Normal, Illinois), having been dumped by his girl on the 24th day of the 12th month of the year.

That fact wasn't the worst of it. Hal was now smoking a cigarette, and he didn't smoke. He was under-dressed with neither gloves nor hat in freezing weather (seeing as when the evening began, he did not expect to be alone, much less stranded and abandoned). Still, that wasn't the worst of it. The worst was he'd had his break-up on a bus, traveling along an obscure Midwest state road.

It had all started innocently enough: "You've been quiet," he said to his girlfriend of two years. She shall remain nameless, but she was a tall and slim redhead, a conceptual/performance artist, who Hal had met at one of her shows. Actually, the show was noteworthy. She was alone on a bare stage, dressed in black leotards. Audience members, who had each received a piece of overripe fruit upon entering the auditorium, were invited to throw objects at her if they so desired. Verbal abuse was also encouraged. At least that's what the program guide suggested. That night Hal had watched this brave girl first stand in silence while the audience tittered (deciding what to make of her), then duck a tomato thrown from the back of the house. Later, she was hit by a peach, just before someone yelled "You suck." Was all this Art? Unlikely, if Harold knew what art *was*, but since he was a second-year law student, he didn't. But the proceedings made for interesting theater, especially afterwards when he met the artist-formerly-known-as-target-practice, and they hit it off. That was two years ago. Now she reacted wanly to his comment about how quiet she had been. Finally, she answered.

"I've been thinking about us," she said in a tone that he recognized as foreboding. He could have changed the subject, or excused himself and headed for the

back of the bus and the restroom. But he had to respond, he had to play talk show host to her celebrity guest star.

“What have you been thinking?”

“That I’m not happy.” Hal was, in a word, startled. He was sure that, from this point, the conversation could only plummet. Across from their seat was a large woman taking up a seat and a half, while a frail younger man, pushed against the window of the bus, tried to make due with his quarter cushion. Hal was certain both had heard the *I’m not happy* comment, and that the woman had leaned sideways for a better listen. Behind Hal sat two young women with teased hair, both yakking on their cell phones, which would usually annoy him greatly. Not tonight, thankfully they weren’t paying attention as Hal’s gal bared her soul.

“Maybe it’s the holidays, but I feel strangely incomplete,” she began. “I’ve been sitting here, staring out the window at these empty fields and the rising moon. It’s a time of year I should be excited about, I’m not, and I just don’t know what to do.” There was a lot that could have been said at that juncture. Like Hal’s impression that this part of Illinois was just plain depressing, with its long stretches of empty crop fields and barren horizons. Or that if any of us feels strangely incomplete it has more to do with ourselves than with who’s sitting next to us. Or that a conversation like this should not even be taking place on a bus. Instead, he said something dumb.

“I don’t understand.” He knew it was a wrong utterance right off. It gave her the opening she needed.

“That’s it, that’s it exactly, Hal, you don’t understand, and I don’t think you ever will.” She said it loud enough for the wide lady and the squashed boy to hear, plus the two girls on their cell phones. They actually stopped yakking.

The rest of it was an uninspired and, for him, painful story. He and the performance artist had been on their way to visit her family in Chicago, but what was the point now? She had chosen Christmas Eve to have a personal crisis, to ruin a holiday weekend for herself, her family, and him. Couldn’t her panic have waited until January?

Hal got off the bus at a gray, dingy stop in Normal. The irony of the town’s name did not escape him – it struck him like a hammer. He thought about toughing it out, meeting her family with his soul full of bitterness, putting on a brave front until they returned to Philadelphia and had a proper, post-holiday breakup, but what was left of his shattered pride forbid it.

He must have been crazy. He watched the bus with his girlfriend pull away, his only consolation being that more passengers were taken on at the stop, and perhaps she’d wind up seated next to a guy who would start a conversation, become fixated with her, and eventually murder her. He bought a pack of cigarettes, stood out in the cold and smoked, warmed by thoughts of her being strangled.

That could sustain him only so long. He went inside the station. The atmosphere was the very essence of depressing. Music was playing from tinny speakers stuck in two corners where wall met ceiling. It was generic holiday music, of

poor audio quality, which was just about perfect. A lopsided, artificial Christmas tree was in the room's center, strung with colored lights that were half-working. There was an older man at the ticket window, who seemed to be asleep. He was listening to a small transistor radio. It was broadcasting a local high school basketball game. There were two long rows of seats for waiting passengers. Only a solitary woman sat at the very end of one, her head bent down to her chest. She looked suspiciously like she was homeless. That theory was confirmed as Hal ventured too close and she smelled funny. He moved to the front window and looked out.

It had started to snow. How quaint: Christmas Eve, white flakes dancing to the ground like ice angels. With the music playing and the man behind the counter now beginning to snore, it was enough to make Hal sick. Then it happened: he saw something outside, squinted to make sure he wasn't mistaken. Across the street from the station, in an empty parking lot, a girl was standing in the gathering snow. Hal wasn't sure what to make of it. He looked back at the homeless lady, then again at the snoring man. Clearly, he had no reason to remain indoors, so he stepped out into the winter evening. He could see better now. The girl was Asian, probably his age, she was dressed in a navy blue pea-coat and jeans, her long black hair tied into a pony tail and now flecked with snow. She was just standing there. It should have seemed strange, but this night, it didn't. Without hesitating, he crossed the street and approached her.

She was looking down, as if the ground held a clue to the evening. He was disappointed in himself as all he could think to say to her was what he said.

"Hello."

She looked up. She had a fine-featured face. Clear skin with red cheeks. She held her hands in front of her body, a picture of inscrutable calm.

"Hello," she replied. Hal should have said something memorable, or funny, maybe something profound. He blurted, "excuse me, but what are you doing standing in the snow?" She turned her head slightly, smiled softly, he got the idea that her English wasn't great, and it was as if she was processing his words. Finally, she understood and laughed. To him, it sounded like the music of a lyric flute.

"I'm at the end," she said with an accent that confirmed the language difficulties. Hal blinked at her, not quite comprehending. She was at the end, that sounded important, the end of what? Whatever it was, he too was at that end.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She took a deep breath, a step toward him. He matched her effort, and now they were face to face, round eyes to oval. Hers were (or so it seemed to him) of a pure innocence. She spoke.

"I came to Chicago one year ago, to study music, it's hard to find friends, be happy. I do like snow, so when it starting snowing, I wanted to be inside it."

The future lawyer had left the real world. He was no longer in Normal, Illinois, or anywhere normal.

"I like snow too," he said (though in truth he wasn't sure whether he liked snow or not).

"Thank you, you have a clean face," she said.

If he lived to be 100, he'd never know what that meant. "My name is Hal," he said.

"My name is Li," she replied and they shook hands: his warmed ever so slightly by the squeeze of her gloved fingers. They then stood in silence, looking at each other but not staring, and it wasn't an uncomfortable thing. They were sharing space, that's all, that's all it had to be.

"Do you know what tonight is?" he asked.

"It's Friday."

"It's Christmas Eve, do you know Christmas?"

"Yes, I've heard of it."

"Do you celebrate Christmas?"

"No." He didn't know if she was religious, or what religion she might follow, but he was ready for conversion. She didn't celebrate Christmas, and neither did he. It was snowing harder now, it wouldn't be long before the two of them resembled Mr. and Mrs. Snowman.

"Would you like to have a cup of tea?" he said on the chance that an Asian girl drank tea. Her eyes brightened.

"I would like that, if you are real," she replied. Hal was struck. Everything this girl said made no sense, yet fit. He felt wise, or lightheaded.

"I'm almost real," he said.

She gave a shy smile, nodded, and looked over her shoulder to an all-night diner down the street. Hal motioned with his arm toward it, and the two walked among the falling flakes. It was as if every random act by the Gods of Cruelty must create an equal act, in response, by the Spirits of Glad Happenstance.

Crazy Girl

Brett Kozma

"Plowed into the ground!"

The car blares at me through cracking speakers and oxidized wires, controlling itself while plummeting down County Road 16, wobbling between lanes and dipping on to the gravel shoulder. Cows watch with indifferent stares. Too preoccupied with myself to drive, to care about the road with its pick-em-up-trucks, I have to wipe myself clean. The evidence of my actions must be destroyed. I have just spent a weekend running in the woods, sitting around fires, drinking beer, no sleep. It's an escape from reality and the only place where I feel normal. Within the woods I feel the refill of masculine power men all crave. With my return to civilization I'm forced to confront my delusions.

Drained but surviving, sustained by burnt earthy coffee and gumption, I listen to Sponge, that wonderfully trashy Detroit pop grunge. Only from Detroit could the suburban angst that fronts Sponge be borne and encouraged. If you have never been there, don't go. Bloody Neanderthals pissed upon, that's Detroit. Genocide and lies stripped the land, Riots and bloodshed formed the buildings. And that makes a base for Sponge and its driven music. Head banging and screaming mangled lyrics keep me awake. I dread the return to the city where dreams go to die. Eyes wandering, I shake to keep awake, unable to focus or stop for fear of spoiling the road side clover with the smell of gasoline and blood. I swerve to keep from hitting another inbred fool in his mechanical penile extension. This is violently dangerous. I weep for the idea of home, a warm bed, safety.

I nearly hit a Mini-van, family packed in like sardines. How fitting the headlines would be, "Family of 7 Killed by Lonely Driver Who Feels Little Remorse." Assuming immortality in such a situation is my prerogative, I am young, I am immortal. But not them, they will all die. Fewer breeders mean a better world for me. Last thing my life needs is more families with abrasive offspring, pushy mothers and spineless males. They just clutter my highways. Fuck families, and fuck anybody who wants one. The American family idea is a disease that should be stomped out with impetus. I would start today, but farm country car crashes can be a bitch on the budget. Drastic actions must be taken. Keep awake...Mmm...think of her...

That girl. You all know her. The one your friends tell you to stay away from. You have said to yourself constantly "don't fuck the crazy girl" but you still think about her. She's nuts, no question about that. Not just nuts, but belligerently bat shit crazy. The kind of crazy reserved for creepy Stephen King movies, not the romantic comedies we strive to replicate. She is going to school to be a psychiatrist. A profession reserved for those determined to self-diagnose their own problems. She drinks, often waking up in

alleys or upon porches, and climbs into sobriety by cutting herself and releasing the pain. She bears the scars, from wrist to wrist, shoulder to shoulder, of a long self wrought life.

Her pain is internal and unnecessary. She grew up normal, nice parents, good family, no abuse. She is chemically fucked. Her problems dwell in her psyche. But, yet you cannot pull away. That girl. We all know her. The psycho. The crazy girl. But only some of us react like me. Her mind should be comforted and fucked. She shows up so undamaged, so clean and sublime. Her purple hair twitters about, calling anybody with testosterone in their blood.

"She's cute" is whispered to her close friend. A chortle and halfhearted warning later I meet the masquerading succubus. All seems mildly interesting but safe, little do I know. Before a month is over all available time is spent crashing in her tiny dorm around bottles of Tennessee's best bourbon whiskey. My body is a forlorn participant in this self destructive, masturbatory practice. Unable to turn away, I dig deeper.

Nights blur into days, classes are forgotten and left to people deserving success. Afternoons are spent preventing suicide, nights chasing it. Drink to satiate, that's the mantra. In reality we drink to die, if only for a moment. I wake up groin hard and swollen, disgusted by the vomit, blood, piss, all commingling across the institutional floor. Do I scream, banish her from my life? Do I walk out, seek a doctor and a priest?

No.

I think love is within this trite life form. I can rationalize this easily, but I know it's wrong and idiotic. This happens monthly, weekly, daily. Reality is displayed for me. I see the fallacies and why this is the proverbial "Bad Idea." Refusing to believe it, I buy another bottle of harsh brown life (charcoal filtering is for pussies, barrel aging is a gift from the gods, and chasers take out all the fun) and forget another day. I used to be normal, liked normal girls. I fit in the social structure as an angered participant, not a blinded sidliner. A social drinker and social person.

Now time is split between comforting the diseased and recovering from self-administered poison. Now dreams are filled with the burn of alcohol instead of warm life. The violent chemical strips my mind of rationality. She goes to the psyche ward.

This time it was a bottle of mild opiates washed down with a bottle of Svedka. At least she has the taste to buy decent vodka. How theatrical, vodka and pain killers. American TV relax, we got the message. This is how you kill yourself. She calls me from the ward requesting I let her date know she can't bar hop and fuck. I am blind to the signs.

Too few days later she calls, asks if I want to spot her a bottle, low funds. Hell yes. She will love me if I buy it, at least my delusion agrees. An eager puppy, tail wagging waiting to be beaten by an abusive tormentor. Days pass. Nothing changes. Bottle by bottle our visceral cavities are whiskey cooked while I smile and comfort her pained mind.

Her crying gives me a hard-on. Why would somebody be attracted to this? Why does a perfectly balanced, mentally stable, proverbial good guy go for the crazy bitch?

What sick person gets turned on by the idea of a damaged mind? My mother would not be proud. Thinking of her, shamefully pulling myself out, doing my business. All the while driving. I don't stop while cars pass me. Why should I give a fuck? Let them see the dysfunction. It'll just show the strangers my heart. Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery right? I don't make the right decisions, I don't do what's right, I am an animal underneath this facade. The radio burns out the songs catch line- "Say a prayer for me."

Please don't, I deserve this, all of it. Visions of the next month trying to fuck her. I won't. She even realizes that I should stay away. For once the crazy bitch has better judgment than me. Maybe that's the truth all along, she has excuses for actions. Just being alive shows she's doing better than medically predicted. I have no excuse, the true fool.

She is God. I dance to her drum, she quits playing it. A lot of prayer and theism for an atheist. Keep driving. The car steadies as I take the wheel and manage to keep it out of the damn ditch. At home I crawl into my plush bed, ready to sleep until it hurts, sleep until I cry. Later, showering, reflecting, thinking, I know what should happen. Sobriety can be harsh like that. Stay away, don't fuck the crazy girl, don't let her attach, keep away, be normal. I don't care. I don't wait to dry before I call.

BinHexed

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David wasn't exactly handsome. Plain, almost-brown, flyaway hair rested in feathery strings on his forehead and tumbled into his eyes. Tiny flakes of dried skin settled around slightly uneven sideburns and at the base of his neck, where the occasional blemish also formed. The skin was reddish overall, as if it had been rubbed a bit too hard with a strange person's cold hands.

This was not a problem, Natalie decided. Natalie herself was set apart with rather unusual features herself. Dark glossy hair fell against delicate, nearly translucent skin. Above her high cheekbones, black, wispy lashes framed a pair of intensely light blue eyes. So clear and light in fact, that when one first glanced upon them, one was apt to think that perhaps she could not see from them. But see she could, and her gaze now fell upon David, typing away heatedly at the keyboard, his face and hands glowing with the cool light of the computer screen. "I could love you so much," she thought, "if you would only give me the chance." A tear began to wobble in the corner of one of the clear blue eyes. Natalie let her breath out slowly and glanced down at the new manila file folder she held in her hand. "I wonder..." She began her thought as she picked up a clean form to insert in the folder, "Americans dream in English. The French dream in French. Indians dream in Hindi." The cardstock held rigid, working itself against Natalie's patient hand. "Do deaf people dream in sign language?" What else could they dream in? Or was there just an empty space within them where dreams could not enter? Dreams that fought to be inside, to hold on to something and be born, but gave up panting and half-hearted. The sharp edge of the card caught Natalie's right index finger, and the wobbling tear fell in a slow jerking path down the nearly translucent cheek.

* * *

Natalie sat in church, looked at her father sitting next to her and began replaying a mental version of Friday night's date. A date in a series of dates that was growing less frequent as Natalie grew less hopeful of meeting her soul mate amidst the dating pool, thinned by coupling friends, now permeated with divorcees, rebounders, and men with no social skills. She was even less hopeful that anyone near compatible might be in their midst. So perhaps her father was right. Perhaps her cynical self had sabotaged the whole thing before it had even begun.

"Nat," her father had begged on the phone before she had left. "Please try for me. Ok? For me." Her father spoke as one who was not elderly, but not exactly middle-aged. As one realizing he would not be around forever to care for his only child. An only child whose obstinacy and impossibly high standards condemned her forever to an ethereal prison of singles populated by eccentrics, academics, and clergypersons.

"Try to do what?"

"To *not* do what you always do."

"What do you mean?" She knew exactly what he meant.

"Don't tell him about your job, Natty. Don't tell him you work in a mortuary. He's a nice guy. And the mortuary thing don't exactly invite second dates."

"Dad, it's not honest if I don't tell."

"Nat, it's not forever. You said yourself it's not gonna be forever. You'll find one of those counseling things soon."

"That doesn't mean I don't work at the mortuary now."

"Listen Natty, I'm just saying that you're a nice-looking girl. You got yourself together. Just don't tell him right away. At least don't make it sound like you enjoy it."

"I'm not slicing up cadavers. I work in an office."

"An office in a mortuary," he pointed out. She sighed. He was right, of course. These things did tend to creep people out. But her soulmate, Natalie decided, would be identified by finding this part of her, a part that most people found utterly morose, a perfectly natural extension of her underlying self. Natalie the nurturer, the mentor, the spirit guide. Meanwhile, she hated people looking upon her like a character springing from the pages of Edgar Allan Poe. The fair complexion, light eyes, and dark hair, she knew, were distorted even further in their ghoulish imaginations. She became a sort of specimen, a very macabre sort of specimen, coldly romanticized and dissected.

"A sound relationship is based on mutual trust and commitment." She declared this platitude firmly in order to avoid more discussion. After all, it was true, wasn't it?

"Have fun tonight kiddo. Please?"

"Don't watch too much TV," she said, and hung up.

* * *

Sam was a nice guy. He wore a dark green turtleneck over his thin frame and his large moist eyes reminded Natalie a bit too much of the dark-clad people who passed through the mortuary each week. They had decided to meet at newly-opened, recently-hyped restaurant which turned out to be nothing special, at least regarding the atmosphere: oak tables, potted ferns, kitschy memorabilia on the walls. Sam hung Natalie's coat on the hook between the booths and ordered wine for the both of them. "Sauvignon blanc, please." From the rehearsed tone of voice and uncertain French, Natalie decided that this might be the only wine Sam was familiar with, perhaps from advice taken only a few hours earlier from a friend. She wanted to tell him that it was really okay if he ordered a Coors or a Molson or something that he would enjoy. But instead she nodded quickly at the waiter and began to concentrate on her napkin while

he finished ordering the rest of the meal. Natalie studied Sam's face carefully. He was anxious, but did not want to appear so. She detected a mark of sincerity in this. He wanted Natalie to enjoy herself, and for his sake she would try. However, she did not want to begin the conversation.

"I work in securities. For a major bank," Sam offered.

His forthrightness caught her off guard. No small talk. No discussion of the present surroundings, weather, current events, or any number of icebreaker topics.

"Oh. That seems very..." Her mind raced for a word that would be flattering, yet not invite much further discussion of career or aspiration. "...secure." She finished after too long a pause and a nervous laugh. It was not funny. She felt her toes curl inside her shoes, but Sam laughed warmly. "It's pretty good money. I work with a lot of pension-planning and retirement accounts. There's some good money in it. Especially now that the population is aging." Natalie did not need to be told that the population was aging. She saw it every day. Every week a new widow or widower at the mortuary, suddenly heartsick and so terribly alone. She held their dry, trembling hands while they made final arrangements and told her, a perfect stranger, openly, of their love just lost. Stories of first meetings, first kisses, weddings, children, sorrows, and final illnesses would inevitably pour forth between shuddering sobs and the blanks on the paperwork. She was not required to listen, but she did. They were alone. So was she.

Sometimes she thought that her existence was meant to be spared this kind of grief. In fact, if that degree of mourning ever were put upon her, possibly she would not be able to bear it. She would simply, gradually grow old, finally quite accustomed to her singular reality. It would not be abrupt or acute, tragic or unexpected. Solitariness would stretch plainly as a thin, watery line, extending into nowhere in particular, to be reunited with no one in the hereafter. She looked in the distant eyes of the bereaved and thought that perhaps it was better this way.

The clam linguini had arrived. Sam went on for quite some time about his cousin—and their mutual contact— who first got him in the business, and Natalie hoped she could keep him on this benign topic for a while, at least until dessert when she could switch the topic to something more amicable— chocolate perhaps. She looked into the moist grey eyes once more, studying their geography like a map. Did Sam have passions? Dreams? Desires? Did he believe in the goodness of people? Did he believe he could change the world? Did he believe in life after death? Or could it be tragically possible that his concerns were almost completely circumscribed to watching his portfolio and ESPN? Natalie listened to the pleasant inflection of his voice, leaping in smooth intervals from syllable to syllable, sighing and rising as he carelessly twirled his linguini. What would be his regrets if he were given only three months to live? Or one? Or what if his mother was suddenly overwhelmed with a heart attack and died on the brand-new sofa in the living room while holding a ceramic bowl and a carrot peeler. What would his voice be like then? Would it sometimes tremble, or break, or give out

suddenly for no reason at all? Natalie refocused on the green-rimmed plate that contained her linguini.

"You know what Natalie? Jon showed me your picture and I'll admit—it made me want to meet you. But your picture really doesn't do you justice. Did you ever do any modeling?"

Natalie understood the intention behind this hackneyed approach and tried to appreciate it on that level. And she didn't doubt the authenticity of his feeling. But it seemed so very disingenuous at the same time. He wanted to impress her. Order the right wine. Say the right things. He wanted to be a nice guy. And eventually a nice guy with a few kids and a dog. A nice guy whose wife or best friend would die and would only suddenly realize life had much more to offer than cable TV and stock options.

"Modeling? No. What picture did he show you?"

"You're leaning up against a tree, I think. It looks like it was taken in the autumn."

"Oh, that picture is so old. I was in college. No wonder it didn't do justice."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Oh, I know what you meant. It's just that I don't think it was fair. Especially if the picture made you want to come tonight. It really doesn't look like me at all any more."

"I'm not disappointed. You're very lovely and very sweet and I'm glad I came tonight." Sam reached over to hold Natalie's hand for a moment.

Desperately, Natalie searched her dating repertoire for an appropriate response, but found nothing cross-listed under the categories of polite and discouraging. She managed a perfunctory thank-you.

Sam waited until dessert until asking Natalie what she did not want to hear.

"So what do you do?"

"Do?" She began to feel funny, as if something had begun to breathe for her, had begun to mechanically circulate her blood. Although experience told her that his response would be polite, underneath it would be a mixture of morbid curiosity and horror. Death in its philosophical state, Natalie had learned, never disturbed people. Most people regarded death as peaceful, even hopeful. It was the interaction between the living and the dead—the talk of ordering a casket in the same way that most people might order an electric skillet or a pair of shoes—that caused the raised eyebrow, the spit-take over the glass.

"Do. For a living."

Natalie blinked. "I help people." She regretted the statement sooner than she uttered it. What an incredibly stupid answer. Instead of steering away from the topic, she had tripped the lever of curiosity full throttle. She began to brace herself for any number of questions regarding cremation, reincarnation, or cryogenics—"comfortable" death topics that would inevitably lead to a deeper investigation of Natalie's psyche. What sort of necrophilia or underlying fetish or perhaps, just perhaps, severe childhood trauma would lure such a delicate, seemingly normal creature into such a peculiar

field? ("Are you terminally ill, dear?" a well-intentioned but overly inquisitive client once asked. "I understand that some people enter this business as a kind of therapy." If it would not have earned her a severe reprimand, Natalie decided it would have been amusing to answer in the affirmative.) Natalie felt her motives were perfectly sane, but did not feel compelled to discuss them. Especially not on first date after first date after first date. Death was depressing enough without adding a date to the occasion.

Sam was scraping at the chocolate sauce of the decadent creation they had decided to split. "So, are you... like a teacher or a nurse or something?"

Natalie breathed deeply. "I work in a mortuary."

The fork stopped mid-scrape. "In a mortuary?"

"Yes." She could withhold nothing at this point. "I'm working temporarily in a funeral home and mortuary, doing a lot of clerical work right now. You know, helping people... with arrangements...and things. I have a master's degree in anthropology and a PhD in clinical psychology. Eventually I'd like to open a practice in grief counseling. But I need to get some money saved up so I can buy into a practice." Natalie decided to stop. This was not a job interview.

"You have a PhD?" For some reason, this revelation seemed almost even more strangely fascinating than the place of employment itself. At least Natalie was spared any further death conversation.

"Yes." She smiled through closed lips, eyes wide.

"You must really like the books," he said, trying to digest this new information. "That's great. I was never one of those book people myself." Sam finished off the final bit of ice cream with a swift motion of the fork. "I really admire people with that kind of ambition."

"I don't think it's really ambitious. I just sort of got caught up in it."

"Well I think it is," he retorted. "I can't imagine doing something like a dissertation without there being something in it for me at the end."

Natalie offered to pay for her share of the meal, but Sam insisted and handed over his credit card.

"Hey Natalie, you like basketball? I could get some tickets?" Sam found Natalie's coat and held it open in a chivalrous gesture.

She did not. Natalie slipped into the coat and decided not to answer the phone for the next several days. How could she explain? Better to leave him bewildered than rejected.

* * *

It was Sunday, and Natalie could not bring herself to listen to any messages on the answering machine. And she still had to deal with her father's inevitable curiosity. Sitting in the quiet pews at church, she was held captive, but she had a plan.

"How did the date go last night?" Natalie's father whispered.

"Jon never mentioned anything about smoking." This statement, worded just so, was actually true.

"A smoker? Forget him. You want someone who's going to stick around for awhile. Not be dried up like ashes." He coughed, then pounded his chest to emphasize this remark. His hand came to rest on his knee.

Natalie closed her hand around her father's and immediately began to concentrate on the unison voices around her, pushing thoughts of Sam, singledom, and little white lies out of her mind.

"...I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

The life everlasting.

Believe.

Some days were easier than others.

* * *

David visited the mortuary on Tuesdays and Thursdays to update software, troubleshoot network connections on the computer system, and manage the mortuary website. The home had only recently gone digital, storing files and information and forms electronically and had not immediately possessed someone on staff capable of handling the new technology. The owners did not trust many people with sensitive information and David had been highly recommended as a part-time paid consultant. Natalie learned much during her first few weeks working with David, including the fact that he had majored in linguistics, minored in sociology, made his own vegetarian soup, hated most sports, had been bungee jumping a number of times, preferred Hawthorne to Melville, and had taken several years of cello lessons. And he never, ever, asked her why she worked in a mortuary. She cared not if she retained anything David had to teach her about software or databases. In fact, her growing technological fluency could only lessen his visits, so Natalie made sure that everything, everything, was kept at the most upgraded level possible and thus required constant training for its usage.

David was working her through the fundamentals of instant messaging. Natalie enjoyed watching the choreography of the task. The brows would furrow, the hands would pause for a few moments. His fingernails were short and clean and slightly uneven. Then the hands would dart furiously across the keyboard, then quickly stop as the neck and shoulders relaxed. Energy spent, the brow would furrow again as the fingers awaited the next command. He said so little. How could she be overcome by one so withdrawn? So obviously alone in his world of clicking and tapping and bungee cords and cellos? And seeming content to remain so. Perhaps that was what frustrated Natalie the most. While she despaired in her loneliness, he wedged himself deeper. How could someone else find such satisfaction in solitude, unless that someone else were either Thoreau or the Unabomber.

"Since you have a Yahoo account, I could install Trillian. It'll give you a few more IM capabilities." More capabilities. More opportunities for training. Sounded good to Natalie. "Sure," she said. The fingers began their dance again.

“Does that keep you in shape for cello-playing?” It was a strange entrance, but how to shift the topic? How to shift the topic to music, then to events, then to attending events, then to playing duets – duets with eyes closed and mouths open and bodies vibrating to the aching strains of a cello concerto.

“I don’t practice as much as I used to. I mostly just do it for myself. That’s really the only reason to study music.”

“True.” Natalie agreed. “There are so many good musicians out there. I gave up on piano after high school because there was so much competition.” The normal conversationalist, Natalie decided, would capitalize upon this mutual interest. But David was not the normal conversationalist. After a pause she felt was too long, Natalie tagged, “I guess that playing music is a kind of honor itself.” She was pretty sure she had heard this said elsewhere, but it sounded good. Unfortunately, it had little effect on the conversation.

“What’s this doing out here?” David nodded towards a form on the desk. “Is that something I need to create a template for?”

“No, that’s just something that we need to hang on to,” Natalie answered. “There were a few...problems.”

“Problems?” David inquired.

“Nothing technological. That man was the patriarch of a large family. And apparently, just about everyone knew that he had a mistress.” She wondered if she should go on. This was, after all, private information. But who would David tell? He spoke of family rather infrequently and friends much less. So she continued. “So he had a traditional open casket viewing and the entire family was crying their eyes out, leaning over the casket and kissing their fingers, then touching the body. You’d have thought we were burying Walt Disney.”

A smile began to creep over David face. He was clearly amused.

“Then his wife goes up to Henry and asks about the ring the guy’s wearing and when she can have it back because he’s not supposed to be buried with it. And Henry turns six shades of scarlet and he tells her the guy left instructions that it be distributed to ‘another source.’” Natalie illustrated this last phrase with fingered quotation marks.

“That’s when the wife goes really beserk. She starts yelling, ‘The sonafabitch left it to his girlfriend! His little twinkie girlfriend!’ And immediately the tears in the entire room turned off like a faucet, and they started to spit, actually spit, in the casket, screaming about the unfairness of it all and how they put up with so much from him, and this is the thanks they get.”

David was now caught in one of his rare bursts of laughter. Most of the time he merely smiled and modestly released a small burst of air. But now his breathy laughter filled the space between them with an unbridled warmth. “Poor Henry. How’d he handle that?”

“Henry actually considered calling the police, but one of the sons got his mother out of the room and that took care of most of it.”

“He was probably hoping that things would wait themselves out until everyone was in an attorney’s office. It’s funny the lengths that people will go to. To pretend. Even to the point of feigning grief. It’s really sad when you think about it.”

“Most people pretend a good deal of their lives. They operate through little filters of what’s socially acceptable. They have so many opportunities to just experience a moment – fully – with another human being. And they’re so busy thinking about orchestrating the context of the moment that they lose the moment itself.” She directed some of this speech to David himself, although she doubted that the subtlety of her message would filter through the psychology of her language.

She sat down. Her own verbiage irritated her to the point of being flustered. Why couldn’t she bring herself to tell him how she felt? That he was the most open human being she had ever met? That everything he said or did emanated from some pure source that cared not one bit what the observing world thought. Not in a rebellious way, but in the sense that he alone was the only true judge of his experience. He had no need to pretend, for he had nothing to hide. Except perhaps something that would allow him to show affection for Natalie.

“The Trillian window will open every time you start the computer.” David returned to instant messaging. Natalie leaned over his shoulder to observe. “At the top of the window is dmkisner. That’s me if you need to ask a question when I’m not here. The shape of the icon will tell you if I’m online and available, online but unavailable, or offline...” With the two of them drawn together in front of the computer screen, Natalie began to breathe deeply. David did not wear cologne, which she sincerely appreciated. Most colognes made her nauseous. She turned to look at him in profile. There was a small bead of wax in his left ear, nestled comfortably just above the lobe. Natalie sucked in her breath and stopped her fingernail from rescuing it. The hollow of his ear was shiny and looked warm. She imagined her finger gently tracing its curve, circling its way back and forth over the tiny bump of cartilage. Computer light illuminated the tiny soft hairs on its outside edge. How innocent the flesh. How salty and sharp and sweet and piquant and moist and tender. Natalie’s imaginary finger followed the upward arc of the ear, then slowly downward and stopped behind the lobe itself. Could he feel her? How could he not feel her?

David created her Buddy Name and added her to a list. He did a software update, and then prepared to leave, picking up his newspaper and empty soda can.

“Do you guys recycle?”

“I’m working on starting it here. For some reason, Henry’s being a little nonchalant. If you want, I’ll take that stuff home and recycle it there. That way you don’t have to drag it around to your next job,” Natalie replied.

“Thanks.”

Natalie worked late that evening, watching the little icon at the top corner of the screen that indicated David was online. Finally, at 6:48, it changed to an empty circle – offline user. She reached toward the screen and touched the circle with her finger.

* * *

Thursday evenings were always the hardest on Natalie. Walking slowly back to the car, she always became painfully aware that it would be another four days before she would see David again. She decided to make some pasta when she got home. Yes, feed the cats, make some pasta, watch a movie. "Natalie," she thought as the ignition turned over, "You are a walking cliché."

The water was boiling when the phone rang.

"Nat?"

"Yes Dad?"

"I just bought some weather stripping at the hardware store and I noticed that yours needed to be replaced last time I was over. You gotta watch that kind of thing or your utility bills are gonna look like the national debt."

"Isn't that what a landlord is for?" Natalie replied.

"When has that landlord of yours ever done one thing on time? Why should he care? You pay the heat, right?"

Natalie sighed and doubled the amount of pasta in the stockpot.

* * *

Pasta finished, weather stripping in place, Natalie carefully arranged the dishes in the rusting dishwasher and joined her father in the part of the apartment that might be called a living room. She had considered moving several times, but she continued to acquiesce to the surprisingly safe neighborhood in such a low-rent area.

"So," Her father began to try to make himself into an old chair that had gradually and stubbornly grown less comfortable over many years. "Am I your hot date this weekend?"

Natalie ignored all psychoanalytic implications of this remark and replied, "Yeah, I guess so." She sat on the couch, hugging her upper body around a once-blue pillow and rocked back and forth.

"Aw Nat, why? You're such a nice-lookin' girl. It's the mortuary thing, isn't it? I know it's not a bad job and you do good work there. But as soon as you find something else things'll pick up."

She remained silent for a bit. "It's not the mortuary." Natalie rolled her eyes and fell back into the couch. "I mean that it doesn't help to have such ... an unusual work environment...but it's me. It's me."

She should have been sobbing, but she recognized the resignation in what she was about to say.

"Natty..."

"It wouldn't matter where I worked. I know it's hard for you to imagine Dad, but I'm not a very attractive package. What can a man want with a woman who'd rather discuss Freud than watch football? What can they share with other? How can these two people be happy together? I wish I were more ...in sync with people, but I'm not. I have PhD and a socially bizarre job, now all I need is a mortgage and I can kiss myself goodbye from the world of relationships forever."

"Nat, I shoulda never been your father. Maybe I'm too much like all these guys that you been striking out with. I wish I could help you more, but I don't know anything about your Mr. Freud myself."

"Are you asking for an explanation?" Most of the time, Natalie loved to pretend lecture. And most of the time, her father enjoyed listening.

"Keep it short."

"Freud advocated a deterministic philosophy of psychological development. He said that most of our decisions and behavior are rooted in childhood experience, where we develop a subconscious and sublimate our basic desires, our socially inappropriate desires within it. But we can never sublimate everything completely. Sometimes desires surface against our conscious will, such as in jokes or slips of the tongue or dreams."

Natalie's father waited patiently, as he had learned to, while lost in translation.

"Basically, that means that our childhood makes us who we are as adults."

"And he says that we can't change it or get better?"

"No," she answered. "Freud wasn't a fatalist. But he did describe an experience he had in a small town in Italy where he just kept turning the same corners, getting lost in the same set of streets, getting noticed by the same set of people, as helpless as if he were walking in a dream."

"He wasn't smart enough to carry a map?"

"No, Dad. It's real and metaphorical. We're all lost on the same streets all the time. We make the same irrational decisions. We repeat old childhood patterns. Fight the same neuroses. Relive past traumas." Natalie's gaze wandered to the open window. Children were playing at a nearby playground. Their happy screeches crescendoed and decrescendoed in the damp evening air.

"Baby." Her father looked at his daughter straight on.

"Baby. Sometimes things just happen for no damn reason. You know that, right?"

"Yes," she said with closed eyes.

"No damn reason at all."

"Absolutely. No damn reason," she repeated flatly.

"I just want you to be happy, is all," he answered softly.

"What would make me happy is to share myself." She slid to the floor, where she lay theatrically on the beige rug, sprawled out reptilian-style. "Share everything I learn or dream about or see or visit. And I can't find anyone to share these things with me."

"Screw sharing. Grab a couple of dreams for yourself."

Natalie sat up.

"You know. Dreams. Basic desires."

She blinked several times at this decidedly non-parental advice.

"What happened to 'Do it for me, Nat.'?"

"I take it all back. You said yourself. You're not like other people. And other people aren't like you? So why waste your energy trying to share with them? You maybe think that you and your PhD here in this crummy apartment can save the world? If most of the world is wandering around lost like your Mr. Freud says, I think you got very little chance. If sharing makes you happy, then share yourself. But don't make other people and their happiness part of your deal. Don't you know of anyone who's happy just being themselves?"

She nodded slowly. Of course she did.

"Take a couple of lessons there. Lots of people got degrees. You only got you. For life, kiddo."

* * *

Natalie turned the computer screen to remove the glare from the sunshine coming in from the window and began her day.

Login?

Password?

She launched the browser and clicked through a few more screens.

Inbox 4 Bulk 3

She clicked on the Inbox. The first message was of no importance. The second contained an attachment from a vendor listing price changes.

Scan and Download Attachment.

Download Attachment.

She waited a few seconds.

Some files can harm your computer. If the file information below looks suspicious, or if you do not fully trust the source, do not open or save this file.

Natalie clicked open. A few seconds later, a window popped up.

(This file must be converted with BinHex 4.0)

Natalie smiled. Time to IM David.

natpal: file corrupted, i think. r u busy?

dmkisner: brt

Be right there.

* * *

David showed up at the mortuary 20 minutes later. The BinHex window was still on the screen.

"Do you know if he was sending from a Mac or PC?"

Natalie shook her head.

"Do you have his information? I'll call him, get him to resend the document, and see what he's doing as he sends it. Maybe the code is being stripped from the attachment."

She began searching the rolodex, and finally found the right card. David got on the phone, and almost immediately got put on hold. The mortuary, only beginning its digital existence, had not yet entered the world of the cordless phone. David was stuck at the desk.

"It's really warm outside for this time of year," he remarked.

Natalie agreed silently. She could almost smell the lilacs. Then she thought for a moment. She thought of the many moments where she had held back from conversation, from feeling, from feeling so fully that she would surely break like porcelain. He couldn't leave now, chained to the desk by a two-foot black spiral. How much time was in this moment? Five minutes? Ten?

"It was just like this on the day of my mother's funeral," she replied.

"Your mother died? I'm sorry."

"She had a heart attack. There was a defect in a major vessel in her chest and she died while she was watching TV. Just making a salad for dinner."

David appeared to not know quite what to say, but seemed willing to listen.

She continued. "My grandparents made me wear black for the funeral, even though I was too hot. They told me not to complain in front of my dad – to just be a good girl and hold his hand. I think I held his hand that entire day. I guess I've never stopped." Natalie's voice began to tremble. She eyed the space around her.

"You mean," David began, pulling his head back "What you do here everyday... You see your dad in all of these people?"

"Yes." Natalie inhaled and forced her voice through the tremor. She sensed it would not last longer than what she wanted – no, needed – to say to someone, if she could. "I want people to realize that death doesn't...doesn't summarize a life. My mother's death was so... meaningless. It happened for absolutely no reason at all. But that doesn't mean her life was meaningless. I've never been afraid to die. Or of the way I might die. I'm really more afraid of the way that I'm living. Even though she doesn't know, never knew...I don't think my mother would approve."

Words became increasingly powerless to communicate Natalie's feelings. She tripped around them like ball bearings.

"People should connect to people...notice things, really notice things. Like the color of a person's fingernails. Or the cleft in a person's chin."

She was looking at him fully in his guileless, upturned face. Did he know yet?

"I mean, how can I champion a cause if I can't trust, can't connect to others? Or myself? I've always been afraid to do what I really want to do. To maybe take a career risk. Or to take a vacation. Or just pick up and move." Where was this going?

"What keeps you here?"

She stumbled around her thoughts, rejecting each that came to her.

"The thought that maybe no one would miss me." Her insides turned. Not true. Not true. Quickly she looked downward. The teal-colored carpet was of no help. She closed her eyes.

"What keeps me here is...is...the hope...that..."

Suddenly, David was connected with the necessary person and began talking.

“Yes, I need to speak to a Paul Shaeffer about an attachment sent this morning...”

It was gone. The moment was gone and so was her voice. She stood awkwardly perpendicular next to David’s shoulder. She was a mass of quickly dissolving crystals, her tongue thick in her mouth.

Screw sharing.

Quickly she grasped the guileless, clefted chin and applied the dry pressure of her lips to his, trespassing on the sentence falling from them. The slightly uneven sideburns were sweaty, as was the back of his neck as her fingers gracelessly grasped it. Natalie felt her temples pounding, her cheekbones exploding, her throat closing in upon itself. She stepped backwards limply, releasing the motionless face.

The phone was dangling by the edge of the desk. David sat unmoving next to it, his right hand loosely holding the mouse. The air had fallen around them and crashed with a strange buzzing noise. Natalie fought for a piece of the solid air and held on. Almost inaudibly, she rasped, “...I never wanted to hurt anyone...ever.” Yes. Not Sam, not her father, and certainly not David.

Then, she fled for the restroom, immediately turned the latch, and sunk down where her tears met the unforgiving gray tiled floor.

* * *

Natalie emerged an unknown stretch of time later. David was gone. The phone had been replaced in the cradle. Slowly she walked toward the computer to restart it. The BinHex window was gone. In its place was an IM window with seven characters in it.

u there?

Strip's Can

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The carneys set up across the highway from a greyhound track and a few blocks from a grey-sand and sharp-stoned beach. Strip (who was so dubbed ten years ago, when he climbed on stage with an exotic dancer and started peeling off his clothes with a swiveling sense of rhythm that no one had ever suspected he possessed) sets up next to Chopper. They talk to make the time go by faster. Strip tells Chopper about his mom and dad.

His mom was a housewife and his dad drove trucks. When Strip was fifteen (his name was Clarence), his dad brought a venereal disease home from California, and his mom found out about it from the doctor, whose careful nodding and throat clearing (Strip imagines the episode, invents details) made it clear to Strip's mom that either she or her husband had to have picked it up from somewhere else. She couldn't pronounce the illness after leaving the humming office, the cramped waiting area, even as she was looking at the letters in print on a rose-colored handout that the doctor had given her. Chlamydia. So when she met Strip's dad in the greasy garage of their run-down ranch, he looked at her dumbly when she tried to explain what he'd done to her. She'd had to take him by the paw and lead him into the house, leave him standing on the ancient dog-pee stain in the shag carpeting while she fished the handout from her pocketbook. He'd turned pinkish then beneath garage-oil streaks. He dragged his palm from behind his ear to his breastbone, pilling the dirt with nervous sweat.

Strip came home to find that the kitchen cabinets had been emptied and smashed into a pile in the center of the house. A heap of greasy brown pots and pans was spangled with irregular fragments of dishwasher-safe white with green flowers. It had been a controlled explosion. Even in rage, Strip's mom wouldn't want anyone to cut his foot on an errant shard. Strip's father hunkered in the corner with his head in his hands while Strip's mother sat on the couch, watching TV and whistling a slow off-key version of a Patsy Cline song.

He tells Chopper all of this as they bang awnings into place and arrange stuffed animals safely along the back walls of their stands. He tells him even though he knows he shouldn't, because if a carney tells a story like that about his own parents, even to another carney, it's like jabbing a sharp tool into his own already-dicey reputation. And Chopper could very well look down on him for it. But it's Chopper, and Strip knows a lot of dirt about his life too: He's got a daughter, Rachel, and an ex-wife who seems to

have a new boyfriend every couple of weeks but never forgets to hound Chopper for child support if the check doesn't show up in her mailbox by the second of each month. Anyway, he trusts Chopper enough that he's going to ask him to be a partner in his business venture. They pull plastic sheeting down over their stalls as Strip finishes his story.

He came home to find his parents in this odd configuration, arrayed around a pile of broken kitchenwares. They didn't notice Strip when he came in. Strip made a low coughing noise and his dad looked up. His mom kept watching TV and whistling. "Is everything okay?" Strip asked softly. "Everything's fine. How was school today?" Strip's dad had this unyielding impulse to smooth things over, no matter the cost. It was either a highly developed ability to ignore reality, or it was because if he ever did show any emotion or react strongly to the people around him, he might spill everything he'd been holding in for so long. Strip had this quality in common with his dad, and it would prove to be both a help and a hindrance in his relationships throughout the rest of his life.

Strip put his backpack down on the couch next to his mother. "Hello Clarence," she finally said, then went back to her whistling and watching. Strip sat down next to his backpack. "School all right?" his mother asked. "Fine," he said. His mother stopped whistling. The three of them sat there for the rest of the afternoon, a gray expanse of time with a low ceiling, punctuated by audience laughter and by Strip helping himself to a bag of Doritos, the *thwee-click* of an occasional lighter and the crickling inhale of a cigarette. Strip's dad went to the bathroom and the momentous thrum of long-held-in pee could be heard hitting the toilet. Strip's dad grunted, maybe because of painful urination. Well after dark, Strip's mom turned on a lamp. Strip went to bed, his room a cocoon of black light posters and pyramids built out of empty Marlboro boxes.

The next morning, the house was clean. Both of his parents were asleep or had gone out and there was an ashtray full of cheerios on the kitchen table, alongside a spoon (all the bowls had been broken). Strip poured milk in and ate the cheerios before setting off for school, a cigarette dangling from his lips as he stepped onto the walkway.

Strip has an idea. He tells Chopper about it that night, after the carnival closes, asks him if he wants in. They could get rich, and they might even end up famous because no one has thought of this before. They decide to ask Dale, their buddy who takes tickets for the roundup, to come in too. They meet outside Strip's trailer and pull milk crates into a circle.

"It's got girls and it's got dogs," Strip says, and pushes his orange hat up off of his eyebrows. The three men lean into toward each other, their elbows on their thighs. Cans of Coke and Sprite leaded with Jack Daniels are suspended between their knees.

When Strip got home from school, his mother and father were still nowhere to be seen. He took a pack of cigarettes from the carton his mom kept in the drawer below

the microwave, which was broken and was only used to store cereal boxes and other things that wouldn't fit into the cabinets. He lit a cigarette and imagined what would happen if both of his parents had left for good. It could be that his mother had walked out on his father and his father had walked out on his mother and without either of them realizing it, they'd both ended up walking out only on Strip, who would end up the sole occupant of the house. It wouldn't be so bad. In fact it could work out great: he'd make the house into a club by darkening all the windows and charging admission to kids from his school. Alison Schroeder, his would-be girlfriend, could get in for free. Maybe she'd even help him run the club. He could soundproof pretty easily. It would be an underground thing and no one would have to find out. Even if they did find out, he'd only be charged as a minor...

The details were coming into focus when he heard the door creak open. His mom came in and collapsed at the kitchen table. Strip's dad had left. She'd asked him to. She told Strip that he'd had an affair and that she couldn't live with that. Strip nodded, put his hand on her arm where it laid along the table. He didn't want to hug her, but he felt that he should comfort her somehow. They sat at the table and smoked cigarettes and Strip's mom made herself a few vodkas with orange juice. Strip drank orange juice and snuck in the vodka when his mom was turned the other way, her jaw relaxing into permanent disappointment.

"Where'll we get a boat that size?" Dale asks.

Strip fans his hands out at his sides, like a magician about to unveil something. "They're all over the place. When they aren't perfect anymore, people are dying to get rid of 'em."

"Yeah, but," Chopper begins, and Strip cuts him off.

"I know a guy. When we get down to North Carolina, there's a guy there." He tells them that the laws for gambling and exotic dancing are different when you're on the sea. That nobody's ever thought to combine the two, much less put them out on the water, where everything's freer. Strip knows a guy that got married out at sea. He didn't even have to get a justice of the peace because the laws are all different. None of them has any nautical experience, but they all hood their eyes to better view the fantasy of life on a ship, where the cradle of the ocean would offer existence without restrictions and where they'd be in charge of the party.

"But a greyhound track?" Dale asks.

"Jesus Christ, Dale," Strip says. "Greyhounds are small, they don't need a track as big as the ones you get on land."

"All the track is is sand anyways," Chopper adds. "Think Rachel can come in on the business when she's old enough? I mean, she's good in math, she might be an accountant. She's gonna be in high school. Soon she can do the books."

"Or dance," Dale snorts, his fist to his mouth like he is coughing.

Chopper grabs Dale by the shirt and pulls their faces together. "Don't talk about my kid like that." The ground is wet. The milk crates have sunk into it. Dale is shaking and Chopper is glaring.

"Sorry, Chopper," Dale says. They unlock.

"So the boat," Chopper asks, turning to Strip. "Who's this guy?"

"Yeah," Dale says, parroting Chopper.

"He owns a fucking gigantic hotel down in Hilton Head," Strip says. "The guy's loaded. Lots of military go in there when they're on R and R, tons of marine big wigs, people who know people, all that."

"What if the dogs fall off?" Dale asks.

"It's gonna be a big boat," Chopper says, facing his palms towards each other and then growing the space in between them.

"Walls on the sides," Strip says, his hands imagining two walls, sliding up and down them.

"Where'll the girls be?" Dale asks.

"In a tent in the middle of the place. Or down below, I don't know." Strip scratches his hat. "We only have to go places where it's warm anyways, so it doesn't matter if they're outside." Dale nods, pours some Jack Daniels into his Coke can. Chopper takes the bottle from him and pours some into his Sprite.

"Didn't ya ever see those huge ass oil tanker boats?" Strip asks Dale.

"Or the aircraft carrier ones?" Chopper adds. "Remember the monster thing Dubya landed on when he thought that we'd won the war in Iraq."

"He's dumb as a fish," Dale says, laughing into his fist.

"Anyways," says Chopper, "Strip's right. The world's a mess of broken boats that nobody wants. Boats that are less-than-perfect that folks wanna unload cheap."

"Exactly," Strip says. "Dancers and dogs: easy to control. And we don't have to stay still, that's a huge bonus."

Dale goes to the trailer and brings back another can of Coke, pops it open as he sits back down. "So what's our first step?"

Chopper throws an empty can on what they have dubbed the beer garden and takes a swig of JD straight. "Girls, dogs, and a boat."

Strip nods his head. "Money. We gotta start getting some money together."

*

A couple of weeks later, they are in a different state. Strip is at his booth, standing on dirty plywood flooring that has absorbed mud from seventeen of the fifty states. Toys are pinned grotesquely to the wall behind him, above sawed off pieces of PVC piping and a slew of tennis balls. He loves it, even though he wants to do something bigger. He loves knowing the ins and outs, how to throw the ball so it lands in one of the PVC tubes, tempting people with the anticipation of getting something for less than it's worth—a huge pink panther with lunatic felt eyes. But he knows the odds. He is in charge.

They have been saving fifty percent of their earnings for the venture – Chopper only has to put fifty percent of what he has left after child support payments, so he’s going to be vice-president, and Dale makes less than they do, so he’s going to be a junior partner.

After closing, they meet by the beer garden, a pile of beer and soda cans that will grow until they leave it there, a monument to their time in town. The rides close before the games and Dale arrives first. He opens a bottle of whiskey and shares it with the carneys who stop by. The three men wait for the party to end before Strip retrieves the coffee can. He counts their money, \$467.00, before receiving the bills that Dale and Chopper peel off the wads in their pockets. Strip piles those bills on top of what they have saved already and stuffs it all into the can. They clink cans in the center of their triumvirate and down the rest of their drinks.

For days after Strip’s dad left, his mother sat on the couch or at the kitchen table and cried. She’d stop crying for long enough to make dinner and she’d go to bed and sleep without crying but it seemed to Strip that soft sobbing edged every other moment of the day. At first he felt sad for his mother. But as the days wore on he stopped feeling anything and he treated her as if she were acting totally normally. “Mom, I’m going out today.” Sniff. “Mom, Gramma called.” A nod and a wipe of the nose with the back of a hand. “Mom, I’m going to school. See you when I get home.” And he’d wait for the screen door to slam shut before lighting a cigarette and walking to the seven eleven for the 16-ounce coffee with cream and seven sugars that would keep him going through his first class and into homeroom.

Finally, after his dad had been gone for two weeks, Strip came home from school and found his mother chopping apples on a piece of plywood on the kitchen table. He sat down as she mixed the apples with brown sugar.

“How was school?”

“Okay.”

“I’m making a pie for dessert.” She took a slug from a can of Old Milwaukee.

“Looks good.” Strip picked up an apple slice and crunched it between his teeth.

“I got a job today.” Strip stopped chewing for a moment.

“Wow. Cool.”

“I’ll be cooking – making salads and sandwiches at the Crock.”

“Cool.”

“You can come in for lunch.” She pointed with her beer can while moving some hair off her face with her forearm. “Grab me a bowl from that cabinet, would you?”

Strip’s dad called him every once in a while from wherever he was, and met him after school sometimes if he was in town. They’d hop into the cab of his truck and drive to Dunkin Donuts. They’d twiddle coffee stirrers and leave a pile of empty sugar packets in the middle of the table while Strip would answer his dad’s questions in as

few syllables as possible. "School's good." "Mom's fine." "No, the pipes haven't burst." "We've been leaving the water dripping."

"I didn't think it bothered me at the time," Strip tells Chopper late at night, after Dale and the other carneys have gone to bed. "But ya know, now that I think about it maybe it's why I never stick it out in relationships."

"Fuck it," Chopper says. "I stuck it out so much I got married, and lookit where it got me."

"Yeah," Strip nods, "Fucked."

"Fucked," Chopper shakes his head. "Yeah, but at least I got Rachel. Man, did I tell you what she said to Santa when she saw him at the mall?"

"Yeah you did," Strip laughs, "She told him her daddy'd get her whatever she wants." The two men chuckle and stare at the ground between them, as if Rachel is asleep there. Some raindrops fall out of the darkness.

"How's your mom doin now?" Chopper asks, tossing his can onto the beer garden.

"She's doin good. Drinks a lot these days but hell, why not. But she's okay, you know? I don't talk to her much."

"You should give her a call." Chopper says. "It could be you're all she has."

"Yeah, I should. I will."

"We'll get a lead on that boat in Hilton Head," Chopper straightens his sweatshirt as he stands up.

"A couple more weeks is all." Strip snakes a pack of cigarettes up out of his shirt pocket, fishes one out. "I'm gonna smoke one more before I turn in."

Chopper nods, shuffles to his trailer. Strip watches him go. Chopper's door bounces off the metal frame a couple of times before clicking into place, leaving Strip alone in the beer garden.

La Capilla

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The sun didn't come out today. I don't know why. We woke up at 10 a.m., but I was sure fooled. It was pitch black, and I asked my wife, "what's going on? Did we sleep all day? "

We were both hung over, pills and beer, cocaine and weed. Morphine. I was sick hungover. I couldn't remember the night before. Did we go out? Did we stay in? It doesn't matter . I have to go out now. A.M. or P.M. It doesn't matter. I need cigarettes. I need some fucking smack. I look at my wife. She's naked. Still mostly asleep though I am sure she noticed that I got up. Her legs are spread wide and the cheap blanket covers only her torso. I see her pussy . I am disgusted. Such vulgarities offend me. Strange, considering where I have been, and where I am now. I ask myself how I got here. Quickly, I push the thought from my mind. It really doesn't matter. I'm here now and the sun hasn't come up. I need some cigarettes.

Maybe the dust has hid the sun. I can barely breath the dust is so viscous in the air. Isn't that what killed the dinosaurs? Is this the end of man? I look to the sky halfway expecting the Christ to return. No such luck. Not today. I walk to the corner store. El Mercado. I can at least get some cigarettes and a half liter of Sprite or whatever the fucking measurement is. These tiny Mexicans and their tiny products. I am an American, a giant in this Lilliputian hellhole. I guess I'll get two of them. Twenty eight pesos later and I have two of these tiny Sprites and a pack of Marlboro Lights. Maybe I should bring the wife something. She will be up soon. I'm sure she will wonder where I have gone. Not important right now. What's important now is to get to la farmacia and talk to my man noeh and get some morphine, some totem poles, a few coderit and maybe a bottle of amphetamines until I can get some coke. The Sprite is tiny. The coke is huge.

I consider again the absence of sunlight. The dust is thick, but surely not so much that it has blocked the sun completely. An eclipse maybe? It has been going on too long for that. The possibility that I have lost my mind entirely seems most plausible. I consider-

"Hey papi"

Some whore. She's disgusting. Her face crevassed thick with wrinkles. Mascara applied liberally only serves to draw my attention to the glassy bloodshot eyes. Tired eyes. Her fingertips are brown and her nails cracked. The skin around them peeling and red. Her skirt is so short I can smell her sex. A wave of nausea rolls over me.

"Papi, que pasa? Tu quieres jugar?"

"No, no.. Thats ok. Thanks though. "

"I give good head, papi. Five dollars and I suck your dick. "

"No really. I'm fine. " I see desperation and disappointment in her lips. The corners drop ever so slightly while maintaining a smile. A soft smile. Her lips are appealing. I imagine she can suck a dick and, for a moment, I consider it, but I have more important things on my mind. Things that just can not wait. My disdain fades some and I find myself speaking only to her lips, red with too much lipstick, cracked and blistered, but full and embracing. Welcoming.

"Why is there no sun? " I ask, not taking my eyes of her tragic lips.

"I don't know, papi, it jes happen sometime." She walks closer to me. To my surprise, I do not recoil. In fact, I lean forward. She is inches from me and I feel her hand at my waist. I've lost weight since coming to Matamoros. Twenty pounds or so. My pants hang loosely and her hand slips easily down them. I feel her calloused fingers caress me.

"Please papi. I love big American dick. Mexicans no have dick like this. I love Americans, papi. Yo quierlo." She is pouting. Blood rushes to my penis, filling up her hand. She is good at her job, but i am good at mine too. My job now is to get right and she can't help me with that. I have to see Noeh. I grab her wrist and pull her hand away with, perhaps, too much force. She does not flinch. She's used to it. Her eyes tell me she welcomes it.

"I have to go. I have things to do." I turn quickly and don't look back. I hear the heels of her second-hand American shoes click unevenly as she walks away mumbling incoherent rapid Spanish. I am flattered. By a whore, I am flattered. It is big isn't it?

The mystery of the Sun is what I think about as I walk. It is the only thing that detracts from feeling the last drops of opium metabolizing and vanishing. I can't imagine where it could have gone. I look to the sky again. It doesn't look like dust. It looks like night. I see stars, faded, but twinkling like cartoon water. I notice that I have stopped walking. I am wasting time. I can get nowhere standing still. I pass by a small shop. The sign reads *Taller un Mecanico*. Junk surrounds the hand painted sign and a small couch sits in the yard. Two legs missing and springs exposed. It reminds me of winter and a chill passes through my veins. My arm hurts. My asshole is so tight I am Rush Limbaugh. I duck to walk under an awning at the adult bookstore. These tiny Mexicans. In the window I notice the biggest dildo I have ever seen. I am disgusted. Sickened by the thought of some tiny Mexican woman positioning herself onto it, while little brown men drink Tecate and laugh, hands in pants, their eyes fixed on the poor victim of such a good time.

Through the window I see Noeh surfing the internet. Probably looking at

pornography. Exotic American women. Blondes and redheads, even black chicks. Probably he thinks this is America. Probably he is right. The door doesn't open for me. I push and a cowbell rattles above my head. Noeh looks up quickly and clicks the mouse twice.

"Michael. Como esta mi amigo? You look bad my friend." He seems genuinely concerned. He's a pharmacist and knows his wares. He's a young man. Very good looking with a vibrant intelligent smile and straight teeth. He has lived in a border town all his life, and he knows the deal. I have lived here a few months, and I would like to think we have become friends. He speaks English so I don't have to befoul his language with my stubborn tongue and slurred thoughts.

"Jesus, Michael. You jes came here yesterday, no? I sold you much drogas. What to you do with it my friend?" He seems he is not kidding. He can't fathom with his tiny Mexican mind what a man could do with 60 Xanaxes 250 milligrams of morphine and various amphetamines and opiates in less than 24 hours. He can't imagine. His naivety draws a smile from me as I put a 12 pack of Indio on the counter.

"My wife ate it. I didn't even catch a buzz, Noeh. Can you believe that shit?"

"No Michael. I can't believe that shit. How is your beautiful bonita roja? I cant imagine her doing anything wrong."

"Yeah ..." I stumble over my thoughts desperately trying to maintain the balance of polite conversation, "well you'd be surprised. What do you have for me today?"

"Of course." Noeh shuffles nervously and averts his eyes to the bottle on the counter. "Today I have the Xanaxes".

"Give me 60."

"Already done my friend. Also I have the morphine. I only have 100 mg of the liquid left, but plenty of las pastillas."

"Damn! Okay. Give me the liquid and another 200 mg of the pills. Got any of the coderit today?"

"Oh you like the coderit, no? Jes, I have some left. Do you want the 50 mg or the 25 mg pills?"

"Noeh, come on."

"Jes, jes. How silly of me. The 50 and... Anything else?"

"No, just the beer. Oh yeah, give me two of those workers."

"Que?"

"Oh. La jeringa."

"Ah, of course. You always get clean needles. Most people buy one needle and don't get another until it is too dull to pop a balloon."

"I figure I'm taking enough chances already. I'll control what I can, anyway. Tu sabes?"

"Yo se. Yo se mi amigo." Sadness. He hates this part. He despises the confederacy of suicide we have entered, but my money is good. And even as a successful businessman in Matamoros, he is not so rich he can choose ethics over

business.

"It is \$114.23."

I reach into my and a wave of panic splashes over me as I realize it is empty. I check the other pocket. I always put it in my right pocket. I notice the weight gone. I feel off center. My knee buckles slightly and I feel as if my bones are made of iron and a magnet has replaced my wallet. The iron in my very blood is drawn to the small square absence of pressure on my ass. Noeh looks confused.

"What is it my friend?"

"My wallet. I don't... That fucking whore! That fucking whore stole my wallet! Ah, I am a fucking idiot. 'Your big American dick.' God, I am such a moron. Fucking putz. That fucking whore! Noeh. Noeh, listen to me. You know I'm good for this. My credit cards are in there. I'll get it back. You know I am good for it. The money is yours just let me taste something."

"Michael, I trust you, but this is mucho dinero. What if someone else wants to buy and i dont have? What if something happens? I jes can't do it."

"Please Noeh? Okay then just the temgesic. I will get the tafil and coderit later. Please man."

"Well, I guess I can give you five pills, but you must pay me as soon as you can. Michael I am not rich man. I hold the Xanax as long as I can."

"Thank you, Noeh. Gracias mi amigo. Por favor. Yo quiero una jeringa tambien."

"Si, si. Pero what will you do about your wallet? Can you call your credit card company and have them cancelled?"

"Come on, Noeh. You know those aren't my cards. I have to find them. I have to find her. She can't be far from her room. I'm sure she just went to get some rock. She'll have to come back to turn her tricks. She will be back and that spic fucking whore is dead. Pinche puta."

"Well I trust you Michael. You are my friend. Be careful. La Capilla is no place to play around. Tu sabes? Find what you are looking for and get out. "

"Of course, Noeh. You know me. Thank you. By the way, can I use your bathroom?"

There still is no sun as I leave the pharmacy, but I no longer feel as if I am losing my mind. There must be a rational explanation. No longer does the return of Jesus seem a possibility. The stars look much like stars now and my arm feels better. I am almost content to wander the streets of La Capilla for a while before searching for the whore. A rush of blood, hot with anticipation flushes my face, as the image of her lips mouthing something indiscernible floats delicately through my thoughts. I imagine the Sun eclipsed by a fragile and infirm face filled with struggle. Night descends slowly and deliberately over the whole of Tamaulipas as a meretricious Mary dances between the light and my eyes.

I walk briskly but roll like the ocean through the dingy narrow streets. I see pinatas outside shop windows: Buzz Lightyear, The Incredibles, Ninja Turtles. Icons of

American youth swing in the breeze while small brown children kick a roll of duct tape in the street. They squeal and shout, oblivious to the holy images hanging restlessly above them. La iglesia es abierto. Shrunken old widows still in their mourning black wander into the church. With purpose and conviction, they cross the threshold. The bells never stop singing. The padre is always in.

I consider stopping. I am drawn to the bell's siren song. The sound of gossip in harmony with the bells arouses my curiosity. Joven. Muerte. Words. Clipped staccato phrases grace my ears. I pass without looking. Not today.

I return to the place where I encountered her. She is not to be found. Buildings of weathered plywood are crammed into each available space. Hers is on the corner. She is always standing in the doorway unless she has company. Her door is closed. Seeing her windows blackened reminds me of my anger. I think again of the couch, the springs and the winter. This time without chill or association. My anger swells as my libido had a short time earlier. I consider knocking but decide to wait. She will be back. She, like Noeh, is not so rich as to allow conscience to interfere with business. Maybe we, me an American, are not so different after all. I find a spot on the curb that seems cleaner than the rest and sit down, deciding to give gravity a break. It is hard work keeping a man down all the time.

I cough. A bead of sweat rolls down my face. I can feel the dust in my eyes. They are dry and painful. I've become accustomed to the dirt, the filth and the smell of this godless land, but for the desert wind, I have no tolerance. I feel the breeze on my wet skin. I am chilled in the intense heat as I imagine my sweat glands accepting the grimy street air. Desperate for assimilation, my skin collects the dust and grows darker with each passing day. The water is filthy. There is no getting clean in Mexico. There is only brown.

I follow my thoughts to the edge of consciousness. My head falls repeatedly and against my will to my chest. I do not feel the heat nor do I feel the remorse for what I've left behind in America. I do not feel dirty. Cleanliness is next to godliness, but I do not feel clean either. I feel nothing. I feel fine. I hear the door open and see a small ugly Mexican man walk out. I position myself out of sight. The man is short even by Mexican standards. His hair is thinning and greasy. He wears a sweater with a collared shirt underneath. It looks ridiculous in this heat, but he doesn't seem uncomfortable. His few teeth are yellow and black. He walks down the stairs with a slight limp and looks back into the room. For the first time I see her. She is crouched over a bucket, naked. Urinating and wiping her nose with the back of her hand. She is positioned on the balls of her feet and appears quaintly graceful. I can hear the piss hit the metal bucket but feel no revulsion. Only pity. Perhaps she needs the money more than I do. I push this thought from my mind. It is just bad business.

"Adios, Maria" says the ugly man as he gently pulls the door closed behind him.

I make sure he is out of sight before moving toward the room. The stair creaks when I put my weight on it. I am careful not to be heard. Why I can't say. She will soon

know I'm here. I place my hand on the doorknob, amazed by how normal it looks. Part of me expected a huge hand, like one has in dreams, to struggle like a philistine to turn the minuscule handle. Then squeeze, like Alice, through an unpretentious little doorway. I place my ear to the door. I can hear what sounds like the flick of a lighter and the shuffling of bare feet on the plywood. Deliberately, I turn the handle and enter. She is still naked, on the bed with a pipe stuck to those lips, now gray and blistered. She does not look up.

"Aye papi, I expected you to come back."

"Give me my fucking wallet, bitch!" I do not hear myself say the words. The only sound is the violent sucking of air through the pipe. The lighter goes out, and she looks up at me with a coy smile.

"Papi, you want I suck your dick now?"

I rush across the room propelled by a wave of rage and disgust, fear and attraction. My intention is to knock the pipe from her lips. My hand hits bluntly on her little face and her arms drop to the bed, still clutching tightly on the shooter. She sticks her chin out in defiance. In expectation. And I see a tiny crimson dot form on her lip. It swells before my eyes. She smiles and throws me my wallet. I immediately open it. The credit cards are still there. The cash, however, \$200, is gone. Her eyes are glazed, pupils dilated. Her brown eyes are black. She moves to the corner of the bed never looking at my face. With her eyes fixed on my zipper. She unbuttons my pants and pulls out my cock.

"Ooh. Yo gusto. I like big American cock." She fills her mouth. I swell immediately seeing myself between those lips of familiarity. I do not resist this time. She moves her head back and looks me in the eye. This time there is no smile. There is only despairing acceptance, wretched arousal and fear prosaic and unceremonious. I am compelled to hit her again, but quickly look away. I see my penis streaked red with her supplicant gesture. Smearred with the blood of her busted lip. Her beautiful damaged lip. I close my eyes and feel myself entering her mouth again.

I can not get off. The morphine leaves me numb. The experience does not register. The blood of Maria, a whore, leaves little impression on me and I can see nothing of the outside through the darkened windows of the shack, but I stare intently. I wonder where the Sun has gone. Isn't this what killed the dinosaurs? I look at the holes in the ceiling. I think of America. I think of the pharmacy. I can not get off, but I make her suck \$200 worth, nonetheless. It is violent and painful for her as she gags, but she does not object. This is her business. This is what she does. What she is good at. I think of my wife and how she is waiting for me at the hotel room, nervous and hungover. Not waiting on me. Waiting on what I will bring. La tafil. La cerveza. La temgesic. La decadencia. Ella espera por el Sol. Esperaremos junto, para siempre.

Windmills

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It is a Saturday morning, two days before Christmas, and we are driving to Palm Springs to buy a house. There are windmills spinning by the side of this desert highway. They are tall, white, and mechanical, resembling three thousand skinny children twirling in unison on a playground. I stare across the desert floor, over the sand and tumbleweeds, at the spiraling ivory towers of steel through my dirty windshield. For a moment, I have the sensation that we are completely still, frozen in the moment, paralyzed by some kind of magnetic force emanating from these mysterious structures. I quickly look down at the speedometer of my used Volvo, which reads seventy-five miles per hour, and realize it is rather my own perception.

I look back into the rearview mirror, at my sleeping son, who would love the oscillating pinwheels in the dry morning zephyr but decide not to disturb his slumber. I glance over at my wife to shake her from her sleep but I've become wise in my six months as a father. I let her continue her much needed nap since she was up with the baby most of the night. Instead, I am left to enjoy this by myself.

Odd things appear in the desert. Last summer, when I made the solitary drive in this ten-year old Volvo across the Mojave to Las Vegas on the I-15, I saw stones sailing across the playa near Death Valley. Several miles ahead, I witnessed an abandoned car burning on the side of the road. I slowed down and for a moment stared into the fire but saw no sign of life. When I rolled down my window, I felt the oppressive heat against my pale face and wondered if I stayed long enough, if I would just melt like a wax doll. After a moment, I rolled up my window and continued, paralyzed with extreme fear, praying that I would make it to civilization before something bad happened to me. I wondered if someone was inside that burning automobile, or if it was the act of an arsonist who lurked along the highway.

I stopped for gas and a burger at roadside diner then got back on the road, looking in my rearview mirror for the smoke from the car I had passed. I had a feeling in my chest that someone was following me. Then, just outside Las Vegas around dusk, a pack of coyotes wandered across the highway and blocked my path. I stopped the car and stared as they surrounded my car. One paused and stared at me with yellow, rapid eyes, opening his mouth to reveal his sharp teeth and I knew that I had to go. I revved

my engine, accelerated through them and sped off toward the City of Sin. I've never told anyone about these events – not even my wife whom I tell everything – because I am unsure of their factuality.

Life often works this way. You witness something so unfathomable but there is no one there to attest that it is true. Fear sends you away with no evidence. I wonder sometimes if these events were real.

As we pass the windmills, I realize now that these giant turbines are indeed real. They stand in contrast of the dark snow-capped San Bernadino Mountains that hover in the background. And since we left the darkness of Santa Monica, they are the first truly engaging landmark. Their rotors gyrate slowly, sending invisible electricity out to the air conditioners of these desert communities that loom ahead in the Coachella Valley, just a few miles beyond this San Gorgonio Pass. I think about the outcry that came with the construction of just one windmill back home on the South Shore and Ted Kennedy's plea to stop a huge turbine being built in Chatham as it would destroy the maritime landscape, not to mention the value of some of the family's real estate holdings. Here, in the middle of nowhere, stand three thousand windmills, bothering no one.

I turn my eyes back to the road and click on the static-filled radio, anxious for the freeway exit for Palm Springs. I want to get off this long desert highway. I am tired from a long school week. An old Beach Boys tune finally comes on and Mike Love sings "Christmas comes this time of year" as I steer toward the off-ramp, wonder why we've driven so far from the ocean and why I am in California for Christmas instead of my snow-filled backyard back in Massachusetts. It suddenly occurs to me that we may have just arrived in our new hometown.

* * *

I've contemplated the idea of my son growing up in the desert, about what kind of life I can offer him here. His pale complexion is more suited for New England but the homes here are cheaper. There would be plenty of recreation: the tennis and golf are the very best in the world, home to major international tournaments. But still, I question sometimes if we are making too much about buying a house. I know I can't go on living in a cramped apartment with a crying baby but I wonder if these badlands of California offer the solution – exiled to the desert. Hollywood is a long way from here.

I remember the house I grew up in Rhode Island. It was a small ranch in a bedroom town close to Providence, literally tucked in the armpit of Massachusetts. There was nothing extraordinary about that house. It was my parents' first purchase, all they could afford with a new baby on the way. It was quaint, two-bedrooms, attached garage set on a cul-de-sac, surrounded by woods, abutting the Catholic nursing home, Hospice of St. Brigid, home to my invalid grandmother for the isolated final years of her life.

We've looked at just about every house and condo in West Los Angeles, mostly expensive, two bedrooms, from the coast out to Culver City. We've even gone down to

Playa Del Rey and Westchester and walked through the complexes built on methane fields or wetlands, ones that overlook the cement aqueduct of the Los Angeles River or the runways of LAX. They are almost double what we can afford as teachers.

There are days when I'll step outside into the sunshine of the cement stoop of my Santa Monica complex and wonder if my son will be forced to grow up in an apartment, a consequence of my quixotic dreams of show business. No matter what time of day, the drunks from the bar next door are usually there, high on cheap cannabis and beer. I wonder if they came to California years ago with the same dreams and when they dissipated, they found solace in barroom billiards. I am looking for a solution in the desert, a means to keep up us in California for a few more years, maybe for the rest of lives. We can't just give up and move home. There is too much pride at stake. We are looking to abandoned land to prevent us from abandoning our dream.

The house shopping began as soon as my wife was pregnant. I had returned from my Uncle James' funeral in Connecticut. We had no intention of starting a family at that time, we just did.

My wife wakes up and rubs her eyes.

"Where are we?" she asks with a yawn.

"We're here," I reply. "In the desert."

I pull onto Frank Sinatra Drive. They say Old Blue Eyes lived here in gated-compound just down the road in Rancho Mirage. I wonder if he came here, as I do, haunted by visions of his boyhood back in the east. If he felt a sense of betrayal for missing those New Jersey winters. I read that Frank liked it here because people left him alone. That sounds appealing to me.

I turn onto Palm Canyon Drive and study the Spanish architecture blended with the glass window shops. There are Christmas trees with red ribbons and ornaments along with Yuletide decorations suspended along the boulevard. Palm trees and sequoias bend over the avenue and red and white flowers adorn the grassy median, fake reindeers standing among the pastoral landscape.

"Looks like Beverly Hills," I comment. "Except in the desert."

"It's nice," she continues, studying the shop fronts of El Paseo.

"Don't get any ideas," I remind her. "We're broke."

"I can't window shop?" she asks innocently.

"Give me your credit cards," I respond.

I pull the car off Palm Canyon into a parking structure and get out and stretch. A Bing Crosby tune is playing in the courtyard. I hear the sound of a fountain below us and, for a brief moment, I feel like having a cigarette but remember I quit six months ago, a promise to my wife when our son was born.

The ride from L.A. to Palm Springs seems as if it is always two hours. The trip back, however, is unpredictable. There's the end-of-weekend traffic, no different the mass exodus from Cape Cod on warm Sunday nights in the summer. I remember those rides, the feeling of the wind blowing in the back window of our station wagon as my father listened to the Red Sox game. We've journeyed out here before during our three

years in California but this is first time with the baby, so any ideas of a romantic weekend have slipped away. I take my son out his baby seat as my wife unfolds the stroller. I put him in and we walk down the entrance ramp to the sidewalk.

The weather is pleasant, a bit warmer than the sixty-degrees in Santa Monica, where the ocean brings fog and wind on occasion. I know that this mild temperature is short-lived for in four months the 70 degrees will rise close to the century mark.

"I'm hungry," my wife says with, "let's get some Mexican food before we meet the realtor...what's his name?"

"Mori Wasserman," I say.

"Is he the broker?"

"Broker, owner, agent, everything," I say. "I think old Mori's been in the business a while."

"What business is that exactly?" my wife asks pessimistically.

"The one that's going to get you your dream house," I shoot back.

I push my son along the hot sidewalk and look around at all the interesting colors and buildings, studying them. Santa Claus is ringing a bell outside of the Brooks Brothers store and my son giggles as he waves to us. I suddenly have an urge to return to my youth and my trips to see Santa Claus. As I walk in the heat, I suddenly imagine myself in a cold parking lot of a shopping mall in Rhode Island, holding my mother's hand with my right and my Christmas list with my left.

We continue past the Santa and I reflect on our real estate search. We started by signing up for email listings, hoping to find a condo near our rent-control apartment that would fit into our tight budget. After my wife became pregnant, I quickly took a job at a local Catholic high school but even with two salaries, the prices were astronomical.

Then I found the answer. I was sitting in The Coffee Bean on Wilshire one morning typing a screenplay on my laptop, when through the large glass window, I saw a man standing on the corner wearing the sign that announced: *Homes in the Desert, just an hour from Los Angeles!* I stood up to take a closer look at the advertisement. *Realize your American Dream. Homes starting in the high \$200,000s.*

I had sprinted out into traffic toward the man. This was the answer! A home just outside of Los Angeles, a mere hour away. It was too good to be true. We could have a house but be a short drive from the city. As I approached the unshaven man with a Dodgers cap on, he backed away.

"I ain't got any money, buddy" he insisted.

"I don't want your money," I assured him. "How do I get one of those houses?"

He looked at me oddly and smiled as I pointed at his sign. It was as if I was the first person to actually acknowledge his advertisement. He reached into his pocket and handed me a card.

"Call this eight hundred number," he said. "Ask for Mori. He'll set you up, real good."

"Thanks," I said. "You Mori's partner?"

"Nah," he said. "Just an employee out of his satellite office."

And now, here we are a month later, enjoying our burritos and margaritas at Taco Del Deserto, thumbing through local real estate guides. My son happily devours his bottled formula. I want to give him rice and black beans but he's only six months old.

"I like this one," my wife says. "And it's on a golf course."

I look at the picture and nod. I have to admit the prospect of country club living seems appealing.

"Very nice," I say. "But we don't have that much."

"But there's a community pool," she says, sliding the listing to me.

"Too much," I reply.

"Well how much do we have?"

"Not that much," I say. "We're teachers."

I think about my job. My contract was negotiated over a few pints with a priest. We settled around one in the morning when the bar was closing.

"Jesus will take care of the rest," he assured me with a Guinness in his hand.

"He's taken care of me for fifty years, Gabriel. All the way from Cork."

I had nodded.

"And Jesus brought you to Pacific Palisades, Father?" I joked.

"God is good," he shot back taking a swig of his beer.

"I have a son now, Father," I reminded him. "We'd like to buy a house."

"The doors to the house of God are always open," he said "And we'll also need your services as the volunteer basketball coach. Be patient."

"That's easy for you to say with that free house next door to the campus," I had replied.

"Again, God is good!"

But God wasn't that good to me. My assignment was a junior high class full of stress. After the first month of school, my mother dropped dead of an aneurism and I had to fly back to Boston. I returned to Santa Monica and staggered around between a phase of depression and drunkenness. I started smoking heavily and my wife threatened to take my son and walk away. To make matters worse, Father Liam was named in a sexual abuse case that shook up the entire parish. Hollywood reporters were following me around for a comment since I had been his assistant-principal when he was absent. In the end, we decided that a move to the desert might be the best scenario and here we are, exiled to the land of the sand.

After the Mexican meal, I wander out to the courtyard by the Spanish fountain and call our realtor, Mori, the head of Desert Oasis Resort Properties, Inc. He tells me that he's running a few minutes late and to meet him by the first property, near Dean Martin Way just past Jerry Lewis Avenue. It's a bank-owned property, he relates, one that they are eager to get an offer on. I hang up and think about my sister doing her last minute Christmas shopping for us before she goes to the FedEx store to mail the packages to our doorstep. I call my friend, Schwartzman, and ask if he can stop by and

pick the packages up before the homeless folks who congregate at the bar next door get at them. He asks if I'll be back for New Year's Eve and if I want to go to Hollywood to a new bar called Magnolia near Sunset and Vine. I look at my wife laughing with my son by the fountain and tell him probably not. Besides, Schartzman's wife Dea is still sore at me for treating a friend of hers she set me up with badly years before.

We drive the ten minutes to our potential new house. It's nice, better than anything we've seen in Los Angeles. I stretch as Mori Wasserman's big black Cadillac pulls up to the curb. He gets out: sky blue suit, Western bolo tie, and white leather boots that click on the pavement.

"Gabriel Bradley, I presume," he says with a New York accent. "Moris T. Wasserman, Desert Oasis Resort Properties, Incorporated."

He shakes my hand and pats my son's head.

"Oh my goodness. A new child! *Mazel tov!*" says Mori. "And none-the-less, a masculine child!"

"Thanks," I reply shooting my wife a smirk.

"Let's give the missus a look at this desert estate, shall we?"

My wife smiles. I am not totally as enamored and hold my son tight in my arms as Mori takes her hand and leads her into the desert bungalow.

Inside, Mori gives us the tour. It's obvious the place needs work but according to Mori, the home is perfect.

"And out back, there's a nice little yard for little Ian," he says.

"His name is Liam," I stammer.

"Yeah, yeah, right. Liam," he laughs as he slides the glass door to reveal a small in-ground pool and a patch of grass.

"Not much to mow here," says Mori. "But the entertaining you could do here, I'll tell you."

I look at the structure and notice some cracks in the exterior.

"Any earthquakes out here, Mori?"

He taps his chin.

"Let's see, the wife and I moved here in seventy-six," he begins. "I'd say we've have a handful...four-point-two in April...but for the most part, there's not much. Unless you take the wife dancing." He leans in and gives my flattered wife a hug at her hip. "Your insurance will take care of anything unexpected."

"Well," I say. "We appreciate your time. But we don't like anything unexpected." A strange look comes over Mori's face and he stares at me oddly.

"You don't like this palatial manner, Gabe?" he says.

"It's Gabriel," I correct him. "And no, I don't think this is for us."

He frowns and looks at my wife.

"Well, what does the missus, think?"

My wife looks at me, knowing I'm going to kill her if she disagrees but it is too late. Mori has won her heart.

"I like it," she says defiantly. "I want to live here. It's great."

Mori claps his hands and lets out a hoot. My son thinks this is hilarious and begins to laugh. My face becomes beet red and suddenly I hate the desert.

"Well then, all that's left to do is go back to my office and sign the papers. It's air-conditioned. We'll send your offer right along," says Mori gleefully. "The bank will be thrilled."

He turns and leads my wife back through the sliding-glass doors into the kitchen for one more look. I follow angrily with my son. I put him back in his stroller and look at my arms that are red from holding him so tightly. Our Realtor points out the window treatments to my wife and knows that there's only one solution to our problem. I smile and walk behind.

"Mori, are these cornices?" I ask, pointing to the green striped boxes above the window.

He turns and looks at me.

"Umm...well, I'm not quite sure," he says.

My wife looks at me disdainfully.

"What's the problem?" I ask. "We practically own the place. Right, Mori?"

Mori looks at me weakly as my son climbs up on the table.

"We might want to watch the scratches," he says. "We'll talk more at my office after I make a phone call. Follow me back."

We follow Mori's black Cadillac to Frank Sinatra Boulevard then back toward Rancho Mirage. My wife is steaming angry at me as she sits, arms folded.

Silence.

"You're right," I finally say softly.

"What?" she screams. "What did you say?"

"I haven't been doing my job," I said. "As a father and a husband. I apologize."

"What? What do you mean?" she demands.

I look ahead at Mori's slow moving Cadillac and can almost feel his eyes upon mine staring in the rearview mirror, waiting for me to just try to get away.

"What I mean is that I need to look out for both of you, more often. Do what's right for us."

My wife looks at me suspiciously, as Mori slowly goes through a yellow light, his left hand out the driver's window waving for me to follow through. But I have a six-month old baby in the back so I begin to slow the Volvo. The signal turns red as Mori fills the middle of the intersection and that's when a silver Lexus slams right into Mori's Cadillac. The sound of crunching metal and breaking glass lasts only for an instant until everything goes still and my son begins to cry from the backseat. My wife immediately turns to see if Liam is okay as I watch Mori move his car slowly to the side of the road on the opposite side of the intersection. Then my wife snaps back and stares at me — cold.

I throw up my hands. "I swear that wasn't my fault," I say. She just folds her arms and looks out her window.

I see a sign for the Palm Springs Airport and click on my right hand blinker. My wife starts to say something and I gently reach out and put my hand to her thigh. Her eyes begin to well up with tiny lakes and when the green light appears, I turn the Volvo toward the highway as the alternator begins to rattle underneath the hood.

* * *

We are driving home and the windmills rise up from the San Gorgonio Pass. I look back at my son and once again, he is asleep. I pull the car to the side of road, angry with myself and pause for a moment. My wife opens her reddened eyes and looks at me.

“What’s wrong?” she asks. “Why are we stopping here?”

The road behind is dark and quiet. I look in my rearview mirror but see only a long path of tar leading back to Palm Springs illuminated by the orange sun burning out brilliantly in the occident. There are no cars leaving. It’s Christmas Eve in California and I feel a yearning for the east, for home. I open my car door and walk across the dust to the other side of the Volvo. I take my son into my arms, holding him tight as if I will never let him go. He awakes and looks at me curiously then out to the giant spinning windmills on the side of the highway.

“What on earth are you doing?” she demands.

“Shhh,” I whisper. “This is nice. I want him to see it.”

“See what, Gabriel?”

“His Christmas gift,” I say. I kiss my son’s forehead as he yawns and opens his eyes and we begin to walk slowly toward the windmills.

A Study in Light

Heather Momyer
Chicago, Illinois

On this Saturday morning, someone tall and thin pulls back the green curtains of the window overlooking Main Street. Watching from outside, she knows these curtains are green because she has walked up and down this street at all hours of day and night while the sun and moon have moved across the sky. But today, but now, it is nearing noon and the rising sun faces this window with its window box of assorted drooping flowers, dahlias of yellow and orange, red and green, all slouching into a course and dry brown speckled white with mold, and she cannot see that the color of the curtains is green. She only sees the darkness edging the sides, moving like water into spaces beyond the frame. She only knows that they are there and that they have been green every day before this one.

From the sidewalk across the street from the window where she stands, the man's silhouette softly blurs, arms out touching the drapery, a fuzzy shadow of gray space barely visible underneath a brash reflection of sun and clouds, of storefronts that line her side of the street. In the window, she sees mirrored the gray of the mortar between the stones of the hardware store and one of the two blackened bovine heads of the bank building whose architect must have felt that cows, and not gargoyles, would be most appropriate for this Midwestern town of corn farmers and soy farmers, but when she looks directly up at this building, steps back and feels the stone at her fingertips, there is only protruding blackness haloed by red light. Eyes, nostrils, and horns are only in the window across the street.

She focuses to the window and looks for the figure behind the buildings, behind the sun and clouds, behind the parting green curtains. This man with out-stretched arms pushing the long fabric aside, standing between the space of visible and not visible, foggy and blurred behind the mirror, and she thinks of the man who lives there and turns her head and steps over sidewalk cracks toward one of the coffee shops. She stands at the intersection waiting for the light to turn, for traffic to stop, hoping she can avoid hidden eyes, but there are delivery trucks and cars of brunch-goers smelling of bacon and hash browns, pedestrians sipping coffee, and cyclists on weekend errands. She waits on the sidewalk feeling the stickiness of the heat under her shoes remembering that she has seen this man before in the coffee shop she is walking toward, at the gas station on the corner, and in the few restaurants and bars in town. She wants to think for a moment that his eyes are ice blue, but she wonders what this means. His eyes are liquid and pale and she knows this because she has seen them before, under eyelashes that blink over coffee while slowly reddening from the smoke

of his own cigarette. She says they are blue because she must give them a color. "Vapor" and "haze" will not suffice.

She places this man at the window still in morning boxers and tee-shirt, cursing for never remembering to water the flowers. She can only imagine. The clouds block her vision. On the sidewalk corners, barrels of petunias grow healthy around pieces of paper and empty boxes of Winstons. But there is no trash in his window box, only disease. Perhaps he'll plant something hardier next year, geraniums or even pansies. He'll buy them from the greenhouse instead of starting from seeds, hoping this will ensure their health. While there, he'll buy another African violet to set on the inside ledge of the window because they remind him of his grandmother who grew corn and raised vegetable gardens while his grandfather milked the cows.

Every year she had tomatoes and beans, onion, and zucchini, while interspersing red pepper, herbs, or garlic on spring planting day. She had orchards while wild raspberries and blackberries grew along the roads and fence lines, gardens of flowers – irises, tulips, primroses, and day lilies – but inside, in the kitchen where she sat after the sweat of the farm and oven, were the African violets that sat along her windowsill as he ate raspberry pie or fresh apple butter on toast. But here, with dying plants in front of him, he thinks he can scrape away the fuzzy white covering and return the vividness of life for just a few moments more.

But there is only one moment, lingering through time and space, and now from where she stands, she cannot see at all behind the glass overlooking the street and wonders if perhaps he has left to quickly get dressed, put on his shoes, and step out for a late-morning coffee as he sometimes does. He rarely stays in the shop but sometimes she will be there, ordering black tea, and they will sit near each other, holding the daily news between themselves. Now, as she waits to cross the street she sees that the door of his apartment below the window is not opening, and in the window, there is only the light of the sky and street.

And maybe this is not the man who may or may not be still standing behind the window overlooking Main Street. There are friends, teachers and poets, a man who is getting married in the fall. A visitor is in town. He is passing through on his way to visit relatives two states over. He might be asking the leaser of this apartment to be his best man in a wedding of khaki and outdoor girls in flowers, barefoot, sucking strawberries near a fountain of chocolate. Or maybe it would be a wedding of sit-down dinners, blue satin vests and svelte bridesmaids in black dresses, cellos playing "Ave Maria," toasts of champagne, composure and formality, or maybe they will be waiting for parents to skip and kick to another "Pennsylvania Polka," waiting for shots of whiskey to go down dry throats.

Perhaps this new groom-to-be woke late after spending a night on the couch, after spending an evening of games of billiards and darts, after an evening of cigars and beer, and tonight will be one of his many bachelor parties of strippers and booze, though he looks out the window and for a moment, he wonders how far he will let things go, but quickly decides that such things should not be thought about. He sees the

traffic below, a woman walking her dog, a cyclist resting his bicycle against a parking meter and then dashing through the doorway of the bank while still wearing his helmet. And then he looks out the window and sees space and air, particles of nitrogen and oxygen, full spectrum whiteness, and if asked what he was looking at, he would say, "nothing," though behind the empty space between the glass of the window and the solidness of rock and concrete of the buildings across the street, he sees the waitress from the night before and consciously looks back to the street.

On the corner is a woman in a yellow dress looking up into the light of the sky and it seems that their eyes almost meet, but she looks back to the streetlights and fidgets with the rings on her fingers, none of which are wedding bands. And in the moment of time it takes for a dream, the moment of time it takes for a vision of life at the instant of death, he sees the women of his life – his girlfriend and mother, sisters and aunts, grandmothers and former lovers, the strippers to come – and they could all be standing below on the street, squinting their eyes to the sun, looking into his face with no sense of recognition. And in that same instant, he sees the dying plants and the hangover from the night before begins to rise in his throat. He steps back and leans against the wall, his stomach heavy as the weight of a diamond worn on the finger of a woman with brown hair, pulled into braids, long enough to cover nipples.

She is a painter who speaks of Turkish baths and fine wines, of space that is both visible and invisible, of light and perception. She will spend her afternoon in a studio dabbing oils onto another self-portrait as she dreams through the scenes of the Italian pornography that she and the man whose apartment she slept in shared the night before.

In the fantasy of his mistress, the Italian lover repeats, "*Bella, bella,*" and in the fantasy of this painter, she will hear only the voice of her own lover, fantasizing him into what she sees him to be, as the brush will move down strands of hanging hair.

This morning she woke late and alone in red sheets while a man sat in the darkened den, etching through another scene of a play, drawing a character with the letters of a keyboard, sipping coffee from the coffee shop below, and she left him there to go to the window and open the curtains.

Now, as she stands there, her hands over her head, she pushes back the green cloth and feels the heat of the sunlight on her forehead and nose, in her eyes. She squints and blinks, then notices the brown of her hands, the stains of oil pigment left on her fingers and underneath her nails from the day before, and on the street she sees the brightly painted petunias growing on the corners, and she does not see the litter that lines the dirt under their green sappy leaves and stems.

From behind the window, she hears the brakes of the trucks and the sliding of doors while men deliver grocery items to the restaurant almost beneath her, and as she stands there, she thinks she can smell the aroma of the coffee sifting from the coffee shop that is just beyond her vision. It sits on her side of the street, and she knows there are four or five tables under the red awning where people are sitting right now drinking espressos, reading novels, discussing politics and love.

Across the street is a woman walking her dog, a bicycle leaning against a parking meter, a woman waiting to cross the street, and from her vantage point at the window, she imagines herself on the street, standing in the exhaust of the delivery truck, in the smoke, while the sunlight surrounds her, while she thinks of how she could have been any of these people – the woman walking the dog or the woman waiting for the light to turn – and she thinks of the painting which she will work on this afternoon and decides that only the color matters; the form is irrelevant.

Never Pain to Tell

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The woman in white, who looks a good deal like my dear old wife, enters the room. She smiles at me, just like my wife used to smile, but only after I had made love to her. Her other smiles were never as beautiful. The nurse however, smiles just like that all the time and it makes me wonder what she has been doing before she sees me. I know that we have nothing between us, nor probably ever will, as long as I am the man in the yellow room and she is the woman in white.

She can not stop smiling at me. Only when I smile back to her. Then she stops. I have learned this is the way for her to draw her lips back together, no matter how she might have felt because someone has made her happy. Perhaps the pleasure is from the man in white, the one who seems to know me so well. He may know where I have come from and what has gone through me, but what stays inside, is as much a mystery to him as it is to me.

The woman in white asks me how I am doing.

I have also learned that she tends to ask question after question, to make statement after statement. I talk quickly to insert the answer in between her sentences. Otherwise, what I say will be covered. It is hard trying to keep up with her, but I try since I have little else to do. I can save my strength up for this race of responses.

"I'm fine, you?"

She tells me that my blood pressure is fine. She smiles at me again, as if she is in love with me and is happy to know my heart is taking it easy. She undoes the strap squeezing my arm in two.

"That's better."

She asks me if things are better for me now, ignoring what I had just told her. So I repeat myself as her back is turned to me. She mixes a few pills together and gives them to me. When I hold them in my hand, they look like teeth that had been knocked out of someone's mouth.

"I take all of these? Yesterday it was only four."

The woman in white does not nod. She goes over to my bed and arranges my sheets so that they look tidy. Since the sheets are the same color of her dress, I remark, "When you do that, I cannot tell where you begin and my bed ends."

For a moment I attribute her lack of response to her thinking what I said was vulgar. I apologize, or begin to, but then I stop. I am the man in the black chair, in the yellow room, watching everyone come and go. Who do I need to feel sorry for? No matter what I say or do, she is always coming back to see me.

"How is the weather today? Is it cold or warm? I can see it is sunny, but I can't feel the air, you know?"

She mumbles something about it being hot and how her uniform does not breathe.

"Maybe it will rain later today and then everything will cool down."

The woman in white voices the same statement, with slight rearrangement of words and goes through my hamper to take out some dirty clothes. Her feet make a peculiar sound across the tiles on the floor. It is light and airy, but at the same time has a popping portion of it that keeps me alert and on edge when I hear it.

The woman in white asks me why I haven't been changing clothes as often as I should.

"It's less work for you and the machines, isn't that good?"

She talks into the wall, away from me. All I hear is the sound of her voice reflecting off the tiles and bouncing into my ear. She says that she wishes I would change clothes more often. It would make them easier to clean, fewer stains and smells to remove.

"I'll change right now if you want."

Maybe, she says, maybe you should change right now. She gives me a direction and I follow it. Her back is turned and so I am able to preserve some modesty. When I am done, I announce, "I am finished dear lady," wearing a smile as well as a new set of clothes.

She asks if I am finished yet, in a tone that is heavy with a mix of anger and sadness. Towards who, I am not certain. I sit back in my chair and the woman in white gives me a liquid to drink. I begin to feel tired and I ask if I can go to sleep. She tells me she needs to weigh me and I obey, dragging my feet to a scale in the corner of the room that is cold on my bare feet.

"178 Pounds," I tell her so she does not have to strain her eyes for my sake.

She recites the number 180 aloud, adding two pounds to me. Immediately I feel heavier and I ask again if I can go to sleep. The woman in white says she wants to have a look at my throat. When I sit down she looks into the glassy haze over my eyes and says that I look tired. She tries to keep the statement to herself, breathing out the words and trying to inhale them back in so that I don't hear them. But I do, and then I start to grow angry.

"Please, I want to go to sleep, I am very tired, the bed is hard to get comfortable in. It is too hard. I hate it. Let me go to bed now so I can spend the hour it takes me to nestle in it and then I can go to sleep. It is useless for me to stay awake. There is nothing for me to do. I've done all that you people want me to do, know let me rest."

The nurse files some paperwork and scratches it up with a pen. She does not look

up from her work until it is finished and she hands it over to me attached on a clipboard. My mind is dancing to the echo of my heart beat, and I have no idea what I am signing, or if I am even writing my real name. I look down at what I have let slip from the pen and it is a long black tail with a few dots floating on it.

As she heads for the door, which is painted bright blue like the sky, I tell her goodbye. Not in the solemn way, but in the playfully solemn way, pretending I will never see her again. I smile. She smiles back at me. The woman in white's teeth are not as pale as I imagined them to be. She has been drinking too much of everything.

The door closes and I get up to go to bed. Everything is ready for me. The cold of the floor rushing up between my toes suddenly gives me a jolt and I cannot go to sleep. I am frustrated because my body aches from sitting all day long. But my mind is still running. It can't slow down in the cold.

Outside I can hear the voice of the woman in white. I can hear the voice of a man too and I look out the round window and I see them in the hallway. For a minute, I hope that they are lovers and will put on a show for me. I figure that is why she smiles so much to me. But it seems now, that at most, they were lovers, because she's yelling at him, and as I listen in, I learn that it's about me. I feel delighted.

"Is he-

"No, and I don't think he ever will, I smile and I talk to him,"

"But you get nothing."

"Sometimes he smiles back."

"He probably doesn't understand."

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing, I thought I saw him looking at us. Probably just a shadow of something."

Feast

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The rumbling finally subsided, but Renee continued to tremble. Richard held her tight, as he clenched his muscles, desperately trying to keep his own limbs from convulsing. Richard knew that shaking would only scare Renee more.

He turned on the flashlight, just long enough to locate three candles, and a book of matches. As Richard lit the candles, Renee pulled the blanket she had made earlier that year around her shoulders.

"We're alright," Richard whispered, kissing her gently on the forehead. "We're going to be fine."

Renee only continued to shake. She clutched their old cat close to her chest, and ignored its spastic struggle to be free.

"How ruined do you think our house is?" Her voice barely peaked a whisper.

"It's nothing we won't be able to fix, I'm sure." Richard knew it was destroyed. He had never seen her look so defeated.

"How long do you think we'll be down here?" In the dim light of the candles. Richard watched Renee's chin quiver. Mascara created a road map from her eyes to her jaw.

"I don't know, darling."

"I bet my piano is gone."

The couple slowly fell into an uncomfortable sleep, while the aftermath of the avalanche settled above them.

Renee woke up, constantly that night, to press against the boards that not only made up the ceiling of their shelter, but the floor boards of their yellow painted kitchen as well. As sturdy as they were, she feared they were teasing her. Those boards could snap at any moment, allowing the snow to pillage her shelter.

For days, the news reporters and weather men gave notice of the growing danger of an avalanche. Wet snow accumulated in light, drifting layers on the nearby mountains, as the wind constantly shifted. Everyone was advised to take cover in the fallout shelters of their homes. Renee and Richard had been below their kitchen for nearly a week. With each day, the cramped size of the refuge felt as if it was shrinking.

The candles had become only small, hardened remains of the pools they had been dripping into all night. Richard lit three more. Renee sat in the opposite corner of the space, only four feet away from him, hating him for convincing her to move from her rundown Detroit apartment, to such a desolate area of Iceland. He was in love with the land, the lack of people, and the beauty of the language. She was in love with

him. It only made sense for her to move with him. The moment the avalanche hit, however, that love and adoration was buried under a torrent of fear and acceptance of death.

The two sat in complete silence, as the day continued to drag on. Time no longer existed, as they had never thought to bring a clock into the shelter. Both craved a cigarette, a drink, anything to kill the stench of the cat's piss that seemed to be taking over the tiny crawlspace.

"We never put a litter box down here," Renee muttered to Richard. "It's like a fucking gas chamber in here." She covered her nose with the neck of her sweater.

Richard nodded, and reached to touch her knee. Renee shrank back. "It's really cramped in here," she explained, simply.

The cat paced back and forth in the corner, visibly agitated. Its puffed up tail twitched, anxiously, as a low moan escaped its throat. Richard picked the animal up, and cradled it in his arms. He needed something to hold to stop his once strong hands from shaking. He tried his hardest to comfort Renee, yet he could barely hold his own being together. Richard watched as Renee fell into a violent sleep. She shook, and rolled on the dust covered floor, while she breathed loud and fast, as if something was suffocating her. Small spaces gave her anxiety.

Several days passed, though it felt more like months to the couple. The shelter began to feel like a tomb. The chemical stench of urine burned their throats and made their eyes water. The candle supply had run empty, and the stash of food was close behind. Richard and Renee laid together, pressed tight against the wall. The sound of grinding teeth was the soundtrack for overbearing nicotine cravings.

Renee fed the small portion of food she had been hiding to the cat. The candles had turned into puddles of wax, and the batteries of the flash light had become obsolete.

"She's so helpless," she whispered, holding her beloved pet close to her stomach. Richard held Renee in the same manor.

"You need to eat," he whispered. He ran his fingers down the xylophone of her spine. "The cat will be fine. Save the food for yourself."

Renee shook her head. "She's so small. She must be so scared." Her throat tightened as her voice shook. "Remember the story about the plane that crashed, and the soccer team that was stranded?"

"That was a movie, right?" Richard had no idea where the story was headed. He shook with fear, for what she was about to say.

"Yeah, but it was based off of a true story."

Richard thought for a moment. "Weren't they rescued?" He prayed she was trying to tell him a story to give him some sort of hope.

"They were rescued, eventually. But they had to eat each other, first. They didn't have food, and they were dying from hypothermia, or malnutrition, or whatever. That's beside the point. The point is, they didn't have food so they had to eat each other."

Richard held his breath for a moment. "Someone will find us," he whispered. "I'm just saying," Renee continued. "If I die before someone comes to help us, and you need to eat, you can eat me."

Richard tried to laugh. She had never said anything so ridiculous, he thought. There was no way she could be serious.

"Renee," he finally said. "I am not going to eat you. That's fucking ridiculous. I'd eat the cat before I'd ever eat you."

She tightened her grip around the cat. "Don't you dare eat her."

The cat squeaked. The grip around her body was uncomfortably tight.

Richard rolled over, silent. The conversation had become too ridiculous for him.

"Just don't let me go to waste," Renee's voice was calm and steady. Richard didn't respond. She called out his name. He pretended to be asleep.

More time passed, and the two began to grow weak. Renee gave the remaining crumbs of food to the cat, until there was no more left. The cat had resorted to eating its own feces. Renee slept too often, her forehead was constantly soaked with a fever. Richard couldn't find the ability to sleep. His stomach writhed and clenched with such agony, he found himself dry heaving through out the day. Nutrition deprived, his body shook. His mouth salivated as he tried to force thoughts of his favorite dishes from his mind. The darkness only made the space feel smaller, and the coldness of the snow above them was causing the temperature to drop.

Renee stopped shaking. Richard let her lay, finally at peace. She hadn't slept so well since before the avalanche. It wasn't until he heard the cat crying in the corner beside her that he felt something was wrong.

"Renee," he whispered, touching her face. Her skin was cold. No breath came from her nose. Richard panicked. Shaking her limp body, he screamed. "Renee, God damn it! Wake up! Jesus Christ, please just wake up."

Time felt as if it had stopped. What once felt like a tomb had now become a coffin. The dead body of the woman he loved distracted him from the snow covering his home, and the smell of urine and feces that clung to the air. His hunger continued to oppress him.

He moved to the other wall, as far from Renee's body as possible. Her voice haunted him. "Just don't let me go to waste." Those seven syllables, recapitulating every second, caused his hands to shake. The small knife he always kept in his pocket made him dizzy with its possibility.

Richard stared blankly into the darkness. The cat continued to cry. His stomach continued to tear itself apart. Finally, he let his hunger dictate his actions.

First, he felt through the pitch black room until his hands fell upon her fragile body. He stripped off her clothing, wrapping his own cold figure in the layers. Richard rolled over Renee's body. Even though she was dead, he felt that she could still watch his movements. The churning of his stomach pained him more than the hotness of his tears ever could.

He pulled out his knife. The small blade easily sank into the flesh of her thigh. Her skin peeled away in strips, which he threw aside, for the cat. Instantly, he could hear its greedy mouth devour the tissue. It purred with satisfaction.

Wedges of her muscle sliced out easily. Tears flowed rapidly from his face, onto his hands, and he cursed himself for disfiguring his beautiful love. He brought the morsel to his lips. His mouth watered, as his eyes continued to pour. Richard sat in agony, until his mouth produced more saliva than the tears from his eyes. He ate the meat.

Richard's crying subsided, but the feast continued. The taste and texture were comparable to beef. He hadn't had beef in years. His table manners disappeared, as he tossed his knife behind him, and resorted to biting the meat straight from her leg. His stomach digested happily, as he sank into a peaceful sleep.

The next day, Richard awoke feeling stronger than he ever had before. He crawled to Renee's ruined body, and sheared away his breakfast. The cold weather had help preserve the meat. Richard ate for what seemed like hours, until the pleasure of his meal was cut short.

Sunlight sliced the darkness sharper than a knife in a thigh. The satisfaction of the meal before haunted him. It taunted him to come back for more. In a language he still hadn't grasped, Richard heard the shouts of the men above him. Hands reached into the hole, and lifted him up to ground level. As he was lifted onto the stretcher, and carried to the back of an ambulance, he started down at his hands as the paramedics whispered "Jesús," to each other. He knew he had blood on his face. As the remaining paramedic climbed down into the shelter, he vomited at the sight of the feast he had interrupted.

Granny's Killers

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Granny's timing couldn't have been worse. The old hag walked into the lobby just when I had started feeling good about myself again. Despite the fact that I was fifteen years older than the manager, and I had an Associates Degree from Blair Community College, I was waiting tables. Yet again. I struck out when I interviewed at some of the machine shops around town. Those H.R. bitches all wanted to know why I'd left a great job, running state of the art industrial machinery at the VanderHoff plant in Roosterville for 12 years, without so much as a lead on a new gig. I didn't fool one of them when I looked them in the eye and lied.

It was the middle of the lunch rush at Gravy's. There I was- scooping ice into glasses, listening to the dining room's buzz of conversation and laughter over the hiss and splash of the soda fountain, when I realized I hadn't even had the urge that day. I hated the job, but the upside was that it kept me busy. Too busy, and too tired, to go out looking for trouble. And then Granny walked in. As soon as I saw her lipstick and the white hair rolled into a bun, I knew she was there to bring trouble to me.

The sight of her gave me an instant headache and the pain in my bad knee flared up. I had to admit- she was good. It only took her two weeks to find me. I never told her I was working there. She must have followed me to the restaurant all the way from Roosterville. Already working her magic on the staff, she laughed and squeezed the hand of the chick at the hostess station, who I hadn't even spoken to yet. Granny pointed at me and waved with her face lit up with a smile. I could tell it was fake, but I couldn't tell if anyone else knew. She had the sweet old lady act down. It made me feel like I was going to vomit.

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Granny sat in one of the booths just down from the hostess station making little gasps of excitement as she absorbed the ambience of Gravy's. Mr. Dietz really should have hired a professional decorator because his tribute to popular culture looked like he spent an afternoon cleaning out his basement or attic and bolted all the worthless junk he found to the walls. Board games, road signs, and giant Pez dispensers all hung in random places. It was a garage sale waiting to happen. Granny was convincing. And calculating. People heard her *ooing* and *ahhing*. She wanted everyone to notice

her, so if I grabbed the bitch by her cardigan sweater and kicked all 89 pounds of her right out the front door, my boss, co-workers and the dining room full of customers would all jump to the conclusion that I was the asshole.

I wanted to trade tables with one of the waitresses, but I was new there. I didn't know any of them well enough to ask for a favor. That would have only delayed the inevitable anyway. Granny wouldn't leave until she got what she came for. I knew her well enough to know that.

I approached her booth, order pad in hand. My only means of defense was to treat her like any other customer.

"Ritchie!" She exaggerated the look of surprise on her face. I could understand her calling me *Ritchie* if I had known her since I was a boy and she had been calling me that all along, but I was 34 years old when our paths first crossed. "What are you doing working here? Moonlighting?"

For a second, I thought that maybe it wasn't all an act, and that senility was taking hold. One of the last times I was in her living room, I told her about being fired from the factory. I wanted to blame her for that too, but that was my own damn fault. She only sold me the pills. It was my idea to eat them while I was working.

"A job's a job." I had to maintain my defense. "Would you like something to drink?"

She ignored the direction I was trying to steer the conversation. "Your feet must be aching." Granny must have been in a hurry. She opened her purse. I expected to dance around the reason she was there for at least another 45 minutes. She was about 110 years old. What else did she have to do all day? Maybe I wasn't the only customer who quit making the weekly trip to Granny's house.

She tilted the opening of her purse toward me to reveal a brown-tint, prescription bottle full of painkillers. "Do you need a killer, honey?" Pulling out all the stops, she made the leap from *Ritchie* to *honey*.

I had long since grown immune to her artificial sentiment. But it had been months since I had seen a bottle packed full of Vicodin like that. I could feel my body temperature rise. My ears grew hot. Sweat coated my palms. My teeth clenched. I couldn't let Granny know she was getting to me.

"No. I already told you," I tried my damndest to hold eye contact with her. But that quiet little vial of joy in her purse was calling my name. The sweet siren song already had me lying to myself. *It's been long enough. I could just take one again. This time I could keep it under control.* It's easy to believe lies when you're told what you want to hear. I acted as if seeing the pills hadn't made the impression she was hoping for. "I'm done with those." I stood my ground. Those pills had given me enough problems to last a lifetime.

"Nonsense. This is medicine." She had played that card so many times she sounded like she believed it.

*

Granny giggled her way through a vanilla shake and left sooner than I expected. I didn't even see her go. As I gathered her glass and silverware, I congratulated myself for being strong enough to resist her. And the pills. Just when I started to think she hadn't put up much of a fight, I grabbed her wadded up napkins. Underneath them was a crisp one dollar bill and the bottle of Vikes. My tip. I dropped the napkins back on top of the bottle.

The noise in my head was deafening. I wanted to scream. I wanted to run away. I wanted to crush the pills into the sidewalk out front. I wanted to swallow them dry and lay down on the floor right there in front of everyone and feel their warmth pulsate through my veins.

And more than anything, I wanted my life back. The way it used to be. I wanted my house back. I wanted my wife back. I didn't want to have to drive from Roosterville to downtown Mill City everyday and pretend to be nice to people in hopes they'd leave me a 10 percent gratuity. I didn't want to wear an apron and a bowtie. Or a plastic name tag. Nothing says dead end job like a name tag. The name tag isn't for the customers. I've never had a patron, other than Granny, call me by name. If they do anything more than wave at me they always call me *sir*, or *hey you*. Name tags are for the manager, so he can keep straight the constant stream of employees, and if he tells you by name to clean up some kid's puke, it creates the illusion he's less of an asshole.

I stood there, not sure what to do with the bottle. The hostess made it easy for me. She walked up behind me with her arms full of silverware rolled in napkins, menus and four people waiting to sit down. I pushed Granny's wadded napkins over the pill bottle and shoved it all into the pocket of my apron.

As the foursome made their way into the booth, a sense of familiarity rang out about them. Most of the people in suits that came in were there for some sort of business transaction. They would be stiff and polite and careful with their portfolios and their table manners. Gravy's wasn't the most impressive establishment to woo a potential client, but the choices in downtown Mill City were limited. And we beat the hell out of the greasy spoon around the corner.

These suits were different. The two men and two women laughed and joked and were obviously comfortable around each other. One of the women did a double take when she looked at me. She tilted her head and looked at my name tag, and then back at my face. Her eyes narrowed in thought.

One by one, all four of their names and their Roosterville High yearbook photos popped into my head. Just like when Granny came in, my body surged in pain. Before they recognized me, I made an excuse to get the hell away from them.

"I'll be right back to get your drink orders," I held up Granny's dirty dishes to explain my immediate departure. I gave my best counterfeit smile even though I knew it never fooled anyone.

I damn near ran into the kitchen to the dishwashing station and dumped the dishes into the bus tub with a crash. The glass might have broken, but I didn't care. The employee bathroom in the back of the kitchen made my skin crawl. Every

customer in the place would run screaming and never eat there again if they saw the fuzzy grime climbing the walls. But I knew I'd have privacy in there.

The hollow door slammed into the wall. The room was so tiny I had to hover over the toilet to close the door behind me. I turned the lock, not knowing why I bothered. It's not as if anyone is ever in a hurry to follow someone running into a bathroom.

The weight of the vial of killers rested against my leg. I had no idea how I stayed sober for the last two weeks. I couldn't hide from my worries there, in the bathroom with puddles of dried urine on the floor, forever. I had to go out, face my old high school classmates, and take their lunch order. I felt like an idiot. Every poor decision I'd made in the last twenty-some years ran through my head. I didn't need their effortless success, dripping from their bodies like a comforting sweat, validating that I was a loser. We would inevitably exchange pleasantries and memories, have the catch-up conversation, and pretend life today was super. If I was lucky, they would speak as if the food service industry was a wise career choice. I would tell them how happy it makes me to serve people. And as a bonus, when it was slow I enjoyed refilling the ketchup bottles. I needed a pill to numb the pain. I needed a pill to believe my own lies.

I pulled out Granny's killers. *Those pills had given me enough problems to last a lifetime.* The childproof cap fell to the floor and I shook five or six tablets into my hand and dumped the rest of the bottle into the bowl. Each little splash of water from the pills caused me physical pain. The killers still in my hand would help me face the embarrassment and the feeling of inadequacy waiting in the booth. *Those pills had given me enough problems to last a lifetime.* I stood there in front of the toilet and lied to myself, *I would take them just this once, then never again.* I even threw in, *and this time I mean it.*

Time seemed to stand still. I held my hand out, palm up. I gradually tilted my hand. The tablets clung to the curve of my palm until my tilt reached a steep enough angle. One by one, each of the pills fell. Tiny divers dropping into a pool.

Those pills had given me enough problems to last a lifetime.

It wasn't the idea of facing my classmates. Not really. I hadn't given two shits about any of them for twenty years. And in an hour, they'd be gone for another twenty. The long way around to why their presence bothered me was because, it wasn't their approval I was after. It was my own. I wanted to get my shit back together. Finally. Once and for all.

With my fingertips on the toilet's moldy handle, I tried to both muster the strength to push it down to flush the killers away, and to fight the urge to reach into the water and save Granny's killers before they began to dissolve.