

An Inheritance

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Abstract

A collection of seven short stories.

Acknowledgments

For Amber, Walt, and Greta.

Many thanks to my family, Laura Moriarty, Tom Lorenz, Ann Rowland, Matthew Smalley,
my cohort, and all my friends and colleagues at KU.

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An Inheritance

I was unclear how John and my Uncle Max had become friends, but John always spoke to me as if the nascence of their relationship was widely known, so I never asked for any of the details out of fear of offending him. He sat on one side of the table with Mona, his Iranian girlfriend. Erica and I sat on the other side. John, an Englishman, raised his wine glass in my direction.

“It doesn't get any better than this, my boy. We're in one of the most beautiful places in the world. Great food, great music, great friends.”

He trailed off and took a long drink. I took a drink as well. The food was very good, the music was okay, and the friends were really my dead Uncle Max's, not mine.

Earlier that morning, Erica and I had hiked a trail that ran alongside a looming, bouldered ridge where we ran into John and Mona by pure chance. I remarked on the odds of meeting them in such a sparsely traveled area. John explained that my uncle had introduced him to this part of the world decades ago. Wind blown snowdrifts were

interspersed on both sides of the rock trail, and heavy cloud cover hung over us. I mentioned that Erica and I had reservations at the Silver Steakhouse that evening. I offered to change our reservation to four. John and Mona agreed.

Erica whined for the rest of the hike down. Neither of us had packed properly for the high elevation. I just had a waterproof windbreaker with me—no gloves, no long underwear, no hat. Once we were off the mountain, she spent the afternoon drinking on our hotel bed and watching a tennis tournament. She passed out with an arm across her forehead around sundown, and I had to shake her awake so we'd make our reservation on time. When John and Mona greeted her at the restaurant, she did not even acknowledge them. They exchanged a glance as we were seated, like two people who'd wandered into a bad part of town at twilight.

"Everything looks fantastic," John said as he opened his menu, not nearly enough time passing to read anything.

We had this attractive young waitress. She told us about the nightly special, a duck confit, talked some about the history of the restaurant since it was our first time there. The building was over a hundred years old, a converted post office. The water we were drinking was welled from a natural spring fifty yards from the back door. Behind the waitress, in the corner, a woman with black hair sang old country songs while a cowboy next to her worked a slide guitar. Their shadows danced behind them as a busboy tossed a fresh log into the fireplace. We picked a bottle of wine and I asked the attractive young waitress if the kitchen would deshell my lobster, even though the menu specifically said they wouldn't.

"I'm afraid not," said the waitress. "That's our policy. A Board of Health

recommendation, actually.”

I said that I couldn't handle that. I really wanted the lobster, but lobster could be exhausting. I said I would sign a health waiver if I needed to. The waitress seemed amused and touched my shoulder.

“Let me see what I can do.” Her nails were painted a light green. “I don't do this for everyone,” she added. She was one of these waitresses that touched you all the time—when filling your glass, when popping by to see how things tasted.

Erica leaned back in her chair to look the waitress up and down. There were times that I could see straight into Erica's mind, times when I looked at her and I'd get the sensation you'd have the instant before a pitcher of ice water was spilled into your lap.

“You seem like a real whore,” Erica said, and it was unclear whether she had tried to say it under her breath, or if it was intended at full volume.

“I beg your pardon?” said the waitress.

Erica folded her menu and handed it to the waitress, her eyes widened. “I didn't say anything.”

The waitress turned quickly and walked off. John and Mona carried on like they hadn't heard what Erica said. The three of us talked while Erica drank wine. After her first glass, she left the table unannounced and did not return for several minutes. Half an hour later, some server we didn't recognize delivered our food. The lobster was fully armored and a set of small tools accompanied it.

When we were mostly through eating, I grabbed a waiter who was headed for the kitchen and requested another bottle of the Domaine Ramonet. He asked me what year I wanted.

“Does it matter?” I said. “I can’t ever tell a difference in the year. Bring like the fifth most expensive bottle.” The waiter looked around the room, checking to see if anyone had heard me. He nodded and hurried off.

We were not old, Erica and I. I was getting a bit soft around the middle, but so was most everyone else my age. I thought we were still cool, still knew who made the good movies and the good music. Erica was about to turn twenty-nine. She was working overtime on this idea that the generation creeping up from behind was preparing to wash us both away.

My Uncle Max had died ten months ago and left me about \$750,000 of his estate. His decision to give me the money was bewildering. My dad, his older brother and only surviving immediate family member, had received nothing.

Mona leaned towards Erica and spoke in her heavy accent. “Are you not feeling well, dear?” Erica had barely touched her forty-seven dollar steak. She had a salad that was just sitting there, wilting.

“I am not feeling well, thanks for asking,” Erica said. “But it doesn’t have anything to do with my stomach, or the food, or the altitude, or anything like that.” She held an upturned hand in front of my face.

John stood up. “You ladies talk it out. We’re going for a smoke.”

I followed him out of the dining room and through the restaurant’s front entrance. The mountain air was unkind, cutting through my windbreaker, under my arms. We walked through the parking lot, past all the trucks and rented SUVs. The little town had one road running straight through the middle, and a single streetlight standing across from the steakhouse. Mountains surrounded us entirely, wind rushing across their faces, their

dark peaks rising against the night sky like cloaked figures.

John handed me a cigarette and then frowned as he held a lighter to his own. I'd been around John maybe five times in my adult life, and each time he'd made the incorrect assumption that I was a smoker. He lit my cigarette and I took a long drag and my head flushed. John tilted his head towards the sky and blew jets of smoke that the wind carried away.

"Your uncle would've loved a night like tonight." He looked at me. "What do you plan to do with the money?"

"Burn through it," I said.

"Be serious."

"I'm being serious. I don't have anything to plan for."

"Invest it. You can talk to my guy in London. Open a restaurant. Buy some art."

"I've thought about some of those things. I quit my job. I'm just going to enjoy it."

"You quit your job? What will you do when it runs out?"

I laughed. "I don't know. Work on finding a new girlfriend?"

John became very serious. "That's a good idea, mate. A real good idea." He finished his cigarette and then added, "But get to work on a new girl before the money runs out."

A skinny dog with unruly black fur walked underneath the street lamp across from us. I couldn't tell if it was feral or domesticated. It lingered for a moment, then turned and trotted up the street. Farther along, the pavement loosened into a narrow dirt road that wound its way up into the mountain range. The dog disappeared into the dark.

"Come work for me. Live in London." John said.

"I hardly know you, John."

“That’s what your uncle said the first time we met. Remember? Look how that turned out.”

He took out another cigarette and lit it. “Come with us. Tonight. We’re flying out of Jackson Hole in the morning. We’ll spend a week in Paris before we return to London.”

I shook my head. “I can’t explain to you what a nightmare it would be to drag Erica out of the country.”

“Leave that dreadful woman in your hotel room and come with us.”

I had a momentary urge to defend Erica. She wasn’t the best, but she wasn’t the worst either. I thought about mentioning to John the shoplifting phase she’d gone through a couple years ago—how it had annoyed and exhilarated me at the same time, how she was still working off her allotment of community service—before realizing that this would not function well as a defense of her character. I pulled on my cigarette again and thought maybe I was wrong: Maybe Erica was the worst.

We crushed out our cigarettes and walked back to the restaurant. The night embraced us. I could hardly see two steps in front of me. In the dining room the woman with the black hair was yowling the last few bars of some country western relic. Erica and Mona were laughing in a strange sort of way. A new bottle of wine was uncorked and sitting in the center of the table. It looked like Erica had finished her salad and even cut a few bites from her steak.

*

When I received notice from Uncle Max’s attorney about the inheritance, I wasn’t sure how to take it. Max had gutted my grandparents’ savings in the 1970s to get his business off the ground and then had somehow pitted them against my dad. Grandma

would complain about my dad when I was little, saying he never looked at things from Max's point of view. In a voicemail, I asked Max's attorney to doctor the will to make it seem like \$50,000 or so had been left to my father. He responded with a formalized email, saying if I wanted to go down that path, he could recommend a good criminal attorney that I would sooner or later need.

I didn't tell Erica about the estate for several weeks. I thought about how she would probably like me a lot more once she found out about the money. But it's turned out that she likes me less. She doesn't want to spend a dime of it. She detests it.

I got excited at the opportunity to quit my job. The inheritance was probably ten years worth of salary not factoring the seven percent raise that I'd get annually. I handed in my letter. I said a few "burning-bridge" type things, served three days of my two-week notice, and walked away feeling pretty good.

*

Back at the dinner table, we were wondering if our waitress would reappear. Libertarianism was huge up here. I imagined the girl stumbling into the dining room with a large revolver, mascara streaming, ready to fire off a round at Erica, leaving me a few seconds to decide whether to intervene. John flagged down a passing waiter and ordered some kind of escargot appetizer. Erica, in a softened tone, asked the waiter to find our waitress so she could apologize for the whore comment.

"Why'd you order those snails?" I asked John.

He shrugged and stretched the flaps of his sport jacket across his large stomach, as if to button it, but the jacket was too small, or John was too wide, to make the connection. The snails were delivered ten minutes later and no one touched them. I paid the bill and

called the manager over and asked him to make sure the insulted waitress received the tip. He asked which waitress, but I didn't know her name. He said he'd take care of it, but I did not believe him.

We said goodbye to John and Mona and walked into the night, back to the hotel. I took a shower and put on one of the white bathrobes with the hotel logo on the breast. I got a seven-dollar beer out of the mini fridge, something I'd never done in my life, and sat on the edge of the bed drinking it. Erica appeared in front of me in her lavender underwear. She reached deep into her purse and pulled out a small felt bag with the words FOOL'S GOLD printed on the side in a Western-style font.

"Look what I got at the gift shop," she said.

"What is that?"

"Pyrite," she answered. She upended the bag on the bed and the rocks scattered on the comforter.

I picked one up. "Did you pay for these?"

"No!" she whispered. "I took them during dinner."

I had a sip of my beer and studied the rocks for a moment. "This is maybe the dumbest thing you've ever done."

Erica gasped. She gathered up all the rocks like she'd just realized I wasn't allowed to see them. "Why did you say that?"

"You stole a bag of fake gold," I said. "Think about that for a second." I was really angry all of a sudden. "If you're gonna start stealing again, why not steal something good? I saw the stuff in that gift shop. There was some good stuff in there. I saw a display case with a bunch of old six-shooters. A normal person would have stolen the fucking six

shooter!" I took a drink of the beer. "I'm so pissed at you for what you said to that waitress."

"I said I was sorry for that."

"You said sorry to everyone but the girl."

I finished my beer and lay back on the bed. Erica went into the bathroom and shut the door. She may have started crying. After a while I got up and put a sweatshirt on over the bathrobe. I worked my feet into the complimentary slippers with the logo on the toes, grabbed a second beer from the mini fridge, and left the room.

The hotel bar downstairs was dimly lit like the Silver Steakhouse. There was a large fireplace in the center of one wall. I noticed a few glances my way as I entered, at the flaps of the robe spread out beneath the sweatshirt and the lack of pants. There were several faces that I recognized from dinner. The waiter who brought us our second bottle of wine was sitting with a girl in a turtleneck sweater. I nodded at him and he looked away. There were a few other employees I remembered, and then I caught sight of our waitress, the one Erica had insulted, sitting in the corner with a large young man. Their arms were circled around a candle in the center of the table, fingers touching. She had changed from her uniform and was wearing a print dress. I ordered a local beer that I didn't recognize and walked over to their table, hovering for a moment before they noticed. The large young man tilted his head and, in a neighborly sort of way, asked if he could help me. I said no, thank you, and turned to the waitress.

"Where'd you go?"

"I went home. Then I came over here. With him," she said, indicating the young man. She picked up a glass of water in front of her and took a drink.

"I left you a nice tip," I said. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

She deferred to the young man.

"I think that would be fine," he said after some time. He stood and pulled my chair out. "Joshua," he said, offering his hand.

I shook it, sat down, and tried to order them a drink, but they didn't want anything. I got the impression they were teetotalers. Wanting to ingratiate myself, I pushed my beer to the side and ordered a Sprite.

I looked Joshua up and down. He was all brawn, with hair everywhere. He wore a white t-shirt and jeans and had no jacket with him, although it felt like twenty degrees outside, the sort of bitter night that could open up into a blizzard at any moment. He seemed like someone that would have been more comfortable in another era. I imagined him wearing overalls, operating a railroad handcar at the turn of the century. I saw his old mother asking him to clear away a hornet's nest on their front porch, and Joshua rolling up a newspaper really tight, and swatting the nest to smithereens while he got stung, left and right.

"Can I ask what your name is?" I asked our waitress.

"It's Natasha," she said. "What is yours?"

"Daniel Madison."

"Daniel," she said aloud. She thought about my name for a while. "What is it you want?"

"Nothing really, I guess. I just wanted to apologize for what Erica said at dinner." I smiled at them.

Joshua seemed to wince a little. "Sorry to ask this, mister. But do you answer for

what your lady said to Natasha?"

"Sorry?"

Natasha cut in. "Up here, we don't talk to each other like that. The way she talked to me. It's a real dishonorable way to behave, in our opinion. Up here, if a woman says something dishonorable, her husband's generally expected to answer for her."

"I'm not her husband."

"But she's your lady, right?" Joshua said, putting his elbows on the table. He was looking directly at me for the first time.

"Yes, she is. No question." I took a drink of my Sprite. "I am happy to answer for her, or take the blame or whatever."

"It ain't about taking blame. It's just answering for her."

"Sure. I'll answer."

Joshua frowned and thought this over and scratched at his hair-covered forearm. He stood, after a moment, and motioned for me to stand as well. Natasha also got up, smoothing her dress with her hands.

"Do you need to pay the bartender?" Joshua asked me.

"Yes, I believe so." I said.

I zigzagged through tables to the bar and paid for the draft and the Sprite. I left a fifty percent tip. When I turned around, Joshua and Natasha were waiting, and the other patrons of the bar, the rest of the Silver Steakhouse employees, were finishing their drinks and standing up with their eyes on me.

Joshua put a heavy arm around my shoulder and led me into the howling night. The wind was stronger and colder, and you could see it etching discomfort into the faces of

Joshua and Natasha and the others who followed us outside. It whipped up under my robe, along the inside of my thighs, and I remembered that I didn't have any underwear on, just the robe I put on after the shower and the sweatshirt over it.

We walked to the center of the street and the group made a lazy circle around Joshua and me and Joshua said a few words. He spoke loudly so that everyone could hear above the wind. I didn't really pay attention to what he was saying. A thought entered my head, and I wondered if I could offer Joshua and these people some money, and maybe I could go back inside, by the fire, and bypass whatever was going to happen. I tried to think of an appropriate figure. As my mind raced through my options, I noticed Joshua was cocking his large right arm behind his head.

It's strange, but Joshua's fist felt soft as it smashed into my nose. It hurt, sure, but at the moment of impact, I thought it should have hurt much more than it did. My feet left the ground for an instant, and I landed in the dirty street with a thud. I felt the warmth of blood coming out of my nose and down over my chin, and I worried that the flaps of my robe had spread apart and I was lying there half naked. After a quick inspection with my hands, I realized they had not, that I was still decent, lying there covered, but bleeding from the face.

Joshua clasped me under the arm and lifted me back to my feet. He brushed some dust off my sweatshirt, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me. He looked me over good. When he was done, he and Natasha and the others filed back towards the hotel bar's entrance. The blood had already reached the collar of my sweatshirt and was soaking in. Tears were streaming from my eyes.

Natasha was the last in line to reenter the bar, and she stopped to take a final look at

me, over her shoulder, before going in. "Can you make sure you get that tip from your manager?" I said, although my voice was muffled from the handkerchief. "I didn't trust that guy." For a second I thought she might not have understood me.

"Thank you, I will," she said. And she went into the bar and closed the door.

*

The hotel had a first aid station open just off the main lobby. The nurse inside had me sit down in a worn leather chair and lay my head back. She unwrapped a package of gauze and handed it to me. Joshua's handkerchief was bright red and soaked through. The nurse looked for a long time at my nose and was very careful when touching it. She said it wasn't broken.

"I think the inside of your lip is cut, though. There's blood coming from your mouth." She peeled back my upper lip. "This ain't bad at all," she said, stuffing dental gauze against the cut. When she was done, she cleaned her hands and dried them. "Now, what else can I do for you?"

"Would you ring my room and get my girlfriend down here immediately?"

"Of course. Shall I tell her to bring you some pants?"

"Not necessary. Just get her down here so she can see me with blood all over myself."

The nurse excused herself and returned with Erica a few minutes later. My eyes were still blurry with tears, but it looked like Erica had reapplied the makeup she'd washed off after our return from dinner.

"Daniel, what happened?"

"Your mouth happened, that's what," I said, sitting up sharply. The nurse took my

arm and eased my head back down.

“Who did this? The waitress?”

“Are you being serious? That little girl? Her goddamn tank of a boyfriend did this. Had a fist the size of a head of cabbage.”

Erica looked at the nurse. “Does he need to go to the hospital for this?”

“Oh no, no, no. Just needs pressure and ice. Anyway, the nearest hospital is in Clifton. Thirty miles from here. The ER would be closed by the time you got there.”

“It closes?” Erica asked.

The nurse nodded.

Erica took my hand. “We should call the police. This is battery.” She turned to the nurse. “Can you call the police? Or show me to a phone?”

This seemed to confuse the nurse. “I guess you could ring the sheriff’s office, but the nearest car is usually in Clifton. Thirty miles away.”

Erica began to pace the room. She announced there was something she needed to do. I sat up and yelled after her, but she slipped through the door without looking back.

The nurse pulled up a stool and sat next to me, putting a dry hand on my forehead. Her face was above mine, shading me from the light fixture. In my stupor, nothing about her appearance had registered. She was old, with several teeth missing, and her expression frightened me. She opened a bottle of white pills and counted out four of them.

“Won’t be able to feel any pain after you take these,” she said.

“Could you crush them up and put them in a drink for me?” I asked. “From the bar? You can charge it to my room. I know that’s probably not your job.”

She looked annoyed, but seemed to think this over a moment before announcing

that she had to check on a sick guest. She stood and walked out, taking the pills with her.

“Are you bringing the drink or not?” I called as the door swung shut. I dozed off while waiting and was awakened by Erica’s return.

“What did you do?” I said, wiping my eyes. The bleeding from my nose had stopped.

“I went back to that steakhouse.”

“Erica, what did you do?”

“Nothing! Relax. I put the stupid fool's gold back.” She sat down on the stool next to me and ran her fingers through my hair. “I’m sorry. I am sorry.”

*

In the dark of our first floor apartment, Erica and I sat on the couch watching a baseball game on TV. It was a Friday night in April, just barely into the season, and our windows were propped open allowing sounds from the street to filter in. We heard dog collars from the sidewalk and echoes of the announcers' voices coming from other TV sets in the complex. I knew nothing about baseball, at least compared to Erica, but I watched a lot of it with her. Our team had just blown a three run lead in the eighth inning. Erica was mumbling to herself about the manager's decision to bring in the situational lefty who had blown it.

“He's going to misuse him all season,” she said. “I can see it now.” She spread her hands in front of her as if framing a newspaper headline.

We'd been back from the mountains for four days. On the drive home I started to think I'd organized the vacation to run from problems at home. This bothered me since I had no problems to run from. Or if I did have problems, I'd forgotten what they were.

I got word that John and Mona had been in a serious car accident the morning after

our dinner. I made several phone calls and finally reached him in his hospital room in Clifton. He was quick to affirm that he was fine and I could tell he'd had many conversations regarding his health already that day. He'd fallen asleep at the wheel and the SUV had drifted off the road and slammed into an embankment. John shattered his radius and had a grade-two concussion. Mona walked away without a scratch.

"No physical scratches, anyway," he told me. "She was distraught at the sight of my arm, let me tell you." Through the phone, I heard metal rings slide across a curtain rod. "She's staying at a hotel across the street until I get out. Looks quite nice. I think she's enjoying it."

John sounded washed out. I asked him again if he was okay. He assured me he was fine.

"Listen Dan, let's stay in touch. I understand the desire to explore the listless thing for a while, but at some point you'll have to fill your life with something. You come from a good family. Keep me in mind."

The baseball game ended with a loss and Erica opened her laptop to type up some thoughts on bullpen oversight. This was to be expected after losses. She generally had no reaction to wins and took no ostensible pleasure in them. They were met with a curt nod of the head and some mention of the next game being more important, or the game the day before being a missed opportunity. Sometimes she'd post her thoughts on her oft-neglected blog, or to a message board she was a member of. Most of the time she'd copy and paste them into a cathartic email addressed only to me. I usually don't read them, because I don't understand them, but they're all saved in a folder I titled "erica_needs_to_quit_watching_baseball."

I got up and opened the refrigerator door as she typed. "You want a drink before we go to this thing?"

*

The graphic design firm where Erica worked held employee parties about every quarter. Erica always seemed like she didn't want to go, but I thought the parties were great. I remembered my old office parties where nobody raised their voice and conversation dried up after five minutes. Managers watched to see how many drinks you had, how many times you went to the bathroom. You got the impression these things counted against you once Monday rolled around.

The last of Erica's office parties, the Christmas party, had been held at the firm's headquarters. They brought in a local band and had holiday punch spouting from an ice sculpture shaped like a quill. By the end of the night, two laptops and some scanning equipment had been stolen from the offices upstairs. I was surprised when I heard that Neal, the head of creative, had opened his own home for the spring party.

A group of us crowded into Neal's kitchen. He was wearing an apron and jerking a skillet back and forth across the stove. Neal made a joke about not having experience cooking in front of an audience. No one laughed, so I laughed. He looked right at me.

"Dan. How are you?" The group in the kitchen turned to me and I became acutely aware of my black eye and mending nose.

"Very well," I said. "Love your home." Some of the people in the group gave me weird looks. Seemingly not in reaction to my face, but weird in some other way that I couldn't describe.

"Erica told me what happened," Neal said, touching his own nose. "God, that's wild.

I wanna hear the full story later.” He switched off the burner and carried the skillet out of the kitchen. The little group dispersed in different directions. I tried to make my beaten face look pleasant as people passed.

The firm paid pretty well. I knew what Erica made and it was more than me, even before I started making zero. Somehow all of these designers and their spouses seemed wealthier than they actually were. There were lots of blue shirts and nice belts and silver earrings. Surveying everyone, I decided I needed a drink. Erica asked me to get her a Tanqueray and tonic since I was going.

I made my way through a crowded hallway and exited the house onto the backyard patio. Next to the swimming pool was a bar manned by a hired server in a white shirt. There was another bar inside, near the front door, that was surrounded by a crowd of people. Garden lamps were burning out on the lawn and the pool's underwater light bulb was changing from green to blue and then back again. The bartender, an older gentleman, stiffened as I walked up, as if I'd caught him asleep on the job. I ordered two drinks and he set about making them with a surprisingly deft touch. I tried to make a joke about how I was planning to drink a lot. I said I would be back, in a Terminator sort of voice, but he just told me last call was at eleven and began to wipe out a glass with a towel.

Back inside, Neal's wife Caroline came gliding up next to me in a long purple dress. There was a small white flower in her hair. “So glad you came, Dan,” she said. “I didn't see Heather's name on the confirmed guest list, so I figured you had other plans this evening.” She smiled and held up a glass of white wine. “God, did someone hit you?”

Caroline thought I was dating this other employee at the firm, some girl in accounting named Heather. I'd let the mistake go the first time and it just became harder

and harder to correct her over the years. It was inconceivable to think about setting her straight now.

"Someone did hit me actually."

She examined my bruises. "Did you deserve it?"

"I'm still not clear on that."

"Neal will be happy you guys made it, bruised face or not," she said.

"We never miss a chance to be entertained by the rich and powerful."

Caroline laughed. "That is not a nice thing to say."

"I meant it as nice," I said. I gave her an awkward hug around the shoulders with one arm and she patted my hand. It was easy for me to talk to Caroline. I usually sought her out at these events.

"So how many hours has Neal spent preparing for this thing?"

A roll of the eyes. "I told him to hire a caterer. I begged him. The only thing he had brought in was the alcohol. See those flowers? He drove forty-five minutes to get them." Neal was on the far side of the room from us, lifting his apron over his head and wadding it into a ball. A few people applauded and others raised their plates in adulation.

"How is the standardized test business?" Caroline asked me.

"It no longer exists," I said. "Well, the business still exists, but my job there doesn't."

"Oh? Where are you now?"

"I'm at home now,"

"Working from home?"

"Essentially. I'm developing a couple of things."

Caroline seemed to understand that there was nothing in development and changed

the subject. She asked if I wanted a tour. We wound around the house, occasionally picking up, and then losing, additional tourists along the way. Neal just installed new baseboards here. Here is Neal's great-great aunt's chair he repaired and reupholstered himself. Neal painted this picture of the family's deceased Irish Setter the week after she was put down. Caroline seemed annoyed, exhausted by, and in love with him all at once.

At one point she disappeared into an upstairs bedroom and returned a minute later with a large book. She held it out to me. "Ty Gerstenkorn's latest," she said. It was titled *Wearing Shoes, Wearing Neckties*. "Neal gets advance copies of these things if he wants them. This doesn't come out for another three weeks." She handed it over and I was surprised at its weight.

"Is it good?" I asked.

"It's okay. I remember how much you said you liked him."

"I do like him." I raised and lowered the book a couple of times. Caroline looked around as if doing a mental inventory of all the different spaces in the house. "That'll about do it," she said, and led me by the arm down a dark hallway to the head of the stairs.

"It really is a great house. And a great neighborhood," I said, as we descended back into the din of the party.

She waved a dispelling hand at me. "All this stuff fades to gray pretty quickly. I don't even notice how pretty our street is unless I see it in a photo."

Erica appeared the moment we touched the bottom step. She took the Tanqueray and tonic from my hand. I'd carried it over every inch of the house. She looked in the glass and frowned. The ice cubes had dissolved into thin discs. She took a sip, stood on her toes and kissed me on the mouth, then turned to Caroline.

“Caroline, I’m Erica. I’m one of Neal’s designers.” She paused, seemed to gauge Caroline’s reaction. “You expected Dan to be kissing some other girl, right?”

Caroline looked at me, as if asking for assistance. “Yes, I guess I did.”

“Dan’s *my* boyfriend. He doesn’t have anything to do with Heather. Somehow you got confused about it. He’s too polite to tell you after all this time. Dan has a tough time clearing up misunderstandings. So I do it for him.”

“Oh, I’m embarrassed.”

“Don’t be! It’s his fault.” Erica said, taking a drink. “He’s weird, you know? Like he’ll call up city hall in the middle of the day and cuss out some staffer over a parking ticket or something, but then the kid at Subway will put tomatoes on his sandwich and he won’t say a word. And Dan *despises* tomatoes.” She finished her drink. “Alright, I’ll see you guys later.”

Erica disappeared into the crowd and Caroline and I were left at the foot of the stairs. She’d taken her heels off for the tour and the purple dress curled beside her feet like a viper. I apologized for myself and for Erica and said I would get the book back to her soon. She said she hoped I had a nice time and went off to rejoin her guests.

I tried to get outside to the old guy, but his secret was out. I could see him through a window, loosening his tie, surrounded by arms waving empty glasses. I waited my turn at the main bar and got two drinks, this time both for me, and tucked the book under my arm. I wandered into a room where loud music was blaring from speakers in the ceiling. There was a group of people in the corner around a felt-top card table. They’d opened the windows so a breeze was coming in. I sat down in an empty chair and explained to the man next to me why my face was broken before anyone could remark on it.

The card game they were playing was a drinking game. The man next to me tried explaining the rules, but I couldn't keep up. It sounded like it was being made up as they went. Every once in a while, a large woman sitting on a couch behind us would rip into a peal of laughter that rose cleanly above the music. You had to finish your drink as fast as you could upon hearing it. This was the only rule I caught onto. I stayed at the table long enough that the playlist coming from the speakers started over at its beginning.

As I was picking fuzz off the green felt, a young man, who was on Erica's design team, stumbled into the room, tripping over a chair that was knocked on its side in the doorway. He righted himself and his eyes passed over the faces in the room until he found mine.

"FYI," he announced, jerking a thumb over his shoulder, "Erica is in the pool."

After establishing that "in the pool" meant Erica was swimming in it and not dead at the bottom, I headed towards the backyard. A crowd had bottlenecked at the door, faces amused and eager for the spectacle outside. I waited at the back of the line as they slowly filed through.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Caroline, her cheeks scarlet, fingers loosely holding the stem of her wine glass. She was very clearly drunk.

"Do you like this?" she asked. She touched the strap of her purple dress, then extended her hand towards the floor with an awkward flourish.

"I do. It's lovely."

"Do you know what's funny?" she said, lowering her voice so that it was nearly inaudible. "When I bought it, the only thing I had on my mind was you."

"What?"

"You heard me."

I set my drink on a bookshelf and took her by the arm, away from everyone. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know. You're not getting it. I want to make sure you get it this time."

"What are you talking about? You don't know me, Caroline. You thought I was dating some woman named Heather."

"Oh, please." She tried to laugh, but choked on it. "I thought that was our little thing. Our little running joke. It's evidently not since you told Erica about it."

"This is not good."

"Oh Dan, who cares? Not me." She looked around the room and made a decision. "I'm going to bed. I'm gonna find your phone number and call you next week when I can explain what it is that I want."

She stormed off, had to adjust her balance after a few steps. The purple dress struggled to keep up. Upon reaching the stairs, she snapped an arm around and pointed at the book. "I want that back when you're done." She vanished up the steps.

I considered following her, but decided against it, standing at the bottom of the stairs for several minutes. In the backyard, there was a lot of hollering going on. As I walked out, I snatched a half-empty drink off a silver tray. People crowded at the edge of the pool to watch Erica swim with her clothes on. Her dress fanned out as she glided through the water so that she resembled a manta ray. Neal appeared next to me after I'd watched for a while.

"She's awesome, man," he said, laughing. "I dared her to do it. I'm sorry."

I felt for a moment like I was walking into some cosmic experiment. Neil on my

shoulder. Caroline stumbling into her bed upstairs. Erica swirling in the green water. Me as some kind of ligament that could tie everything together or rip it apart. I was the variable that could be introduced or manipulated to effect uncontrolled results.

"It's not a party until someone jumps in the pool with their clothes on, right?" I said.

"Right. Have you had a good time?"

"Yes." People were trying to get Erica's attention, entreating her to perform water tricks, but she was pretty much ignoring everyone. "Let me ask you something, Neal," I said. "Were you ever afraid of something being stolen, opening up your house to all of these same people?"

Smiling, he said, "You can't live your life that way, Dan."

Erica noticed me from the pool and called my name. "Where have you been, baby?"

"Looking for you."

"Get in."

"I think we should go."

"Get in!"

Soon, all the drunk bystanders were chanting along with her and I saw no way out of it. I set the book on a deck chair along with my phone and handed my drink off to some girl. The water around Erica was foaming from all of her thrashing exhortation. I faintly heard the roar go up from the crowd as I hit the water.

Walder

Entering high school, Cale's primary goal was to make it through to graduation unharmed and unnoticed. He succeeded pretty well at this until a growth spurt around his sixteenth birthday left him well over six feet tall with strong arms and a handsome face that replaced his boyish doughiness.

People began to notice Cale. It scared him at first, the attention, but he quickly got used to it. He bought new clothes and painted over the marching drum major wallpaper in his room. He discarded most of his real friends for shinier ones and abandoned his original goal of existing beneath the surface in high school. He tried out for the soccer team. He hired a personal coach and ate hyper-healthy meals and made varsity.

He had a second goal, which was more important, which he kept to himself because the probability of failure was high. He decided to pursue Elsa Hayworth, the girl with dark

eyes and dark hair that he had wanted for a very long time.

He fumbled his way into it, acting cocky around her. She was wary from the start, and resisted him for months. They went to a dance together, but just as friends, the winter of their junior year. Near the end of the night, they were in the parking lot making out against a gleaming black car. Cale ran his hands all over Elsa. He tried to slip one under her dress, but she caught him by the wrist. "*Who are you?*" she whispered into his ear.

Cale wasn't sure how to respond. Elsa was the first girl he'd kissed. He was trying to keep up with his own idea of what a normal guy would try to do when kissing her. He confessed this, in lieu of anything else to say, and Elsa gave him marks for honesty. She could see his pudgy face, smiling there, beneath the surface of its new exterior. Elsa relented and they got together, but she could never shake the feeling that he was going to screw her over. Which, of course, he eventually did.

Most of their final two years of high school they were seen everywhere together—shoulder to shoulder, fingers touching, keeping to themselves as if everything they did was one long, drawn-out inside joke. Their behavior annoyed a lot of classmates who wished their own relationships measured up.

They found their ways into the hidden spaces of each other. Cale wanted to be a petroleum engineer so Elsa bought him a subscription to a petroleum technology journal. He was blown away by the thoughtfulness. Ultimately, the journal ended up discouraging him out of his dream because of its dense terminology and concepts, but Elsa never found out about that.

Cale spent a month writing Elsa a thirty-three-page letter explaining all the things he felt about her. She had to flatten it with a stack of books so it would fold up and fit into

her nightstand. She would pull it out and read it some nights, but it would make her so excited that she couldn't sleep. She preferred to just imagine the idea of it.

Elsa was into reading—crime novels and historical fiction and fantasy tales and the poetry of Lord Byron—although no one outside her family knew about it. At the time she began dating Cale, she was obsessed with a five-part novel series titled *Walder* that unfolds, over three thousand pages, the story of a man who builds an army of cyborgs to fight for his planet's independence from an intergalactic mining conglomerate.

“Elsa, this is weird stuff,” Cale said, running his finger across the dust jacket. “It somehow makes me feel good that you're into something stupid and lame like this.”

“Don't trash it until you read it,” Elsa said.

Cale didn't read it, but he did see the first movie with her—a matinee in a half-full miniplex, attended mostly by middle-aged *Walder* fanatics. Walder was a short bald man with spina bifida who was forced to fight for good with his intellect. He wore a black space suit with a luminescent green *W* on the chest. Cale liked the serio-comedic dynamic Walder had with his cyborgs—they were great at waging war, but horrible at everyday tasks, like cleaning his living quarters and washing his suits. There were intense action scenes, and the dialogue was funny, and critics said that *Walder* was a nice surprise—a refreshing turn of the space-action hero paradigm.

Cale read books two through four in a few short months so he could catch up to Elsa, and they read the last one at the same time, arguing bitterly if one got ahead of the other. Their relationship hit cruise control and it seemed like there would be nothing except smooth, gently sloping thoroughfares ahead.

Senior year Cale met a girl named Amanda Carpenter who attended the St.

Elizabeth's girls' school across town. He bumped into Amanda in the shadows of a house party one spring weekend when Elsa was away on a ski trip. Amanda wore a bright green talisman around her neck and her blond hair was swept to one side. She had an ox tattooed in a thin black outline along her right forearm.

"What music do you listen to?" Amanda asked him, turning the talisman around and around with her fingers.

"Nothing really," Cale said. His musical interests wouldn't mature until college. "I play soccer," he said, offering something else of possible interest.

"Soccer's cool." She put a cigarette to her lips. "You dating anyone?"

"Elsa Hayworth,"

"Really?" Amanda said, taking a hard, appraising look at him.

"You know her?"

"Of course," she said, smiling.

Amanda coveted Cale and pursued him for months after. He kept it a secret from Elsa. This seemed like a harmless decision to make. He thought Amanda would tire of being rejected, but she got ahold of his phone number and started sending texts and pictures of herself. She came to his soccer games and sat in the opponent's section so no one would notice her. Some of the players noticed anyway and figured out she was there for Cale. They said he was a lucky bastard. Cale got pissed off and started shouting at them.

"Whoa, whoa, what is the big deal?" the soccer players said. "Look how discreet Amanda is, sitting on the other side of the field. You could pull that off if you wanted to. Elsa would never know." They grinned and folded their arms across their jerseys. Some elbowed Cale in the ribs knowingly.

Cale dismissed this idea, but he came away with the thought that Elsa, or their relationship, was somehow constraining him. He hadn't done anything wrong. Was it so reprehensible to just be in contact with another girl? He started to get high on Amanda's attention and resented Elsa for how guilty it made him feel.

One Saturday morning Amanda took a walk through her neighborhood and appeared at the steps of Cale's house with a change in game plan, an appeal to a different side. She sat in his living room and laid out a business case for why she should assume the role of girlfriend from Elsa Hayworth. She touched on the ways she would be an upgrade socially, emotionally, sexually. Cale went to soccer practice later and made the mistake of bringing the discussion up.

"You pussy," they said. "Don't sit there and whine to us about these two girls that would tear each other apart just to get with you."

"Forget it," Cale said.

"Look, you've done the honorable thing so far. Figure out what you want. Then, you can break it off with her. Whoever she turns out to be."

At school they would have special assemblies where counselors and cops would show harrowing videos and then talk about recreational drug use. They'd focus on how the ostensibly harmless drugs were actually just as bad as the hard ones. Once you got started with anything, your mind would sooner or later begin yearning for a better high.

Cale began thinking of Elsa as his gateway drug to Amanda. Amanda seemed more grown-up. She was business-like. There was a certain edge there. Her texts were fully spelled out. He hadn't even realized how much Elsa's cutesy shorthand had annoyed him. The unpredictability of everything was exciting.

He finally just decided it wasn't that big of a deal. They were not adults. They weren't married. He went and found Elsa and told her what he was going to do. Elsa asked him to repeat himself, to repeat Amanda's name. She knew who this Amanda girl was, she just couldn't picture her face. Elsa went back into her house, eyes streaming, and Cale drove away, feeling sick and relieved at the same time.

As it turns out, Amanda was severely deranged. They only made it a month. She replaced the green talisman around her neck with a small vial filled with clear Noxzema facewash that she told everyone was Cale's semen. Cale didn't like her unfamiliar smell and her volatility, and found himself thinking in strange ways when he was around her, as if her craziness bled through to him. Cale still has a long, thin scar at the base of his neck where Amanda clawed him after he officially called it off. He had a thought the night they broke up, which he only realized later as precocious, about how unfair it was that the development of his soul was so sharply outpaced by the development of his body.

The rest of their senior year was weird. When interaction at school was unavoidable, Elsa greeted Cale warmly, like an old friend, not knowing what else to do. Cale lost his starting spot on the soccer team, and they flamed out early in regionals. He went to prom by himself, and lines of girls in sequined dresses looked on him with contempt, whispering to each other that he was a dirtbag who deserved to be alone. Elsa got invitations from four different guys, who'd been waiting for a Cale mistake, but she didn't accept any of them and went to a movie with her dad instead. There was an actor in the movie who looked somewhat like Cale, and he played a very convincing, very realistic dirtbag. Elsa found herself crying into her Coke. Her dad noticed, and put his arm around her, his jaw muscles tightening.

That summer Cale began to drink a lot more than was normal for him, and he would post cloying things on Facebook and Twitter aimed at Elsa. Most he would delete in the morning, but she often had already seen them anyway. He had sex with a string of girls in those few months, and afterwards debated whether he wanted Elsa to find out about them.

In August, the second installment of *Walder* hit theaters to critical acclaim and long lines before midnight premieres. Cale assumed they would see it together, that the power of *Walder* would somehow wash away their own mess for a few hours. Cale left a message with Elsa's mother, but she never delivered it. He ended up seeing it with his parents and liked it more than the first. Elsa wouldn't catch it until after the DVD release, not even realizing the movie was in theaters.

They both moved to the state college in the fall and lived at opposite ends of campus. Elsa found a bar near her dorm where she could sit outside in the afternoon while the sun fell in between the spires on campus. Depending on what cops were lurking around, she would occasionally drink there. One afternoon she met Devin, a junior from Oregon. He was a philosophy major. He explained that philosophy allowed him to extend out his intellect over the span of his life, long after he graduated. The way he said it was arrogant, but Elsa loved the idea of extending herself outward, the way she felt when she read her books.

Elsa only saw Cale a few times that year. He grew his hair long and started wearing his shirts with the collar wide open so his chest hair showed. Cale didn't care what he majored in anymore. Petroleum engineering seemed like it was out of his realistic purview. He made a friend from New York named Todd who knew where to buy good drugs. Todd was an Economics major who was better at helping other people manage their lives than he

was at managing his own. He lived down the hall and learned all about Elsa pretty quick.

“I know she's an awesome girl,” he told Cale, very late one evening. “But I think you should get moving.”

Cale was swept up in distractions, but he could always feel her nearby, on the fringe of his life. In his mind, she was like a house swallowed up by a flood—unseen, but with the foundation still locked into the same place it had always been.

He tried to quit drinking a couple of times that year because he felt like he was no longer acting in his own self interest, but it didn't take. In the midst of one of these attempts, he sent Elsa an email and gave an update on his life. It was dramatic and he cringed later when reading it.

Semesters passed and they were sophomores and *Walder III* was released in 3-D. Cale saw an opportunity because 3-D gave Elsa severe motion sickness. He could pick her up and drive them ten miles outside of town and they'd see it at a small multiplex in 2-D. Afterward they could get something to eat. Elsa returned his voicemail three days later, and they had an easy conversation. Cale got around to addressing *Walder III* eventually.

“What do you think?” he asked, and she could hear how emboldened he was, grinning through the phone.

But she calmly refused, said thank you, said she was going with friends. Elsa held the phone to her chest for several seconds after ending the call, as if it could stem the aching there. She saw it by herself after her friends bailed on her for a house party. Cale got drunk and downloaded a bootlegged copy with subtitles off the Internet. They both loved it, their favorite of the three.

Cale found it difficult to insulate himself from someone he loved, even at a school

with 15,000 students. Elsa was at the student rec center a lot, in black tights, so he quit working out entirely. She was on the front page of the student paper one morning, some awards banquet for liberal arts majors, so he only read national news from then on. One cold afternoon at a deli, Cale and Todd overheard a guy in a black fleece brag to his friends about this girl Elsa he'd been banging. Cale knew there were a total of five Elsas in the student register, so it might not have been her, but he couldn't shake it. He tried to pick up a girl that night, but embarrassed himself. He woke up the next afternoon and felt every ounce of the twenty-five pounds he'd gained so far that year.

Over Thanksgiving break, back in their hometown, Cale pulled up next to Elsa at a stoplight. His face was swollen, with watery eyes—a different type of pudgy than his pre-teen years. She waved, and when the light changed, gestured for him to call her. When he did, she invited him to her parents' Black Friday cocktail party. He showed up about an hour late, hoping to not look earnest. Mr. Hayworth put a Black Russian into Cale's hand and tried not to stare—Elsa had warned him about the weight gain. After a couple drinks and awkward reintroductions, Cale relaxed and had a nice time. When most of the guests had left, Elsa showed him pictures of her trip to Peru. Cale acted surprised that she had gone to Peru. As she flipped through the pictures on Facebook, he pretended like he hadn't memorized the entire album.

The next one you are laughing, feeding farm animals

The next one your hair is damp, but I'm not sure why

The next one your sunburn has gotten serious

They went out onto the deck later. Elsa had drank too much and now held a cup of coffee. The sun was setting behind redbuds that lined their fence and Cale could smell

leaves and woodsmoke climbing above them.

"I don't see you around anymore," she said, bumping against his shoulder.

"That's your choice," he said.

"What have you been up to?" she asked, ignoring that bit of hostility.

"Nothing really." Cale took a long drink from his glass. "Todd and I are partying and shit, having a lot of fun."

"Are you still Political Science?"

"No," Cale laughed, as if this was a stupid question. "I hated that shit. Business Administration now."

"Oh," Elsa said. He seemed angry and she inched away slightly. "Did you delete your Facebook?"

"I did. I got tired of all the crazy people I was friends with. I log on as Todd whenever I want to."

"I need to meet your friend Todd sometime. I've heard about him for so long."

"You've heard about him? Why do you need to meet him?"

"Just because I'm curious to see who your friend is,"

"Okay," Cale said, smacking his drink down on the railing. "I'll set something up so you guys can meet."

Cale wondered why he was talking in this way. He told himself to stop. Elsa offered him his own cup of coffee, but he asked for another drink instead. She took his glass and made the drink, and before he'd finished it, she devised a plan to get him out of the house amicably. Cale was insulted at the suggestion of a taxi. He shuffled to his car, panting and dizzy, dragging the weight that looked so unnatural on his long frame.

Cale and Elsa didn't see each other for the rest of the school year. *Walder IV* was released that summer. The bandwagon, movie-only fans annoyed Elsa as she waited in the ticket line with the soon-to-be pharmacist Luke. Luke was not a Walder fan. He had seen the first movie and hated it, but Elsa decided there were other things about him that made up for this.

The fourth movie cut out a significant section of the book in which Walder's brother betrays him by selling the location of their secret power plant to the enemy conglomerate. In a junket interview, the film director said the brother's treason would have convoluted the plot too much for casual fans, so he had the brother remain loyal in the movie. When Cale realized this was happening, about thirty minutes into the film, he became angry and flung a box of candy at the screen. Almost immediately, an usher with a tiny flashlight appeared in the aisle. He scolded Cale like a child while the other moviegoers looked on. Some critics praised *IV* as the best yet, but Cale and Elsa both hated it.

Senior year, Cale switched to Communications because he didn't get into the business school. He and Todd moved into an old clapboard house near the bar district, and Cale got a job at a restaurant that was within walking distance. There was a professor that fall, Gary Dill, who taught a public speaking course and Cale sort of struck up a friendship with him.

Cale started to consider his own future. "I could be a college professor," he mentioned to Todd one night while they watched baseball on TV. Todd lifted his head off the couch to get a good look at Cale, to make sure he'd heard correctly. "I think that would be great, man."

Cale started going to Professor Dill's office hours to talk. During one conversation on

a Tuesday afternoon, Cale said he thought he was on academic probation, but wasn't sure.

"You need to get that figured out then," Dill said.

"I know. I'll call my advisor." Cale looked up at him, ashamed. "I've been in this haze for a long time and I'm trying to get out."

"Hey, I know what that's like. You're not the first."

Leaving Dill's office, Cale ran into Cesar Rodriguez, who had been a friend in high school, a friend Cale had discarded. Cesar was friendly anyway and asked how things were.

"Everything is great," Cale said, and he ran a hand across his own stomach, feeling the bulge. He thought that he would run five miles later that night, but he would end up not doing it.

"I ran into Elsa and Luke," Cesar said. "You guys still talk at all?"

"Who is Luke?"

"Her boyfriend? The pharmacist?"

Cale nodded, pretended to know. "I do talk to her some."

"Good. They are great. Luke is a great guy. I guess they are going to Europe this winter."

"It was good to see you, Cesar."

Walking to the edge of campus, alongside the black walnut trees and brooding stone buildings, it didn't bother him as much as he'd imagined it. He was okay with it. Once he had thought that there was this understanding between them. Like they shared the same orbit, and the farther they moved away from each other only meant they'd meet up sooner on the other side. It was time to start thinking in different ways.

There had been lots of girls the first couple years (not so many lately), but none of

them had been serious. He wasn't going to take any of them to *fucking Europe*. He thought it was part of his penance for Amanda Carpenter, to remain single. Apparently Elsa didn't understand he'd been serving a self-imposed sentence for her. What a huge waste of time the last several years had been. His whole life was on hold and he hadn't even realized it until now.

When Cale got to their house, he roused Todd from a nap and they embarked on a three-day bender. Todd went along without asking questions because he was pretty sure what it was about. They drank until there was nothing left to drink in their house, then they bought some drugs from the kid on their block with the black Range Rover. Cale later would remember some things from those seventy-two hours: squinting through his own windshield, wipers sweeping away rain, headlights passing on his left. There was a girl who smelled like disinfectant in the back room of the strip club out by the bypass. At some point they were at a high school party, a large house with lots of lights, and they made several trips to a liquor store on the kids' behalf until Todd grabbed Cale by the sleeve and whispered: *they're making fun of us*. They met a waitress at a 24-hour diner and Cale thought he was getting somewhere with her until the manager stepped in and asked them to leave because there was too much shouting going on.

Cale woke Friday afternoon, sun at the corners of the blanket he'd pinned above the window as a curtain. He had a text from his supervisor at the restaurant—they'd fired him for no-showing on his last two shifts. An overdue reminder popped up on his phone; he'd missed a Psych test earlier that morning. Cale put his phone under his pillow and cried for several minutes, until he was gasping for air. He had not cried like this for some time.

When he was finished, he got out of bed and took a shower. He washed his face and

rubbed it where it ached from sobbing. Cale thought about one part in the first book where Walder decides he has to galvanize public support against the conglomerate, so he orders the assassination of an elected official, someone who is actually on his own side. They pin the killing on the conglomerate and it gives Walder the capital he needs to wage war. Elsa used to talk about how much she liked this part because the reader was still uncertain whether Walder or the conglomerate (or both) were evil. She was drawn to the parts that she knew would only make sense in retrospect.

Cale started running and losing weight. He ran through the streets late at night and came home with his shoes wet and mud flecked up the back of his shirt. He would lay his shirts on the bed, just to look at them. Anything he could do that would produce tangible evidence of effort of any kind, he loved. Cale stayed connected with Professor Dill and felt like he was on track for an A. He went to the city one weekend and bought a wool Herringbone overcoat with a credit card he'd signed up for as a freshman and never used. The coat went down to his thighs and made him feel confident, like he was on his way to a job interview. He wore it everywhere.

Cale's face started to square off again. He remembered things that he liked about girls, but also started to notice them in different ways—their smells, their accessories, how nice they could be if you let them. He went on several dates with a girl from Communication Theory, but there wasn't much there. Cale collapsed on the couch after one dinner. Todd spoke to him, without looking from the TV. "Getting past the shit doesn't mean you find someone as good as her right off the bat."

Back home, towards the end of the Christmas break, Cale went out with the guys from the soccer team. They met at a bar that had become the holiday dive where alums

gathered when they were back in town. Somehow the conversation turned to Elsa and the guys said she'd brought her boyfriend home with her for break. Said they had flown to London two weeks ago. Cale got up from the table and ordered a few more drinks than normal and ended up going home with Emily Bonderman, who went to some Ivy League school. She'd had a crush on him for nearly a decade, stretching all the way back to his pudgy, pre-Elsa days. The next morning, while Cale slid back into his clothes, Emily laid in bed, covers to her chin, and watched him.

"Did you know?" she asked, her voice rough from a late night of drinking and cigarettes. "Did you know that you wouldn't even glance at me in high school?" Cale stopped dressing to look at her. "Like you'd turn your face so it was impossible for me to enter your field of vision when we'd pass in the hall. I found your Geometry book in the library once and you didn't even acknowledge me when I handed it to you. Did you know any of that?"

Cale didn't respond.

"I think that you did," she said. "I think you always knew what you were doing." She sat up in bed, the covers falling away, her breasts exposed. "But yet, here you are now. Why is that?"

Cale left.

"Who are you?" Emily called after him as he closed her front door.

He drove home to his parents', his car nearly frozen, his expensive overcoat smelling like smoke. He felt polluted by his hometown, by the people and his past, as if the little momentum he'd gained recently at school was now being reversed. He packed up his things and left a few days early. The drive back was dangerous. An ice storm was churning its way

across the state, a swath of misery hovering over a hundred-mile length of interstate. It took twice as long as it would've under normal conditions, but he made it to his house late in the afternoon. He saw sagging power lines and wet leaves clustered in the street. Above the trees, a cold radiated out, settling across everything. It felt manufactured and harsh, like the earth was being carefully frozen by a machine.

Todd was in his room, playing a video game. Cale poured cheap whiskey in a glass, then went upstairs and showered with it, letting the water dilute the alcohol to the point that he liked. The smell of Emily Bonderman washed off him, some of it running down his forearm and into the glass. He put on a black sweater that his parents had given him for Christmas. He checked his email and saw one from his advisor with the subject line PLEASE SCHEDULE APPT IMMEDIATELY, but he deleted it. He went to Todd's room and they watched a basketball game and Todd worried aloud about law school applications. Cale asked if Todd had locked the doors before leaving for break. Todd was unsure.

"I feel like somebody's been here," Cale said. "Everything smells weird. My bed looks like it's been slept in. I think we had more beer in the fridge."

The basketball game ended around ten and Todd grabbed an orange flier off the coffee table. "Fish Fry is playing in an hour at the Kent." They put on their coats and walked through frozen grass since the sidewalks were treacherous. The wood paneled floor of the Kent was wet from all the snow and ice tracked in. Most of the people inside were still wearing their coats. Cale felt protected in his. A painting of Lord Byron loomed over the bar in a spot where you might expect a TV. Cale and Todd ordered two drinks apiece since it was about to get crowded.

They did not notice that Elsa and Luke had fought their way into positions by the

bar just a few feet from them. Cale and Todd moved to a booth where they would stay for the entire set. Fish Fry came on stage and launched into their quasi-hit that had been playing on a local public radio show, the song that would eventually lead to their record contract. The lead singer, a thin man with tortoise shell glasses, had a grave baritone that needed several stanzas to stretch its legs.

Cale noticed Elsa and Luke at the bar near the end of the set. Luke had shiny black hair and a huge silver watch, but he was slightly built and not what Cale had expected. Cale was not sure if they'd seen him. When he got the idea to get up from the booth, he realized that Todd was no longer there. Fish Fry had concluded their set, and canned indie rock was issuing from speakers near the ceiling. Cale looked down at the table and realized the waitress had been delivering drinks to him for eternity, nearly empty glasses spread across the table, yawning up at him.

He got to his feet and moved towards them. He ran a hand along the grooved wood panels on the wall like a blind man groping along a building. When he reached the bar, he just started talking, without introducing himself to Luke, like the three of them had planned to meet there. He said he'd heard they'd been to Europe and asked how it was. He concentrated on annunciating his words. Elsa's head was pitched forward, her eyes widened, as if she expected Cale to embarrass her. She introduced Luke and they talked about majors and hometowns. They all agreed that Fish Fry was great. They all agreed that Cale had drank too much. Elsa started to talk about something else when, out of nowhere, Cale asked if he could talk to her alone. Luke straightened up at this.

"I can't," Elsa said, but her tone said otherwise.

"Not gonna happen." Luke said. He felt he needed to say something.

"It will only take a minute. It probably shouldn't wait."

"You're being annoying," Elsa said.

"I know. Just one minute."

Luke raised his arm and put it into Cale's chest, so the silver watch pressed against Cale's sternum. Luke said it was time to back off. Cale didn't move and saw in Elsa's face, against very long odds, that she would go somewhere and talk with him.

He recalled a case they'd studied in Psych class about two grade school lovers who'd broken up in college, who were happily married to other people, and who began an affair with each other in middle age after meeting by chance at a health club. "Rational adults acting with the irrational fervency of teenagers" was the line that Cale remembered.

Elsa stood up and moved Luke aside gently, saying she would be right back. Cale relished the look on Luke's face as he peeled her away and they headed for the door. Once outside, Elsa poked Cale in the chest with two fingers.

"What do you want?" she said, her breath visible in the cold.

"You wanna go watch a movie or something?"

"You're an idiot."

"I'm sorry about all this," Cale said, and swept his arm back towards the bar and just kind of indicated everything around him.

Elsa turned and walked away, past a row of bars and up along the avenue that Cale's house was on. "Where are you going?" he said. "What about Luke?" She was leaving both of them behind.

He followed, caught up to her. "You should walk on the grass like this," Cale said. "Sidewalks are too dangerous."

She said nothing, but stepped up alongside him.

“Hey,” Cale said, looking up. “This is where Joe Hendrick lives. Todd and I owe him fifty bucks. He's been after us for a year.”

Elsa looked up at the large house. Bicycles were propped against the porch and the mailbox was overstuffed. The house was darkened except for a light over the door.

“Here, let's do something,” Cale said.

They went to the all-night convenience store on the corner and got milk, bread, packaged apple turnovers, Roloids, breath mints, a quart of motor oil, and several other things. Their bill wasn't large enough, so they pulled other items off the shelves until they got it to \$49.96 with tax.

They returned to the house and went inside. The air was dry and undisturbed, none of the tenants returned from break yet. They restocked the fridge and the pantry and hid certain items in interesting places: the Roloids were put in a toolbox, a Penthouse was slipped under the sheet of Joe's bed where his girlfriend was likely to find it.

Cale was being funny and charming. As the minutes wore on, the tension between the two of them was easing. Elsa found herself laughing at the things he was doing. They taped the convenience store receipt to a mirror in the bathroom. Cale signed it.

When they were done and back outside, Elsa stood still at the end of the walk and Cale kissed her eyes and her forehead. She looked up and kissed him back. Later at Cale's house, he felt the familiarity of having his hands around her waist in the dark. The next morning, it was gray outside, icicles lining the eave above the window. Elsa was next to him, pretending to be asleep. Cale tried to recap the situation in his head. He was afraid to move under the covers or say anything out loud—everything seemed fragile. He waited for

her to open her eyes.

When she did, they talked about what each of them had to do that day. Elsa covered her mouth with one hand while she spoke, a self-conscious mannerism that surprised Cale. After ten minutes of lying there, Cale wondered aloud what Luke would think of all this and then everything went to hell.

Elsa recalled the dappled face of Amanda Carpenter, even though she was past all of that. She imagined Luke paying his tab at the Kent and leaving by himself, crawling into his bed alone. She wondered why she had left him there. She realized she was trying to fit pieces together with Cale that might not fit anymore. She dressed and picked up her things and went to the front door, Cale following in his boxers.

"I messed up," he said.

"It's not your fault. It's my fault."

Elsa mumbled something else that he didn't catch, and she left. Todd stood at the top of the stairs in sweatpants. Cale passed him on the way to his room and shut the door.

Cale learned later that Elsa went to Luke that morning and apologized, then broke up with him. Cale thought this was good news, but as the weeks carried on with no word from her, he realized it wasn't. He left some voicemails for her that weren't returned.

Elsa graduated in the spring and moved to Pasadena. Cale needed a fifth year to complete his Coms degree. Todd went back to New York for law school, and he and Cale never saw each other again, communicating by email for a few years before losing touch altogether.

Walder V was released that summer and there was talk of an Oscar nomination for Best Picture. Elsa thought about seeing it, but she was busy with a new job and didn't get

around to it. Cale went to see it with Professor Dill one afternoon after grading some papers together. He was helping out with summer coursework, a sort of unofficial grad assistant. Professor Dill snuck candy into the theatre and talked throughout the film, but he was a Walder purist and knew parts about the books that Cale had missed or forgotten.

That night, Cale climbed the stairs to his one-bedroom apartment. He checked his email and read some reviews of the movie—the critics were always able to articulate how he felt about a film. He heated up some dinner and clicked through online job postings. He would need to start applying for a job soon. Professor Dill said he would make some calls.

Cale got a notice from the school saying his email address would expire in a few months, so he created a Gmail account. He thought about sending a mass email with the new address, but trying to figure out who to put on the distribution list made him decide against it. He created a new Facebook profile. In case anyone needed to find him, that should work. Cale's mom sent him a hand-written letter saying she loved him and was proud of how he'd gotten his life on track. It was a nice letter, but Cale didn't know what she was talking about. The line about the track implied there was a known destination.

It was tough for Cale to put much stock into any of his own plans. He figured circumstances might change. He figured his feelings might change. He'd been waiting on a change for years. There was a girl in the provost's office that was like thirty that he'd seen a few times. He wasn't sure how much to open up to it. Still, he wanted to be free and ready in case an email or a text or a phone call presented itself one night, so that he could say to Elsa, "Don't worry, I know where you are. I'm a step ahead of you. I am already working on it."

So Sorry I Hurt You

Jane bought a dining table as a way to show off—one of these floating furniture pieces, where the legs retract into the body of the table, and the thing just hangs suspended in midair while you eat. Her goal was to stair-step our dining room towards relevance, God bless her, and the table was the jumping-off point.

They shipped it from Sweden in a flat brown box, bound together with a thousand staples, to a warehouse in the industrial part of downtown. It took me most of a Saturday to get down there, load it up, and get back to the house. When I got the box inside, Jane kept lifting it off the living room carpet with one finger and remarking on how lightweight it was, and she was right. Its weight didn't feel nearly equivalent to the eight thousand dollar price tag.

“Why a floating table, exactly?” I had asked when she started getting serious about it. “Why would a scientist spend their time on something like that? And why would anyone buy it?”

“Why not?” Jane responded, tossing some junk mail into the recycling chute. “Why’d they develop that pill you’re taking to regrow your hair?” she said, turning to face me, and I had nothing further to say on the subject.

Jane had a bit of a drug problem in college, but mostly kicked it by the time we got married. Her hobbies had been shifting towards quiet, domestic pursuits as we aged, although she often went about them with an addict’s feverish mentality. She took art classes at night, then would draw calming landscapes in the office until three or four in the morning, bent over the desk with her hair tied up above her head.

She unpacked the table and put it in the center of the dining room, atop a fraying rug, then stood smiling in the doorway, running a finger along her collarbone. I couldn’t have been more disappointed with the way the thing looked. It was a thin panel of synthetic material made to look like wood, with four legs each the diameter of a pool cue. And it was nearly two-dimensional. If you looked from the correct angle, it would disappear from your sight entirely. The underside was protected by a clear plastic plate, beneath which was an expanse of pinions and gears and colored wires running in untraceable mazes.

Jane washed an old linen tablecloth, and pulled it across the table with the care of an army nurse spreading a blanket over a wounded, sleeping GI. We realized quickly that something was wrong when I switched it on for the first time. After an hour spent flipping through the instruction manual, I figured out the tablecloth was blocking the hovering agent’s exhaust vents, and the thing was overheating before it could get off the ground.

When I mentioned this to Jane, she went to the office and found a very specific type of tablecloth on the Internet that has holes fashionably cut out for the exhaust vents, and so we spent another five hundred dollars right there.

She and I began our relationship in college, in love, in a state of performance, probably not unlike anyone else. We were highly attuned to one another's desires and fears, terrified of rejection by the other, but at some undefined point we each settled into who we really were. And then the years began to bleed together. We started making our own way, searching for things that could possibly make us happy: I taught English, and tried to write stories on the weekends. Jane did the drawing classes and shopped for expensive furniture online.

*

She invited Joe and Tori over for dinner to see the new table. Tori was our old college friend, and Joe was her slick investment banker fiancé who liked to speak on involutions in the economy in a way that diminished the people who were listening.

I was secretly hoping for the day this engagement fell apart. Joe was the definition of smarm, and Tori was still in that performance mode around him—acting more carefree and fun-loving than she really was. He'd given her an engagement ring with a round diamond the size of an Alka Seltzer tablet.

Jane bought steaks for me to grill. She led Joe and Tori by the hand into the dining room to show them the table the second they got there. Joe lifted up one corner, looked underneath.

"Where's it plugged in?"

"It has a six-hour battery," Jane said, with not an insignificant amount of pride.

Joe nodded. “Nice.”

Tori was impressed, too. And she was beautiful, and I knew things about her that Joe would never know. Like the way she pinched cigarettes when she used to smoke. The sound of her crying in a limousine on the way to her brother’s funeral. She, in her yellow bikini at nineteen, on the sun drenched sand of Puerto Vallarta.

This was a problem for him—being on the outside, looking in—at dinners, at weddings, where the old stories were hauled out of reserve and paraded around. He would listen with a restless, artificial smile, his eyes wandering off, fixing on the furthest point he could find.

Joe was a reality-show baby—one of these “rabies” as they call them—his parents meeting decades ago on some season of the Real World. You may have witnessed his conception on the third episode from a grainy night-vision camera mounted in the corner of a cast-house bedroom. Such a strange pair, his parents—the mom, a beautiful blonde, and his Dad, a ragged, racist Midwesterner—every moment of their odd, drunken beginning on the neon-soaked streets of Las Vegas recorded for eternity.

Joe would talk about his family, if you asked him, in a hardened way that must have developed through years of abuse on the subject. His parents broke up before the season wrapped, right after the revelation that she was pregnant, and I don’t know that he ever met his dad, but Joe turned out successful, and now made enough money drive a dark green electric sports car and buy recreational drugs whenever the mood struck him.

He was handsome, too, despite an under-bite that made him look endlessly annoyed. His other physical blight was his left foot, which was turned outward noticeably, a congenital condition, causing him step in a delicate way so that he bounced as he moved. I

noticed, not long after we first met, that he used various tactics to hide this. He would stay seated for long periods, or would make his way across a room in segments, so that a person couldn't observe the irregular line of his movements long enough to notice anything. They were impressive, these tactics, the strategies of a severely self-aware person.

When the dinner was laid out and steaming on this eight thousand dollar piece of plastic, we circled around it, standing before our chairs, and I couldn't help thinking there was something prayerful or sacrificial about our arrangement. Jane flipped the switch, and after a moment, you could hear the whirring sound of the hovering components warming up. Joe lowered his ear to the tabletop. Soon, the fans began to run, making a sound like water swirling in an inlet, and Joe jerked upright, a dazzled smile coming across his face. The table then rose a few inches off the ground, gently, so as not to disturb the glasses and cookware, and the legs folded up with an electric whine.

Floating, it resembled a ghost, the tablecloth running over the edges and fluttering slightly in the fans. Joe looked underneath again, maybe to ensure it wasn't an optical illusion. When he was satisfied, he began to clap politely, and then Tori joined in, and then all of us were doing it. Jane started laughing, and took a bow, like she had invented the thing. We sat down and passed the dishes, one person to another. I watched Jane, opposite me, put her hands beneath the table and enjoy the cool sensation of the fans.

When dessert was over, Tori said she felt bad for not bringing anything, and offered to go buy some marijuana from the after-hours kiosk in our grocery store parking lot. She wrapped a scarf around her neck, and left through the front door with her purse trailing behind her. "Help with the dishes," she said to Joe over her shoulder.

I had to go to the bathroom, then went to fish my cigarettes out of the sock drawer. I don't know why I kept them there, just a routine from my formative years that never stopped feeling right. I'd puff cigarettes while they smoked their weed, since getting stoned made me lose my shit.

When I walked back into the dining room, the table was mostly cleared, still humming evenly. From the kitchen came the sound of running water and light voices. I took a few steps in that direction, and could see Jane standing elbow to elbow with Joe at the sink, their backs to me, a stack of dirty dishes to their left. They were rinsing and placing items in the dishwasher, cleaning the wine glasses and steak knives by hand.

Sometimes you can tell, even from behind, when two people are smiling. Joe scooped up some soap bubbles and blew them into Jane's hair, and she laughed and bumped him away with her hip. There was a familiarity between them, an easiness. I stepped back into the shadows and watched. It might've been innocent, but they were finding an entertainment in washing dishes that was not normal.

Whatever was going on between them, I felt jealous, and irritated, and surprisingly aroused—my emotions like several colors painted over the same spot until the result is something muddled and near-black.

Their imaginary affair storyboarded before me: the lying, the intuitions, the attempts at guessing passcodes, the gruesome discovery. The divorce. Would Joe and Jane get married to each other? Would Tori and I bond through it all? *Would Tori and I get married?*

I was still standing in the dark when Tori came in the front door, waving the hermetically-sealed bag of drugs. “Line at that thing was insane,” she said. “The old guy in front of me apparently had never paid for something with his retinas before.”

The three of them smoked a joint, and I lined my cigarettes up individually on the coffee table like I was playing a game against myself. The girls began laughing and howling in the familiar drug-induced way they did—like they were the only two people remaining on earth—and Joe and I were left staring at each other.

“You hear about this Hendrickson guy over at Bank of North America?” he said, tapping ash onto the carpet, his eyes glassy. “This guy offloads a half trillion dollars into some Brazilian civic renovation project that’s a cartel front, and nobody notices for an *entire week*. By then, he’s vanished from the face of the earth and the money’s off to God knows where.”

There was some sense of delight in his voice, in bringing up a topic that I wouldn’t be able to discuss with any sophistication.

“A bank that’s getting too big for its own good,” I said.

Joe halfway frowned and nodded at this, like he was in agreement with me, but that his reasoning was better. I wanted to never see this person again for the rest of my life.

Some hours later, they drove home, Jane and I waving from the front porch, the wind blowing dried leaves in through the door. In our bedroom, I watched Jane undress—revealing the lovely curve of her back, the white of her calf. Her clothes ended up in a pile by the window. She came at me in bed, the moment cheapened somewhat by the smell of weed on her skin. I pictured her coming at Joe, expecting to feel repulsed by it. But I wasn’t.

*

The next day, I had some kind of a breakthrough, the feeling of something being jarred loose. I started working on a new story, my best idea in years, about a successful novelist who begins to believe his wife is having an affair with a man who has a prosthetic foot. The novelist isn't even mad about the affair, he's mainly just curious about what she sees in the one-footed man, so he starts following her around, doing little things that entice them into meeting each other. My thoughts were consumed by it.

At school, I started neglecting various teacherly duties—canceling StuGo meetings and tutoring sessions—instead writing in my classroom with the lights turned off, a square of late-afternoon sunlight making its way across the floor.

I gave Jane an early draft to read, but it sat untouched on the table for a week, so I took it back. Against my better judgment, I made twenty copies in the teacher's lounge and had my class read and workshop the story, trying to pass it off as the published work of a fake author named Lonnard Croyle. As soon as I spoke Croyle's name out loud, they searched for him on their learning screens (which I should have anticipated), and after some pretty stiff questioning, I was forced to admit the story was mine.

They started whining about how creative writing didn't fit into their curriculum, that they didn't think I should use their class time to explore my own personal hobbies. I had never before felt this vulnerable, being lectured by children, and something inside me snapped. I raised my voice and heard myself saying things to them I would not believe later:

"This class has sucked all semester, and everyone in this room knows it." I walked to the center of the room and loomed over them. "*Fuck* your curriculum. The workshop is moving forward, like it or not."

The class went silent—you could hear Mrs. Daley diagramming sentences next door. I regained some composure: “Do this for me, and I’ll do something for you guys when it comes time to turn in grades.”

There may have been one or two bits of worthwhile commentary that came out of the “workshop” (*I liked it – It’s funny – Not too long*), but they mostly just critiqued with the easy cruelty found only in people who haven’t begun to think about their own death.

Regardless, I was energized by my present circumstances, this sudden outpouring of writing, feeling myself in abundance. This was the beginning of some change, some fortuitous shift in my work.

*

I devised a motto for myself to help me seize writing opportunities, and wrote it on a card taped above the mirror. It read *TODAY!* in blue marker, but after a few consecutive days of laziness, Jane crossed it out and wrote *Tomorrow...* beneath in eyeliner pencil, along with a little happy face.

I’m not sure how long I stood there, staring at it. At first, I was surprised that an eyeliner pencil could be used so effectively to belittle someone. The surprise quickly turned to total outrage.

I retaliated in the first way I could think of and drank a bottle of wine she was saving for the Oscars while she was at her drawing class that night. I sat facing the door to the garage so that she would see the empty bottle and my smiling purple teeth the instant she walked in. But she did not come home, and it got late, so I crept into bed and sent her a text:

saw ur artwork on the card THX FOR THE SUPPORTTTTTTTTTTTT

I wondered if she was with Joe, late into the night. She might have been off somewhere working on her drawings. When I left for school in the morning, she was asleep on the couch, in her clothes. That afternoon an email arrived from her:

C- I'm truly sorry if I hurt your feelings, but you need to TOUGHEN UP. The only thing I know about the art world is that the thin-skinned have no place in it. You are great at what you do. I was trying to help you WORK HARDER, to GET BETTER. It was not the right way to go about it though, you're right. Our acct is overdrawn btw, but I'm going to see Joe to get the charges refunded. -J

That weekend she cleaned off my writing desk that had become cluttered at the edges with objects of hers—an old phone, some candles, pages and pages of drawings. She bought me a new coffee mug, one that glows bright blue when the coffee is hot, and encouraged me to spend time at the desk. She reiterated my writing was important to her. She put a new *TODAY!* card above the mirror and asked where the defaced one was. I said I'd thrown it away already, but it's really folded up in my sock drawer.

*

I am taking a pill that was just released in the last year that regrows your hair, and it's going pretty well. The main problems are that the new hair is a bit darker than my natural color, and the follicles curl once they reach a certain length, like something that

would look more appropriate growing out of a melanoma. Jane hates the whole idea behind it, thinks I'm taking poison, and says she likes the way I look naturally. She talks about the pill like it's an organism with thoughts and decisions to make.

"How does it know to grow new hair on your head, and not your knuckles or the bottoms of your feet?"

Joe makes fun of me about the pill. He likes to remind me to take it when we eat together ever since he found out I can't ingest it on an empty stomach or my risk of stroke goes astronomical. Everyone gets a good laugh out of it, especially Jane. Her hope is that I'll be shamed into not taking it anymore. She's going to have to keep on hoping.

*

It quickly got to the point where the table was collecting dust, all four legs on the ground, and Jane and I were eating quiet dinners in the high-backed stools at the kitchen island, a disconnect settling between us.

Jane's clutter that used to populate the empty spaces of my writing desk migrated to the table, so that eating there would've required cleanup beforehand. I would stand in the dining room in the dark some nights, just wanting to kick it, an imaginary neon price tag suspended above. I tried to remember how I pictured the table in my mind before we owned it, but I couldn't do it. It was just like how I could never remember the way I'd first envisioned a vacation once it was over.

Joe had a big fat gift card to Outback Steakhouse, so the four of us went out for dinner, and Jane's table sat alone in the dark of our dining room. As was typical, the conversation eventually turned to the topic of my writing. Usually, I had to rouse myself into the faux-enthused state I had perfected to ward off any concrete discussion of my

work. I liked to present myself as someone who was naturally gifted at writing, but who didn't really have the time to explore it to the fullest extent of my talents. This, I thought, made my continued failure much more understandable, and really a little tragic. But on this night, my enthusiasm was real.

"I'm working on something exciting." My voice was humming, electric. I tried to tone it down a little. "It's tough. You know—with family stuff." Here I gestured towards Jane. "It's tough to get any work done."

"You're getting good feedback, though?" Tori asked, wide-eyed and encouraging. A tray passed behind her balancing a giant fried onion and foot-high cheeseburger.

"He is," Jane put in, clasping my forearm. "He has a manila folder that's six inches thick from good feedback."

"Proud of you, Charles," Joe announced. "I'm always worried you're gonna say you've given up." He was eating cheese fries from a plate at the center of our table. "All that mental isolation. People go insane from that."

And then, like we'd had this dinner a thousand times before, we moved on to a discussion of Joe's days as a creative writer, two years of precocious success as an undergrad, before he'd fortunately switched majors to something that was actually worth his time.

*

After the dinner, the four of us moved to the Outback bar, under its friendly red glow, and I drank and drank, and got the bartender to crank up the music to a level that caused some people in the restaurant to cover their ears. I went to the bathroom, and on my way, started chatting with a redheaded woman who had stress acne around her mouth

and forehead. She wore yellow tights and a jacket with brass buttons. She was an art teacher in the same district as me, and we knew a lot of the same people. Most of what she said I couldn't hear over the music.

I was only able to admit this to myself later, but when I talked to her, I tried to imitate Joe. He does this thing where he aims his thumb at your chest while making a point, and it makes you feel as if the ideas he's explaining were ones you came up with yourself. It's such a strange gesture, but I've always wanted it for my own. It seemed to be working on the redhead, because she was transfixed on my every word. We talked for a long time, and I felt an odd power over her.

When I started complaining about what Jane had done to the *TODAY!* card, I realized in the slow blink of the art teacher's eyes that she wasn't transfixed by anything I was saying—she was just luxuriantly drunk. There was nothing in her face that registered she understood me, or the card, or that anything beyond today even existed.

Around this point, I noticed Jane out of the corner of my eye, wearing her coat, her anger apparent, jangling the car keys at me as if I were an escaped dog she was coaxing back out of the woods.

*

Well before Jane and I began dating, Tori and I had this weird moment in college. On Spring Break in west Florida, we spent the day drinking and lounging by the pool, while the rest of our friends toured around off the coast on a fishing boat. A storm blew in that afternoon, unlike anything I'd seen before, the wind bending the palm trees so far it seemed they would snap, and our friends had to stay overnight in Miramar Beach. I have some memory of that night alone with Tori in the rain-battered beach house, sitting close on a

white couch, a bottle of Parrot Bay in my hand or hers, having some debate over whether Jimmy Buffett had been a musician or a restaurant. The next day I couldn't remember if I'd made a move on her, or if I'd just imagined everything in my head. She and I never discussed it, and our friendship went on as normal.

But she and Jane were such good friends in college, I'm sure they talked in private about every detail of that night. I feel like something happened. Maybe not sex, but something weird. If it had, then Jane certainly knew everything about it—the way I'd tasted to Tori, how long I'd been able to perform. All of this made it quite possible that my wife knew things about my own past that I didn't even know myself.

*

Jane came to school one day to have lunch with me in my classroom, and carried with her a little white box tied up with a bow. She handed it over, trying to act reserved, but clearly brimming with gift-giving excitement. Inside the box was a large white plastic die she'd ordered on the Internet, about the size of a baby's fist, something you might see in a role-playing board game. Etched in black on each of its twelve faces, she'd customized them to read *TODAY!*

"You just roll it. Like this," she said, gently tossing it across my desk. It landed on my grade book. "You just give that thing a roll whenever you feel like putting your pencil down." Looking down at it, I found myself wanting to ask how much it had cost. But I didn't.

I thought of college, when I felt so many cloying things about Jane to my very core. I could never express anything out loud or in writing to her without sounding stupid and lame, just like all the other heartsick couples around us. Eventually, I gave up trying to tell her anything at all. Whatever I had said at the beginning, though, was enough for her to

want to marry me. She had to prod me into proposing. I'm still so embarrassed at the way that I did it.

For just a moment at the desk there, with the *TODAY!* die facing up at me, I felt hopeful about our marriage, like she and I were floating on the glass of the ocean at night, and there, in the distance, we could make out lights from a ship.

But there was something in imagining her leaning across the sink with that eyeliner pencil, thinking it was so funny, thinking she was helping me, that I wasn't ready to let go of.

"This is so great, thank you," I said. "And isn't it funny? It's energized me to get some writing done this very lunch hour."

I leaned back in my chair, and waited.

Her face soon darkened.

"Oh," she said, and she began to collect her things, pausing to brush hair away from her face. "You want me to leave." She walked to the edge of the classroom, calm and controlled. "You're an asshole, Charles. A fucking baby."

It took a couple days to get her speaking to me again. I apologized, in ways that are not easy for me. This pattern was typical, and nothing to worry about. The hurt person withdraws, the offender pursues, switch sides, etc. I did my best to put it all behind me.

*

Joe and Tori invited us over to his house for dinner for the first time ever. Jane drove and I sat next to her complaining that we didn't have better friends to eat with. I was frustrated and irritable because the cuckolded novelist story had ground to a halt. He was following his wife around, taking notes, acting as this weird sort of puppet master, but

everyone somehow ended up in Paris, and I couldn't figure out how to get them out of there.

"Do you want me to say no next time they invite us somewhere?" she asked, sounding tired.

"I don't know. Are they ever going to get married? Joe—he's just—can't we start to spread ourselves around a little bit?"

"I'm curious to know who else you'd like to eat dinner with."

"People that don't make me unhappy," I said. "The Ellisons?"

Jane was baffled. "The Ellisons? That we met the one time? The Toastmaster Ellisons?"

"They seemed interesting."

"You thought *she* was interesting."

"Dead wrong. You are so dead wrong about that."

Jane leaned forward into the steering wheel, like she needed to rest herself on it.

Joe's house was at the end of a sloping street, in a neighborhood with tall fences designed to keep people out. The driveways were long, with steep gradients that ran upward, the houses peering down at us from on high. Tori still kept a condo downtown, but most of her stuff was already moved into Joe's.

Some days Joe's foot seemed worse than others. This night it was worse. When we walked inside, he bounced around the corner and handed us little eight-ounce glasses filled with smoothie he'd made from his neutron beam juicer. It had kale and pineapple in it, and several other ingredients that he mentioned after I stopped listening. It tasted like sunlight breaking through a wall of winter clouds.

Of course, they'd bought a dining table just like ours, only theirs was better, made by a higher-end Swedish manufacturer, with a genuine pine finish and stone warming panels to keep food hot. Our dinner floated before us, and I was so mad I couldn't see straight.

"Wait, wait," Joe said, stopping everything before we started to eat. "We're forgetting something." He looked off into the distance for a long time. "Oh yes," he said, tapping his temple. "Your pill, Charles."

Jane didn't even seem to care that they'd copied us—she seemed genuinely happy for them and their table, which was confounding to me. What was the point of purchasing the thing if it didn't serve as some kind of one-upmanship? I mean, what is really the point of having your food floating in front of your fucking face if everybody else is doing it too? I was so pissed at Jane for making me care anything at all about furniture.

After dessert, Tori made another trip to the weed kiosk, and I again watched Jane and Joe rinse the dishes in his massive kitchen, their elbows literally rubbing, me sitting on a couch in the adjacent living room beneath a domed ceiling that resembled what you'd see at an indoor arboretum. I remembered feeling strange when I first saw them interacting this way, not sure how to define my emotional response. They knew I was watching them this time, and it didn't seem to dampen their enthusiasm at all.

Joe was running steak knives under the faucet, then wiping them clean with a towel on his shoulder, when something suddenly came to me, and I realized what I needed to do with the novelist story. It was a divine sort of feeling, shot up inside as if through a vein, that I nearly jumped off the couch and cried out.

I realized, sitting there, that Joe was evoking something complicated within me, something I couldn't quite describe. Whatever it was, it made me focus. Being in his

presence brought about perspective, just like how I could only appreciate feeling normal when my body was racked with sickness.

When we left, Jane and Tori embraced like this night was the last they'd ever have together, although there'd be too many more to count. I shook Joe's hand on the way out, feeling a strange gratitude for him.

I drove home, because Jane was too stoned, and she apologized for scoffing at the idea of the Ellisons. She reached over and ran her fingers through my hair.

"I'm proud of you for wanting to branch out, Charles."

"Well, I'm sorry about suggesting I don't want to spend time with Joe. I really do want to spend as much time with them as possible."

"That makes me so happy, honey. They really do love you," she said. She sounded half asleep. "And I love you."

"I love all three of you," I said, the car racing through the lamp-lit street, the moon keeping pace in the window.

It was late when we got home. I made some coffee and went to my desk to write all of this down. The night carried on, hours passed perhaps, and then I heard the even humming of the table from down the hall, and the electric whine of the legs retracting.

Jane had moved all the clutter into an armchair in the corner, and was lying flat on the ground beneath the table, the only light in the room coming from streetlamps flooding the window. She'd taken her shoes off, and her white socks were the only part of her I could see, sticking out from beneath.

"This is fun," I said, giddy from my writing, as I crawled underneath beside her. It was like spring down there, the fans cool and light in our faces.

"I was scared to get under," Jane said.

"Scared? Why?"

"I thought my body might disintegrate or something." She laughed, but she seemed to be crying a little. "I'm so high, Charles."

"That's okay," I said, and I snuggled up next to her. We lay for a long time in silence.

"Charles," she said, and now she was really crying. "I'm not sure I've been as good to you as I should have been."

This felt like some momentous confession coming on.

"No, no, no," I said, and I shushed her. "We can talk about it tomorrow." At least for tonight, I just wanted to imagine what she'd say.

Some time later, she fell asleep. I carried her up to bed, then went back to my desk. Long after the coffee went cold, I nodded off in my chair.

I forgot to switch the table off, and I awoke to find it lying on the floor, the battery dead, the legs still retracted. It must have crashed to the ground in the middle of the night, but we were both sleeping so soundly, so peacefully, floating in dreams as rich and radiant as the day we first met, that neither of us heard it.

A Person of Tremendous Value

Some nights I'd take the light-rail down to the media store to watch the girl that worked there. She had braces, and she'd do dorky dances when they had a band playing in one of the multi-purpose rooms. She'd lift one leg up at a time, and pump the other arm, and dork-march around the café, perfectly in time with the beat. She didn't care what people thought. It was ridiculous. It was embarrassing. Holy cow, I loved her.

I wanted to hug and squeeze and bite her. I wanted to nibble those cheeks, and just put my face into her brown hair and smell it. It wasn't insane to think she could love me. Maybe she was the person I'd been looking for my whole life—a person I could be dumb with. My Little Dummy, with braces. They could write a song about it. Play it on a speaker ten thousand feet up in the air so everyone could hear it. Man, I could hardly control myself.

And she was fashionable. She knew the trends. Shiny tights, and the lace-up boots with a heel. And one of those hats that looked like a windsock. I heard a guy on TV joking that women are dressing like gnomes nowadays. I remember laughing out loud at the time, but I've changed my thinking. Gnomes are in, and they're freakin' hot.

Did she ever do any actual work? Who knew? Did anyone care? Not me. She was like a customer half the time, reclining in the glass-walled studios with a tablet, or sitting at the bar drinking a tall soda, yakking with customers. Maybe that was her job—to yak with customers. To look good. To make it a fun place to be. She yakked, she squeezed arms, she touched the wrists of strangers.

But she never yakked or squeezed or touched with me. I would lay low in the e-book section and sneak looks at her. She never noticed. Of course she didn't. You can't blame her. I'm five feet nothing. I'd need to stand on a chair and flail my arms for her to see me. And my teeth suck, and also my face and body. My feet are all wonky. We could spend all day coming up with stuff.

I went down there one night to ask her out, finally. I was tired of the creeping. And my Dad had given me an ultimatum. He's super successful in the hotel business, and lives out by the ocean now with Claudia and his huge dogs. He's freaked out about me being alone. Says it keeps him up at night. He paid all this money for me to join the Mears Agency Dating System, although I haven't set up my profile out of moral objections. Dad said if I didn't go ask that girl out, he was going to fly in from California and do it for me.

"You are a person of tremendous value," Dad said over the phone, blah blah blah. His dogs were barking in the background. "Now get down there and talk to this woman, or I'm going to come and humiliate you."

I was in nonfiction, my heart was hammering in my chest. I'd drank about six cups of the Japanese tea that gets you wired out of your mind. The interactive author posters would always talk to me when I was hiding back there. All dead authors, all arrogant as hell. They were in these gilded frames, with the blackness of space and stars floating around them. They'd follow you with their eyes, tell you your Rewards Account balance, offer ten bucks off a download today, etc. Always when I was trying to keep a low profile.

"Just browsing," I would say, which got them to shut up.

I saw her up front, she had on that windsock hat, and a dark shade of lipstick, and was tapping her heel. I just went for it, and Holy God was it embarrassing. She was like a head taller. Her expression went from surprised—to flattered—to embarrassed, in the span of half a second. I don't even know what I said. Let's go get an Americano? I think I was almost yelling. She looked down at me like I was an insane person.

My fingers were up around my mouth, trying to cover my teeth. She started playing with her hands. Her eyes darted around the room. Finally she said, Sorry, she couldn't, but that I was so sweet. Thank you, she said. The answer was no.

I went outside, ran across the street, and stood in the rain for a while, then caught the light-rail home. I had to pee so bad from all the tea. I thought my bladder would tear open.

I waddled to the elevator, down the hall to my apartment, barely made it to the toilet. My apartment is all-white. White rug, white blinds, white ceiling, white molding, white appliances, white sheets, white bed. I've got a problem with color. And I keep the temperature really low, so that plus the white, it's like being in a refrigerator.

The west wall is a floor-to-ceiling window that looks out across downtown. It's cantilevered, so you can walk out on it, in your bare feet. You look down, and it's like you're floating.

You can see the light-rail, and people walking and talking down there. When the sun sets behind the buildings, it sets the whole sky on fire. The airport is in the distance, little dots of light coming and going. I thought about that girl at the media store, about the girl I met at our banking conference, about Elaine, about several others.

I was replaying the things I'd said earlier in the night, asking her out. I got so mad at myself—I took the toaster out and slammed it onto the kitchen floor, but it was made of steel or something, and it cracked the tile. I kicked it into the corner, and it scratched a cabinet. I picked the toaster up, and there was absolutely nothing wrong with it. I slammed it down a few more times. Nothing.

I made some toast and went to bed.

I had a fitful dream about the braces girl that night, but got startled out of it because my neighbors were having loud sex through the wall. I could hear everything, like I was in there with them.

I felt embarrassed, both for me and for them. What they were doing sounded disgusting, but also great. I was sick. I was lonely. I decided I would try out the Mears online dating thing.

*

Our department is eight people plus our manager, all crammed into the corner on the 38th floor of the bank building. There's me, Kim, Mario, Trese, Angela, Melissa, Chris, and then there's Elaine who's got the space next to me. It's the customer service call center,

but we take like five actual phone calls a day. Mostly we respond to irate online comments or inquiries such as:

“\$235 for a fuckin transfer to Peru @CMBank?? thx you nickel and diming facist fuks. hope u die”

Then we come back with something like:

“@grandmabecky Hi Becky, I’m Corey! Sorry to hear of your frustration. I’ve passed your feedback to our fee schedule team, but would like to chat with you further in private! Plz send me your location hub info!”

Usually people were nicer when they realized actual humans would respond, but we still got likened to Satan a lot. Our manager, Per Mortensen, would remind us that often an irascible online persona masked a sweet and caring individual of flesh and blood who had been legitimately wronged. It was our job to peel back the outer layer and get to the soft center. That’s when the real fixing could begin. We were the hands and fingers of the bank, he said. And the lips and the soul.

Whatever. This place is awful, but I’m really good at this job. I know how to diffuse things, and I’m non-threatening.

Per says I’m the best he’s ever had. We’ve got free coffee, we get fifteen days vacation. There’s big guys in suits upstairs making earth-shattering decisions, and we’re down here goofing around and being dumb, or we’re bickering and biting each others’ heads off.

Elaine was my friend, and I got to work right next to her. She was a goofball. If it was slow, she’d tape videos of just her mouth reciting famous movie lines, and share them with everybody. Always villains, like Emperor Palpatine, or Giero from the *LOTR* reboot. She’d

play up all the gross mouth noises, all the smacking. It made me sick. She was a goofball extraordinaire.

I wouldn't send videos back because it would've required a close up on my teeth. Elaine's teeth were pretty. Shining and white and wet, with a big gap in between the front two that I could have wedged my tongue in.

I was logged out of my station and not working hard that Monday, setting up my Mears profile. I was already worried about the profile pic, whether I'd show my teeth or not. When Dad signed me up, they'd sent me a swab kit that I ran all along the inside of my mouth and tongue and sent back to them. They had all my Biologics out there—genetic screening and my lipid counts and other stuff that made me uncomfortable.

All the shit was public! I about had a heart attack at my desk. Corey Allen's Fertility Determinants for all to see! I just started checking boxes like crazy—Private, Private, Private, Private, Private, Private.

Elaine saw from her cube. "What are you doing?" she said. "That better not be Mears."

I angled my screen away from her. She rolled her chair over and banged it into mine. It hurt my knee. She slapped at my hand so she could see what I was doing. "I'm not going to be friends with you anymore if you join that creep-fest."

"How about you let me live my life for once?" I said.

"I thought we said you weren't ever going to do that? What happened with the girl at the media store?"

I told her, and then Elaine started rubbing that tendon or whatever it is just above my collarbone with her long fingers. I sort of relaxed. I felt better.

"She didn't give any excuse?" Elaine said. "Just a no, and that's it?"

"Yes, but I find that refreshing," I said. "Honesty. It's admirable."

"It's horseshit," she said. "What a smug little bitch. You don't want somebody that's going to be like that."

"Good," I said. "That's so helpful. Tell me some more about the people I don't want, or the dating sites I'm not supposed to join."

Elaine shrugged. "Brutal honesty is a major red flag in a person, Corey. It's a character flaw. You want a relationship with some lying built into it. You want some secrets. You want someone who's willing to massage the truth to make you feel better."

"Like you have any idea what you're talking about," I said.

"Like *you* do."

Elaine had one freaking boyfriend her whole life. The cloud manager Damon Jennings down on the 22nd floor. It lasted a single insane month, and ended with her posting his bank statement and social security number online, along with a picture of him with his pants off. Somehow this experience qualified her as my interpersonal therapist.

Elaine always wanted to be involved with everything I was doing. I loved her ruddy cheeks and her oval face, and the long eyelashes that always looked wet. Sometimes I wanted to kiss her, or squeeze her, or kill her, but she'd been a soccer player in college, and could beat the daylights out of me.

Per appeared and said there was lots of stuff waiting for us in the queue, so Elaine rolled off. I finished my Mears profile before lunch. The site made my head spin. Find a girl using Biologics, or Crowd Monitoring, or Financial Investments, or Social Awareness, or Worldview, or fifty others. I spent an hour using the avatar-builder, lengthening the legs,

enlarging and diminishing the breasts, rounding out the cheeks. It was all about building an ideal physique, but I tried to put some flaws into it anyway.

Biologics could get me a perfect physical match, but it seemed like Crowd Monitoring was less-clunky than the other algorithms. I'd seen this all over the news. People were pissed. The Justice Department was looking at it. Mears was using an opt-in thing, said they were only listening to their own users, but there was a lot of confusion.

The site said a Mears drone could analyze conversations and identify females within a large crowd, based on factors I would emphasize—content of conversation, lilt, tone, timing, whatever. There was a stylish, mean-looking lady on the site telling me about it. *"It doesn't matter how attractive someone is if you can't talk to them, right?"* she said. *"This is your life. Your profile data indicates you want a long-lasting, monogamous relationship. Our technology can help find someone you can talk to."*

I said yes. I opted into Crowd Monitoring, and the stylish lady said they'd need to complete an assessment that would take about an hour. I went to lunch with Elaine. I got a turkey and cranberry baguette with arugula. I got an ice water, plus a huge coffee with soy. Elaine lectured me about the Mears thing, said I was making a dumb, emotional decision.

Then she talked about how much she disliked Per, and ate about half of her cucumber wrap with a sweet chili sauce. Per should stick up for us in division meetings, or should get rid of Trese and Angela, etc., all code for how much she was in love with him.

Before I clocked out that night, I made the small transfer I always did from a grouping of our largest corporate accounts into my secret personal account. I'd set it up in a weird way so that it looked like a legit sweep into an investment account. Super small

amounts, the oldest trick in the book. No idea how much money I've built up. I'm afraid to look at it, because they monitor everything we do down here. Don't want to draw attention.

The gist is that somebody owes me something. I'm not sure what. It's a terrible thing to think, I know. When I take some of that money, I feel a little bit better. I already know it's terrible.

If I get tired of being here, I'm going to use that cash to stake myself as a pro poker player. Like the guys on TV. Those cool guys. I'll move to Las Vegas, I'll get a bunch of different colors of sunglasses, I'll eat steak at the casinos at 3:00am, I'll stand in front of the fountains, or do the zipline from one big bright tower to the next. I'll drink in the desert air, and maybe find a beautiful girl who tried to work in one of the sexy shows, but just didn't have the heart for it.

I did my Mears assessment at home that night with my tablet, laying on my back in my comfy bed. The stylish lady popped up and barked instructions. The iris scanner on the tablet turned on. I had to read sentences aloud, and look at about a thousand pictures in succession. Like a red bird perched on a cactus, or a monkey with stupid glasses, or a person pointing a gun at another person, that kind of thing. I held the tablet two feet from my face. It took forever. My arms got all achy and prickly. The thing was literally reading my mind. Finally she said I was all done, all ready to go. They would have something for me soon.

I got out of bed and took my clothes off and sort of danced around in my underwear. I walked out on the window that looked out towards downtown. There were people out there walking around, the train whizzing by, airplanes moving slowly, shapes up in the windows of the high rises. They could see me. They were looking. I knew they were. I

danced, I sang some songs as loud as I could, until I felt stupid and stopped, and my apartment fell totally dead silent, except for pipes moving water overhead.

I booted up my poker app and got under the blankets.

*

Mears found Veda at the football stadium. I had setup my compatibility scan with identified females between 21-35, with an emphasis on humor and irony. She was at the stadium, evidently, watching a game with her masseuse, although I have no idea who takes their masseuse to a football game? Or, I guess I know exactly who takes their masseuse to football game: Veda does.

Mears captured and crunched whatever Veda and her masseuse talked about and they spit my name out as an 86% match. To this day, I don't understand what the percentage means. They sent me a notification and I looked at Veda's profile, and she had about seven hundred pictures of herself out there. Full body length, side of her face, the top of her head, her feet, bright green bikini, business casual blazer and pencil skirt. I could see her health metrics—how much calcium she had in her blood. Half of this stuff you needed to be a doctor to understand. Was calcium in your blood good?

We did a video chat, and it made me feel good about her. I could hardly see, as she was all backlit. I wasn't so nervous, maybe because I showed my teeth in my profile pic, so that was out of the way. I gave her a quick tour of my apartment, with my tablet held out in front as I walked, so she could see I wasn't a total slob.

First date we met at an old office building park that they'd leveled and reconstituted into a nature preserve with replanted grass and wimpy new trees that were all the same height. Big sustainable playground, kids crawling all over the place. Kind of a nice park, but

it felt like you were inside someone's model train diorama. Like instead of the sun up there, it was a big burning eyeball watching me walk across the grass in my dirty tennis shoes, with my backpack stuffed full.

But there were lots of families and sidewalks, so Veda suggested it as a safe space. She had on a windsock hat, big surprise, and the shimmery tights, and I about fell over when I saw her. She was way prettier in person. She wasn't a supermodel, but she was beautiful to me, and not really that much taller than I was. She came loping across this long expanse of grass to meet me.

"You are adorable," she said, while we were still pretty far apart. I handed her some flowers, and she said they were too cute. Then she took a picture of them, and me.

"I can't find you on facebook, or Twitter, or BooBoo, or anything. And your Mears stuff is all private. I wanted to do some reading up on you beforehand," she said, winking, "but now I see I've got nothing to worry about."

I was pretty private. Really private, I said, and Mears was way out of character for me. Veda said she totally understood. I'd brought a picnic, and led us to a stand of baby poplar trees. Veda went nuts at how sweet it all was. She took pictures of everything. I got the blanket spread out. I had a block of cheese in my hand. Then, there was this noise above me. I looked up and this big black bird came swooping out of the sky towards me, like the cheese was for him. I kind of flinched, and made a move like I was going to run off.

Then I heard Veda laughing, and I looked over and saw she was filming me with her phone. "You are hilarious," she said.

I was afraid of the bird, but I started hamming it up like I really wasn't. I ran in little circles, waved my arms, and shrieked, and eventually the bird flew off. Veda got down on

her side on the blanket she was laughing so hard, and I was pretty sure that I loved her right there.

I cut the block of cheese up into snackable squares, and we had fun. She wanted to know all about me. Somehow I got on Elaine and Per, and how they both annoyed me so much, and how my Dad was the biggest idiot in the world. I talked some about poker. To try and make her think I was a daredevil, or to impress her, I told her about my secret account at the bank, and all the money I was taking. Her eyes got all wide, and she made a perfect circle with her mouth.

“How much money is it?” she said.

“Not a ton,” I said, trying to act smooth. “They won’t miss any of it.”

*

I mean, I liked her a lot. We went on sixteen dates in all. I really, really liked her. She was super-active, and wanted to do all this stuff that I hated. Hiking the Warren Canyons, a huge corn maze, Lazer Tag, sashimi class, water polo, couples massage with the football masseuse (whose whole parlor smelled like vinegar). If she was sweaty and excited, white saliva would gather at the corners of her mouth when she talked, and it made me ambivalent about kissing.

I couldn’t tell if there was any methodology to the Mears thing. I really couldn’t. Veda was always bringing up how thankful she was that Mears matched us up, almost like she wanted to pray to them before we were about to eat. But after all our talking, I couldn’t tell if we had anything alike in terms of conversational cadence or lilt, or not.

She was super cute. Beautiful. When I showed her my apartment the first time, she brought a little green cactus, green as kale, and set it on my white coffee table. It really offset the lack of color in the room nicely.

It's possible I loved her. She had no secrets. Nothing.

Her dad was a federal judge, and a bit of a closet racist, mom moved to Portugal with their accountant when Veda was in high school. One night she called off a date to the community theatre because she had diarrhea. There were all these ex boyfriends. Old and young, fat and lanky. She was on good terms with all of them, from what I could tell. That was the thing. She was so positive, so fuckin' friendly, I couldn't figure out anything about her. Did she like everyone and everything? Was that humanly possible?

She'd show me videos in the middle of dinner because she couldn't explain something properly, and she knew some clip would do it better. Like a comedian telling the same joke she was telling. At night, I kept getting messages that I'd been tagged in a BooBoo video and they were waiting for me to login and create my virtual edifice.

Videos and pictures. Calorie counts, steps taken, heart rates logged. She had sixty thousand pieces of media out there documenting our dates in the first week, probably.

We were at this dark Italian place with the twinkling candles on the table, and salty bread in a basket, and I was halfway into a sentence when I realized she was filming me from behind the wine bottle. Like she was trying to hide it. Like I wouldn't see! I told her to cut it out. I was sick of the pictures and videos. She was very apologetic, and I felt a little bad. But a few days later, she was doing it all over again, just asking my permission beforehand.

I determined she just wanted to experience stuff later, not while it was happening. She was never present. This was a huge part of her life—to document boring moments with a big smile on her face so she could look back on them later and pretend they'd been fun. I felt like an old man around her—I knew I should lighten up.

But I say this stuff, and then I think of this moment when we were walking the Chalk cliffs one weekend, in the rain, and I kept falling and cutting my hands up on these lichen-covered rocks. Veda was just striding along, not winded at all, chattering up a storm the whole way. She had on a mesh baseball cap, and lime colored shoes.

Somehow we got on the topic of my mom. Dad and I had no idea where she was, or what had happened to her. Dad had been fooling around, and she had too, etc., and I didn't like talking about it. And Veda was like, "I want to find a time warp and go find your 4-year old self, and just hug you and let you know that you don't have to worry about anything."

I didn't know what this meant, but I thought, yeah, that would be pretty nice if she could figure out a way to do that.

We'd made it to the top of the cliff, and you could see the trees and the grass fields stretched out below us like this big salad. It was drizzling and lightning, and super dangerous. My hands were bleeding. She ran her hands through my sopping hair, and she kissed me with her cold, red, wet mouth.

Then she took a picture of us, and tried to frame the incredible view behind, and she said, "Enough with the tight-lipped bullshit, Corey. Show your teeth."

I just politely laughed, but she was dead serious, and dropped her hands to her side. "Show your goddamn teeth, Corey."

*

Elaine was bugging the heck out of me about meeting Veda. She was tenacious about it. It was maddening. Elaine thought she was gonna somehow expose Veda and Mears as this big fraud. Like she was gonna pull off Veda's windsock and we'd see wires and circuits where the skin of her scalp should be. She scoured the Internet for stuff on Veda, started hanging pictures of Veda in my cube. Veda in her last ten Halloween costumes, in front of a full-length mirror, phone held out awkwardly to the side. I tried to tell Elaine just the good stuff about Veda, but the bad stuff got out too.

"It makes me sad. The whole thing does," Elaine said, and she made a face like she smelled something awful. Elaine was jealous. Although not of me, I don't think. Just of happiness in general. "Are you happy with her?" she asked, and I said absolutely.

I kept getting emails from Mears saying they'd found other girls for me. I guess I needed to turn off the Crowd Monitoring. 68%, 75%, 90% match. I wasn't reading them. I wasn't looking at the girls' pictures.

Was Veda getting these emails too? I'm sure she had other matches. Did she have other boyfriends? We hadn't discussed it.

I was looking at the back of her head. She was on my couch watching college football, and had a pork butt simmering in a Dutch oven on the stove. She had on a big gray sweatshirt that came down to her bare knees, and her hair was tied up and sticking out like a pineapple. The nape of her neck was pure white. I was playing poker, sitting on the carpet, up against the wall.

The whole building smelled like pork butt and this spicy, acidic brine she'd rubbed all over it. There was a knock on the door, and I thought it would be someone complaining, but it was Dad.

My dad with his colored hair, all gelled back, and his long business coat, and an overnight bag slung over one shoulder.

“Give your pops a kiss,” he said, barging in. “This place smells like a zoo.” He flung his bag down on the coffee table and it knocked off my poker magazines, and Veda’s cactus. “Whoa,” he said, when he noticed Veda. His jaw dropped, and he melted into this soft-spoken, spineless romantic guy in an instant.

Veda stood up.

“You’re a vision,” Dad said, clasping her whole arm. “Really. Truly. I can’t believe this guy finally went down to the store and introduced himself. I don’t believe it.”

Veda gave him this smiling, mile-long stare.

“Are you the one who works at the media store? Where are your braces?” Dad said. “Or do I need to shut up?”

“The latter,” I said.

He and Veda hit it off, and watched football and talked about his dogs, and some infestation he had at a Radisson he owned in Santa Monica.

“Look at the natural light in this apartment,” Dad said, craning his neck around. “Claudia would love it.”

Veda had me take a picture of the two of them, then Dad went and turned the burner off and dumped Veda’s pork butt into the trash. “Let me treat you kids. Let’s celebrate.”

I was freakin’ irate, but Veda grabbed her coat, and we hit the Mediterranean place I’d always wanted to go to. Dad drove in his big black rental car, and he drank two clay jars of wine all by himself. Next door there was a place that sold blankets, and Dad got Veda the most expensive afghan in the entire place, and she wrapped it around her shoulders and

spun around. We did karaoke, went to a tobacco place and smoked cigars, took eight hundred pictures with strangers. Dad drove eighty miles per hour everywhere we went. I felt like a little baby, sliding around on the backseat. He and Veda wouldn't shut up about Mears. Dad had met Claudia on Mears, he said, and then he got all teary-eyed.

I told him he couldn't stay at my apartment, and he got offended and looked at Veda. "Oh, okay. I see what you mean."

"Oh no," Veda said. "I'm not staying over."

"Yes, you are," I said, and I grabbed her hand, and she looked at me with her eyebrows raised.

I rushed us up to the apartment. You could still smell that pork butt from the lobby. I led Veda to the edge of my bed. I didn't turn on any lights, but the city was all bright outside. She'd never stayed over before. We'd never done more than kiss. Her mouth was right at my eye level. It was wet. It was red and cherry. I kissed it, and she kissed me back super hard. I took the afghan off her shoulders and threw it in the garbage on top of the rotting pork butt.

I was being awkward as hell probably, but it didn't feel like it at the time. I unbuttoned her coat, and slid my hands around her waist, up her back, under her shirt, back around to her chest. She was saying, yes, yes, yes. I had never felt like this before. It was crazy. I took off her boots. I rolled her tights down to the floor.

It was amazing. We made love for a long time, I think. She smiled the whole time, benevolently. It was awesome. We were on the bed, on the carpet, up against the window. I couldn't believe what was happening. She got on top of me and looked down, and the city lights coming in from the window made her look extremely pale. It was 95% perfect. The

only thing out of the ordinary was that I swear she kept making this little move with her hand like she wanted to reach out and grab her phone from the nightstand. Which distracted me a little, but not too much. The whole thing was mostly, really great.

*

That next day was a Sunday, and Veda woke me up laughing, her legs wrapped around mine under the soft sheets. The whole apartment was lit up. It hurt my eyes. It was lunchtime. She was on my tablet, and she held it in front of my face, and said, "Look."

It was the Mears website. She had a video playing. It took me a minute to figure out what I was watching. We were both in the video.

There we were, in the green grass, and something was filming us from a great distance, but zoomed way in up close. There was the grass, and the baby poplar trees, and my dirty tennis shoes, and the blanket. The reconstituted park, our first date, of course.

The sound on the video was incredible. I was running from that big black, crazy, murderous bird, and you could hear my heavy breathing, and the sound of grass and dirt under my feet. I had that block of cheese in my hand, and I was shrieking. It was funny. What an idiot I looked like. I looked tiny from way up high.

"Wait," I said. "Who is filming this?" I said.

"Mears, I guess," she said. "You're such a goofy guy. I love it."

She tried to kiss me, but I pushed her away.

"They monitor our dates?" I said.

Veda shrugged. "Probably was in the fine print. Probably part of the opt-in process." I took the tablet from her. "Aren't you an expert on fine print? Mr. Bank Man?"

I freaked out. I threw the tablet across the room, and it put a gash in the white wall. I got out of bed because the video was still playing. I picked up the tablet and looked at it. I was on there, talking trash about Elaine, and my Dad, and describing how I was defrauding the bank I worked at, sweeping money into my secret account. Fifty six thousand people had viewed it. The comments were mostly about the bird. Some of them were trying to figure out what bank I worked at. My employers would love to see this, the comments said.

I freaked out. I took the tablet into the bathroom and smashed it against the corner of the sink until it broke. I took the coffee table and flipped it over. I blamed Veda, but I don't know why. Wasn't her fault. It was my own. I kicked her out of my apartment, kicked her clothes while she was gathering them. She had to lug out that huge Dutch oven. From the window, I watched her cross the street and hop on the train, sail off into the city.

She told me to fuck off before she left. I hated her. The sky was totally white, and I was feeling lightheaded, looking out the window. I was short of breath. I looked up there, into the sky. I couldn't see anything. No drones. But they were out there, obviously.

At work, I was a mess. All jumpy, and I couldn't stop going to the bathroom. There was no way the bank didn't find out about this eventually. Or would it go away? My mind was sloshing around all over the place. Per was looking at me sideways. Elaine kept bothering me, kept asking what was wrong.

Welling anxiety, every day. There were those guys in the suits upstairs, there were guys in the basement that could track everything we did. It felt like a tiny balloon was inflating, pushing, just behind my sternum.

I stopped transferring money obviously. Veda was calling me, or sending me chat links, little short apologies, but I wouldn't respond. I shut down. At night, I stayed in my

apartment, under the blankets, playing poker. You couldn't just give back money you'd skimmed, could you? You couldn't just say, oh, I didn't realize I couldn't do that. Here's the money back.

I scheduled all my vacation in a panic, and flew to Nevada. Dad got me a free corner suite at the Palisade. He thinks Veda's with me, thinks we're in love. I'm in the room now, drinking a sparkling water, and eating a quinoa bar. One window looks down the strip lengthwise, the other's framing the peach-colored desert sun. There are cacti here, there's sand. I can see the desert mountains way off in the distance. They look like big mounds of delicious ground coffee. The lights here are inescapable, and so are the people. They pump oxygen into the air vents, all through the casinos. I'm trying to figure out if I'm going to stay, or if I'll go back home.

Once I got out here, I checked the secret account, and there was nothing in it. Not a dime. Zero. Zippy. The strangest relief I've ever felt. That money went somewhere. I have no idea where. One possibility is the bank emptied it, and they know. I sit there in bed, in the middle of the night, and think about it.

But I'm killing it at poker. There's a cash game downstairs at any hour of the day or night. These guys are sharks, but I am just as good. I can spend five hours playing without even thinking about it. The key is folding. That's the whole key to poker. Getting away from hands, not trapping yourself. There are customer service call centers everywhere here. Every casino has one. I could get a job easy. I'm trying to figure it out.

My apartment is all locked up, my mail is held. I'm still getting notifications from Mears. New women, high percentage matches. It's good to be away from home, frankly. Away from the bank, from Veda, Elaine, Per, the apartment, the media store girl. There are

drones back at home, floating around and looking at people because I told them to. Makes me sick to my stomach, although I'm finding something oddly comforting about it? Like they're keeping tabs on things while I get it all worked out in the desert? I don't know. That's probably crazy. I am incredibly sunburnt. There is free aloe in my bathroom. I was at the pool all day, by myself. I'll probably go back tomorrow. Everything is going to work out just fine.

We Can Seat You Now

Ethan and Kari were in the restaurant lobby waiting when Lea pushed inside, bringing the wind with her. She had on a long coat and scarf. Snow was on her shoulders. It was a couple of weeks past her sixty-third birthday.

“Hello, mother,” Ethan said. He hugged her. Kari stood to the side.

Jasper’s was dark and loud with conversation. It was a place you knew was good by the design of the menu. Someone, in a back office perhaps, had taken great care with everything.

“Sorry this place is so far,” Ethan said. “We could’ve picked you up.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lea said. “I try to fit in a long, dangerous Uber ride in the snow every winter, so I’ve hit my quota now.” She had small hands and her mouth was perhaps a bit too large for her face. It was something she’d been conscious of her whole life.

"This is Kari," said Ethan.

"Of course," Lea said. She smiled. She shook Kari's hand in a mechanical way that made it clear she'd decided in advance not to hug.

"So nice to finally meet you, Lea. I feel like we know each other already," Kari said.

"Likewise, dear. Should we sit down? It's as cold in here as it is outside."

They moved as far from the door as possible, and sat on a velvet sofa. They kept their coats on. The floors were mixed wood, but the staff had laid out several mats to soak up the snow tracked in.

"Kari," Lea said. "I've been reading all about you and your art. All your recent success. It's very exciting. I'd love to hear the whole story sometime."

"Absolutely, I would love that," Kari said. "It's been a whirlwind."

"I'll bet," said Lea.

Lea was dressed well. Kari was, too. They might've been mother and daughter to someone watching from across the room.

"How are your kids this semester?" Ethan asked.

"Oh, they're fine," Lea said. "They talk a lot. They're funny. They write funny papers." She shrugged. "It's not a struggle to come up with nice things to say about them." She took off her gloves and looked at her hands. "Where is your father?"

"It's just ten after," Ethan said, looking at the window. "Plus the weather."

Lea told them a story about a woman in the apartment below that was becoming a good friend. She had a serious lung infection. Ethan thought he remembered his mother once nearly coming to blows with this woman, some disagreement about a viny plant that was coming down from one balcony to the other that needed to be trimmed.

“And how are things at the bank?” Lea asked him.

“Things are fine, I guess,” Ethan said.

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Well, my last day was Tuesday.” He took Kari’s hand. He’d always been a slight kid, but handsome. Long fingers. One of his front teeth was shorter than the other. “I’m going to work as Kari’s business manager.”

“Are you being serious?” Lea laughed. “I thought you loved what you were doing there.”

“I don’t think I ever said I loved it.”

“You did, actually. I remember the exact moment you said it. Easter brunch, at the Hoppock’s. Going through the buffet together.” She looked at Kari. “When did you decide to do all this?”

“Can we just wait until Dad gets here to discuss it?” Ethan said. “I don’t want to get into a big thing and then have to repeat it ten minutes later.”

“Of course,” she said. She smiled and looked around the restaurant.

Kari’s phone rang. She made an apologetic face and walked toward the restroom hallway. She reached up to scratch a spot on her neck. Ethan and Lea watched her go.

“She’s adorable,” Lea said.

“She is,” he said. “But I wouldn’t use that word in front of her. She hates it. Dad said the same thing.”

“They’ve already met? I thought they hadn’t met.”

“They haven’t. He saw her picture in the paper and emailed me about it. ‘Adorable’ was in the subject line.”

Lea put her gloves into her purse. She moved the purse onto her lap.

"There's nothing wrong with being called adorable," she said.

"Kari disagrees," Ethan said.

"Is she the type of girl that would confront me about a comment like that?"

"She is. But she'll wait until she knows you better."

Ethan paused, looked around the lobby. "Actually," he said, "I'm glad we have a second here, because I want to warn you."

"About what?"

"Dad wants to get back together."

"With who?"

"With you."

"Oh, please, Ethan."

"He's emailing me, he's calling me about it. I've never heard him talk like this in my entire life. He's going to ask to take you home tonight."

Lea laughed. "He's living with someone."

"I don't know if he is or not. I can't keep up with all that stuff."

"He's out of his mind."

"Maybe. But he's got a big plan worked out, and it's up to you to stop him," Ethan said. "I mean, if you want to stop him."

"He's like clockwork," she said. "I almost knew you were going to say that before you said it."

Kari came into view. She was placing the phone inside her purse.

"Anyway," Ethan said. "Fair warning for you, mom."

A hostess seated them in a corner under a mural of a taupe horse galloping through the desert. On the adjacent wall was a window where they watched snow falling on the parked cars outside. Around them were the noises of knives on plates, and people still in their business clothes, laughing, telling stories. It was a contest to see who had worked the hardest that week.

The waiter came and he had the watery look of someone who'd slept off a hangover all day. He dropped off some menus and artisan bread.

Ethan and Lea were having a debate about the last time they'd been to Jasper's, when they heard Keith's voice sail loudly above the din of the restaurant.

"How in the heck are you, Brogan? You get that retainer business with Vanguard figured out?"

He was standing next to a nearby table of smiling colleagues, men and women, who were drinking and eating. Keith was tall, with hair gray at the temples. He was smiling, wearing a long, tan coat, and holding gloves in one hand.

"Everything I learned about exclusion clauses I learned from this guy," Keith said. He was pointing at someone named Brogan who looked vaguely familiar to Lea.

"When he says button it up tight, you better do it," Keith said. The table laughed. "Alright, I'll leave you alone."

Keith walked over. He stood Ethan up and embraced him. Kari was introduced, and Keith stooped to kiss her on the cheek.

"You're prettier in person," he said. "So great to finally meet you."

Before taking his seat, Keith circled the table to kiss Lea on the cheek.

"Have we ordered yet?" he said.

"We just sat down," said Lea.

The waiter had not left a menu for him, so he moved his chair over to share Lea's. He removed reading glasses from his jacket and put them on. He leaned into Lea noticeably so that their heads were nearly touching.

"Kari," he said. "We've been waiting patiently for this guy to bring you around for dinner. I was thinking about adding you on Facebook, but I thought we needed a face-to-face first."

Kari laughed. "I'm not sure if the face-to-face is required anymore."

Ethan shook his head. "Dad needs to get offline entirely. His personality doesn't transfer to social media very well."

"Har-dee-har-har," Keith said. He turned to Lea. "Are we friends?"

He loosened his tie.

Lea looked at him, confused.

"I mean on Facebook," he added.

"You sent a request once. I ignored it."

"That's not very nice," Keith said.

Lea smiled. "I can just imagine you on there, clicking through everybody's life, zooming in on pictures. I don't want any part of that."

Lea handed him her menu and moved him away with the back of her hand. Keith scooted his chair away. Something about the way he did it made him look like a child. After a few moments, he removed his glasses and tapped the menu with a finger.

"Chicken l'Orange. We've been coming here for twenty years, and I've never gotten anything else."

“Why do you even bother looking at the menu then?” Kari asked. She looked up sharply. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Kari,” Lea said. “You can say anything you like to him. In whatever tone you like.”

“This is going to sound existential or something,” Keith said. “Or it’s going to sound more meaningful than I want it to—but I’m sort of hoping it won’t be on there every time I look. So then I’ll be forced to get something else. But it’s always on there.”

“That doesn’t sound meaningful at all, Dad,” Ethan said.

“Yes, that seems totally devoid of meaning,” Lea added.

“It’s like *Good Will Hunting*,” Kari said. “It’s like the end, when he’s not in his apartment.”

Lea laughed loudly. “That’s exactly what it’s like.”

Keith clapped his hands together. “I need to stop talking.” He looked at Kari. “When we get together, the two of them have this contest to see who can shovel the most dirt on me.” He took a drink from his water glass. “It seems like you’re going to fit in well.”

Keith asked Kari questions that irritated Lea—where Kari went to school, what her parents did, what she thought about certain charged current events, all designed to suss out Kari’s political, economic, religious affiliations. Keith went on and on about Kari’s artwork, her attractiveness. Lea was relieved. If Keith had any insane ideas about reconciling as Ethan had said, she wasn’t able to detect them.

“So what do you want to know about us?” Keith asked Kari, abruptly.

“Wow, I don’t know,” she said. “Everything, I guess. You’re putting me on the spot.”

“Ask something,” Keith said.

“Hmm. I’m curious what kind of kid he was. Ethan.”

“Oh man,” Keith said. “He was a nightmare.”

“No, he wasn’t,” said Lea.

“Yes, he was. We sometimes talk about this—he wouldn’t even exist—I guess none of us would be here talking—if my connecting flight from Dallas had landed two minutes later than it did.”

The waiter appeared, and Keith took him by the elbow.

“We’d like a bottle of champagne. And I’ll have an Absolut martini.”

Keith continued. “So, we met on this connecting flight out of Kansas City. I was in law school. She was working at a jewelry store in Chicago.”

“How old were you?” Kari asked.

“I guess we were twenty-three or twenty-four,” Keith said.

“I was twenty-five,” Lea said. “He was twenty-three.”

“And so you just struck up a conversation on the plane?” Kari asked.

“She’s afraid to fly,” Keith said. “So that was sort of my ‘in’ with her. She’s trying to read the faces of the flight attendants after every bit of turbulence, that sort of thing.”

“That’s mostly true,” Lea said.

“So I just started talking. To distract her.”

Ethan made a gesture with his hand to move things along. “And then the stewardess mistook them for a married couple, and Dad grabbed Mom’s hand as they took off, and that’s basically the end of it.”

“That’s it? You were just together after that?” Kari said, snapping her fingers. “I’m sorry. Is this—we don’t have to discuss this if it’s awkward for you.”

“No, it’s fine,” Lea said. “Everyone knows Keith and I don’t have a happy ending. There’s hardly anything we don’t talk about as a family. Which is a good thing, I think.”

Keith frowned. “I don’t know if it’s right to say we don’t have a happy ending. Maybe it’s not a traditional ending.”

“He did calm me down on that flight,” Lea said. “For whatever reason. And we just sort of hit it off after that.” Lea smiled, and looked at the ceiling like she was deciding whether or not to continue. “He was really good looking. I mean, he’s still good looking, of course. So I was too distracted to worry about dying in a plane crash after he sat down next to me.”

Their waiter reappeared, and delivered Keith’s martini. They ordered their meals—Lea the green gazpacho, Kari and Ethan the grilled blue prawns, Keith his chicken. When Ethan and Kari asked to split a salad, the waiter gave them a condescending smile and said it wasn’t possible. Keith watched the waiter walk off towards the kitchen with menus under one arm.

“I don’t like that asshole,” he said.

Lea resumed speaking to Kari. “I don’t mean that the only good thing about Keith was his looks. He was funny too, as you can see. And there was something about our conversational timing that just matched up. I noticed it immediately. We didn’t have to try very hard.”

“That is sweet,” Kari said. “Ethan and I are like that, too.”

“We are?” Ethan said.

“Aren’t we?”

“I don’t know about you,” he said. “I’m trying hard as hell.”

"Be quiet," Kari said. "So Ethan was born when you were..."

"I was thirty," Lea said. "We got two cats after we got married because Keith didn't want kids initially, but then—"

"Oh Lea, that is bullshit," Keith said.

Lea laughed. "It's not bullshit. He didn't want them for a few years, and then I found this lump right here in my neck. They thought it was cancer, all very scary, et cetera, but it turned out to be a benign cyst, and everything was ultimately okay. After that, he changed his mind."

"I didn't know any of that," Ethan said.

"That's because it's bullshit," Keith said. "Not the cyst, but the other part. I always wanted to have kids, we just had loans to pay off first."

"Mom," Ethan said. "They thought you had cancer?"

"Oh, yes. They seemed sure of it. Your dad was a total mess. Way worse than me. Breaking down in the car, at the store, everywhere." Lea brushed breadcrumbs from the tablecloth. "I'm sort of glad we won't have to go through that stuff together now. You know, whenever one of us gets sick for real."

"Jesus, Mom," Ethan said.

Lea covered her eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound like that. Sorry, Keith."

Keith was looking down at his martini, turning the glass around and around by the stem. He lifted one hand to his nose and smelled it. "My fingers still smell like ink from the office. I'm gonna go wash up."

Keith stood, folded his napkin, and disappeared. Lea picked up a piece of bread and spread butter on it.

"I'm sorry, Lea," Kari said. "I didn't mean to bring up an awkward subject."

"You didn't at all," Lea said. "In fact, I think you were asking about Ethan and we were just blabbering on about ourselves."

"I don't want to—this may be way out of bounds for me to say this," Kari said, leaning into the table.

"What?" Lea said. "It's alright."

"I don't think it's necessary for you to apologize to him for what you just said there."

"Kari," Ethan said. "You should stay out of this."

Kari turned and glared at Ethan. Lea adjusted the silverware that surrounded her plate.

"No, it's fine," Lea said. "You're right. Keith is extremely sensitive, and I've always sort of accommodated that."

"My father left my mother," Kari said. "So I have some frame of reference to this. My mom would repeatedly—"

"Kari, you just met them like fifteen minutes ago," Ethan said. He wiped his mouth and threw the napkin at his empty plate. "Can we just try to get through what we need to get through tonight without psychoanalyzing the whole fucking thing? We'll have birthdays and Thanksgivings and Christmases where we can get everybody's behavior sorted out, and figure out who's at fault for what, and who should be blaming who..."

Several in the restaurant were looking in Ethan's direction.

"Let's calm down," Lea said. "Let's calm down."

"I am calm," he said. "It's amazing. It's just amazing."

"What is?" Lea asked.

“We’re here for like fifteen minutes and somehow you guys already have me yelling at Kari. I just find it amazing.”

Lea spread her hands out in front of her. “Let’s start over. Just start the whole thing over.” She sat up very straight in her chair, moved in closer to the table. “Kari, just ask me a question about Ethan, and we’ll pick it up there, and when Keith comes back he’ll be amazed at how deep our relationship has become since he left for the bathroom.”

Kari smiled. “What was he like as a kid?”

“He looked just like Keith. We just called him “Little” for a year or two. You could put him up in the cupboard, with his feet dangling out. He’d sit up there while I’d fix dinner. He always wanted to read books, or go to the theatre. Just the sharpest kid you could imagine.”

The waiter appeared and Ethan ordered a scotch on the rocks, single malt. Nearby, Brogan and the rest of Keith’s colleagues were standing up, putting on coats, after paying their check. Brogan walked over to say hello.

“Lea, do you remember me?” he asked. “Tyler Brogan from Hennessey Brock? Keith and I used to play racquetball.”

“Of course,” Lea said.

“No, don’t get up. I just wanted to say hi. Are these your children?”

“One of them. Ethan, my son. This is his girlfriend, Kari.”

Ethan stood to shake Brogan’s hand. “Fiancée Kari, actually,” he said.

Lea looked sharply in Ethan’s direction, surprised.

“Oh, congratulations,” Brogan said. “You have a date set?”

“Not yet,” Kari said. “Hopefully soon.”

"Very nice to meet you both." Brogan put his hands in his pockets, and leaned back on his heels. He had the movements of a person who was bored with success. "I was glad to see Keith out and about, especially with family around the holidays. Good to see he's doing so well."

"Is he doing well?" Ethan asked.

Brogan opened his mouth, paused. "Don't you think so?"

"I have no idea, honestly."

"Well," Brogan said. "He seems much better than the last time I saw him."

"What do you mean by that?" Lea asked. "Does he have reason to not be doing well?"

Brogan smiled. "No, I really don't know. It's just good to see him, that's all." He paused again. "You know, I really talk too much. Everybody says it's true. My wife hardly lets me out in public."

Keith came walking up behind Brogan, holding a new martini that was halfway gone, one he must've gotten directly from the bar. He slid an arm around Brogan's neck.

"What are you over here talking to my family for, you rat bastard?"

"I was just shoving off," Brogan said. He laughed. "How drunk are you?"

"Only my second," Keith said, holding up his glass. "Come here, I wanted to ask you something."

They moved away from the table, toward the entrance.

"Nice meeting you all," Brogan said, over his shoulder.

"You're *engaged*?" Lea said to Ethan.

He shrugged. "We are."

Lea looked up at the ceiling, touched her throat. "Well, congratulations. I'm just surprised. It makes me happy, of course. That was just a strange way to unload it on your mother."

"He wasn't supposed to do it like that," Kari said.

Lea began to count on her fingers. "So, you've quit your job. You're getting married. Is there anything else I need to know about?"

"There is, actually."

Lea laughed. "Oh God, what else could there be?"

Ethan looked around the restaurant. "Where the hell did Dad go?"

The waiter appeared and set Ethan's scotch on the table. Ethan picked it up and took a long drink.

"Your food will be out shortly," the waiter said. "What else can I get you? More bread?"

"No, for the love of God," Lea said. "We'll let you know if there's anything else we need."

Something changed in the waiter's face. It looked like he was about to say something that would get him fired. "I apologize," he finally said, smiling, before disappearing to the back.

"Ethan, what else?" Lea asked.

"Hold on. Did Dad go outside?" Ethan leaned back and looked out the window. "What the hell is he doing?" He got up from the table and walked across the restaurant to the entrance. He shouldered the door open and walked out into the snow. It was

accumulating in the street and muffling traffic noise. Keith was standing ankle deep in it, without his coat, holding his drink. He was looking up at the sky as Ethan approached.

“Dad, what the hell? Where’s Brogan?”

“Got in a cab.”

“What are you doing? Are you coming back in? Are you leaving?”

“Not sure.”

Ethan took his dad by the shoulder. “Come on back in. Kari and I have some things to tell you and Mom.”

Keith finished his martini, tossed the glass softly into the snow. He looked at Ethan.

“Have you warned Kari about my drinking yet? You might want to do that, because I’m ordering another if we go back in. Or have you gotten into all the women I slept with at the firm?”

“No, and we’re not going to get into it. We’re gonna go back inside and have a normal dinner with normal conversation, and that’ll be it.”

“Your mother becomes a different person when she’s around me.”

Ethan sighed. “Can you really blame her, Dad? Can you imagine anybody else handling what you did better than *she* did?”

“How is it possible to answer a question like that?”

“If it were me,” Ethan said. “I wouldn’t even be in the same room with you, let alone sit down to eat a meal with you in a nice restaurant. But she does all that stuff anyway.”

“She does it for you.”

Ethan laughed. “You sound so disappointed.”

“What?”

"Of course she does it for me, you asshole! Why would she do it for you?"

"I don't mean to suggest that she should." Keith puts his hands up in front of him. "I still love your mom, is the thing."

Ethan shook his head. "Tell her that, then. Stop telling me." He looked up at the sky. Snow floated into his eyes. "It's fucking freezing out here. You can stay out here and die, or you can come in with me. I left Kari in there alone with mom." He headed for the restaurant entrance. "Or you can get in a cab, and go home. I don't really care."

Back at the table, after several minutes, Ethan began to think his dad wasn't coming back. But then he saw Keith come in the front door, and brush the snow from his hair and shoulders. Keith made a beeline for the bar, where a full martini was sitting unattended, and picked it up. Then he headed for the table.

"Sorry, everyone," Keith said, sitting down. "Where's the food?"

Kari spoke up. "On its way."

"So, Keith," Lea said. "Our son has several things he'd like to tell us. Are you planning to get up from the table in the near future? You need to use the restroom first?"

Keith laughed. "No, go ahead. Sorry."

Ethan eyed Keith carefully. He was holding his scotch aloft.

"Okay," he said. "So I quit my job at the bank, Tuesday was my last day, and I'm going to work for Kari as her business manager."

"Wow," Keith said. "That's great. You've already quit?"

"Yes," Ethan said. "And also, a couple of months ago, we got engaged."

"Are you kidding?" Keith said. "You really did? Ethan, that's fantastic." He got up from his chair and hugged Kari. He grabbed Ethan by the face and kissed him on the forehead.

"I'm so happy to hear it," Keith said. "Truly, I am."

"Thank you, Keith," Kari said.

"And then," Ethan said. "The other piece is perhaps not such cheerful news, but it's still exciting."

"What is it?"

"Kari and I are moving to Los Angeles in March. She knows lots of people making it out there. We're going to open a gallery."

"In L.A.?" Keith asked.

"Yes," Kari said. She looked at Lea. "I have family out there, as well."

Keith turned to Lea. "Did you know about this?"

"About ten seconds before you."

Keith looked down at the table, spread his napkin across his lap. "Well, hey. I think that's great. I mean, not the moving away part, but if you have an opportunity that you don't have here, you need to go for it." He turned to Lea again. "Don't you think so?"

"Of course," she said. "I mean, I hate thinking of you so far away, but I want you to do what makes you happy." She paused. "I mean, we love you so much, Ethan. I know we don't see each other as much as we'd like, and our lives maybe haven't worked out like we thought, but you're everything to us. There's just never going to be a day that goes by that we're not hoping and praying for you."

"And Kari seems very easy to love, too," Keith said. "So it won't be a problem incorporating her into all that."

"Thank you, guys," Ethan said. "It's been a tough decision for us."

"I can tell, just by looking at your face," Lea said. "I'm glad it's off your chest."

"Let's order some champagne," Keith said. He looked around for the waiter. "Didn't I already order us some goddamn champagne? Where the hell is that kid?"

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Out on the sidewalk, with their coats and gloves on, it was still snowing. A taxicab was pulled up to the curb with its passenger door open. Kari and Ethan were hugging Keith and Lea, and saying their goodbyes for the evening.

"Let's have lunch somewhere," Kari said to Lea.

"I would love that."

"Call me next week," Keith said to Ethan. "I want to come over and see this ridiculous TV before it gets put into a moving truck."

"Syracuse plays Kansas next Saturday," Ethan said. "You should come over for that."

"I'll do it."

Kari turned to Keith. "You are right. I should've gotten the chicken."

"I told you," Keith said. "Listen to your father-in-law next time."

Ethan and Kari got into the cab and it pulled away from the curb, fishtailing a bit, tires spinning in the snow. Keith and Lea were left standing next to each other on the sidewalk, watching the vehicle merge into traffic.

"I don't know how you're so okay with all this," Keith said. "You act like it doesn't affect you at all. I am devastated."

"That's because nobody's ever left you before, Keith."

Keith put his hands into his pockets. He said nothing for a long while. "I guess you're right."

She turned toward him. "You *look* good, though."

"Do I?"

"I thought that the moment I saw you tonight."

"You're lying. Is it worth anything for me to say you look fantastic? Elegant, even?"

"Not really. As in, it's worth nothing."

"Are you still swimming?"

"Every day," she said.

"I need to do something like that."

"You should," she said. She looked at her watch. "Alright, good to see you."

"Listen," he said. "Let me take you home."

"No, I'll take a cab."

"Don't risk your life with those guys. Not in this weather. I have the Range Rover."

He pointed across the street. "It'll be a breeze."

"I don't know if I feel comfortable being alone with you, Keith. You're drunk. *You* should be the one getting a cab."

"I'm not drunk at all," he said. He lifted up one foot and stood perfectly still. "Let me take you home. It would make me feel better."

"When you say 'take you home,' are you talking about my home or yours?"

"Yours, of course," he said.

"You're not coming inside."

"No way," he said. "I don't even want to. I'll just leave you on the street and tear off."

Lea didn't respond.

"Come on," Keith said. "You can tell me more about your students, I can tell you about my clients." He pulled the car keys from his pocket. "We can talk shit about L.A."

"Alright," she said.

Keith held out his arm, and they crossed the street together. He helped her into her seat, and closed the door gently, then tiptoed to the driver's side and started the engine.

"Oh, shit," he said. "I left my credit card in there. I'll be right back."

"Okay," Lea said.

Keith hustled back into the restaurant. He headed directly for the bar, which was dark and empty now, except for a single bartender, a tall guy, whose arms were behind his head, fixing his ponytail. Keith waved him over hurriedly.

"Help me out, man. Really quick."

"Yes sir," the bartender said. "What can I get you?"

Keith spread his fingers out and pressed them into the bar, then looked up into the bartender's eyes.

"Line up five shots of Absolut for me, right here. One, two, three, four, five. Right now, man. I've got a cab waiting outside for me."

"Five?"

"Five, let's go. Hurry up."

The bartender set out five shot glasses and deftly filled each with vodka. Keith took out a wad of bills from his wallet and tossed them on the bar.

"You keep all of that," he said.

Keith picked up the first in line and downed it, then the others voraciously in succession. He closed his eyes, then leaned forward onto the bar, placing his palms on it. He cleared his throat loudly, several times. He started whispering to himself. The bartender looked down on him with concern.

“That’s perfect,” Keith said to him. “Thank you.”

The bartender watched Keith back away and head for the exit. Keith paused briefly, and put a hand on the wall to steady himself, then he disappeared out the door.

Trajectory

Death was always a consideration when flying, but then you ducked aboard, sat down next to me, and I was too distracted to think anymore.

There was your carry-on full of books, your ginger ale, the stewardess mistaking me for your wife. You told me to stop scanning the inside of the cabin for an undiscovered structural weakness. As the wheels left the ground, your hand flattened and moved at an ascending angle, matching our trajectory into the sky.

First date, and there were two people seated behind us whose conversational timing didn't quite match up. They'd cut the other one off, laugh at something that wasn't a joke. They were trying so hard, whereas we didn't have to.

I liked to watch other women watch you. You could hold an entire restaurant in suspense by standing, sweeping your jacket aside, removing the wallet from your back pocket.

Our first house, you thought, was a mistake, with the narrow kitchen, and the lead paint, but you were the most depressed when we moved out.

Sometimes you'd get choked up recounting the plot of a film you liked, and wouldn't move on until you'd composed yourself. I'd laugh in amazement, which you always seemed to take the wrong way. More than one friend said you were the best looking man they'd ever seen.

We got two cats. You passed the bar. We were thrust into powerful social circles that concerned me. I decided to teach, though we didn't need the money. The cyst they removed from my neck was benign.

Our son was an idea one day, and then was something very real the next. He looked just like you, but loved me more, at least until he got older. Your drinking was distressing while I was pregnant, like watching a musician on a drawn-out farewell tour.

We were on the same page about parenting, until we weren't. You got harder and harder on him, brought your father into it, and didn't even realize. The sound of your footsteps upstairs, or the sight of you appearing in a doorway, was sometimes frightening.

After sex, you immediately left for the bathroom. Your golf trips could have circumnavigated the globe if placed end to end, but you never made it to Europe with me. I'd see old pictures of myself, and worry about my body. Your assurances should've helped, but they never did. I wanted to look good only for you, but that was just a concept in marital theory.

I moved a box in the basement, and there, in a little pile, were his drugs. He announced that he wanted to go by a different name. When you and I connected anymore, it was in opposition to him. He left home for school, and I had sessions with Dr. Ellerby that I paid for in cash.

Here's what my friends decided: You saw my need for intimacy as just plain neediness, and once it seeped into our marriage, it was never undone. You didn't have the energy for it. I became something to be handled carefully.

There was a period when things were looking up. Your mistake on the Girl Scout form, and the fifty boxes of cookies that showed up, portended the greatest spring we ever had. Every year we thought the cats would die, but they never did. We read and reread parts of the Bible, tried to unlearn and relearn everything. What did we really believe? What did *you* believe?

I'd lie on the rug so I wouldn't feel the vibrations of your snoring. The floor was so thin—I only felt the emptiness of the house underneath me. Your brother died, a few years before your parents. They buried their child, who was already an old man. Something about that made it all seem worse.

Our perception of young and old kept changing—it was a moving target—but the women at your firm always seemed to be about the same age, with the same lovely proportions. Meeting me, they looked relieved at the absence of threat. Or perhaps I projected that.

I no longer liked to watch women watch you.

Dean Coyle I let down easily. He thought I was more unhappy than I was. I wanted him as a friend, but I let the obsessiveness drag along. At the end, he begged me never to tell you anything. His fear of you is what I remember most.

Our son so clearly likes you better now, even after you decided to leave. There's concern on his end when he answers my calls. Like you, he equates intimacy with neediness. The difference is he's aware of it.

I heard you started your own firm. I'm rooting for its success, even though that's absurd.

He's finally getting married next month, at thirty-five, to a little girl who seems to want more out of life than she's likely to get. I get the feeling she's disinterested in family, which should worry us both.

You're his handpicked best man, and will be on display alongside him—in tuxedo, with your ash-colored hair. Your date will be mixed in amongst the other guests—like me—just watching. You've had no consequences.

I looked up at the bookshelf the other day and realized I wouldn't live long enough to read everything that's there. I'll have to choose wisely. There are a few thrilling options. I did call Dean Coyle once, although he's long since married. There are a number of other folks that may be interested to hear from me.

Carol

We had a nanny that came on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She was with us about six months, and then two things happened: (1) I realized she lived next door to us, and (2) I believed she was trying to keep it a secret. The house next to us was big and sectioned out into several apartments. The nanny would come out the door of her apartment before dawn, cross the street and give money to the homeless guys that congregated there, then she'd walk around the block, and show up at our door with a coffee by seven thirty.

I brought all this up to my wife. My wife was arranging red candles and a bowl of salad on the table for a filtered picture she would later post online. She had a web business that helped people figure out how to make their lives look impressive on the Internet.

"I don't see what it matters where the nanny lives," my wife said.

"It *doesn't* matter," I said. "Except that she didn't tell us."

“Okay,” my wife said. “So she’s our neighbor. And you think that’s bad.”

“It might be,” I said. “Why hasn’t she mentioned it?”

“Maybe it’s not important to her.”

“When she came for the interview, how come she didn’t say, ‘hey, this is strange, but I literally live next door.’”

“Maybe she’s a private person, Kenny. I don’t think it matters.”

“It matters,” I said. “Trust me. It’s weird.”

“Well,” my wife said, as she went back to her candles. “It’s nice you’ve found another thing to get worked up about.”

Carol was the nanny’s name. She was a college student. The problem was that she was really damn good with our baby, plus she didn’t know what her services were worth. She also had these big glasses that magnified her eyes. They were off-putting because Carol was very blinky.

I spent a few days trying to find out stuff about Carol on the Internet, but I only discovered that there’s about three hundred thousand people in this country with the name Carol Jones. So at night, I would walk between our two houses and try to determine which window was Carol’s, but never with any success.

During the days, I worked a demanding job to try and get us a better life, which meant I had to spend long hours at the office, and I was often preoccupied when at home. This meant that I really didn’t have time to be worrying about Carol.

But nobody else was going to if I didn’t.

So, I developed a list of things for my wife to ask Carol the next time she came over, things that would either prompt Carol into admitting she lived next door, or would ensnare her in a lie. I rushed home from work that day, eager to see how it went.

“Your list?” my wife said, looking around the kitchen. “I honestly forgot about it, Ken.”

“So,” I said. “I guess we’re okay with a total liar watching our child.”

“The baby loves her, Kenny. And she loves the baby.” My wife nodded into the corner, where the baby was swaddled and sleeping beneath the slowly revolving ceiling fan. It was like the baby was in another country, way over there on that side of the house.

“When was the last time you even held the baby?” my wife asked.

I realized it had probably been weeks. Or maybe even months? I didn’t even remember the last time I’d *looked* at the baby. At that moment, I couldn’t even remember what gender the baby was.

So, before sunrise on Thursday morning, I waited under the stairs for Carol to come down. She went across the street and chatted with the homeless guys like always. She handed out big wads of cash. Then she set off around the block. She had her hands pulled up inside her sweater. She was in no hurry.

I followed her. When she passed under a long stand of dark trees, and I rushed up behind and grabbed her arm.

“Hey,” she said, then she recognized me. “Oh, hi Kenny,” she said. “You scared me.” She went into a blinking fit.

“You lived next to us all this time, and you lied about it,” I said.

“No,” she said. “I never lied about anything.”

“Yeah, you did Carol. And how much of the money that we pay you do you just give away to those homeless guys? I see you over there every morning.”

“I give them all of it,” she said.

“That’s insane,” I said, backing away. “You’re crazy, Carol. I won’t have someone crazy taking care of my baby.”

Carol looked hurt. I turned and hurried home and told my wife what had happened, that I’d fired the nanny. My wife didn’t respond, she just laughed to herself while she finished what she was doing. She was polishing a brass reindeer that had a little plaid scarf tied around the neck. She worked carefully and quietly. I could hear the baby was crying somewhere upstairs, somewhere way, way, way up there. When my wife was satisfied with the reindeer, she got up and went outside, and stood on the sidewalk, looking up and down the street, and she waited there for Carol to get home.