PORTRAITS: A COLLECTION

Timothy Boswell

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APPROVED:

John Tait, Major Professor
Bonnie Friedman, Committee Member
Walton Muyumba, Committee Member
Miroslav Penkov, Committee Member
Robert Upchurch, Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of English
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
Michael Monticino, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

This collection consists of a critical preface and five short stories. The preface analyzes what it terms ‘fringe fiction,’ or stories dealing with elements that are improbable or unusual, though not impossible, as it distinguishes this category from magical realism and offers guidelines for writing this kind of fiction. The short stories explore themes of attachment, loss, guilt, and hope.

Collection includes the stories “Portrait,” “Dress Up,” “Change,” “Drawn Onward, We Few, Drawn Onward,” and “Broker.”
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PART I

PREFACE
Fringe Fiction:
Stories on the Margins

A young woman dog-sits a beloved pet cloned by its wealthy owners. A little boy is chained to a tree in the back-yard by his well-meaning mother. A man makes a living impersonating a caveman in a theme park. A young girl literally laughs herself to death. In short fiction by T. C. Boyle, Steven Millhauser, George Saunders, and other skilled writers of bizarre situations, the reader’s suspension of disbelief could easily be stretched to the breaking point. In any fiction, the textual thread uniting author and reader is tenuous at best, subject to interruption, doubt, and abandonment; a reader’s trust is incrementally earned and rapidly lost. Somehow, these writers and others like them convince their readers to relinquish skepticism and become absorbed in the created world, rather than mentally disassembling the support structure holding it in place. Without a clear category to place them into, these and similar stories are either broadly categorized as simply ‘literary’ or lumped in with magical realism, which is not an appropriate label. With acknowledgment that magical realist fiction is itself heavily concerned with fiction and writers on the margins¹, I suggest the term ‘fringe fiction’ as a shorthand for discussing texts that inhabit the boundaries of probability and common experience without slipping into the realm of magical realism. After a brief attempt to delineate the shape of the category I propose, distinguishing it from magical realism, I examine some of the common threats to success in these stories. These risks, while not entirely unique to stories containing unusual or unlikely elements, present themselves persistently in fringe fiction, and an analysis of how these writers navigate such dangers provides a better chance for other writers, such as myself, to avoid their pitfalls as well.

Magical realism, briefly defined by Wendy Faris, “combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them” (1). This blurring of boundaries allows for a unique set of tensions in these stories, which contain what Faris calls an “irreducible element” of magic that transcends the uncanny, “something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse” (Faris 7). While magical realism goes beyond the simple inclusion of an impossible element in the midst of a possible context, the categorization depends on this element being present in the story, for it is what gives magical realism “its capacity to explore the protean relationship between what we consider rational (what is knowable, predictable, and controllable) and irrational (what is beyond our complete understanding and control)” (Stewart 477). Fringe fiction, as I define it, does not contain an impossible element; all of the aforementioned stories could occur without any violation of the laws of the universe as we know them. It does, however, share with magical realism this tension between the rational and irrational, to a degree, or more commonly a tension between the familiar and unfamiliar.

Fringe fiction explores life at the margins of our experiences, showing events that could happen, but perhaps do not; they also present glimpses into lives that are lived, events that do occur, but far distanced from the mainstream experience of life. As long as this type of story is catalogued with magical realism or simply stamped as literary fiction, the opportunity will be lost to examine the unique aspects of these bizarre (yet possible) stories. Discussing magical realism, Jeanne Delbaere-Garant states that “it was becoming urgent to think out new categories that would leave more room for border-cases” (250). Some of these border-cases, I suggest,
deserve discussion as a group of their own, if only because they merge many of the risks of magical realist fiction with the challenges of generally catalogued literary fiction.

Fringe fiction does not possess that one, impossible element that must be simply accepted on faith. It presents, instead, a picture of a created world that could exist in the reader’s own world, in his or her own understanding of how life works, and yet this created world contains elements beyond the reader’s lived experience. Any time elements of the fantastic, unlikely, or overly strange enter into a piece, specific dangers immediately present themselves. The elements may come off as farce, when they are intended as drama, or they may distract attention from the real heart of the story, whether it be in characters, plot, or ideas. Their uniqueness may wear off and they may fail to perform their function throughout the whole story, or they may appear too unlikely to a reader and pull the reader out of the story, damaging the chances of the work’s success. Writers such as Boyle, Saunders, and Millhauser, who regularly write in this vein, have learned how to address these threats and successfully relate a story that is both improbable and believable.

Their stories, many of which skirt this boundary between the improbable and the impossible, borrow from the conventions of multiple genres, including fantasy, science fiction, and horror, even when officially designated as literary fiction. Michael Chabon, discussing ‘literary’ authors who borrow from other genres, suggests that “many if not most of the most interesting writers of the past seventy-five years have, like Trickster, found themselves drawn, inexorably, to the borderlands [...] the spaces between genres, in the no-man’s-land” (xiii). Chabon takes this a step further by arguing that the short story, “if it wants to renew itself in the way that the novel has done so often in its long history,” must go to the “boundary lines, the margins, the secret shelves between the sections in the bookstore” (xiv). Fringe fiction often
inhabits these spaces, and it is an inherent irony that in order to discuss it, observing similarities and distinguishing features, I must label a type of text that defies definition by drawing from so many genres and traditions. The limits of this new category are also quite subjective, with stories such as John Cheever’s “The Enormous Radio,” often considered magical realism, blurring the limits at one end of the spectrum – is it conceivably possible that an electronic malfunction could turn the neighbors’ radios into transmitters, providing a rational explanation for the story? – and stories like Millhauser’s “A Visit” or my own story “Portrait” at the other end, featuring unusual behavior but no violation of natural law. For my purposes, it is less important to exclude and define than to explore and understand.

In my own reading and writing, I find myself drawn to stories that explore this space, this gray zone – stories presenting circumstances that could (or do) occur in reality, yet thrive in the surreal ambiance that surrounds the people, places, and events existing outside mainstream experience. This preface is not meant to provide a comprehensive analysis of fringe fiction, or even an overview of how these stories affect the contours of short fiction today. Rather, it discusses a few of the methods often employed in successful fiction of this type, draws on a select handful of representative examples, and explores them in the context of my own short stories from this collection that contain significantly unusual elements but are not magical realism – specifically, “Portrait,” “Broker,” “Drawn Onward,” and “Dress Up.”

In discussing narrative, Vivian Gornick makes a useful distinction. According to Gornick, “Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say” (13). In each of the stories mentioned above, the situation is what makes the story memorably unique, a set of unusual
circumstances in which the writer places his or her characters, whether it is in the company of a caveman impersonator or a child chained to a tree. However, as Gornick points out, these situations are not the story – they are not what the writer has come to say, but merely part of the apparatus that allows the writer to say it.

Four of the five stories in this collection feature unusual situations, but as I wrote, rewrote, and revised them, I came to realize that these situations were not what the stories were really about in my case, either. Like many writers, I sat down to write without a clear certainty of what I had to say, only the knowledge that I needed to communicate something. Over the course of following my characters through a strange series of settings and events, learning what mattered to them and to me, the sense of what the stories were about (a beautifully versatile word meaning pertaining to, in the vicinity of, surrounding, approximately, or on the verge of) emerged as something at once definite and simultaneously ephemeral.

Before proceeding, here is a quick overview of the situations and stories of the relevant pieces in this collection. In “Dress Up,” the situation is that a woman works in a funeral home, applying makeup to the deceased, while she dates a man who runs a crime scene clean-up business. The story, though, is a young woman struggling with her need for male approval in the wake of her father’s misplaced affection and then abandonment. More specifically, the story is the need to make peace with the past and not rely on others for one’s feelings of self-worth.

In “Drawn Onward, We Few, Drawn Onward,” the situation is a young woman (the same as in “Dress Up”) who takes a morbid and challenging job cleaning up scenes of violent crime and trauma, while trying to reconcile with her terminally ill sister. The story is the tragic inevitability of loss, and the urgency of finding a means to cope and even thrive in its presence.
In “Broker,” the situation is a woman who works as a fantasy concierge, arranging wish fulfillment for clients, who chooses to play the role of doting wife to her company’s latest client, her ex-husband. The story is the sorrow of emotional and literal barrenness, the consequence of choice, and the fall-out of love without shared communication.

In “Portrait,” the situation is a man who feels driven, one year later, to personally deliver the portraits taken by his wife the day she died. The story is the permanence of art, the desperation of grief, and the guilt of loving again.

If what the writer has come to say is not the situation, then, but some elusive other thing, then the writer must successfully encourage, persuade, or coerce the reader into privileging the situation less and the story more; the reader must trust in the verisimilitude that the author is creating, enough to relax into the current of the narrative and allow it to carry the reader to the destination, without spending the entire voyage wondering how this craft can possibly stay afloat. After studying numerous stories that successfully complete this voyage, I have found several commonalities between them and have generalized a set of guidelines as illustrations. While these authors, and other talented creators of short fiction, continually dodge, stretch, or break any rules applied to their art, they also demonstrate an awareness of the conventions, and – as Chabon puts it – whether flouting or following these conventions, they play with them (xi). As I wander onto the literary playground, looking for someone with whom to share my toys, these strategies help me understand the activities of my experienced playmates and be better prepared to join in the game.

*
Guideline 1: Don’t be surprised by the unusual circumstances.

With an awareness of the inherent fallacy in assuming anything regarding an author’s perspective, I suggest that the author’s (or at times, narrator’s) apparent attitude toward events provides a paradigm for readers to follow as they engage with the text. There is a certain tone that effective writers repeatedly strike in fringe fiction, one that presents circumstances with clear-eyed observation, and often matter-of-fact acceptance; wonder may be present, or even awe, but they are manifested through the characters or narration, rather than intruding through an author’s amazement at how events are turning out. In this way, they share a tendency with magical realism, in which the impossible elements “are well assimilated into the realistic textual environment, rarely causing any comment by narrators or characters, who model such an acceptance for their readers” (Faris 8). However, while in magical realism the impossible element “refuses to be entirely assimilated” (Faris 8), the unlikely element in fringe fiction must ultimately be convincing in its verisimilitude.

In George Saunders’s “Pastoralia,” a man makes his living by impersonating a caveman in what amounts to a live-action diorama in an educational theme park. As bizarre as this is—and it is only one of many bizarre elements in the story—the narrator presents the situation in the most nonchalant manner: “Some are required to catch wild hares in snares, or to wear pioneer garb while cutting the heads off chickens. But not us. I just have to haul the dead goat out of the Big Slot and skin it with a sharp flint. Janet just has to make the fire. So things are pretty good. Not as good as in the old days, but, then again, not so bad” (68). The reader is quickly immersed in this world, in large part due to the narrative stance that Saunders adopts. The situation does not require elaborate explanation, drawing attention to it as excessive exposition might do; instead, the narrator takes the reader directly into his life, and his thoughts, with the first
sentence: “I have to admit I’m not feeling my best. Not that I’m doing so bad. Not that I really have anything to complain about” (68). Already the focus is on the narrator and his experience, with the unique situation entering the picture only as it extends into the narrator’s description of his day.

The narrator is not startled to wake up and find that he is role-playing a caveman and living on roast goat while tourists snap pictures, so why should the reader be startled? Saunders is rightfully admired for his ironic wit and pointed humor, which serve this story well, but the fringe element – that situational complexity rendering this man’s life outside the reader’s experience – is deftly handled by being related as nothing out of the ordinary. There are certainly other successful stories that state the unlikely element up front, introducing it in one fell swoop, rather than gradually revealing it through the story as Saunders does here. In either case, however, the element is presented as something in keeping with the rational world it inhabits, the contextual reality of the story.

In my stories, I am frequently tempted to employ a device readily recognized once one searches for it: open the story with an interesting and unusual situation, described vaguely so as to remain mysterious, hooking the reader and then ending the opening section with some punchy, catchy sentence that suddenly makes it all clear and (hopefully) makes the reader want to find out how things possibly got to this point. Typically, this is followed by a flashback or exposition setting things up, which is crucial to the story but not interesting enough to function as a beginning. This technique appears in slush piles and stacks of student papers, and also, no doubt, in some successful and critically acclaimed stories. However, it must be used intentionally, and too often it is not. In my story “Broker,” I revised it in such a way that the first sentence of the second paragraph states quite explicitly what is occurring, rather than coyly dodging it for pages,
so that readers can focus on the dynamics of Gillian’s inner and outer conflicts rather than piecing together the classic Backstory Puzzle: “For the last three years, Gillian had worked for Fantasy Broker Enterprises as a service specialist who arranged wish fulfillment for wealthy clients, everything from a day as a rock star to conquering Mount Everest” (110). Old habits die hard, and I have had to repeatedly examine my beginnings to see that their focus is on Gornick’s conception of story, rather than situation or an elaborate ploy to trick readers into wanting to continue reading.

These general strategies overlap with the second commonality for the successful writers I studied. While many of these strategies might be applied to other types of short stories – or in some cases, to fiction in general – I am specifically discussing fringe fiction here, because of the unique set of challenges to believability that these stories contain.

Guideline 2: Establish your characters, and establish them early.

The situation may be dazzling. The situation may be remarkable, amazing, and somewhat unreal. Yet, the characters must be established – and quickly – else the situation has no meaning, because it does not have well-drawn inhabitants to reflect and respond to its dimensions, to give it shape and definition. Without fully established characters, it is merely an event, not an experience, and the reader needs to experience a situation to be vested in the story.

As discussed in the previous section with “Pastoralia,” the fantastic element can be successfully presented quite early in the story, as merely one aspect of the overall construction, its full extent revealed gradually. At other times, the ‘reveal’ is postponed, and the unlikely element is not immediately introduced. In T. C. Boyle’s “Admiral,” for instance, the unusual circumstance is not revealed until the nineteenth paragraph of the story, after the characters have
already been drawn and defined. The reader is already acquainted with the protagonist Nisha and her idiosyncrasies, who knows in her heart that this dog-sitting job she is taking is wrong, who thinks about a Wordsworth poem on daffodils and leeches whenever she needs a laugh (because she has had every job but leech-gathering), and who calls to mind her mother’s mantra that *A woman of color does not clean house* when confronted with “another version of herself” in a maid’s uniform (2). The reader has been introduced to Nisha’s employers, the Strikers, “stiff and erect as the Ituri carvings they’d picked up on their trip to Africa,” an aloof couple exuding wealth and assumed superiority (3). When the strange circumstance enters into the story – that the Strikers have paid two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to clone a beloved and deceased pet, a dog named Admiral, and want Nisha to precisely recreate the former pet’s life – the foundational apparatus upon which it will rest is already constructed. At this point, the reader has reached the conclusion that this is just the type of outlandish, privileged action the Strikers would take, and understands the motivations driving Nisha to accept.

Boyle anticipates the reader’s need to marvel for a moment at this turn of events by providing a section break two lines later, but then he returns directly to discussing the characters and their history, rather than pontificating on the dubious science of cloning. Without the expert delineation of his major characters, Boyle’s story would rest on the unusual event itself, and readers would be ill prepared to experience Nisha’s coming of age, disillusionment, betrayal, guilt, and acceptance.

In my story “Dress Up,” I wanted readers to enter the mindset of the story’s protagonist, a young woman named Casey, and to get a feel for her quirks, concerns, and youthfully naïve outlook early in the story, to better understand her decisions later. I chose a third-person perspective that stays very close to Casey, entering her thoughts at times, to emphasize the
conviction that this is her story, not a story of crime scene decontamination, funeral home
operation, or any of the other unusual elements that appear:

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Casey murmured, her black heels together and her hands
clasped operetta-style, to a man in his late twenties, perhaps a few years older than she,
who was standing in front of the casket. He had brown hair and eyes, a slim build, and a
simple honesty in the set of his mouth that she fancied she had seen in herself; she had
the fleeting thought that if they were in a movie together, they could play brother and
sister. His hands were in the pockets of his slacks, and he was looking at the deceased
with the expression of someone waiting on his drycleaning. (53)

Ultimately, it is the characters who must carry the story, regardless of the situation, but
the existence of a surreal, unreal, or unlikely situation brings with it the threat of pulling the
spotlight from the characters to the circumstances. The characters must be more convincing,
more fascinating, more worthy of turning pages than the remarkable situations in which they
operate, otherwise the story will falter, and skilled writers convince readers of these qualities in
their characters early in the work.

Guideline 3: Be willing to do research.

In Boyle’s story “Admiral,” mentioned above, a wealthy couple pays an exorbitant sum
to clone a dog that was killed. Very little science enters the story, but during a conversation
between the couple and the young woman they hired, the couple describes “how they’d taken a
cell from the lining of Admiral’s ear just after the accident and inserted it into a donor egg that
had had its nucleus removed, stimulated the cell to divide through the application of an electric
current, and then inserted the developing embryo into the uterus of a host mother” (7). Several
pages later, there is a mention of the first dog ever cloned, “two years ago, in Korea” (14), a reference to the actual dog, cloned in South Korea in 2005 by the same process outlined above, and also an Afghan hound, as is Admiral in the story. While none of this information is critical to Boyle’s story, the careful insertion of researched evidence gives the ring of truth to what might otherwise be an unbelievable situation with the feel of borderline science fiction. For those unfamiliar with the real-world counterparts to a story, the factual details help flesh out the process by which the remarkable set of events has come to be. Likewise, for those readers who know something about the science or the actual events prompting an idea, adherence to the facts inspiring a story can establish credibility and redirect attention back to the story itself, where it belongs.

In my stories “Drawn Onward” and “Dress Up,” the characters Blake and Casey engage in the professional clean-up of sites of violent trauma, officially known as crime and trauma scene decontamination. The CTS Decon industry has a considerable amount of information available to the public, from training requirements to statements from professional organizations, and I spent quite a few hours reading through articles, guidelines, legal requirements, reactions, and recommendations, and at the end of this, it was much easier to write the scenes and conversations relating to my characters’ work with a degree of authority. Whether slipped into conversation, as when Blake comments on how the lungs absorb most of the blood from a gunshot wound to the chest (Dress Up, 59), or described in detail during one of Casey’s jobs – “She clomped around in her one-time-use, nonporous, sky-blue biohazard suit, gloves, filtered respirator, and chemical spill boots, facts and statistics about bloodborne pathogens running through her head” (Drawn Onward, 95) – the terms, equipment, and other details enrich the descriptions and create a more convincing portrayal of her time working in this industry. All of
it was as factually accurate as I could make it, so that any reader, even one familiar with the business, should feel he or she is in the hands of a knowledgeable author, and settle into Casey’s experience rather than wondering how much of the story is real.

Guideline 4: Know when to ignore the research.

In this type of story, often the flavor of verisimilitude is more critical than pure factual accuracy. This perceived truthfulness can be achieved through research and the careful inclusion of only those details that serve the story. After countless hours have been spent poring over books and articles, it can be tempting to include the fascinating tidbit that only a professional in the field, or the most dedicated researcher, could possibly know. However, if it does not serve to enhance the reader’s understanding of either the situation or the story, it is superfluous, and worse yet, can become an indicator of the author’s presence rather than camouflage to hide his or her efforts. I – along with other writers, I suspect – have experienced a desire to adhere exclusively to the research once it is performed, so that the basis of the story is factually sound. While this tendency is worthwhile and necessary in nonfiction, in fiction it may not serve the needs of the story. The writer should include what the story needs and leave out what it does not; as Kit Reed puts it, “Each choice you make will focus and channel your work. Everything: the words you choose, ideas, characters, belong in a particular story only as they function in that story and you as writer are going to have to be ruthless about getting rid of anything that doesn’t belong” (213, her emphasis). As elementary as that sounds, too often research can begin to exert its own influence and let its needs be felt, rather than its contributions. This tendency, once again, can be found in any type of fiction, but is more prevalent in fringe fiction that is often predicated on unusual circumstances outside the everyday person’s sphere of knowledge. Less
experienced writers obey this impulse to include a wealth of researched information, but skilled authors instead work in only those details needed to create verisimilitude – the illusion of truth, not truth itself.

In Boyle’s story “Killing Babies,” a young man fresh out of rehab begins working for his older brother, who is a doctor at an abortion clinic. It would have been exceedingly easy for Boyle to include complex research, of which there is an abundance available about the scientific and medical aspects of such a clinic. Instead, Boyle wanted to keep the focus on the characters, on this young man and his perspective on the clinic’s protestors, his developing affection for his brother’s family, and his obsession with a young girl he sees coming to the clinic. Boyle includes very few concrete details about the clinic, and even fewer about the practice that goes on there, which only surfaces directly in a few places: “My hands were trembling as I lit another from the butt end of the first, and I didn’t think about the raw-looking left-overs in the stainless-steel trays that were like nothing so much as skinned frogs” (64). Distasteful and horrifying as this is, it reveals the man’s character and achieves this effect more successfully than a paragraph of researched data.

Boyle includes just enough details to make the clinic seem real, and he establishes credibility through the honesty of a total immersion in the narrator’s viewpoint. Boyle rightfully recognizes that while a well-placed parcel of insider information can go a tremendous distance in suspending the reader’s disbelief, the primary purpose of these details is to create an atmosphere in which the situation is accepted and the story can unfold. An overabundance of information can threaten to disrupt the creation of this environment, or may shift the focus away from the real heart of the story: the characters.
Guideline 5: Be specific and detailed.

On the heels of the previous two guidelines, and sharing many of the same qualities, comes this strategy, which arguably applies to all successful writing and not only fringe fiction. However, fringe fiction depends more heavily than most stories on the maintenance of verisimilitude, and there is no more critical ingredient than details. While broad strokes may cover large areas of canvas, it is the details that grant the entire picture its power and effect. Or, as John Gardner put it, “vivid detail is the life blood of fiction” (25).

As with other elements, the details must be chosen carefully to serve the exigencies of a certain text; they must present their own reason for existing in the story. Flannery O’Connor explains that “to say that fiction proceeds by the use of detail does not mean the simple, mechanical piling-up of detail. Detail has to be controlled by some overall purpose, and every detail has to be put to work for you” (13). Particularly in fringe fiction, with its threats to believability, details must work for the writer, must support and convince. In Steven Millhauser’s story “Dangerous Laughter,” he includes specific details in his physical descriptions of those in the grips of this laughter, details which reveal the themes of violence and release so prevalent in the story, and which are necessary for the sharp contrast to typical perceptions of laughter as innocent or harmless: “One day a nine-year-old boy was discovered by his mother holding down and violently tickling his seven-year-old sister, who was shrieking and screaming – the collar of her dress was soaked with tears. The girl’s pale body was streaked with lines of deep pink, as if she’d been struck repeatedly with a rope” (78).

Laughter in this story fulfills the title’s promise, following through on the foreshadowing of the first sentence with its reference to “that perilous summer” (75). Laughter is not merely an abstract concept or trivial act in this context, but a profoundly mental and emotional process
expressed through specific physical actions, recorded in brutal detail, as when a young girl
laughs herself to death toward the end of the story: “Clara was laughing fiercely, her face twisted
as if in pain. Her skin was so wet that she looked hard and shiny, like metal. The laughter, raw
and harsh, poured up out of her as if some mechanism had broken. One of her forearms was
bruised” (90). An explanation is offered for the girl’s death, that she suffered a ruptured blood
vessel in her brain, but it is not needed for the reader to believe this unbelievable situation, and in
fact the reader more readily accepts the narrator’s conclusion, who writes that they “knew the
truth: Clara Schuler had died of laughter” (91). Throughout the story, the narrator witnesses
hurtful physical consequences to seemingly harmless laughter, expressed through the careful,
precise details that Millhauser utilizes. Then, when the unreal event occurs, it is presented in the
same brutal detail, and it is fully accepted by the reader.

In my story “Portrait,” I wanted to use description to convey the personality and frame of
mind of the first-person narrator. I wanted these details to also paint a picture of unhealthy stasis
resulting in slow decay, a symbol of life and joy reduced to gradual disintegration, all of this a
parallel for the narrator from the first paragraph:

I never put the Christmas tree away this year. By the time I conceded to my
friend Nessa’s reasoning for taking the decorations down, it was mid-October and the
stores were already trotting out their holiday displays again, sickening racks of party trays
and shrink-wrapped candy canes. I couldn’t stand the thought of putting it all away, only
to take it out again a few weeks later. So the tree stayed out, shedding its plastic needles
slowly, a perpetual autumn; round glass balls dropped when I bumped into it in the dark,
and I left them nestled in the tree’s discarded skin. (28)
The narrator’s choice of details to include in his descriptions is intended to go a long way toward revealing not only his perspective, but insight into his character beyond what he has realized himself. This hopefully helps the reader to more fully understand the motivations behind his unusual behavior later in the story.

Guideline 6: Don’t let the situation overpower the story.

Unusual situations can be fascinating solely for their novelty. This tenet holds true in advertising, journalism, film, and a variety of other fields, so it is unsurprising to find it flourishing in literature. An audience’s attention is more readily captured by that which they have not been exposed to time and time again. Even the most patient of editors may be likely to give a mental sigh – and perhaps a loudly voiced “Not again” – when confronted with the fourteenth story in a week with the same basic plot premise. One strength of fringe fiction is its inherent difference – at least in one element – from other works of fiction. Lawrence Block writes:

What every editor wants – and every reader, for that matter – can be summed up in four paradoxical words: the same only different. Your story must be the same as innumerable other stories so that it may provide a similar kind of satisfaction to the reader. Yet it must simultaneously differ sufficiently from all of those other stories so that the reader will not feel it’s something he’s read over and over in the past. (32)

The strength of stories with unusual scenarios lies in this capacity to differ sufficiently; in the space of a few lines, if the situation is truly fresh, a story can leap over this hurdle and begin tackling other criteria.
This strength can quickly become a weakness, though, if it is not kept in service to the real meat of the work. To continue using Gornick’s terms, the situation must be subservient to the story. If it is the other way around, then the story becomes dominated by plot for the sake of action, dialogue that reveals nothing about character, and assorted literary special effects that dazzle the reader’s vision without influencing the reader’s thoughts. If the situation is allowed to be the focus of the work (and many of these situations seem poised to make just such a grab, to exert their not-inconsiderable mass toward possession of the spotlight – after all, they are fascinating), then the story, ultimately, is only about events.

T. C. Boyle’s humorous story “Modern Love” is a satirical take on the title theme, presenting a woman so concerned over infectious disease and maintaining cleanliness that she insists the narrator wear a full-body condom before making love and submit to a barrage of tests before progressing their relationship. The extremity of her needs is catalogued in detail, as when Boyle’s narrator lists “[s]tress tests, patch tests, reflex tests, lung-capacity tests (I blew up yellow balloons till they popped, then breathed into a machine the size of a Hammond organ), the x-rays, sperm count, and a closely printed, twenty-four-page questionnaire that included sections on dream analysis, genealogy, and logic and reasoning” (711). With such entertaining material as the narrator striving to consummate their love through a transparent heavy-duty plastic bodysuit, the woman’s paranoid condition might dominate the story as the alpha and omega of its focus. Yet, with wry observations, Boyle instead turns the whole thing into a commentary not just on modern love, but on the caprices, devotions, and little insanities of love in general: “You have to work at love. You have to bend, make subtle adjustments, sacrifice – love is nothing without sacrifice” (711). Boyle allows the situation to play out with all of its bizarre turns and entertaining descriptions, but he does not allow it to dominate the story.
In my story “Drawn Onward,” early drafts revealed a clear focus on the protagonist’s unique new position cleaning up scenes of trauma, but reader responses revealed what I had missed – that the real story concerned her relationship with her sister. As I revised with this in mind, it led to my understanding that her unusual circumstances were only useful in that they explored the ways she made sense of the relationships in her life. I added scenes of the narrator with her sister and revised the story with this shift in focus, and the story took several strides in the direction of saying that ineffable something that I wish it to say.

Guideline 7: Know what your story is truly about (or be willing to find out).

In George Saunders’s story “Puppy,” one mother travels to purchase a new family dog, while another struggles to maintain her own household, including a son with an unspecified but challenging disability, and hopes to sell the dog. In typical Saunders style, he establishes an ironic, interesting, but somewhat surreal situation, even in his early descriptions of the characters and their literal and mental journeys. The situation is unique – it turns out that the second mother has chained her son to a tree in order to keep him contained and safe, so that he does not dart across the street. The story, though, is about the struggle to find balance between protecting one’s children and letting them be their own individuals, between loving a person as he is and wanting to make him better, and between making a gesture and making a change. It is also about the intersection of outward appearance and inward motivation, and about faulty judgments and dangerously narrow perspectives; it circles around the need for communication and the terrible beauty of our inability to truly see from another’s point of view – and it does this from the beginning. Even before the second mother is introduced, Saunders sets up the differences
between the two families to better contrast them, not to vilify the second mother, but to illustrate the shared battles of both mothers despite their differences.

The first mother, Marie, wants to give her children a better childhood than she experienced, and insists that hers are “not spoiled kids” but are “well-loved kids” (262). The second mother, Callie, also dreams of a better future for her children, one in which her son could learn to deal with his disability and maybe “could someday have a family” (267). She agrees with her husband that “it’s sure not easy raising kids the right way” (264), an ironic contrast to Marie’s condemnation – Marie takes one look at the boy on the chain and decides to call Child Welfare, “who would snatch this poor kid away so fast it would make that fat mother’s thick head spin” (266). This contrast, and the empathy created for both mothers in the midst of their love and insular vision, is where the power of this story is found.

Saunders prevented his readers from becoming engrossed with the boy and the tree, chained to that spot and circumstance, so that the real focus could settle on the dynamics that convinced Callie to put him there and that caused Marie to react as she did. Those dynamics are where the story lies, and Saunders knew it; this knowledge allowed him to structure his entire story in such a way as to privilege the important and minimize the circumstantial.

In each of my stories, I began with the idea for a situation that intrigued me, developed a character for whom I felt an affinity, and allowed the two to progress as they would. This method only takes me so far, and after the general structure of a story is in place, I must take several hard looks at it – generally both from a metaphorical distance and from inches away – and locate the pieces of text that contain some kernel of truth that I want to expose. Once this kernel is identified, I can re-write the story with a sense of purpose, sometimes resulting in a rather drastic re-envisioning of the story itself.
My story “Portrait” is one example of this process, in which the first version revolved around a particular situation. It involved a man who adopted the identities of others as a coping mechanism in the wake of his wife’s death, and it leaned heavily on discursive attacks against the mainstream national rhetoric surrounding the events of 9/11, voiced through my characters. Prompted by opinion, and by plainly speaking what I had to say through my characters, it focused too heavily on ideas and circumstances and was ultimately lifeless.

In the first major revision, which retained perhaps one page of the original twenty-page story, a man still narrated his way into the minds of survivors of the shooting that killed his wife, but I allowed the narrative to enter his mindset, follow his feelings, and engage with his pain and hope, rather than forcing him to act as my mouthpiece. I found that the story was not about 9/11, not in such political terms, in any case; it was about the agony of grief, the shared sense of isolation even in community, and the inevitable survivor’s guilt of living and loving in a world full of loss. However, feedback revealed that the story was still stifled by too many competing elements, pulling it in different directions, and my second major rewrite narrowed further to explore in depth one aspect of the previous version. I cannot claim to have known from the beginning what the story was about, but willingness to find out, for me, means that at times I may need to discard an entire story, or perhaps save one sentence that contains a hint, the faintest glimmer, of what I truly want to say. This glimmer is invariably not in the events, the plot, or even the explicit ideas behind a piece, but emerges as some combination of character, narrative, and that remarkably mysterious relationship between writer, reader, and text. With this type of story, it is especially crucial that I determine the significance of the story, finding what it is truly about, otherwise it is dominated by the unique situation and inevitably goes in directions that are unfulfilling for both writer and reader.
Ultimately, readers will follow a dazzling situation for only so long, and if the situation exists for its own sake, then the fiction is stale and readers are better off selecting a nonfiction work on abortion, cavemen, child neglect, or trauma scene decontamination. For a story to matter, to declare unequivocally why it needed to be written, to express what the writer has come to say, the situation – along with the details, the research, the descriptions, and every other element – must serve that greater good, the change-invoking experience of characters who allow the readers to experience this change as well.

The appeal of fiction situated at the margins, whether the boundaries of genre or the limits of polite, typical, everyday society, is that it opens up fresh opportunities for its characters to react and grow in unusual ways. The threats of the rarely encountered elements in fringe fiction can be navigated successfully and overcome by careful, thoughtful observance of the point that in great fiction, as John Gardner expresses it, “the dream engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things – sights, sounds, smells – as though they were real, we respond to fictional problems as though they were real” (27). These problems, whether experienced by a caveman, a girl laughing herself to death, or the mother of a little boy chained to a tree, help to bridge that mysterious valley between text and reader and to encourage the kind of thoughtful, absorbed engagement with the story that prompts identification and reflection. I agree with Gardner that great fiction does more than provide an entertaining diversion; it also “helps us to know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our faults and limitations” (27). Hopefully, my own stories will continue to benefit from my exposure to works by the masters of fringe fiction and the borderlines defining
it, and my fiction can carry its characters – and those who choose to meet them – through the remarkable situation to whatever is waiting on the other side.
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Portrayal

I never put the Christmas tree away this year. By the time I conceded to my friend Nessa’s reasoning for taking the decorations down, it was mid-October and the stores were already trotting out their holiday displays again, sickening racks of party trays and shrink-wrapped candy canes. I couldn’t stand the thought of putting it all away, only to take it out again a few weeks later. So the tree stayed out, shedding its plastic needles slowly, a perpetual autumn; round glass balls dropped when I bumped into it in the dark, and I left them nestled in the tree’s discarded skin.

Caitlyn was always prompt about dates and seasonal decorations – the pumpkins came down November 1, the stockings went up the day after Thanksgiving. No white shoes after Labor Day. We used to joke that eventually my disorganization would rub off on her, but after nine years of marriage, it didn’t. Christmas cards stood propped open on the mantle, next to a photo of us on the slopes that she took herself with her tripod and gear early last season. I had stacked the sympathy cards in the same pile with the holiday cards, Seasons Greetings! mixed with In deepest sorrow for your loss. My family and coworkers didn’t seem to know what to send this time around, and merged the two by buying blank cards and writing their own, carefully worded phrases inside. Wishing you peace this holiday season. Strands of tinsel pooled on the carpet, sliding off the tree’s gradually denuded branches. Shards of ornaments lay where they fell on the windowsill, curved like eggshell, hollow.

Caitlyn loved her photography, which she did professionally for eleven years out of a little room in a department store at the mall. It didn’t matter, she said, that most of the families weren’t really nurturing, close-knit social units, or that the smiles vanished the moment the shutter clicked, and the bickering began again. For a moment, that perfection existed, and over the years memories of the day would fade, until this illusion became the reality; in the midst of
tears, hurt, and anger, it would be a testament, a stepping stone, proof that once, everyone was together in love, and therefore could be again – an illusory fiction that would become more important than the truth it replaced. Everyone was perpetually real, happy, alive, behind glass.

It had been a year since she died, but I was unwilling to compromise and take down any of the photographs. I even had a few unused frames out, ones we had received as gifts and never got around to putting pictures in; they still displayed attractive models in the frame insets, their faces as sun-dappled and carefree as Caitlyn and I in the frames adjacent, as if we all knew each other, went on trips together, would see each other for the holidays. Portraits of Caitlyn and by Caitlyn continued to cover the walls, shelves, and mantel, and when Nessa was over, sometimes I caught her looking at them, with an expression almost like she understood, or that she was studying something she didn’t want to forget, and sometimes I wished I could put an arm around her, or say, I know.

She had called and invited me over again that evening. Caitlyn had always encouraged our friendship, and surely would now. I had been sick in the bathroom for an hour after coming home from work – an increasingly meaningless position in an insurance office – but felt better now, as I searched for a suitable frame to use for a picture of Caitlyn I had been meaning to put up, despite Dr. Tanner’s advice. I thought to check Caitlyn’s craft table, which had been left untouched, and I found a stack of frames under a sheet of cardboard. It took me a moment to realize that these frames, and the sheets of photos under them, were from her work. I flipped through the photos and noted the time and date stamped on the back – it was the last set of portraits she took. All unfulfilled clients had been given a full refund as the least complicated solution, Nessa had told me, in those days that had since become a blur; I didn’t think these photos had been printed.
I flipped through and found myself staring at the smiling faces, the matching sweaters and blue jeans, the fake wintry backgrounds of Christmas trees and presents or a roaring fire and expectant stockings, while an urge formed in the back of my thoughts and gradually pushed its way forward.

*  

“Let me get this straight, Jack,” Nessa said over dinner at her house. Her brown hair was tucked in a baseball cap, one of those that came pre-worn with a hole in the bill and unraveling threads so she could appear young and cool, which she still was, I supposed. I wondered if she wore it while hanging around in the teacher’s lounge, and if she were ever mistaken for a student. She once told me that her students were thrilled to have her for the first six weeks, especially the male ones, but they couldn’t wait to escape her by winter break. We had been friends for over a decade. She had a Master’s in education and liked to wear toe socks. She also felt I needed to let go of some things – not everything, just some things – and move on.

“You found the portraits from the night of the shooting,” she said, “and you want to dredge all that back up by delivering them to the families. Even though they got a refund a year ago.” She moved a dumpling around in a bowl remarkably absent of chicken. Nessa wasn’t a vegetarian, but she went in phases, and would sometimes eat no meat for weeks and then cap off the month with a massive, bloody steak. It was leftover night – she was having dumplings, while I had fish.

“You don’t approve,” I said. I had expected this, but the possibility of not telling her had never crossed my mind. Without Caitlyn, all the internal monologues that I would have voiced to her built up until they had to have an outlet, and Nessa seemed the only possible choice.

“What would Dr. Tanner say?”
“It’s like therapy,” I replied.

“It’s weird.”

“You told me to find a hobby.” I forked a bite of tilapia and chewed defensively. It tasted of salt and sunscreen, scum and oil.

“I meant learning Chess. Playing the harmonica. Philately.”

“I don’t think that’s legal in this state,” I said.

“Stamp collecting, doofus.”

“Maybe I’m taking Dr. Tanner’s advice. Working through things.” I looked at my fillet, wishing I could throw it back in the ocean, watch it grow back fins and scales and gills, then rejoin its little family. Instead the side of my fork severed where its spine would have been, and I had to drop my napkin over my plate.

“Or maybe you’re just avoiding closure. I thought you had made some progress.” Nessa held her glass, midway between lips and table like she was making a controversial toast and waiting for the assembly’s reaction. I had a sudden memory of her and Caitlyn, lifting beers to toast my twenty-first birthday, both of them too young to drink. One would be topless and the other passed out within the hour, and within the year I’d be asking one to marry me and the other to serve as Best Man. Nessa even wore a tux.

I lifted my glass as well, feeling the condensation trickling beneath my fingers, and a single drop fell down, splashing hopelessly on the fish stranded on my plate – long since starved for water. Too little, too late. I murmured something to this effect, having forgotten exactly what Nessa was saying.

*
I knew I should call first, but I couldn’t think of what to say, how to phrase those first sentences, and after holding the phone in my hand for nearly ten minutes I put it down and picked up my keys instead. I had found the sheet of contact information, and looking up the address of the first family, I found that they lived scarcely fifteen minutes away. I chose to begin with a family in festive holiday wear, a cherry-red dress on the wife with glittering white pearls around her throat, a dapper green pullover sweater on the husband, both late thirties I would say, and the teenage daughters – one in green, one in red, positioned in front of the parent in the opposite color – wore knee-length dresses but no pearls, though they folded their hands demurely like their mother. All were smiling, their heads tilted toward each other, the father’s arms spread to encompass his wife and one daughter, the mother’s hands resting on her husband and the other daughter, this circle of love beaming out of the glossy sheen of the photo-paper. Caitlyn had positioned them in front of the fireplace scene, which even presented four stockings hanging behind them. Perfect. They had apparently ordered the special, this one pose in half a dozen different sizes – wallets, 3x5s, 4x6s, 5x7s, 8x10s, and one 10x13. They must have absolutely loved this picture.

“We’ve always wanted it,” the father would say, perhaps puffing on a pipe, “but we knew it would be uncouth to ask with all you have been through.” He might smooth his moustache, just the sort of man to say uncouth.

“There’s a spot above our fireplace just waiting for it,” the mother would say. “She was the best photographer we’ve ever had.”

I’m only finishing what she started, I would say. Think nothing of it.

*
The house was smaller than I expected, a dingy one-story with various colors of brick scattered throughout its make-up – pink, tan, off-white, grey – producing an unpleasant feeling of disorder echoed by the front yard, which was covered in patches of a squat, spiky shrub that seemed to have escaped from the flowerbeds flanking the porch. A girl’s bicycle with the chain off its gears lay on its side half in the grass and half on the driveway. I parked at the curb and walked up to the front porch, the packet of their photos in hand, and rapped softly on the door.

I heard someone shout inside, and then the door opened, and the wife – Mrs. Preston – appeared, only she wasn’t wearing pearls, or a cherry-red dress, and her auburn hair was so drastically shorter, nearly buzzed, that I wondered if she had worn a wig for the picture. A stained white t-shirt with Cortman Co. Picnic ‘89 over the pocket hung down past her hips, and black leggings disappeared into her faded running shoes. She peered at me warily, saw the folder in my hand, and shook her head. “Not interested, but thanks a bunch.”

“I have your photos,” I said, pulling them out. Her eyes narrowed further when she recognized herself in the picture, and a moment later understanding set in.

“Oh gosh,” she said. “Oh, wow.”

I started to smile. Here it came. Caitlyn must have lived for this. “I know it’s been a year, but I’m sure these mean a lot to you, so I wanted you to have them.”

She held the largest photo by the corner, not lifting it off the stack I held, just peering at it, this reminiscent smile playing about her mouth. Then, abruptly, she let go of it and shook her head again, still smiling. “Nah, we’ll stick with our refund. But thanks a bunch.”

The floor fell out of my stomach then, like that moment when the plane’s wheels lurch off of the runway. She started to go back inside, and I nearly threw the photos at her. “Take
them, and keep your refund. I just want you to have them. Caitlyn – my wife – would have wanted you to have them.”

She paused at that, thinking, gazing at the photographs and then up at me. “Oh gosh,” she finally said. “Oh, wow. You must be that poor man. The widow. Er, I mean. Widower. I read about you in the paper last year.” This seemed to change the rules of the house call, as she stepped aside and held the door open. “Do you want to come in for a minute?”

I followed her through a short hallway filled with shelves of chipped ceramic birds, most looking like escapees from a garage sale aviary, and we came out into a large room encompassing the kitchen and living area, filled with more furniture than it should hold – armchairs, loveseats, ottomans, all of different fabrics and styles – and no overhead light but lamps in every corner. One of the daughters, the younger if I had to guess, was sprawled on the largest loveseat with her limbs tangled up in a boy of similar age, both engrossed in a program on the television. No one else was in sight, but the walls of the room, from the living area into the kitchen, were plastered with photographs. The frames were also mismatched, perhaps rescued from thrift stores, yard sales, even dumpsters, and they held photos of the family at all ages, along with quite a few of family pets – I saw a dog, a cat, and one corner devoted to a green parakeet with a prominent yellow feather jutting off its head. There must have been thirty different family portraits alone.

Wordless, I held the stack of pictures out, and Mrs. Preston took them from me, smiling, and carried them into the kitchen, where she pushed aside a stack of mail in order to drop them on the counter. She pulled out a 3x5 photo and took it to the refrigerator, which was so covered in to-go menus, schedules, and clipped coupons that she had to let the portrait share a magnet
with a shopping list that partially obscured the older daughter’s face. I stepped closer to read the magnet, which said: Las Vegas: Get Lucky!

“Just wonderful,” Mrs. Preston said. “So thoughtful of you. Julie, this nice man brought the photos we had taken last year at the mall.”

“With Ellie and Santa?” She didn’t turn to look.

“No, that little place in the corner of that department store. Where we got your sweater, the one you love so much.”

“With the stripes?”

“No, the turtle-neck. Geez. You know.”

I started for the door, stepping past a sleeping spaniel mix I hadn’t noticed on the way in, curled up on a pile of laundry. I fought the urge to snatch the photographs back from the counter.

“Tell the man thank you,” Mrs. Preston said. “His wife was killed in that awful mall shooting that night but he took the time to drive all the way out here anyway.”

“Thank you,” Julie said.

“Thank you,” Julie’s boyfriend said.

“Sure.” I hurried past the ceramic birds, out the door, past the bicycle and the marauding shrubberies, fighting down nausea, wishing I had not come, wishing Caitlyn had not accepted clients so unworthy of her work.

* 

I told Nessa about how disastrously it went, about their asinine collections of discarded merchandise, about their total lack of appreciation for the art of photography. It was later that evening, and we were assembling a 500-piece puzzle on her dining room table, which had
marbled glass with intentional imperfections. I didn’t understand this any more than her pre-
damaged baseball cap.

“It sounds to me like they appreciated photography quite a lot,” she said. “You said they
had pictures all over the place.”

“Not good pictures. Not these pictures.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t try to deliver the rest.” As she leaned over to look at the box, her
foot brushed mine under the table, and she tucked it quickly back under her chair.

“Maybe not.” I think we both knew I would try again. We worked in silence on the
puzzle for a few minutes, Nessa snapping pieces into place every few seconds while I took a
random piece in hand and searched fruitlessly for its spot, only to toss it back into the mix and
try again with another.

“Jack,” Nessa eventually said, “What would you think about spending Christmas with
me?”

“Hadn’t really thought that far ahead.”

“I don’t just mean Christmas day.” Nessa’s thermostat was broken with her heater on
overdrive, and sweat made the puzzle pieces stick to her fingers like licked stamps. She snagged
a corner piece, then tried to shake it loose.

“Well, I see you pretty much every day anyway. I don’t see why the holidays should be
any different.” The puzzle currently showed a Parisian café scene, including half a baguette, a
sign that read “Patisser,” and three tourists without heads. I found a piece with a face on it and
tried to fit it to one of the tourists. It was the wrong head; it was on backward, looking over the
shoulders like a contortionist. I wondered what that would be like.
“I just know – I mean, I can only imagine – I know this is a really hard time.” It was completely out of character for her to be anything but comfortable in her own skin, but she gave a little yawn before her next comment, which meant she was nervous. “I just think maybe you should be with someone.”

“Oh.”

“All the time. So you don’t have to be alone.”

“Right.”

She tried to mash a piece into a spot it wasn’t meant for, her motions jerky and frustrated.

“You are so dense. I mean you should come stay with me.”

I stared at her, unsure why it felt wrong, now, to be sitting here working a puzzle with her. I watched her continue to jam pieces into place with her thumb, frowning; she had completed the café sign, but two of the three tourists were still decapitated, and one was a sideshow attraction.

“Just for the holidays,” she said.

I looked away, toward the window and the sunset.

“As my guest,” she said.

I looked at my left hand, at my ring.

“On the couch,” she said.

I nodded.

* 

The phone rang three times before someone picked up. I fingered the sheet of paper with the contact information, rubbing the number with the pad of my thumb like it might be smeared away. After the previous visit, I had decided to phone ahead first. This was another family of
four, with a boy and a girl this time. In the photo, they were all dressed alike in red sweaters and black pants or skirts, sandy hair and blue eyes, white teeth, all bunched together and leaning, hair spilling, hands resting on each other’s arms or knees, looking like they might wrestle on the floor and dissolve into laughter moments before sharing hot cocoa and singing carols around the roaring fire in the background. The parents were in their early forties, lines already creasing their eyes and mouths, but appeared content. The boy was around six or seven, all tousled hair and impish smile, and the girl was a few years younger, balanced on her father’s knee and laughing. Caitlyn was right – the perfect moment.

The voice that answered could only be the son, seven or eight now.

“Hello?”

“Hi there. Is your mom or dad around?”

“Mom is. Dad doesn’t live here anymore.”

The forthright honesty of children. My heart stumbled, lurching through the next few rhythms. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Okay.” A measured pause; I had the feeling he was watching television while talking to me. “Who is this?”

“I’m with a photography studio. I have some pictures of your family. Can you get your mom for me?”

I heard a rattle as he set the phone down, and then he bellowed for his mother. I pictured him shouting up the stairs, then sinking back onto the couch in front of Spongebob Squarepants. Perhaps a minute later, a woman picked up, her voice soft but brittle, like its softness used to soothe her children to sleep before it wore away to expose the structure beneath.

“This is Mrs. Harris.”
“Mrs. Harris, my name is Jack Fields. My wife ran a portrait studio, Forever Smiles, where your family got its picture taken last Christmas.”

“Oh. Yes. I’m so sorry for your loss.” She sounded exhausted. “We received the refund you sent.”

“Good. Listen, please keep the refund, but I recently came across the stack of portraits from your session, and I wanted to give them to your family.”

“That’s,” she paused, apparently uncertain of quite what it was, “very kind of you. But we couldn’t possibly. For one thing, that’s not a night I want the children to remember, for obvious reasons, and for another, my husband and I are in the process of a divorce. We don’t really need a family portrait anymore.”

“I understand, really. But some of them are of just the kids, and they’re great; you can just stick them in an album, or put them away for a while. It’s important to me for you to have them.” There was silence on the other end. I imagined her squeezing the bridge of her nose, looking to the ceiling, glancing at her son sprawled on the couch.

“All right. Just mail them to the address you have.”

“I want to give them to all of you. Mr. Harris, too. I want to deliver them in person to the whole family.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just not a good time. I don’t know his schedule, and the kids are confused enough without – ”

“Five minutes. I’ll be there five minutes.”

A deep, belabored sigh. When she spoke again, it had that pitying tone, the kind suggesting she was only humoring me on account of my recent tragedy, and otherwise she would tell me precisely what I could do with those smiling, happy photos. “Fine. Fine. Bring them
Friday at six – no, seven – but I’m not calling Michael. You want him here, you set it up, but you tell him he’s only got five minutes, too. We can divide up the photos and that’s it.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you then. Merry Christmas.”

The phone clicked. I checked the contact sheet, found the husband’s cell phone number, and dialed it. He was distracted and hurried. The conversation lasted about a minute and a half, and I was unsure if he’d even understood what I was telling him or placed the memory I was referring to, but he said he would be there.

I imagined the little girl, the daughter, on her stomach under her bed, her Ken and Barbie dolls fighting and then getting back together.

* 

Look at how happy we were, they would say. How radiant the children. How joyful their smiles. A matched set, the four of us, like we came in a box with a bow, each item not sold separately. We forgot what it looked like, all of us together. We forgot how that felt, to touch. A family, for that moment; yes, it happened once.

We had forgotten, they would say. Thank you. Thank you.

*Daddy,* the children would say. *Daddy’s back.*

It’s what she would have wanted, I would say.

* 

The children did not look up from the video game they were playing, even when Mrs. Harris called them over. There was a tray of Christmas cookies on the coffee table, but no one offered them. Mr. Harris was sitting uncomfortably on the edge of an armchair, while Mrs. Harris stood behind a high-backed chair on the opposite side of the living room, her manicured
nails curled over the chair back and tapping. It was the kind of house that I expected plastic sheeting to be thrown back over the sofa and chairs after I left.

Mrs. Harris came out from behind her chair when I spread the photos out on the coffee table, pushing the cookie tray aside, but Mr. Harris simply leaned forward. They ignored the family portrait and the photo of the two of them, focusing instead on the shots of just the children, chin propped on fist, gazing just off camera, or sitting with hands primly folded.

“They really are lovely,” Mrs. Harris said. “I mean, for the price, for a department store, these are very nice.”

I sucked in a slow breath over my teeth and looked at Mr. Harris. He was regarding the family photo now, curiously, like a museum curator upon discovery of a mysterious specimen.

“These are the ones I want,” Mrs. Harris said, taking two close-ups of each child, leaving one of each child, the couple shot, and the family portrait for her husband. He nodded, scooped the others into an uneven pile, and picked them up. “Thank you for bringing them,” Mrs. Harris added.

“You really look terrific as a family,” I said, gesturing towards the photo on the top of the stack the husband held. “My wife was amazing, but she could only capture what was there already. She saw something there, and she caught it on film as one of the last things she did.” I was speaking quickly; I felt the words had to come out or they would burn through my mouth, smoke holes through my soft palate. “It could have been any of you, that night. You were given this amazing gift, another chance, another year, and the proof of what you’re missing is right in front of you.”
Mrs. Harris retreated behind the high-backed chair, her photos in hand. She spoke quietly, that brittle edge coming back into her voice, and I realized it was not fragility, but anger. “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

Mr. Harris rose, tucking the photos under his arm like a newspaper, and snagged a cookie from the tray. I could feel his wife’s fingers tighten on her photos. “I better head back to the office, too. Bye, kiddos,” Mr. Harris said. The girl waved a hand, waggling her fingers for a few seconds after her eyes had returned to the screen. The boy didn’t look up.

“You don’t know how much time you have left.” I stood, and Mrs. Harris began herding me in the direction of the front door.

“Thanks for stopping by,” she said.

*I*

I went home from there, although I had already moved into Nessa’s place for the holidays. I needed to feel my house, to see the failing Christmas tree, to walk by Caitlyn’s lip balm, find-a-word book, scrapbooking scissors, earring backs, and rubber bands she used as ponytail holders. I needed to see her bridal portrait over the fireplace. It didn’t feel right to sleep in a home where no pictures of her still hung; there was one place where Nessa had failed to hang a corresponding photo when she took them all down, and a faint square of differently-shaded paint betrayed its position, this retinal burn on the wall. Where a photo of me with Caitlyn once hung, she put a mirror.

Mirrors don’t actually bother me. The one time I went to the support group Dr. Tanner recommended, two of them talked about this, about mirrors, but I couldn’t relate. As long as I avoid eye contact with strangers, like in an elevator, or ticket line, or purchasing fast food, it’s
not a big deal. What bother me are empty photo frames – like a grave with an empty casket, this feeling there’s something missing.

So at my house, I left in all of the inserts that came with the frames: the forced smiles, the artificial laughter, the jaunty couple or synchronized family on a bronzed beach, in t-shirts and overalls with the legs rolled up, dancing barefoot in the rippled surf of a 5x7. There’s one on a bookshelf, showing this young blonde woman in three-quarter profile, looking up toward a light that falls across her sharp cheekbones, her eyes pensive, lips just parted as if to speak. One of those we never got around to sticking a photo in. So I see her, the unknowable, the model. I pass by it and wonder what happens to these people after they get their picture taken. Do their friends and family buy frames with their picture from the stores? Can the models give them as gifts, or do they insert an ‘actual’ photo on top of the ‘fake’ photo? Is it fake? Is she truly deep in thought, in the middle of this photo shoot, pondering the meaning of her life and where this picture frame modeling career will take her? As a child, did she ever dream of modeling before someone said “how beautiful” meaning her face and “how photogenic” meaning her smile and “she should be in pictures” meaning the still kind they place inside frames to be sold?

I thought I had seen the woman in a frame at the first house, the Prestons, though I couldn’t be sure if it was an inset or a framed photo. Perhaps she was a friend of the family. After the Preston and Harris families, there were nine more left, but I wasn’t sure I could keep doing this. I didn’t know how Caitlyn did it, day after day, faithfully and heroically preserving artificiality.

*
“I told you it was a bad idea,” Nessa said, sitting next to me on the couch with her feet tucked up under her. She was wrapped in a ball, such that a green flannel lap throw covered her from the neck down. Her thermostat was now stuck somewhere near sixty.

“I know. You’re always right.” We were watching some graphically violent action movie on late-night cable, after an unspoken agreement not to watch any of the cheery holiday fare or romantic comedies that most of the stations were showing.

“That’s true, I am.” She was sitting at an angle on the middle cushion, while I sat by the arm; we weren’t touching, but the top of her head was just shy of my chin. Her hair smelled like grapefruit.

“I thought I could help. It seemed important.” I hadn’t told her there were more portraits left. She had been disapproving the previous night when I told her I was going to a second family, expressing it in the impact of soup cans as she put away groceries and the efficiency with which she wiped down the countertops.

“People have to work out their own lives. We can’t know what they’re going through or why they’re here.” She used the edge of the blanket to rub her nose as the film ended and credits began racing across the screen at triple speed. “I don’t even know why I’m here.”

“To keep me sane.” A commercial came on for a phone sex hotline, showing a slender redhead getting far too much enjoyment from her headset. Nessa giggled, light and airy. I smelled berries, and felt something both pleasant and sickening in the space above my stomach.

“Too late,” she said.

The next movie started, and the opening shots were of a softcore sex scene, the camera gradually zooming in on twining limbs and arching torsos. About three seconds passed, and then Nessa coughed. Her face was unreadable as she kicked off the blanket.
“Well, goodnight,” she said, and padded away to her bedroom. I clicked off the television, the dancing points of light flying toward a vanishing point, a sudden quiet settling heavily, the cushions next to me still holding the shape of the space she displaced.

*

I decided this would be my last attempt. This packet of photos held numerous poses, several featuring a young mother and father with their child, and a few with just the two of them falling into each other’s arms or tickling, squirming, laughing in a way that I didn’t think Caitlyn had posed, but had probably encouraged. Most of the photos, though, were portraits of their little boy, who looked about two years old. He had the same short, black curls as his parents, his mother’s dark, wondering eyes, and these expressive hands that reached for the camera, or the ceiling, or something out of the frame. They had not chosen a holiday theme, but a series of colored backgrounds instead, rich earth tones or baby blue. In the last picture, the little boy was leaning on a large block, an over-sized version of the sort children play with to learn numbers or the alphabet, and it had a big number two on the side. The boy had one hand raised as if to say, I made it! On the surface, they looked so loving, so happy. But I couldn’t bring myself to call, and I was prepared for the worst.

“Your family portraits,” I would say. “Some of my wife’s best work.”

“Then she must not have been very good,” the father would say, while the mother stifled a laugh. “Maybe it’s best she’s not doing this any more.”

“And besides,” the mother would add, “we’re not married anymore, and we can’t stand our son.”
The door would close, and I would stand there with the photographs slipping from my fingers, letting them flutter to the welcome mat to linger outside in the wind and weather, like orphans begging to be let in.

*  
The mother opened the door, although it took me a moment to be sure it was her, and not a close relative— an older sister, perhaps. In many ways, Mrs. Moore looked almost precisely as she had in the photo, pale skin and a close bob of curls, in a t-shirt and capris, eyes wide and searching. But here she wore no make-up, her hair appeared unwashed, dull and flat, and the circles under her eyes were pronounced by the lines ringing them, etching her face now in ridges and shadows. She looked years older, and she seemed to collapse into herself when she saw she did not know me, her smile revealed for the forced construct that it was.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I’m with Forever Smiles Portrait Studio, and I just wanted you to have these. That’s all. There’s no charge.” I held the stack of photos out to her. “Good day.”

Her fingers closed over the other side of the stack, but they exerted no pressure, simply touching the edges while her eyes moved over the portrait on top— their son, leaning on his number two block, triumphant. I was left holding the other side, waiting for her to take them, as Mr. Moore appeared behind his wife, a head taller than she, his hands moving to rest on her shoulders as if to keep her from running out of the house.

“We won’t be needing any,” he said, nodding once. “Take care now.”

“I’m not selling anything,” I said, trying to keep my voice civil, while I attempted to push them into his wife’s hands. I wondered if he had even seen what I was giving her.
“We don’t need any more,” he reiterated, and I saw him start to pull his wife into the recesses of the house. For a moment, her fingers flailed at the photos, fluttering at their corners, and then she pulled away from him and took the stack from me, her voice lower now, calmer. “Please come in.”

She disappeared into the house, and the husband stood there in the doorway staring at me with loathing, but his arm held the door open, so I followed his wife inside. I thought I heard him curse me under his breath as I passed.

Their house was small, simple, a pale yellow A-frame with blue sashes fringing the windows like lashes, the welcome mat placed on the inside of their door and not much beyond basic furnishings in the living room. There were photos of their wedding, more of the two of them on some tropical island, and a plaque next to the light-switch that read *Let Go and Let God.* There was a cluster of pictures on the wall above the couch, but they were arranged haphazardly, with odd gaps between them, and I saw unused nails protruding from the wall in these spaces. I saw no sign of the boy – no photos, no scattered toys, no children’s videos or kid-sized furniture.

Mr. Moore had walked past me and touched his wife on the elbow of her arm holding the photos; she transferred them to the other hand and stepped away again. “Rachel,” he said, but she kept walking, beckoning me to follow her down a short hallway. We passed two doors and she paused before a third, as if to knock. She turned the knob and we stepped into the boy’s room.

I was reminded immediately of our bedroom and bathroom, Caitlyn’s and mine, the way up until three months ago they presented every item Caitlyn had been using, preserved in its original condition, down to her pillow, her hairbrush, her shower gel. When Nessa finally won out and helped me go through it all, she found mold in Caitlyn’s drinking glass, and her towel on
the rack, next to my fresh one, was as stiff as a board. “This is so unhealthy,” Nessa had said, throwing both glass and towel away. She had salvaged the moment by bringing a framed photo of Caitlyn and me into the bathroom, to rest on the sink where her toiletries used to stand. This was before the picture wars, before I began printing and framing more and more photos of her.

This is where the boy’s pictures had gone. They were framed, propped against books on shelves, or slid onto a French memo board that also held several small hospital bracelets and get well cards. There were dried flowers on shelves, and a lovely, artificial arrangement in one corner, with blooming roses and carnations. There were blocks, trucks, and plastic dinosaurs on a wooden shelf carved and painted so that the four posts looked like giant crayons. A large play-mat covered the floor and depicted a miniature town, including a bank, school, and post office, and toy cars sat motionless on its streets. One corner of the room was filled with stuffed animals, all neatly arranged and waiting patiently, and a wicker basket in another corner held a huge, red, rubber ball. An outfit hung from its hanger on the closet door – khaki shorts and a t-shirt that read Momma’s Boy.

“I’ll get frames for them,” Mrs. Moore said. “For all of them.” She set the portraits on a shelf, then pulled the top one off and carried it to the memo board, where she scooted other mementos together until she cleared a space large enough, and then slid the beaming picture of her son into its new home.

She stood just looking at it, one arm crossed over her chest and her other hand at her mouth, picking at her lip, while her husband stood in the doorway. I thought one of them would say something else, dismissing me, but they didn’t, so I looked around the room. On one bookshelf there was another small stack of photos, the kind printed off a personal camera, and a
stack of empty frames next to them. Not entirely empty – a happy child squealed laughter from the inset on top, his hands clasped to the top of his head.

“It’s a really nice room,” I said. Mrs. Moore continued to stare, to pick at her lip, and Mr. Moore coughed from the doorway. I picked up the frame, then looked at the one beneath it – another little boy, dressed in a baby’s suit and bowtie, scowling like an old man. The third frame inset held a little girl, her blonde hair nearly white, sitting in clover and looking up toward the sunlight that fell across her face.

“We could use some privacy,” Mr. Moore said, not unkindly, but I heard his frustration. Before I put the frame back, I looked again, and abruptly I was sure that this little girl was the woman from my frame, that here she was captured as a child, frozen in this room like a sleeping princess. It was her gaze, her face, in its original innocence.

I held the frame but looked over at Mrs. Moore, and in that moment I felt that something painful but necessary was being restrained, and this unnatural suspension came at a cost. In the frame, the little girl would never age, never shed tears, never feel pain. But she would never grow, never learn, never become that woman to peer thoughtfully into the heavens while the sun lit up her hair like fire, and this struck me with a deep sadness. There had to be some balance. I wanted to free her, to ask if I could open the frame and take her with me, but I heard soft crying and saw that Mr. Moore had put his arms around his wife.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said, leaving the frame and walking from the room.

* 

I found myself forgetting all the times Caitlyn and I fought. I lost track of the faults and petty weaknesses that made her human. What was left was an image of something I could hold onto in the face of all reason, something to get me through the nights with a bittersweet pain
more fulfilling than the truth. This kind of pain could be stretched to cover whatever I piled underneath it. It had to be released, Nessa said, but slowly. It had to breathe.

I went through Caitlyn’s walk-in closet that evening, pulling out the boxes that I didn’t put into storage. I tried to remember the inconsistencies, our differences, the arguments, the things that made her – us – real. In one of the boxes, I found a wine bottle filled with sand from a beach in Playa del Carmen. I remembered our first real fight, over whether to have dinner in town or take a sunset cruise. A stupid, meaningless fight. I pulled out a photo of us in the lodge in Banff, smiling in front of the fireplace. I remembered the lodge attendant I flirted with, and Caitlyn’s retaliation with the ski instructor the next day. I saw a teddy bear won at the State Fair and remembered our conversation that night over how soon to have children. I remembered Caitlyn’s tears, the way she locked me out of my own bedroom, the dent I put in the door. I remembered how hurried we were that last morning, the quick peck on the lips as I ran for my car, late for work.

But I also saw birthday cards, and remembered the way she woke me on that morning of each year. I saw her cookbooks, and remembered the ‘secret ingredient’ she put into her chicken marsala. I remembered her ticklish spots, the way she wore her hair, how she twirled a pen while talking on the phone. The sound of her voice. The first time she told me she loved me, when my father died. I unpacked it all, carefully, spreading it out across the carpet, chose one item to keep out – a candle she loved too much to ever burn – and then packed it all away again, pushing it back into the dark recesses of the closet, to await another, later re-awakening.

*

I took down the frames without photos of us, packing them into a box of things to give away, with that earnest young woman in sunlight on top, still peering curiously as I closed the
box flaps. Perhaps I would give that one to Nessa as a birthday gift in a few weeks, and perhaps the woman in the frame would feel comfortable moving from my shelf to hers, knowing we were close, still seeing me often. Perhaps Nessa would put a photo in it, and the woman could finally rest, could close her eyes and stop performing. She is unchanging, that same expression, the same yearning. Her world is static, a momentary burst of light stretched into an unyielding infinitude. She looks upward, awaiting the day the frame will shatter, the spell break. I am no longer jealous of her.

* 

“Merry Christmas,” Nessa said, handing me a small box wrapped in shiny red paper, the kind that crinkles when you touch it. She smiled, and the spattering of freckles on her nose bunched into a tight constellation; they normally only come out in the summer, emerging like leopard spots on her face and shoulders, but she got more sun than usual this year on a trip to the Bahamas, using a teacher discount and sending descriptive postcards from each port of call. She had urged me to go with her.

I tugged off the ribbon, unwrapped the box, and removed the lid. Inside was a pocketwatch on a chain, the kind that train conductors wear; it was silver, with a simple, braided pattern around the edges. I clicked it open, and found that she had carefully cut and fit a photograph into the inside cover. It showed the three of us, arms around each other, with me in the middle. Neither woman was being edged out of the frame. We were laughing, genuine, happy; a perfect moment.

Nessa reached over and tapped the watch. “We’ve got time,” she murmured.
I felt the appropriate cold of winter settling into her house, a frigid darkness pressing against the windowpanes, held captive in the rosy glow of Christmas lights hanging from her rooftop. I didn’t know what to say. We sat, silent, our sides not quite touching.
Dress Up

She met Blake at the viewing of an elderly woman, wiry and sprightly by the look of her, with thick grey hair and thicker glasses, dark moles, and a birthmark near her chin that was mostly obscured by wrinkles. Casey felt she had made the woman look twenty years younger, if not merely asleep.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Casey murmured, her black heels together and her hands clasped operetta-style, to a man in his late twenties, perhaps a few years older than she, who was standing in front of the casket. He had brown hair and eyes, a slim build, and a simple honesty in the set of his mouth that she fancied she had seen in herself; she had the fleeting thought that if they were in a movie together, they could play brother and sister. His hands were in the pockets of his slacks, and he was looking at the deceased with the expression of someone waiting on his drycleaning.

“Hmm?” he said, glancing up. “Oh, thank you. Thanks. I mean, it’s hard.” He was looking at Casey now, one hand brushing bangs back from his eyes, which sprang right back into place, like a Gap model, which is what Casey was thinking now; she pictured him in turtlenecks, pullovers, and preppy vests with nautical symbols stitched in.

She felt a little self-conscious under his gaze and stepped closer to the casket, though maintaining her posture. “She seems like she was a lovely person,” Casey said, admiring the job she had done on the woman’s lipstick – she had chosen a subtle, coral color, one she was fond of herself.

“You can tell?”

She straightened a bit. “Let me see. She baked cookies, didn’t she? She hated a messy house and always said that cleanliness is next to godliness. She loved all her grandchildren and
owned two – no, three cats.” She flashed teeth at him that had sent her dentist to Europe three times over the course of her adolescence.

“Granny? Good heavens, no.” He laughed, pleasantly. “She was a chain-smoking, alcoholic old witch who drove both her kids to early graves and couldn’t tell her living room from the bathroom for the last six months.” Blake pulled out a pack of cigarettes and tapped one out.

Casey felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. She knew she should tell him that he couldn’t smoke here, but she had an unspoken pact with herself never to confront someone unless absolutely necessary, particularly if that someone had recently had a loved one – or relative, at least – die.

“My name’s Blake. And don’t take this the wrong way, but what are you doing later tonight?” He lit up and took a drag, while she fumbled her hands back into choir-pose in hopes this would help her composure.

“Sorry,” she mumbled out, “but it sends up red flags that you’re hitting on me at your grandmother’s wake.”

“Oh, come on, the old bird wouldn’t mind. Here you are, Granny.” He blew smoke into the casket, which swirled around the old woman’s features eerily, hellishly Casey thought, before dissipating. “Besides, just ‘cause they’re dead doesn’t make things different. Still the same person. I’d hit on you if she were alive.”

“That’s completely –”

“Haven’t you ever felt attracted to one of them that came in? One of the bodies?”
Casey gasped. Then she felt her skin changing color, wondering briefly if this is what a chameleon feels – she needed a background to blend in with, and eyed the nearest curtains, but they were closer to maroon than red. She pushed herself past Blake.

“Hey, wait.” He caught her by the wrist. She stopped, raising her eyes from the floor to where his hand grasped her arm, waiting. He smiled. “You did a beautiful job.”

She paused, fidgeted with her pearl bracelet, and stared at the straps on her shoes. “Really?”

*

It had happened last week. Even in death the young man was handsome, a surfer’s shock of thick blond hair tossed back from his forehead with a cavalier disregard for grooming when the swells were high; Casey’s eyes lingered on the edge of the pale blue sheet pulled halfway up his chest, like a wave advancing up that tan beach, and she imagined perhaps a shark had gotten him, mistaking him for a golden god of a seal, and thought maybe she should check under the sheet to be sure his legs were still there. She reminded herself that sometimes Mr. Wilcox left the deceased nude for this part of the process, her part, and after the brief thrill this gave her, she told herself she was going straight to hell and set to work preparing her cosmetics kit.

She stood near the casket at every wake, solemn and professional, wearing the same old-fashioned black dress (purchased by Mr. Wilcox) with her brown hair pulled up in a neat bun and her hands folded in front of her, as if she were about to sing. Bereaved family members would thank her absentely, or sometimes enthusiastically, for the deceased’s appearance; Mr. Wilcox encouraged her to take credit, despite the fact that her work amounted to the finishing touches. She began to live for those moments, when the grieving widow or the grief-stricken husband, alone after fifty years together, would touch her arm lightly, give a small smile, and tell her that
it made such a difference to see his or her beloved looking so beautiful, so handsome, on this last day. Mr. Wilcox would already be in the back, working on another ‘client’, calmly suctioning out stomach, lungs, bladder, and intestines, listening to Frank Sinatra and humming off-key.

Casey began to feel a developing affinity for these people, the recently bereaved, as if it were not a parade of separate, identically dressed families, but rather the same individuals coming back week after week to view her latest creation. She tried different techniques for effect; she looked at her subject, so peaceful and reserved after Mr. Wilcox finished, and tried to guess what sort of person he was, where she lived, what books he read, where she grew up, what his family thought of him. She would piece it together in her mind, form an entire fictional history, and then apply the makeup, fix the hair, and trim and paint the fingernails accordingly. She began to feel she was a part of these families, such that she half-expected them to recognize her when they arrived for the viewing. She took their compliments to heart, and she extended her condolences out of sincerity. She bought marked-down boxes of cards that said *In deepest sympathy* on the front, and she wrote short messages in blue ballpoint with the intention of passing them out to anyone who looked particularly in need of one. She always wrote slowly, carefully, her penmanship exquisite, starting over if she smudged the ink, choosing her words one at a time – forming them out loud, her lips feeling them, tasting their appropriateness – and every time she would read them again at the last minute and decide they were trite, shallow, clichéd in the face of such real pain. The next day she would buy another box and try again.

She had always possessed a level of comfort with death, if not with mourning. As a child, she was the one to pick up the dead bird to show her mother, the one to gross out her friends with what she would eat or touch or say, the one to bury family pets – the ceremony concluding with a tearful and lengthy eulogy that she delivered with dramatic inflection, her
mother invariably weary and glancing at her watch, her older sister rolling her eyes or shifting her weight every ten seconds, her father typically out of town or working late. After Casey’s first weeks working at Wilcox Funeral Home, she was able to view the cadavers as props, as long as Mr. Wilcox had finished with his draining, filling, shaving, and sewing, as long as the mouth was wired closed and the eyes glued shut.

She saw a middle-aged woman once while Mr. Wilcox was preparing her, the woman’s limbs akimbo, eyes open, mouth slack, and Casey had to take the afternoon off, going to a movie with Blake. The woman looked as if she might speak, might ask Casey which eye-shadow she was going to use, and this disturbed the natural separation of the two extremes, blurring the possibility not of reanimation but of a faulty diagnosis of death. She recalled a night at the age of nine that she awoke in a panic, still half-dreaming, and hurried out to the far corner of the garden in her Scooby-doo slippers, kneeling to press her head to the earth, certain she would hear the scrabbling and whimpers of the puppy she had pronounced dead that morning and buried that afternoon. She heard nothing, but the cold damp of the soil on her cheek stayed with her through the night. This memory also came to her at the age of sixteen when she stood at her father’s headstone, a heart attack having claimed him four days before, but she didn’t worry he might feel claustrophobic beneath her feet. It was closer to the feeling she got when her friend from across the street moved to Portland with promises to write every month, though they both knew it would never happen, and she never heard from the girl again but from time to time imagined what she might be doing in that other place.

*Blake ran a type of business that Casey didn’t know existed: Crime and Trauma Scene Decontamination. He rented an office in a squat tan building, a single room with no windows*
and a ceiling fan that worked in spurts. After their second date, he introduced her to his secretary Marvin – administrative assistant, he was quickly corrected – a gangly, fluorescent teenager who sat in the midst of a desk, two filing cabinets, and a dusty plastic plant, and blogged on the computer all day.

“Does Marvin ever, you know, clean up?” Casey asked Blake after they left the office to find lunch.

“Definitely not. He threw up after he saw Saw.” Blake held the car door for her.

“Saw saw?” Casey repeated, giggling despite herself. She was in a good mood, in no small part due to Blake’s insistence on paying for gourmet food everywhere they went. It was a welcome change from ramen, and she was determined to enjoy it while she could. Besides, he continued to be interested in her, and she was doing so well herself, showing great restraint.

This euphoria would last through their next three dates, after which Casey had to be honest with herself. She could not picture a long-term relationship with him. It wasn’t even that she didn’t want to hear stories over the dinner table of how brain matter dried to a cement-like consistency that had to be scraped up with putty knives, or that large amounts of blood eventually formed a Jello-like paste that could be shoveled into heavy-duty garbage bags. At some level, she found these things morbidly fascinating. But he had not asked her once about her plans, or her past, or the intriguingly quirky (she thought) collection of pencil-toppers he saw displayed on her living room shelf when she invited him up for cocoa.

He was astonishingly self-absorbed, and considering her own lack of direction at the moment, she decided this was potentially a Very Bad Idea (she also capitalized important items on to-do lists, physical and mental, and took childish pleasure in the capital at the start of her name). So she assured herself that if he ever hinted he wanted to take their relationship to the
next step, as his disappointment when they actually drank cocoa seemed to foreshadow, she would speak out and tell him to stop buying her dinners and movie tickets. However, aside from heavy flirtation (with her, their waitress, the manager, drivers stopped at a red light), he gave no indication that she was more than a captive audience, whose attention was worth the price of a date.

“If someone slits his wrists or something, or is shot in the stomach,” Blake said, mopping up runny red juices with an undercooked piece of steak, “blood galore. Break out the enzyme solvent if it’s had a chance to dry. But if somebody gets shot in the chest, not that much blood at all.” He paused, his eyebrows raised, watching her as he chewed.

She recognized her cue, and sighed inaudibly. “Why not?”

He smiled around a mouthful of cow, his canines crimson. “You really love this stuff, don’t you? It’s ‘cause the lungs suck up most of it. Y’know, it kinda turns me on when you’re all into this blood and guts trivia. It’s sexy.”

The twinge of guilt Casey had felt in ordering the lobster – the most expensive thing on the menu – somehow vanished, and she wondered, not for the first time, if she could bankrupt him into really noticing her as he’d done at the funeral. “Let’s order dessert.”

“Okay. No crème brulee, though. Always makes me think of this one time, somebody found this guy in a bathtub, and he had been there for like four months, right, and – ”

She mentally went la la la in her head as she skimmed the dessert menu and wondered if he simply found her more interesting when there was a corpse nearby.

* 

The night her father left for the last time, Casey was auditioning her dolls for a part in the impromptu fashion show she had staged on her bedroom floor, her Lite Brite providing a dim red
glow and her combination announcer / director’s voice lowered to a stage whisper. Her father
burst in, and Casey’s first feeling was embarrassment, not at being caught up past her bedtime,
but to be seen actually wearing the fluffy Minnie Mouse slippers her grandmother sent for her
recent eleventh birthday. She sank to her knees, feet tucked under her, as her father approached.

Raised voices had been drifting up from the kitchen a few moments ago, but the house was quiet
now. A tall man, with a thin black moustache and dress shoes that always seemed to clip-clop,
her father was dressed in his suit even this late at night, though it was rumpled and his tie was
gone.

When she thought back to this time, she could never remember what he said, although
she attempted to reconstruct the conversation. She talked it out in front of a mirror in her late
 teens, an awkward silence falling when it was her father’s turn to speak, her imagination unable
to recreate anything appropriate for him to tell her. What she remembered instead was the way
he knelt before her, like he did in his tux in that photo on the mantel with his mother in her poofy
wedding dress, and her father took her face in his hands, his ring cold and hard against her

*  

Casey had graduated from Westview Beauty College when she was twenty, specializing
in make-up, and immediately applied to the major motion picture studios in Hollywood. She got
the distinct impression that her résumés were now either lining bird cages or shredded into those
little strips that reminded her of lettuce, just like she shredded all the credit card offers she
received in the mail, the sheer balance of zeros on them unsettling rather than exciting her. At any rate, her studio interviews went nowhere, and she was forced to accept a position as Third Assistant Make-up Artist on a low-budget independent horror film called Zombie Sluts Ate My Brain that stayed remarkably true to its title. She learned how to make realistic blood with Karo syrup and food coloring, how to make chunky brains using peanut butter and granola, and even stood in for one of the zombie sluts who was off-set that day getting breast implants co-sponsored by the director. Following this three-month shoot, she applied various places again, remaining vague about the nature of the “Award-Winning Feature Film Cosmetics Experience” listed on her résumé and dreading the inevitable question that came about its title (in truth, someone on the Internet had given it a made-up award pertaining to the success of the lead zombie’s bustline enhancement).

A year later, she was circling ads with a purple Sharpie – the red ones still had negative connotations for her – when she came across the listing from Wilcox Funeral Home. Makeup Artist Needed. Exp. Req’d. Inquire in person.

She liked the sound of the word “Inquire,” and was careful to use it when she applied, the first salvo from her armory of qualifications. Not only was she qualified, but she had read the ad enough times to familiarize herself with its vocabulary. “I’m here to inquire about the makeup artist position,” she said, chin lifted, as Mr. Wilcox looked at her with the expression she used to get when she sold cookie dough door to door for her school at three times what it was worth.

He was three inches shorter than she, with a moustache, limpid brown hair combed over a bald spot, and watery eyes that retained a certain firmness in their gaze. Casey had expected him to be in a black undertaker’s suit, with a raven perched on his shoulder perhaps, and had taken pains to dress herself as for a funeral, in fact wearing the knee-length black dress with the cap
sleeves that she had worn only once before, five years ago when her father passed. Instead, he
had on a green flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up – one was rolled up significantly farther
than the other, and this bothered her – rumpled khakis, and worn brown loafers with little tassels.

“Come in,” he said solemnly, straightening and waving her inside with the kind of
unapproachable dignity Casey associated with judges, librarians, and doctors giving very bad
news, and she thought, *Ah ha, there it is.*

He hired her on the spot, almost before she had a chance to tell him about her Beauty
College training, and she had the urge to force him to read her résumé, to assuage her growing
conviction that the months spent on that set slathering teenagers with artificial gore and listening
to the twenty-something director yell at her that the oozing facial wound went on the *other* side
were, in fact, wasted time. Mr. Wilcox seemed mostly concerned about her ability to work with
cadavers, and she lied to him (the sixth time in her life she’d been outright dishonest, she had
kept track, and she went back and forth on whether one of those counted) and told him that she
had practiced on them extensively in Beauty College, like budding doctors did in med school.

“We’ll give it a whirl,” Mr. Wilcox said, with the air of a carnival attendant talked into
firing up the ol’ Spin-o-Rama despite rusting gears and loose bolts, since he personally will not
be the one riding it. His lack of confidence drove her to prove her leaden stomach and steely
nerves, which she mostly did with a couple of stomach-emptying exceptions, and by the end of
the first couple of weeks they had settled into an agreeable rhythm. Mr. Wilcox was grudging in
his praise, a low snort generally indicating approval, but she found herself striving to please him
and enjoying the bounce in his step when she asked him for direction. He liked to toss out
maxims while they worked, often non sequiturs that had little to no relation to the moment; even
so, Casey enjoyed being able to think, “That’s a non sequitur, that is,” feeling quite intelligent, having looked the term up once after reading it in the Sunday funnies.

“Don’t keep all your eggs in one basket, Casey,” he might say, after minutes of silence.

“Yes, Mr. Wilcox.”

“You kids today, always working so hard, trying to get ahead.” He had Casey hold a young man’s pale blue leg still – it flopped uncooperatively – so he could work it into the pants.

“Don’t put the cart before the horse.”

Casey was unsure whether Mr. Wilcox was addressing her or the unfortunate youth on the table. “No, Mr. Wilcox,” she replied, for both of them.

“You’re probably tired of listening to me, rattling on with unwanted advice.”

Casey noted that the young man’s leg was shaved. A swimmer? It gave her a weird feeling and made her aware of the stubble on her own calves. She was also aware, though, of Mr. Wilcox’s pipe tobacco smell, of his confident, hardworking hands, of his salt and pepper moustache. “Actually,” she smiled at him, “I like it.”

*

Casey hit puberty full force not long after her father left, sprouting up and out in all sorts of ways that defied her best attempts at damage control. She developed a fascination with boys that was closer to obsessed stalking than flirtatious crushes, and whenever she attempted a relationship in her teen years, she came on so strongly that one of them ended it in a disgusted huff within weeks, either at the point that she pledged undying love or when he attempted to remove her pants. Her sister was seven years older and had moved out by the time she needed guidance, and when she tried to ask her mother, her mother got angry and said something about being the last person qualified to give relationship advice.
Casey was semi-attractive, with shining blue eyes and slight curves, on the skinny side but with legs long enough to make up for it. She was fond of wearing her brown hair in pigtails until a friend assured her they were a turn-off to any guys older than twelve or younger than forty. She had freckles like all the women in her family, spattered across the bridge of her nose in no discernible pattern. A few days before he went away, her father had read her a bedtime story, his words drifting off as he stared at her and reached out to brush back one of her curls, his face so serious it frightened her. “You look just like your mother,” he had said. His touch lingered a moment on the soft sweep of her ear, and then he left. He did not finish the book.

Blake was the first boyfriend she had in her twenties. It had been nearly two years since she allowed herself to fixate on a man, and she was striving to rein it in – in fact, his oddness made this easier, and she wondered if perhaps he had cured her, helped her to develop normal attachments and healthy relationships by his very undesirableness, and she felt a bit obligated to stay with him out of gratitude. She was happy to discover that she heartily didn’t want to be with him, and she continued to date him because of the pleasantly in-control feeling it gave her.

One drawback to their dates was that Blake seemed to view every outing as an opportunity to grow his business, which Casey found interesting but eventually somewhat nauseating. They would be at a restaurant, clothing store, or movie theater, and he would produce a flyer and a business card and ask to see the manager, who usually didn’t like the direction the conversation took if there were other customers within earshot.

“Most of the companies who do my line of work,” Blake told Casey, halfway up the stadium seating of a darkened movie theater, “limit their financial growth because they see this as too sensitive of a subject. They don’t advertise because they have – what’s the word – ”
“Tact?” she suggested. She picked at something stuck to her armrest, until it started to come off wetly under her fingernail and she left it alone.

“Insular vision. They underestimate people’s acceptance of this sort of thing. I mean, people die, right? Nobody minds watching life insurance ads.” He pulled on the armrest between them, which rose up out of the way, but he did not put his arm around her. The popcorn even remained on his far side.

“People don’t like to face what they’re afraid of,” Casey said, and as soon as she had, she felt like someone should be taking her words down and inscribing them on a small plaque to be given back to her at some kind of recognition ceremony. She is so wise, someone in the audience would murmur. What impressive knowledge of human nature.

“And what are you afraid of?”

“Missing the start of the movie,” she whispered, as the opening credits began. “Hush.” Maybe not so wise, the person would say. Listen to her dodge that question. Casey regularly heard this type of mental exchange and tuned it out as the movie got underway.

It was a thriller about a serial killer, which she knew would get Blake fired up, though it hadn’t been her first pick. In the opening scene, a young blonde lay curled in a nest of blankets on her sofa, a mug of marshmallow-topped hot chocolate in her hands, while outside the killer made his way over the fence and across the lawn, coming closer, his evil nature indicated by the jerky, first-person camera perspective and the rising screech of angry violinists. The woman was watching a movie, and a quick flash of it appeared on her television: True Grit. John Wayne’s face filled the screen within a screen for a moment, and then there were gunshots, then yells from the television, then screams from the house as the killer burst in, but Casey ignored them as she tried to keep watching the images on the television in the corner of the shot.
“The stars, hah?” Mr. Wilcox said, after hearing that Casey’s dream upon graduation from Westview Beauty College had been to do film makeup in Hollywood. “Make the beautiful people even more beautiful.”

“I guess so.” She was bent over a middle-aged woman, applying dusky eye-shadow, while Mr. Wilcox stood with his arms folded and smoked a Meerschaum pipe that would have suited Sherlock Holmes but looked out of place with Mr. Wilcox’s flannel and slippers. He occasionally leaned around Casey, indicating a spot needing further attention with a gesture of a wrinkled finger, his other hand resting for a moment on her back. She found herself leaning into his touch, the gentle press of his palm warm and safe. Her maternal grandparents were no longer living, and her mother had cut off all communication with her father’s parents, but he smelled like she remembered her grandparents’ homes smelling – a good smell, sandalwood and tobacco, not the preserved decay of those elderly that made it to this table. She caught the scent of Old Spice, something her father and his father had both worn.

“Don’t keep a bee in your bonnet,” he said, withdrawing his hand and stepping back.

“I won’t.”

“Jimmy Stewart, yes? Clark Gable, Bette Davis, John Wayne, James Dean. They might be too good looking to need your makeup. Now, this old man could use it.” He gestured at himself and laughed at that, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way she associated with Santa Claus – the one in commercials, not the shopping mall variety who had traumatized her as a child – and she decided not to tell him that those weren’t the stars she had dreamed of working on.

“My father loved John Wayne,” she said instead. “ Owned all of his movies. He’d watch one every weekend.” Her hand was still, the brush motionless against the woman’s painted skin.
“Man of taste, your father. Gentleman and a scholar.”

“I don’t know about that.” She tried to finish, then tried to fix the smudge she had just caused.

“Nobody who loves the Duke could be all bad.” Mr. Wilcox patted her shoulder and puffed at his pipe, nodding thoughtfully, looking for all the world like he had just solved the ultimate mystery.

*

The following Friday, Mr. Wilcox handed her a plain white envelope as they were leaving for the day, with her name printed on it in old-fashioned, swirling cursive. He nodded to her and gave her shoulder a fatherly squeeze. She stared at her name, wondering why she had never considered making the C at the start so grandiose and dominant, looking as if it might swallow whole all the other letters in her name and then start on the rest of the alphabet. It made her feel latently powerful, if a bit intimidated. Mr. Wilcox locked the door behind them and then strolled to his Lincoln, the keys jingling in his hand.

Casey sat down on the step to open her envelope as the Lincoln’s tires scratched through gravel, crunching audibly, the sound reminding her of breakfast cereals and obnoxious animated spokespersons. She opened the letter, skimmed the bottom half, panicked, went back to read the first half, looked up to see the grey Lincoln gone, and then lowered her head between her knees, breathing hard. She pressed her face into her palms and mentally counted in French to calm down, made it to seven, then forgot what came next and had to finish with eight nine ten.

Thirty minutes later, Blake was uncharacteristically attentive as she waved the letter in his face and then forced him to read it, then to read it again when he did not seem suitably distraught. He met her in a coffee shop that sold books, or a bookstore that sold coffee, Casey
wasn’t sure which, and that played horrible bongo music for sale at the register next to tip jars for people who had done hardly anything for her. She liked to come here and try to read the literary quotes on the t-shirts of the employees, to sip lattes, to smile at the handsome young manager, and to wish a movie star would wander in, notice her impeccable makeup, and ask her for her secret. Today, she was too unraveled to even glance at the clever Oscar Wilde quote sported by the girl who brought them each a steaming mug of java on a dainty saucer.

“He left you a hefty check. That’s a nice little severance package, I’d say.” Blake examined the personal check that had accompanied the sheet of gilt-edged stationary.

“He said I’ve been a great employee. Employee. Like that’s it, I’m just a worker.”

“You were just a worker. He’s selling and moving, Case. It happens.” Blake took his mug off the saucer and pushed the saucer to the edge of the table, as if its femininity were contagious.

“He was starting to feel like family, and he just left. Just like that.” She blew on the top of her coffee again and again, her eyes momentarily crossing as they focused on the ripples below the tip of her nose, then she set it back down without taking a drink. “Like it was nothing.”

“He probably needs the money, and obviously doesn’t like goodbyes. It happens.”

“Will you stop saying that?”

“You move on, you know? Get on with things.” He reached out, touching the back of her hand. She could feel the residual heat in his touch, transferred from his mug of coffee. “Are you okay? You look pretty pale.”

“I’m sorry, I just –”
“No, no. I like it. Looks good on you.” He smiled, waving for the Oscar Wilde girl to come back with their check, and a few moments later Casey let herself be directed toward the door. She was soon after bundled into his car with a pile of small boxes in her lap containing scones, tarts, and slices of banana nut bread. She was seized with a desire for them as they passed the display counter on their way out the door, not to eat them per se but to have them, to have them purchased for her. Blake bought them willingly, and he did not want to leave her, he wanted to stay with her, and to have her come up to his apartment and stay with him. These were important factors at the moment, she thought, and acquiesced. She wrapped her arms around the boxes of pastries, counting the steps up to his apartment—fifteen, one more than hers.

“I know how to cheer you up,” he said as he unlocked the door, but she doubted it, though she allowed herself to be drawn inside, then hurried past the cluttered living room to an unkempt bedroom, the twin bed swathed in black. Her brain tripped over itself about six times in rapid justification as she let him undress her and lift her onto the dark comforter, and again he was complimenting her on her fair skin, pale, so pale, and the stubble on his upper lip scratched as he kissed her.

“No,” she said, but quiet enough that she wondered if perhaps she had only thought it, like when she ate a carrot or potato chip and it sounded like breaking glass inside her own head but was only muffled crunching on the outside, and here she was screaming but he couldn’t hear her.

“Be still,” he was saying. “Try to be as still as the grave.” He smiled at his own little joke, even as he pulled her wrists above her and started wrapping some kind of cord around them, and she smiled too, but only because a line from her zombie movie had come into her mind and she wanted to shout it at him. *Get off me, you freak, I’m still alive!* Everything was
muddled, and she didn’t think she had actually voiced it, but she knew this was the end of her free dinners, and she knew she would not be smelling Mr. Wilcox’s pipe smoke any longer, or hearing him toss out John Wayne quotes as he had done randomly over the past week, as her father used to do, and the only males she would be left with would be the manager of the coffee shop, who nodded to her but didn’t know her name, and her mailman, who only knew her name because it was printed on everything he handed to her. Casey pulled her wrists free, pushed him away, and went to draw her clothes on in silence.

She felt his eyes on her, as he sat on the edge of the bed with his hands on his knees, like he was prepared to applaud when she finished. He looked downcast but resigned, like he had suspected this would happen, as if he had already moved on like he had advised her to do. It made her want to cry. She pulled on her dress, a simple green thing with little white dots, one of a few she owned that used to be her mother’s, and another memory came to mind with Blake there watching her – a fashion show she had put on for her father, since her mother had fallen asleep early, half a dozen outrageous outfits cobbled together from the dramatic costumes Casey had collected over her eleven years. Her father’s head had been down, hovering over the papers on his desk, not glancing up for the ballerina, the pop star, the pirate, the glam queen, the clown, or the princess. On a whim, she had grabbed her mother’s green dress from where it draped over the back of a chair and pulled it on, its hem dragging the floor. She stood opposite his desk, arms at her sides, while her mother snored gently, and her father looked then. He looked at her.

* 

Three days went by and Casey didn’t speak to Blake. She sent him a text message ending their relationship, then felt spineless and wrote him an e-mail, then finally gave in and called him
on the phone, which a little inner voice insisted was still rather cowardly. Blake seemed unperturbed, which bothered her more than anything.

She had practiced the conversation in front of the mirror, trying out different phrases, anticipating his clever rejoinders, whether he opted to blame her for ruining things or beg her to take him back. His indifference to the whole matter disarmed her; he instead wanted to tell her about a new case involving a triple homicide and severed digits that the coroner’s office had missed.

“Blake,” she said, pressing on. She imagined herself before a podium, tapping the microphone to get the distracted audience’s attention. *There’s that young woman again, the one so wise about everybody but herself.* “Blake. Listen.”

There was a pause on the other end, and she forged ahead. “I know the answer now, the real answer, to the question you asked me. About what I was afraid of.” *Silence in the audience.*

_Breathless anticipation._


Casey held the receiver, facing herself in the mirror over her dresser. *No, that’s not it._

_The woman at the podium stands very still, amidst quiet hissing and boos from the audience._

_That’s not it at all._

“So Goodbye, Blake.” Casey hung up. She looked at her reflection and imagined the gala concluding, the aborted ceremony ended, the guests gathering up their dinner jackets and muttering to each other as they filed toward the exit. *Strange speech, yes, but she looked lovely in that green dress, didn’t she, just like her mother. Her mother never wore make-up like that, though; no, she didn’t, such a lovely job of it, that girl should be in the movies. Such a lovely girl. Such a lovely dress._
At sixteen, Casey had never considered that a person would be responsible for preparing
the dead for viewing, just as she never gave much thought to who re-shelved all the library books
she picked up and then left in nearby locations, having spotted something more interesting to fill
up her seven item quota. She did not think about where the meat in her sandwich came from nor
how the newspaper appeared on their step, though she knew these things abstractly. And she
was completely unprepared for the realization that her father, lying so composed and stoic in his
coffin, was wearing make-up.

She wanted to tell someone this, to get help rubbing it off, thinking to herself that her
father would have some indignant cowboy saying for this situation, that he would not be caught
dead painted like a woman, and this thought sent a clutching wave of nauseous laughter through
her – Oh, Lord, he is, that’s exactly what he is – and she was then peering around her to be sure
no one was watching.

They had found out from an obituary sent to them by an old family friend. Casey’s
mother remarked on this fact, again and again, over the course of the six-hour drive to Phoenix,
while Casey read and re-read the brief obituary as if it might contain some hidden message, a
clue her father left behind before he died. It revealed nothing.

She touched the side of the casket as if it were his hand, then drifted to the funeral
home’s foyer, where her mother was smoking a cigarette and her sister Melanie stood, hands in
the pockets of her slacks, staring at a large framed portrait of their father, one Casey had never
seen. Casey’s mouth opened when she saw her mother smoking, as everyone knew she didn’t
smoke, as any fool could guess after the death threats against her daughters if they ever tried one,
but Casey said nothing and only stood beside her as her mother exhaled a long, slow cloud.
An unfamiliar middle-aged man, wearing a black suit and carrying a handkerchief as if he might start crying momentarily, approached them and rested his hand on her mother’s upper arm. She raised the arm to take another drag of her cigarette, and his hand fell away.

“I’m so sorry, Estelle,” he said. “How are you holding up?”

She let out a faster, thinner stream of smoke, her eyes focused on where their bruised old Toyota sat parked in the lot. Casey’s sister wandered over to stand beside them.

“This must be Melanie,” the man said, with a smile. “What a pretty young woman. And Estelle, you look just beautiful. It’s such a shame that Alan can’t see you now.”

Normally, Casey would have taken offense at not being included, not being complimented, but today it did not seem to matter, not with her mother’s short, high laugh, not with the way she dropped the cigarette and crushed it out without looking.

“He wouldn’t have noticed,” she said. “Girls, you ready?”

They nodded, mute, stepping over the crushed cigarette on the pristine tiled entryway. They did not speak on the drive back to the motel, but as they undressed in the yellow glow of the bedside lamp, Casey’s mother told her that she had looked nice today, that her father would have liked it. The lamp clicked off, and Casey lay in the dark, wondering as she did from time to time what her father was doing, what would make him smile, what caught his eye.
Emily is eleven years old. She enjoys the feel of a smooth, flat stone flush against the palm of her hand the moment before release; her best throw – eight skips across the unrippled surface of the pond behind her house, ringed by thick cattails, like burnt corn dogs on spikes – outdid her brother’s best by three. She has relegated her dolls to her closet, but keeps them all facing forward. Studying vocabulary, she gets an inexplicable thrill from the word “undulate” as it comes off her tongue. She thinks Velcro is one of humanity’s greatest achievements.

She lies prone on the damp grass, propped on scabbed elbows like a soldier crawling under barbed wire, watching as her brother holds up the butterfly he captured. A friend from three houses over has bet him a quarter. Emily’s mouth is open in protest, but she swallows down her revulsion. Red from the insect’s wing has already smudged onto her brother’s thumb – it reminds her of her favorite Crayon, Burnt Sienna – his touch wearing the color away to reveal the thin membrane underneath. Nearly transparent at the point of contact, it flutters weakly moments before her brother detaches the wing from the slim black body with the smallest tug. They all hold their breaths for a moment, like that instant before the Jack-in-the-box pops out, but the butterfly is still. Her brother looks unsettled, glancing to his friend for how to react, and then covers his uncertainty with a laugh.

Her brother and his friend go inside for dinner. Emily kneels in the grass and uses her hand to scoop a pile of damp soil over the dead butterfly, flecks of earth sticking to the lifelines in her palm. She pushes a stick into the dirt as a marker, though it leans to one side, and she tries to think of an appropriate prayer. Her stomach growls, and all she can think of is a mealtime blessing, so she substitutes the last word.

*God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our butterfly. Amen.*
She feels foolish and runs inside. For the next three days she looks out her window each morning, just able to make out the leaning twig rising out of the dirt, pointing slantwise at heaven, until it falls over and she loses the spot.

*

Emily is sixteen. She crops her brown hair short and instantly regrets it. She plays clarinet, sings and acts in her school’s theater troupe (a small part in the chorus), and struggles to maintain her friendship with the head cheerleader, who grew up on the other side of the cat-tail pond but now pauses during greetings, as if pulling to mind Emily’s name. Emily reads Charlotte Brontë and writes daily in a small, black diary with a lock. Her favorite thing to do is linger behind after play rehearsals, gliding across the great sweeping curve of stage with her voice echoing back to her across all the dark, empty seats that wait hungry like mouths to be filled.

She is in history class near the end of the semester, while the slim, young teacher placidly ignores students doodling, passing notes, or staring at the clock and running mental calculations of the exact minutes until summer break. Emily is actually paying attention.

“A dozen different people saw or heard part of the attacks,” the teacher says, pacing back and forth in his pullover and khakis with a kind of intensity in his step that Emily hasn’t seen before. “He attacked her multiple times, over the space of half an hour. Witnesses later said they didn’t want to get involved.” He pauses after these words, as if they are tunneling underground and need time to reach their targets.

Emily is the only student leaning forward in her desk; she pictures herself on that darkened street, hearing the footsteps approach, smelling the death of summer on the wind.
Kitty Genovese, Emily is told, was a New York woman who was assaulted and murdered near her home. Neighbors who witnessed or overheard parts of the attacks were vilified by the press, and the ensuing investigation led to the coining of the term *bystander effect*.

“The bystander effect,” the teacher continues, “has to do with the diffusion of responsibility. In an emergency situation, people are less likely to get involved if they think others are also able to help.”

Emily pictures herself re-enacting the scene, the horrified audience pressing hands to open mouths and recognizing their own past failures in this live tableau; Emily, meanwhile, shines golden in the haloed spotlight – the victim, innocent and noble, as she recalls just last week when she stopped to help that little boy who lost his mother at the department store.

“It’s apathy, pure and simple,” says a boy from the desk next to Emily. She blinks and looks at him, abruptly aware that his smoothly waving locks are longer than hers. Her ears flush pink as he glances at her. He has been drawing something that looks like a pineapple on a skateboard, which Emily pretends not to see.

“It has been called that, but it’s more of a psychological phenomenon.” The teacher folds his arms, looking directly at the student, but does not appear displeased. “People see the emergency, but they also see others who could help, so no one does. That can lead, I suppose, to apathy.”

“People just need to get up and do something.” The boy finishes the doodle and puts his pen away. “And quit watching from the sidelines.”

In Emily’s vision, she is now rescued by a noble, sympathetic onlooker, who comes skateboarding up and offers her a pineapple with a flourish, presenting it like the captured icon of a quest, the holy grail of fruit. The audience looks confused at this turn of events, examining
their programs to see if they missed something, and Emily smiles to herself as the bell rings. She realizes the boy is looking at her, perhaps wondering if her ears are warm or just pink.

Over the summer, she decides she is in love, errs – but not on the side of caution – and cries a lot at her favorite spot, a small pond where turtles climb on each other’s backs like stacking cups. She enrolls in a summer reading club and selects a book called “Changing the World in Ten Easy Steps” that features chapters with headings like Helping a Stranger and We’re All Equal and Leaving a Legacy. She finds herself skipping to the end, feeling a kind of guilty yet undeniable satisfaction from reading the final page, which addresses her directly with congratulations and thanks for making the world a better place. “You’re welcome,” she says aloud, fully intending to complete all ten steps at her first opportunity.

Emily is twenty. She has a bumper sticker that reads “I love my country, it’s the government I’m afraid of” plastered on the back of her limping blue hand-me-down sedan. She jogs three miles a day, having to set little goals for the last half a mile – that driveway, that mailbox, that pile of dog droppings – to motivate herself home. For the last two winters, she has led a campus food drive called Cheer for Change, collecting 312 cans of mostly vegetables in a half dozen cardboard boxes that she found outside a dumpster, many of the donors contributing in hopes of cutting short her carols. She carefully cuts apart the plastic rings from six-packs of soda, though she is going to school near Topeka and the ocean is 1,200 miles away. She leaves the “I voted!” sticker on her Smurfs baby tee until it disintegrates when she breaks down and washes the shirt.

She takes a cultural anthropology course as an elective, which offers the option of a fifteen page paper or twenty-five hours of volunteer service with a local refugee assistance
program. The program is called *Refugee Resettlement Relief*, and Emily attends training on a Friday night while her sorority sisters hold a talent competition. She goes through three name tags at the sign-in table because she can’t write clearly with a Sharpie. She thinks volunteer work sounds rather heroic, and she hopes that one day someone will write a song about her changing clothes in phone booths; she also dislikes writing long papers. She spends the time ferrying African children – two boys from one family, the Buharis – to the doctor and school. They wear donated baseball caps promoting sports teams they have never heard of. She helps the parents go grocery shopping and explains coupons, the produce aisle, the twenty items or less. They are uncomfortably grateful.

She takes their children, two sons named Kibwe, seven, and Baraka, ten, to the library and shows them how to find books on anything under the sun. The boys pick out lavishly illustrated books on monster trucks, basketball, and kung fu, flipping through and excitedly trying the martial arts poses right there between the shelves, laughing until Emily puts her vertical finger to her lips and they fall silent, all grins. She shows them how to use the public computers near the current periodicals and they stare, awed, as she pulls up video games, educational sites, and interactive cartoon characters they know from t-shirts and lunchboxes they’ve seen at school but not from the cartoons themselves. They wonder aloud how she knows so much about the computer, and she reveals she has two of these at home, and they look at her in a way that makes her feel both important and a bit ashamed. She takes them to Google Earth and shows them satellite feeds of her campus and dorm, revealing the clear azure of the giant inflatable pool out back, and then the boys’ neighborhood with its dull grey two-story apartments, the roofs covered with the dark specks of pigeons, the abandoned cars sitting by the curb out front. Baraka says he wants to see where they used to live, and she redirects to Africa,
and he takes over the mouse having watched her closely, and she scoots her chair back feeling suddenly like a stranger peering in through someone’s window. Baraka struggles for several minutes to find their village, something different in his posture, in the way his fingers curl around the mouse like it might try to escape, but the boys eventually give up and go to check out their books, their gaiety diminished. All Emily could make out on the screen while they looked were shades of brown.

Despite the cultural barrier, the boys’ father, Mr. Buhari, confides to her how successful he was in his home country, of the large farm he owned, of his many hopes. He promises to take her there one day. “You have blessed my family,” he says. “Thank you so much. Thank you.” Emily doesn’t know what to say.

The semester ends, and she stops going to the family’s small, clean apartment, awkwardly quiet without a television. Mr. Buhari doesn’t seem to understand “class requirement” or “grade point average,” only that she’s no longer willing to take his children in for their shots, or to explain the vice-principal’s carefully worded letter on school attendance. He continues to invite Emily over for dinners of rice and meat with spices she’s never had, but she stops going. She is exhausted from school and her job at an on-campus coffee shop, serving lattés with names like The Joltmeister to students bent with bulging backpacks, crooked spines, and smiles but no tips, and she is busy with summer plans – her sorority is organizing a month-long trip to Europe. She feels guilty, and wonders what the boys are doing for summer, whether they will enroll in summer school to re-gain a bit of ground, but the fact is she would like a break from them, from the awkwardness, from the father’s constant thanks, from the anxiety she feels when she leaves their house and goes to spend thirty dollars on a haircut. She stops returning Mr. Buhari’s phone calls.
“You don’t care,” he accuses in the last message he leaves. He is saying more but the time limit cuts him off mid-sentence. Emily receives it on her way to the airport and plays it three more times while waiting for her flight to France, trying to guess what his last sentence would have been, and each time starting to call him but failing to come up with more than opening remarks. She likes to talk through conversations in her head before she has them, to have several chances to come up with witty comebacks or heartwarming compliments, and often finds herself getting angry with friends over conversations that never happened; now, though, she can’t imagine anything eloquent past “Hello, it’s Emily.” She decides to write, but in Europe, she is defeated by cheerful sophistication and expensive luxury splashed across the front of every postcard she finds. Every time she writes one, scrawling tiny lines across the back that wander in and out of the address space, up around the stamp and down the side, she cannot bring herself to send it – a fancy vacation memo to a displaced refugee family – and when she returns home cultured, enlightened, and inspired, it feels to her that years have slipped between them, that a curtain has dropped.

* 

Emily is thirty-four. She watches history programs each day while eating a TV dinner for lunch, one with an animated cat on the box and candy sprinkles on the brownie, on sale for ninety-nine cents. She has been partway through The Sound and the Fury for five months, each night falling asleep after two pages, leaving her husband to set the book on her nightstand and turn off her lamp. David is an architect who paints watercolor landscapes as a creative outlet but refuses to show them to anyone but Emily; she likes how he sorts their trash into recyclables, garbage, and compost, and how once a year he donates fifty dollars to a local hospital that treats children with cancer. Whenever someone else solicits charity from them, though, she hears him
say “We already gave,” as if the recycling and the hospital donation covers all of their bases, which gives Emily a strange feeling toward him that she doesn’t like. She also doesn’t like falling asleep before David does, and she makes him stay up until she is out cold, although lately she has stayed awake behind closed lids, fighting a vague feeling that there’s something she should be contemplating in the vacant calm of night.

They have a single, unplanned child, a six-year-old daughter that Emily dreads to take out in public. Emily reads parenting magazines in waiting rooms, thankful when she is made to wait, skimming article after article for helpful tips or a bulleted list of where she went wrong. She considers purchasing a self-help book for parents but is worried that David would take it personally. She never finds time to go jogging anymore, to relish the violent pounding of her treads against the blacktop, but walks briskly to bring in the mail.

She is in a grocery store, waiting to check out in the express lane. She is already four items over the limit, which makes her nervous, when her daughter Brooke asks for a candy bar and then demands it when the answer is no. The child’s voice rises, and Emily can feel the stares of the other shoppers, their unblinking eyes surfacing from behind tabloids and shopping lists, like crocodiles gliding through a swamp

“We’re having to watch our money, and I told you before we came that we had to stick to the list.” Emily says this more for the other shoppers to overhear than anything else; their perfect children stand immune to temptation, watching dispassionately.

“You never buy me anything,” Brooke yells, and her hand, swung wildly for emphasis, knocks two fashion magazines off the rack, their subscription cards slipping out and fluttering beneath the shopping cart like lifeboats abandoning ship.
Emily’s head is pounding now. *My parents would have given me a spanking for this.* Their parents would have gotten a beating. *I’m a better parent. I’m a better parent.* “Fine,” Emily says, feeling her defenses crumble, wanting to cry, recalling the maxim of some famous parenting doctor who insists on firmness. She tries to salvage things. “One candy bar, but I don’t want to hear another word out of you.”

Brooke stops her fit. She selects a King-size Hershey bar and tosses it into the cart, leaving the fashion magazines on the floor. Emily begins placing the groceries onto the checkout stand in groups according to how they will go into the pantry, trying to remember where the oatmeal belongs, which is increasingly important and upsetting when she can’t. She has to be told the total twice.

* 

Emily is fifty-two. She wears necklaces with small silver angels and has a collection of thimbles that she strongly dislikes, started when a friend gave her one and then another noticed it on her shelf. A perpetual stack of novels sits on her coffee table, next to coasters inset with pictures of Brooke, who is grown and divorced now. She rarely reads the novels, instead browsing through home décor magazines or attempting the hardest difficulty of crossword puzzles, so she can feel better about checking in the back for answers. Once a month she makes something for dinner she has never tried before, generally destroying a cooking implement in the process. She has a page-a-day calendar that teaches her new words; “Onomatopoeia” is one of her favorites now.

Emily finally goes to graduate school, and she takes one class a semester. She manages to keep up with the work just fine, reading and writing while David snores or watches football with the sound low for her benefit, but she has no desire to complete the degree faster.
“At this rate, I’ll still be in school when I’m ninety,” she tells her husband. “And that suits me fine.”

She loves the atmosphere at her university, the spirit of openness and reform. She loves the intellectual debate in the classroom, the way it makes her mind feel slippery and expansive, like a river flooding its banks, like it did in her youth. She sees the world deteriorating, and believes she can do something about it. She is determined not to lose this feeling and thinks perhaps it’s what she knew she should feel when she used to stay awake at night.

“It’s a fact,” the professor says, “that ten million children every year die from preventable diseases. These are things like measles, malaria, pneumonia, and diarrhea. One child every four seconds.”

The students dutifully copy these statistics down in their notebooks, which have hard covers matching the school’s colors. Emily simply listens, and for a moment allows herself to imagine what it would be like to have one’s child die from something as simple as diarrhea.

“Reach into your pockets and purses,” the professor says. “Pull out your loose change and put it on your desk.”

Quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies are set out or slapped down, a few rolling off to clatter on the floor. Emily fishes in her purse and pulls out a quarter and two dimes.

The professor, a middle-aged man in a green sweater and brown slacks, leaves his chair and strides around the room, speaking with more energy than Emily has felt in years. “Look at your desk. The coins you see there are how much it costs to treat a child in Africa for one of these diseases. Thirty cents to save a child from pneumonia, the number one killer. Sixty cents for malaria. Forty-two cents for diarrhea.”
I would have three cents left over, Emily thinks to herself. She imagines a low-slung desk at a gleaming hospital, paying the bill to the smiling nurse – That will be forty-two cents, please, the woman says – and then a dark-skinned child comes bouncing out of a white operating room, restored and healthy.

The professor checks his watch. “It’s time for a break. I challenge you to use your pocket change to buy a snack from the vending machine, and see if it tastes the same.”

Over the break, the class loiters in the hallway, chuckling uncomfortably, talking about last night’s medical drama or what celebrity was arrested for drunk driving. Emily isn’t hungry, and she puts the forty-five cents back into her purse, although now she feels they don’t belong with the unwashed, crumpled bills.

At home that night, she visits a website her professor mentioned, stares at pictures of shirtless boys, of girls with exposed ribs, reads the frequently asked questions and tax deduction information, and remembers what she heard in class. She clicks the box for “DONATE: OTHER AMOUNT” but feels silly typing in $0.42. She will give more, she decides, entering in an amount with two zeroes before the decimal, but it’s a Thursday, which means she needs enough for groceries tomorrow, and it’s almost the first of the month, which means sending a check to help support Brooke and the baby, and they’re already spending money on Emily’s graduate school, and she decides she should wait until she can give a large amount, like a hundred dollars, that would really make a difference. She thinks for a moment about taking money from their cruise fund, but they’ve been looking forward to that for years, and she couldn’t do that to David.

David comes in, yawning. “What’cha looking at?”

“Nothing,” Emily says, the flinch of her hand clicking out of it before she is ready, and she stares at her screensaver of plump babies dressed up like sunflowers and finds it to be very
stupid. She gets an envelope off the shelf and writes $0.42 on the outside, and every week after that she puts as much change and as many small bills into it as she can, until it’s bulging with wadded money and hard coins, and months later she counts it and it’s over a hundred dollars. That afternoon Brooke calls, crying over the cost of a specialist for her daughter’s asthma, and Emily fishes out the envelope an hour later, their cruise fund having been exhausted three weeks before in the western Caribbean. She keeps the envelope after that, but it rests empty on her nightstand, the flap open, as if one day it will hold opening night tickets.

*  

Emily is seventy-nine. She is surrounded by vases holding tulips, roses, and lilies. Eight cards and four colored drawings on construction paper rest in a neat stack behind her head. She sips juice and listens to nature programs on television, though she doesn’t watch them. She is dying. David has preceded her in this, two years before.

For weeks now, a nurse has come to read to Emily. She is unsure whether this is part of the nurse’s job description. Emily requested *The Bluest Eye*, recalling a class on Toni Morrison she took in college. The nurse is a young black woman, her voice sure and strong, and Emily feels a surge of both gratitude and guilt, something she can’t quite name, even with her now-prodigious vocabulary; she wonders, the day before she passes away, whether she should give something to this nurse in her will; she feels a sort of vague responsibility to do so, quite inexplicable; she grows tired before she can put this plan into effect, and falls to sleep.

She wakes briefly the following day, after dreaming of her childhood. She remembers the buzzing of the cicadas at night in the pecan trees, the cottonmouth snakes that glided among the cattails, searching for baby ducklings, the red-winged blackbirds calling angrily as she looked for their nests. She remembers that perfect skip, the flick of her wrist, the way the rock
began on one bank and traveled to the other, leaving behind only ripples to mark its passing, expanding outward long after it was gone. She smiles wearily at the nurse who is hovering in the background, and she thinks of the butterfly, recalling the day she found the fallen stick while mowing the yard, hidden under the overgrown grass like a dormant snake. She had picked it up, not wanting it to catch in the mower, and then thrown it as far as she could, watching it fly through the air and then disappear.

*

Emily is sixty-one, eighteen years before she will get sick and not recover. She is driving through a suburb with rows of identical two-story brick houses, the only difference being which side the garage is on and whether the cars in the driveway are BMWs or Cadillacs; the more affluent her surroundings, the more unsettled she feels, though she’s unsure why. Refugee Resettlement Relief was still in operation, though they had changed locations, and it took some digging to find the files she wanted. As expected, both parents had passed away, but one of the sons – Baraka – settled in a nearby area.

Having called ahead, she is greeted at the door by an austere, middle-aged man in a sweater vest, slacks, and loafers, grey hair thinning around his temples and a firmer handshake than she is used to. He wears wire-frames and has the look of someone, she thinks, who works three days a week – a radiologist, perhaps, or orthodontist – and golfs the other four.

“Emily,” he states, and beckons her inside.

“Baraka,” she easily replies, having imagined this part of the conversation.

“Barry,” he corrects as they walk through the foyer, where crystal bowls filled with seashells rest on glass-toped tables. “Barry for the last forty years.”
Emily is shown pictures of his children and his grandbaby. She learns about how his younger brother messed around on the east coast for a while, then became a successful sommelier who now lives in La Jolla. She hears how Mr. and Mrs. Buhari never returned to their birthplace, but gradually adjusted to life in the states, telling stories of home that Baraka (she cannot bring herself to think of him otherwise) admits to passing on to his first child but not the others. The living room looks like any other, the television two feet wider than hers. She sees no trace of any country but this one, or any past beyond this suburb.

“I’m sorry I never called,” she tells him. “All these years I’ve wanted to, to apologize, to try to help again.” She has practiced this part on the drive, with different inflections, but still she wants to ask for another take.

He waves a hand like he were shooing a fly. “We got another in the fall. Each semester they’d send another student out to drive us around or what have you. We were some of the lucky ones that made it—there were certainly others that didn’t. You shouldn’t feel bad.”

Emily does, though, although she isn’t sure why. She hears his words certainly others replaying in her mind, and she looks through the sliding glass doors to the pool in the backyard, a faux jungle of palm trees, ferns, and lantana growing around the hot tub and threatening to cover the diving board, and she thinks she is seeing something that happened without her, maybe in spite of her, not the result of the one, real change she made, which—she thought before—might not have been all it could, but at least was something. Certainly others. Forty-two cents. We already gave. Emily puts her hand to her mouth, feeling ill, but realizes Baraka is watching her, so she puts her hand to the glass instead. She looks out at the sunlight sparkling on the water of the pool, at the butterflies and bees drifting between the blossoms.

“It was good to see you, Baraka,” she finally says. “I’m afraid I have to go.”
He tries to convince her to stay, but she does not want to meet his daughters or their husbands, does not want to find out if dinner is anything like Mr. Buhari used to make, does not want to force herself to call him Barry. She waves at him from the driveway, and again from the stop sign, where he is still visible in the doorway, hand raised.

Emily had planned to spend an hour at the old turtle pond on the drive back, but she finds it has been filled in to make room for a runway at a private airport. She sits for several minutes in her car, staring through the chain-link fence at the concrete where thick stands of reeds used to be. On the way home, she impulsively stops at a bookstore to find a copy of the “Ten Steps” book she never finished, asking to be directed to the appropriate section of the store, pulling her credit card out in preparation of the purchase. She senses some kind of redemption of the day’s events if she can just sit in a coffee shop, read a chapter, and make a plan for how to put its advice into effect. She reaches the self-improvement section, but an entire, overwhelming bookcase stretches from the floor to above her head with shelf after shelf of books on changing the world. Emily stands her ground and scans several of the spines, but she does not see it, and finally leaves the store.
Cooking was one of the first things Casey had to give up. Red sauces and raw meat were obvious and easy to avoid, but certain things caught her off guard, such as bits of eggshell stuck under her fingernails, reminiscent of skull fragments needing to be picked out of the drywall; one particular casserole brought her lunch back up solely from its consistency. She would make Rice-a-Roni (“the San Francisco treat” she always sang to herself) and remember what Blake said about maggots and bodies that had been undiscovered for more than three weeks: you had to chase the maggots down and burn them, because they had been feasting on body fluids and decomposing fats and contained all kinds of germs and potential biohazards. The last thing a grieving family needed you to miss. She took to buying only fast food, peeling the wrapper back a bite at a time and not looking at it, eating while she drove or watched TV or filled out paperwork, forcing herself to focus and stop inking in all the letters with closed loops.

“The police are just going to do their job and get out. They’re not responsible for blood stains and brain matter,” Blake had said, self-importantly. “You’d better believe it makes a big difference to that family whether you miss a spot, especially when you’re charging five hundred bucks an hour.” That last part still gave Casey a little thrill that tickled the lower part of her spine.

For the previous two months before she signed on with Fallbrook Crime Scene Cleaners, Casey had taken to completing customer satisfaction surveys for free tacos, complaining she was dissatisfied three-fourths of the way through a burger, or telling the manager her soup was cold in order to have her meal comped. It was the first time she had been unemployed since her senior year of high school – admittedly only three years ago – when the manager overheard her innocently advising her customers at Boyo’s Burgers to steer clear of anything with meat until
they’d had a chance to call the exterminator in. She was not handling unemployment well. For the last year, most of her paycheck had gone straight toward her older sister’s care at North Presbyterian Hospital, a sister kept in the dark about her employment status, and Casey had no savings to fall back on.

Casey’s mail began to contain bills with dramatic statements such as: YOUR ACCOUNT IS NOW PAST DUE!!! Casey was alarmed by multiple exclamation points, and the words “debt collector” evoked in her the image of a medical bail bondsman, a bounty hunter in scrubs who would sell her valuable body parts on the black market to pay Melanie’s hospital bill. The debt collector’s name was Claudia Vernon, which only somewhat calmed her; a phone call established that they would accept no less than a hundred dollars a month, or they’ll break my kneecaps, Casey added mentally. She thought the oversized and bolded font along with phrases like “due immediately” justified this assessment.

Melanie insisted that Casey didn’t have to pay her medical bills, but Casey felt she did. If Mel’s long-gone no-good ex-husband (this was practically his name now, to Casey) wasn’t paying child support for Mel’s two kids, he certainly wasn’t going to pay for this. Casey and Melanie’s father was dead, after leaving their mother a decade ago, and their mother was barely eking out a living and could do no more than offer free babysitting. She had been a homemaker for thirty-five years before their father left, and the only job she could get, working a register in a discount shoe store, provided only for necessities.

That’s how Casey arranged the situation in her mind when she first chose to pay for Melanie’s care – simple math, a series of inevitable duties. She signed for financial responsibility, moved to a smaller apartment with lower rent, learned to live without a cell phone, and bought lots of macaroni and cheese. She showed her sister love by paying the bills as
quickly as she could. Then she lost her position as a postmortem makeup artist – the only job she could find using her Beauty College training – when the owner sold his funeral home and moved to the coast. So when the stomach-turning chance to work for Blake appeared, helping him clean up scenes of violent trauma, she forced herself to see it as an opportunity. *Like falling down a manhole, breaking your leg, but finding a fifty dollar bill is an opportunity,* commented one of her many sarcastic inner critics, with whom she argued regularly. *Yes, exactly.*

*  

“I met a guy,” she told her sister the next day.

“That’s great, Case. What does he do?” Melanie was propped up on pillows, looking wan but cheerful. Where Casey was thin and angular, Melanie was full-bodied, gently sloped, even after months on hospital food; their features were both pleasant, familiar, as if they were made from the same stock, but Melanie was formed first, with Casey shaped from the leftover bits. Even now, with her cheekbones more prominent and her eyes weary, Melanie was lovely.

“He’s in very high demand.” Casey decided to leave out the fact that they had already broken up; also up for omission was the tidbit that she was now working for him, cleaning up blood stains because she was gaspingly desperate for money. She had not visited Melanie while she and Blake were still dating, and thus had missed the chance to exult a bit about maintaining an actual relationship, so Casey elected to have this conversation retroactively. “He cleans up goop from dead bodies.”

Melanie tilted her head to the side and smiled. “How sweet. You two have something in common.”

“I know. At least he’s not some weirdo like my last boyfriend, right?” Casey stood awkwardly at the foot of the bed, growing frustrated because she had worn pants that didn’t have
any pockets, and she felt like her hands needed somewhere to go. She remembered her theater teacher in junior high saying that if she didn’t know what to do with her hands, she didn’t know her character well enough.

“Right. Nothing weirder than wanting to commit to a long-term relationship.” Melanie had this way of gradually raising her eyebrows as she spoke, either one or both, which lent a sort of sarcasm even when it was absent from her tone. Their mother did this, and it drove Casey crazy.

“I was referring to the way he didn’t like his food to touch.” Casey coughed, catching sight of Melanie’s hand with the IV needle inserted and taped down. Her veins looked so blue, she thought, like someone had painted them in just beneath the skin, like there should be a crayon color named after them. She wanted to run out of the room.

“You’re right. Total freak.”

“You.”

“So this new guy. CSI type stuff?”

“Um, two of the letters are the same, I think.”

“Look at you, keeping a boyfriend for more than a week.” Melanie’s smile took the sting from her words; her everyday smile looked like the type movie stars flash, Casey thought, right after they wink. Melanie paused. “Has it been more than a week?”

Casey reflected on how long she had dated Blake, so she could answer semi-truthfully. “Close to two months,” she bragged. Her sister nodding approvingly, wearily, and Casey shifted from one sneaker to the other, considered sitting on the foot of the bed, then changed her mind and stepped away, looking at drawings taped to the wall. “The kids been by today?”
“Yeah. Mom and Dad brought them this afternoon, right after school. Liza had this bean plant in a cup that they let her bring home today, and Chase was all happy because he’d won a fight on the playground.” She tried to push herself into a more upright position, but sank back onto the pillows. Casey pretended not to notice, her gaze shifting to her sister then back to the drawings.

“Oh, good. Guess he won’t need those boxing lessons after all.” Several long seconds of silence passed, and when she finally allowed herself to look back to her sister, Melanie’s eyes were drifting closed. Casey started for the door.

“Sorry,” Melanie murmured, her eyes opening again. “This new medicine makes me sleepy. C’mere and give me a hug.”

Casey felt like someone had dropped lead weights into her shoes as she shuffled across the floor and leaned over to give Melanie a quick embrace, barely contacting with her, patting her on the back before turning and heading directly for the hallway. “Feel better, sis,” she said, her eyes dry and her stomach heaving.

*

After their breakup, Casey had not intended to ever speak to Blake again. She attacked a job market that seemed immune to her efforts, and alarming letters strewn liberally with exclamation points continued to come in the mail. She lowered her standards considerably, first to anything related to health and beauty, afterwards to anything that guaranteed a paycheck, but she met with no success. When they spoke on the radio or television about the economy being in shambles, she turned it off and muttered curse words that still made her feel she should get in trouble; she went to interview after interview, and kept the hospital bills in a thick stack held
together by one of those jumbo-sized rubber bands that, in junior high, had once sent her instantly to detention when shot at a teacher.

When Blake called one day, she didn’t return it until after she checked the voicemail, and only the magic words *have a job for you* prompted her then. He was polite and courteous as he laid out the details: he had to go out of town on a business trip for a few weeks, he had no one to take over the cleanings for his clients, the market was tight and the larger firms had their hands full with big-city jobs and anyway they didn’t understand the complexities of smaller-town blah blah blah (she glazed over somewhat at this point, then caught something about ‘distance learning’), the state-required training could be completed online in two days, he’d pay for it, she could start by Wednesday, see her first payment by Friday.

“There is no way on God’s green Earth that I am shoveling dried blood and scraping up somebody’s brains with a putty knife, Blake.” She recalled his many and graphic commentaries on the nature of the trauma cleanup profession.

“I would just keep what’s needed to keep the business afloat until I get back. I don’t want somebody else to move in on my market. You could pocket the rest.” He paused for dramatic effect, and she found herself leaning slightly forward, as if he were in the room with her. “Three hundred dollars an hour, guaranteed,” he said.

She glanced at the stack of hospital bills. The rubber band had snapped today. About half a minute crawled by before she responded, her eyes closed. “Four hundred.”

“I have to pay for the van, the supplies, the disposal, the –”

“Four hundred.”

“Fine. Fine.” He sighed. “My assistant Marvin will e-mail you all the info you need to get started, then step you through the equipment. The videos and web seminars only show you
so much. Look, you’ll do great. Just don’t think about it too much. I like to think up palindromes while I’m doing it.”

“Palindromes.”

“Right. The same backwards and forwards. Like, murder for a jar of red rum. Or, do geese see God?”

“I think you’re insane, but send me the information. I have to go.”

She sat on the edge of the couch and worked them out backwards in her head, despite herself.

*

Her first three jobs were highway trauma scene cleanup, arranged through a paramedic contact of Blake’s. She thought it was a pretty good way to work her way into it. She clomped around in her one-time-use, nonporous, sky-blue biohazard suit, gloves, filtered respirator, and chemical spill boots, facts and statistics about bloodborne pathogens running through her head – she had highlighted about a third of the 500 page training manual before giving up – trying to look professional as she sprayed and vacuumed the roadway. Her arm was sore from the Hepatitis B vaccine she’d gotten the day before, and the wet vacuum was heavy and awkward to manipulate, but there was only a small spattering of blood on the pavement at the first site, and it came up easily. The auto decontamination at the body shop the following afternoon was similarly low-stress; there were no visible stains, and she convinced herself she was just washing a car as she scrubbed and wiped.

The second accident was similar – the wailing family members still at the scene were by far the worst part – but the third was more traumatic. It involved a motorcycle collision with a mid-size SUV, and the motorcycle driver had not been wearing a helmet. Casey didn’t turn her
face away, knowing that would be obvious to anyone watching, but she closed her eyes behind her mask and turned the vacuum up to full strength, sweeping it in wide arcs left to right until she was sure everything was up, and then she returned with the heavy-duty sprayer and proceeded to use twice the needed amount of force.

_The No-touch Cleaning System is the foundation of your PPE_, the gender-neutral voice on the web-video had said during the Personal Protective Equipment segment. _Service and safety are the hallmarks of the CTS Decon industry._

She collected her first paycheck that Friday, and sent half of it on to the hospital. Her fourth job came Sunday at 1:45 in the morning, and she was vomiting into a trashcan three minutes after entering the client’s house.

*

“Blake, I can’t do this.” She had called him as soon as she got home, not caring what time it was there. She was pacing the length of her bedroom, wishing she could afford a larger apartment so she didn’t have to turn every four steps.

“Sure you can. Marvin said you did great on those three highway jobs. He’s been sending me updates, and it sounds like you’ve got everything under control. Press onward, you can do it.” Casey could hear some low swell of noise in the background, but couldn’t place it. A party, at this time of night? A benefit gala? A strip club?

“That’s another one, actually,” he continued. _“Drawn onward, we –”_

She cut him off. “You don’t understand; that was different. This guy blew half his face off. He _killed himself_, Blake.”

“Wait, the body was still there? They’re not supposed to call you in until –”
“No, no,” she shook her head and waved her hand, as if he could see it. “The coroner took the guy with him. But he didn’t take all of him, are you getting what I’m saying to you?”

Blake spoke slowly, calmly. “This is your job, Casey. That’s why the family doesn’t just grab an old toothbrush and go to town. Did you try thinking of something else?”

“Racecar. That’s the best I could come up with, and I think somebody told me that one in third grade.” She started crying.

“You’ll be fine. It gets easier. I’ll be back in a couple of weeks – just don’t give up on it yet. There aren’t many people who can do this, but I think you can. Try one more and see how it goes, okay?”

She sniffed, took deep breaths, and wiped her eyes, catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror. What a pansy, she thought. “Okay.”

“How about, never odd or even?”

She hung up.

*  
The next call was for another nearly bloodless traffic collision with no fatalities, and it restored some of her confidence. She was able to sleep after it – this had been a problem with the previous jobs – and she thought perhaps she could do this after all. She even came up with the word eye and then Dennis sinned, which she was particularly pleased with.

She visited Melanie in the hospital again, taking her a vanilla milk shake, copies of Us Weekly and novelizations of two popular feature films. Melanie brought up the subject of work and Casey tried to dodge it, but Melanie wouldn’t let it go.

“You’ve got to do something with your life. Maybe it’s just this ‘Last Lecture’ type crap I have going through my head every day, but time is short. You can’t spend your life putting
mascara on corpses.” Her hair didn’t look quite as shiny or as smoothly brushed this time, and Casey hated the way she had her hands folded neatly on her chest.

“I was doing something with my life, Mel, but it hasn’t really worked out.” Casey stood at the end of the bed; she hadn’t sat on the edge of it, or really embraced her sister, or brushed the hair back from Melanie’s forehead, in months. She could not bring herself to tell Melanie about her new job, as she could not imagine how that conversation could go well. *I’m having trouble getting confronted with death every day, the messy kind, even after the funeral home job. Actually, it’s not the death that bothers me, sis, it’s the space left behind, in these people who didn’t have time to say goodbye. Who can’t let go. Can you imagine having to let go of your loved ones, whether you were ready or not? Oh, I guess you can. Never mind. I’ll just leave.* Casey stepped nearer the door, as if her monologue had been voiced, and wished she had the right words.

Melanie was watching her. “So Spielberg isn’t banging down your door? Hmm. Maybe you should go back to school.” Melanie twisted the paper tip off her straw wrapper, then blew it at Casey, who merely sighed as it ricocheted off her forehead.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to take out more loans. And I can’t imagine what I would study now, anyway.” She forced herself not to see the wires, the IV, the banks of machines with lights and graphs, the dullness that was creeping into her sister’s expressions. Casey’s stomach grumbled loudly as Melanie took an audible slurp of her milk shake, and Casey wished she had gotten herself one, too.

“Well, good grief, Eeyore, things can’t be that bad for you. Figure it out.”

Casey had a sudden memory of her childhood bedroom, inherited from her big sister, decorated in Winnie-the-Pooh with a sprawling mural of the Hundred Acre Wood across one
wall – a good unisex theme, since their parents had not wanted to know the gender of the baby ahead of time. She kept the theme until it was simply too embarrassing to have friends over, but she continued to find other reminders of her sister, like the stash of Redbook magazines Melanie had stolen from her mother and hidden behind a loose baseboard, full of scandalous articles about things Casey didn’t understand yet, or the burn marks on the hardwood floor where the two of them had lit candles and held a séance to contact great-great-grandmother Rides-Horse-Like-A-Man, who was supposed to be a full-blooded Cherokee and didn’t take guff from anyone, according to Mel. Casey felt guilty when she asked her parents to paint over the mural, just as she did when she put her dolls in the attic, assuring them they were not in trouble but just needed to go away for a while. The familiar characters of Pooh, Tigger, or Eeyore evoked sadness in Casey even now, as she wondered what happened to them when Christopher Robin grew up.

“Casey?” Melanie was watching her again, and breathing shallowly now. “You okay?”

“Sure. Yeah. Listen, I’ll be more cheerful next time, okay? I promise.” Casey also promised herself she would buy an extra milk shake the next time, as she leaned over to give Melanie a quick semi-embrace, her mind focusing on whatever it could grasp beyond the walls of the hospital room. She spent the rest of the day cruising for collectible pencil toppers in antique stores and refusing to think of anything else.

*

Her next call came at 2:30 on a Thursday afternoon. It was a murder scene; Marvin warned her that a man had been shot four times, so she should prepare herself. She was thankful that she had eaten lunch early, and she took a few minutes to flip through the packet of graphic crime scene photographs that had come with her training materials, breathing deeply, forcing herself to look directly at them.
When she arrived at the house – a one-story red brick affair in the suburbs, a Toyota Corolla in the driveway and a garden hose coiled like a snake next to a bed of wilted begonias – the police and coroner had already left. She knocked on the door, already dressed in her suit and carrying a vacuum in one hand and a case of supplies in the other. A young woman answered, early thirties perhaps, with red-rimmed eyes and a boy cut of short-cropped brown hair, the kind Casey had her junior year of high school, when she toyed with the idea that her tomboy tendencies implied she was a lesbian, before an emotionally scarring experience convinced her that she emphatically was not. For a moment Casey remembered her backlash in the other direction, her obsession with anything pink or fluffy, which she had not entirely outgrown.

The woman was laughing at her, a short bark of surprise that she muffled with her hand; this seemed to discompose the woman further, and she wiped away one tear, then another, and looked about to fall apart. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You just look like somebody out of *E.T.* You know, the bad guys that come to take him away?”

Casey blinked behind her mask. She tried to think of something amusing to say that would lighten the mood, but *Phone home* was the only line she could come up with, and it didn’t seem relevant. “I just need to bring some equipment in first.”

The woman nodded, her arms crossed over a rumpled grey UCLA sweatshirt that looked too big for her, and then she belatedly stepped out of the way. Casey stepped through the foyer and into the living room, containing a blue sofa, a red armchair, a small television on a large entertainment center, and photos of the woman and a man that Casey presumed to be the deceased, in various romantic poses and locations. The floor was a simple, short loop carpet, beige except for dark stains in the center of the floor. There were no other signs of trauma.
Casey let out the breath she was holding. She could handle this. She made two more trips to the van, bringing in an ozone machine to purify the air and remove odors, heavy-duty 55-gallon bags, and sealed plastic containers. She pulled out a camera and took ‘before’ photographs for insurance purposes, set up the ozone machine, then took out a razor blade and began cutting away the carpet in a large, irregular oval that encompassed the stains.

“My name is Gina,” the woman said from the doorway. She was still hugging herself, standing directly in the threshold of the doorway into the living room, as if any contamination would strike up against an invisible barrier before reaching her, so long as she took not a step closer.

“I’m Casey.” When she had worked at the funeral home, she tried to perfect the right tone of voice to use, the mannerisms, the figures of speech that were appropriately somber without implying that you were grieving as much as they, but she still felt that she blundered it every time. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” Gina put one foot forward, then drew it back. Her voice was weak but steady. “Will you be putting in new carpet?”

“No.” Casey finished cutting the carpet, peeled it up, then folded it and put it into one of the massive bags. As expected, the blood had soaked through to the baseboards underneath. “We contract with another company for the carpentry and home restoration parts of it. I’ll just be getting things clean and safe.”

“Safe,” Gina repeated, sounding like she would say something else, but then just nodded.

Casey used a mop and sponges to get up the bulk of it, then used bleach, hydrogen peroxide, and a special enzyme solvent solution, disposing of each soiled cleaning item into one of the bags or containers. She could feel Gina watching over her shoulder, and rehearsed
different things she could say in her head, liking none of them, until she liked the silence even
less. “This will get easier with time. I know it’s your whole world right now, everything, but
someday you’ll wake up and be able to breathe again. First thing is just to get this cleaned up.
I’m gonna get this floor like it never happened. I mean, of course it will never be like it never
happened, I mean, but I’m going to try to, you know, get it right for you. Do what I can.”

There was no reply, no sound but the stiff scraping of the brush as she scrubbed, and she
twisted awkwardly in her suit to look over her shoulder. Gina had sunk to the floor, her head
down on her knees.

“I’m sorry,” Casey started, “I didn’t –”

“No. No, you’re the first person to say more than two kind words to me since this
happened.” She kept her head down, so Casey couldn’t see her expression. “I could never clean
that up myself, but I couldn’t leave, I just –” She stopped, lifted her face enough to wipe her
nose on her sleeve. “Anyway, thank you. Just… thank you.”

Casey finished decontaminating the floorboards, removing all trace of the bloodstains,
and took her ‘after’ photographs. She left the standard packet of paperwork on an end table,
loaded her equipment – stepping carefully past Gina, who hadn’t moved – and then stood,
nervously, in the foyer. “We’ll send the bill to Crime Victims Reparations,” she finally said.
“It’s a federal agency. They’ll take care of the cost in this case, so you don’t have to worry about
it.”

Gina’s head quavered in what Casey took to be a nod. “Thank you.”

“Okay. That’s it, then. I’ll just let myself out.” Casey waited a moment longer, but
could think of only one thing to say that felt remotely right. “I’m sorry.”
Casey went out to the van, climbed into the driver’s seat, and rested her forehead on the leather steering wheel. *Stupid, Casey, you never know what to say.* She raised and lowered her head three times, a little harder each time. She stared at the digital clock, watching the numbers tick by until it was an even 4:00. She thought of Melanie. Finally, she climbed back down and stripped out of her decon suit, then walked back up to the front door in her t-shirt and jeans. She knocked again and waited, her heart thumping painfully.

Gina answered the door after only a few seconds, wiping a sleeve across her eyes and looking uncertain. “Did you forget something?”

Casey reached out and hugged her, tightly, like she hadn’t allowed herself to hold Melanie in a long time. She felt a long, shuddering breath go out of the other woman, who leaned into her. Casey held her in silence, feeling something unknottyng itself in some inner place, then slowly disengaged herself. She met Gina’s gaze, gave her a small smile, and hurried back to the van.

*

Blake phoned the next night. He sounded irritated and mildly drunk. “Well, kiddo, it looks like Fallbrook Crime Scene Cleaners isn’t going national just yet after all. The idiots in Vegas don’t know a good thing when they see it.”

“Does this mean you’re coming home?” Casey paced her apartment in her purple silk pajamas, her toes curling on the carpet each time she stopped moving.

“I mean, talk about a city that needs as many cleaning crews as it can get. Yeesh. I bet somebody’s getting killed as we speak. It’s a crying shame.”

Casey wasn’t sure if he meant the crime or the missed job opportunity, and didn’t feel like asking. “So are you coming home?”
“Yeah, I’ll be back tomorrow. Listen, I hear you’ve done a fine job. If you want to stay on as a part-time contractor, I can use you whenever I get over-booked.”

She smiled at the thought of never scrubbing bloodstains again. “I’ll pass, but thanks.”

* 

Casey sat on the floor of her walk-in closet, the single luxury feature of her apartment and half the size of her bedroom, surrounded by boxes, papers, and photos. She flipped through a beige folder holding an application and promotional materials for the University of Southern California, which she brought back after an invigorating tour of the campus during the spring she graduated from high school. The guide had rattled off enrollment statistics and degree options to the group while Casey pictured herself on that patch of grass, passing out fliers to save starving children, or cruising on her bicycle like that European-chic girl gliding by in her rain boots and beret, or shooting up her hand in a cavernous auditorium to answer the professor’s rhetorical question, followed by stunned silence and then a standing ovation starting with the classic three, slow claps. She came home from the tour, bubbling over with excitement about all her options and the fact she had two whole years, really, before she absolutely had to pin herself down to one major or another, and her mother just laughed and asked, “And who’s your current sugar daddy who is going to pay for all this?”

The next day, a crestfallen Casey asked her big sister what she thought of her second choice, cosmo school, studying hair and makeup – cosmetology, Melanie gently corrected – and whether Melanie thought she would be good at that. Melanie took down her hair without a word, found a pair of scissors, and then told Casey that she had been wanting to try something different. It was certainly different when Casey finished with it that day, but Melanie insisted that she loved it, and that Casey could practice on her any time.
Casey had practiced on her all through beauty college, growing increasingly competent, and then again when she took the only job even tangentially related to her goals, preparing the deceased for viewing at a funeral parlor. Before she went to apply for the job, she begged Melanie to be her test subject.

“How is this going to work?” Melanie asked, climbing up to lie on the kitchen table in her own dining room, on a blanket that Casey had spread out.

“I have to make you look dead first, then practice putting on makeup to make you look alive again, or as close as possible.” Casey began applying a dull grey base to Melanie’s fair skin.

“This is crazy.” Melanie laughed and scratched her forehead.

Casey swatted at her hand. “Stop moving! You’re supposed to be dead.”

Sitting in her closet, holding the massive, silver-clasped makeup kit she had put away when she lost her last job, Casey thought back to that moment, that conversation, those words. It was before Melanie got sick, of course, before the diagnosis, so she couldn’t have known. She remembered how Melanie looked after she finally got her fit of giggles under control, lying still and composed, hands folded on her abdomen, her grey skin looking cold and lifeless as Casey prepared her palette. For a moment, looking at her sister, Casey did not want to continue; it was too unnatural, and the feelings it evoked too real. What would she ever do without her? How did people say goodbye? She pushed these feelings down and began liberally applying foundation and then blush, with the eventual result that Melanie declared herself to be the love child of a zombie and a rodeo clown. Casey gave in and helped her wash it all off.

Casey opened another box in her closet, holding ticket stubs, fliers, snapshots, wristbands, stickers, key chains, brochures, and the assorted paraphernalia she had collected and
kept with a kind of nostalgic certainty that one day she would make creatively masterful scrapbooks from them, the kind she would be invited on talk shows to display. So far, she still had boxes of photographs that had not even made it into albums, and she had only made one scrapbook page, based on her trip to Sea World on her twelfth birthday when she was picked to sit on Shamu the killer whale, and the whole world, the rapt audience, *finally* all turned and looked at her. Casey looked at the page, lifted it out, and found a stack of restaurant napkins, coasters, and matchbooks underneath. There were paper-wrapped toothpicks from the ‘50s diner where they ate for her mother’s fiftieth birthday. There were hard, cellophane-wrapped green mints from the Italian restaurant where they always ate as a family when her father was in town, where they went after his funeral, and where Melanie took her, just the two of them, to tell Casey first about what the doctors had said.

“What the hell is autosomal recessive agammaglob – agammoglobin, whatever, forget it. They’ve got to be wrong, doctors can be wrong.” It infuriated her then, as now, that she could not even pronounce the condition, as if this gave it some kind of advantage over them.

“It’s okay, Case. I’ve had weeks to start coming to grips with it. And we’ve still got some time.” Melanie slurped at her minestrone soup, like they were discussing the fashion gaffs of the ladies at the next table, or talking about what Melanie’s kids had done at school that day.

Casey could not see straight. She wanted to throw her breadstick at something, wanted to grab the candle off the table and set fire to everything around her, wanted to make Melanie take back every word she had said. She could only think of her need for her sister, for the one stable person in her life. At last she heard herself say “I love you,” the only words that she could bring her mind to form.
Melanie reached across the table to touch her hand, that pixie’s smile nearly surfacing again, her eyes moist but thankful. “You always know just what to say.”

Casey sat in her closet, cradling in her palm the mints from the restaurant, which she stared at for a long time as the AC unit in her apartment clicked on and off. She reached for the beige folder from the university and opened it again.

* 

Melanie looked tired. Tired and old. The laugh lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth seemed to have been carved in, and Casey noticed the waxy dullness of her skin. She had just had her infusion, and the nurse told Casey not to overexcite her. Melanie had been flipping through a stack of her kids’ drawings when Casey came in carrying a new vase of flowers, the green glass filled with carnations in colors that didn’t occur in nature.

Melanie gave an exhausted smile. “Where’s my milkshake?”

“I thought a gin and tonic would serve you better.” Casey placed the flowers on the rolling table that extended across the bed, the riot of greens, blues, and purples not matching anything in the drab room.

“Now you’re talking.” Melanie set aside the stack of drawings, even this movement time-consuming and belabored.

Casey shuffled around to Melanie’s elbow, then sat on the very edge of the bed. “But then I remembered that you can’t buy liquor on a Sunday.”

Melanie raised her arm, trailing wires, and for a moment Casey thought she was going to push the nurse call button, or pull out her IV, or something else drastic. Then Melanie shook her fist at the ceiling, muttering curses against the liquor laws. Casey smiled, then looked down and picked at a thread on the off-white sheet. “I’m going back to school, Mel.”
“That’s wonderful. What are you going to do?” Casey studied Melanie’s fingernails, stretched on the sheet beside her own hand; her sister’s nails were still painted and polished, well-maintained, in contrast to her own perennially ragged edges. Melanie must have fought the urge to laugh when Casey said she wanted to go to Beauty College, and Melanie’s hair had taken nearly a month to fill in properly after Casey cut it.

Casey watched the faint pulse on her sister’s wrist, the gentle throb of her vein in time with her heart. “I want to be a grief counselor.” She paused before looking up, fearing amusement or worse yet, disappointment. But her sister was simply nodding, serene, her gaze affectionate and approving. “Yes. That’s a perfect choice for you. You were always good at listening and saying the right thing.”

Casey found herself holding her sister’s hand. It was cool, and Melanie’s grip was weak, but she felt her sister press her fingertips, felt that quiet thrum of her sister’s pulse, and Casey knew she would not be able to hold herself together much longer. She wanted to say more to justify her decision, to prove that this was not her impulsiveness or need for validation. With her recent income, she had been approved for a loan that would help with the medical bills for a while, and she could continue to work while in school. She started to tell Melanie this, but found herself saying something else.

“Mel, I’m sorry I’ve been so cold to you. I don’t know how else to keep it together, but I think I can learn. I just feel like I –”

“Look who’s here to see Mommy!” It was their mother’s voice from the doorway, and Melanie’s two small children squeezed past their grandmother’s legs and into the room. It suddenly felt crowded to Casey, as their mother trailed the children in, hugging both daughters, complimenting Casey on the flowers, and helping the children to carefully love on Melanie.
Melanie’s expression shifted at their approach, hardened into something artificially happier, a stoic cheerfulness that had dropped for a moment.

Casey scooted backward toward the hallway. “I’m just gonna get some coffee,” she said, and she saw Melanie nod, just a touch. Their eyes met, and Casey mourned with her sister in that moment, an underground waterfall of grief, unseen on the surface.

She stepped down the polished hallway and wondered what the children would ask someday, wondered what they would need to hear, wondered if she would know in time.
Broker

Gillian stood at the tiled countertop, one arm braced resolutely against its edge with her elbow locked, the other hand scrubbing a stubborn mustard stain out of the dingy grout. She wondered whether Mark owned this house or had borrowed it for the night. The house was formidably old-fashioned to her, a sprawling two-story Tudor with the obligatory white picket fence, hand-carved cabinets and a movable island in the middle of the kitchen. The oak varnish was worn off the kitchen’s hardwood floors in areas of high foot traffic, and there were food spatters on the backsplash above the range – neat copper squares with symmetrical sunburst designs, speckled with bits of oil, grease, egg, and pasta. She cleaned because she felt responsible for the stains, the food spatters, the chips on the rim of the porcelain sink, as if she were to blame for any attention the house needed, although she had first set foot in it half an hour ago.

For the last three years, Gillian had worked for Fantasy Broker Enterprises as a service specialist who arranged wish fulfillment for wealthy clients, everything from a day as a rock star to conquering Mount Everest. She had arranged several situations for clients stuck in the past, “If Onlys” she and her coworkers called them, who paid handsomely to find out what might have been. Some were more interested in hard facts, paying for investigators, researchers, and probability experts to detail likely scenarios had their choices been different. Others were explicit about the alternate reality that they wanted to live in for a day or two. Most were on their deathbeds or fast approaching, or had passed through some other crisis which had caused them to stop and take stock of their lives. It wasn’t hard to figure out their motivations. But until now she had never been part of the scenario. Her ex-husband Mark had called her supervisor directly two days before, requesting a night of “What if?” with Gillian and detailing
his preferences – he would provide the house, the company would provide the children, and Gillian would simply be the doting wife and mother she might have been had things been different.

She put her back to the large, white-curtained window overlooking the circular drive. *This is not what our house would have looked like.* The spacious floor plan made her feel tiny, ineffectual, a diminutive queen fighting a losing war against her castle’s upkeep. She suspected the massive white refrigerator might swallow her whole if she touched it; it featured a single magnet that read “Always Kiss the Cook”, which she peeled off and tossed into the wastebasket. Chicken carbonara had been his favorite, years ago, and she was determined to have it ready when he drove up, but she was putting off making dinner, as even purchasing the groceries had made her stomach contort threateningly. She found fine China, white with some awful curlicued blue nonsense around the edges, waiting for her in one of the upper cabinets, as if she herself had sequestered it there for a special occasion, a pattern she’d compromised on in exchange for her choice of wallpaper or wedding cake. When she brought the stack of dishes down on the counter, a tiny piece broke off one of the plates.

Her supervisor, Jim, had come into Gillian’s office and told her everything, while Gillian sat lightly rapping a pencil on her desk, listening with a blank expression. Jim said he had explained to Mark that this was outside Gillian’s job description, that service specialists arranged but did not take part, certainly were not required to spend the night with clients, and if Gillian did this it would be as an independent party – in effect, as a client herself. Gillian had pushed the graphite tip of her pencil into the remains of a muffin on her desk, stabbing its blueberry heart, and when she finally spoke her voice rose for the first time in her tenure with the company, while her other hand inadvertently knocked over the long-dead bromeliad by her computer. She
couldn’t possibly see Mark again, could she? She rested her forehead on the pencil skewering her muffin, feeling the round imprint of the eraser pressing right between her eyes – one shot, one kill – as her boss gave his assurances that she was not obligated to do this. Gillian ignored this and told herself that her review was coming up, that this was going above and beyond; she justified it to herself in that manner, as if her job depended on it, convincing herself that there was really only one possible answer. She had to excuse herself to the restroom after she insisted that she could do it, where she sat for fifteen minutes fully clothed on the toilet seat in her tan pantsuit. She tried to feel professional but could only recall those other times waiting in the bathroom, desperate for a plus sign or two straight lines. She had to re-do her makeup three times, and ended up taking the afternoon off.

*

Two days later, she drove a red company mini-van through manicured suburbs far nicer than the neighborhood where she lived. There were SUVs and mini-vans in the driveways she passed, detailed with bumper and window stickers about honor students and their sports teams, band camps, or vacation spots. Was this where he lived? When Gillian reached the address that Mark sent to her Blackberry, she had two hours to get dinner ready before he arrived. Mark was responsible for the house, and the children were waiting for her when she came in, the boy watching a violent movie on TV, the girl playing a Gameboy. Like little latchkey kids. Jim had probably handled their hiring, or shuttled it off to Gillian’s coworker, Susan, who was the official Service Specialist handling Mark’s request.

She recognized both the children, who came from Star Kidz, their Hollywood connection for juvenile talent. The boy’s name was Chad (he would be going by the name David for this part, the name she and Mark had picked out years ago, naively hopeful), and she had even used
him once before to play a loving grandson for a near-blind old man with a doting and wealthy
wife. He was eleven but looked eight, with a slight frame and dark hair like her. He had a
tendency to over-play his parts, but he was dependable. She knew the girl only from a headshot
she had seen in the past – Anna something, she thought it was – who looked about six, petite and
lightly freckled, with a mass of nearly-black hair that fell in her eyes, eyes that always looked a
bit surprised but were simply taking everything in. She looked, it occurred to Gillian now, just
like their daughter would have looked, Paige, had she ever been conceived.

Gillian stood in the tiled foyer, the loops of the grocery bags caught in her fingers,
watching the children while she debated what to do. She started to address Chad, to compliment
him on that mustard commercial he had recently done, to introduce herself to Anna. Instead, she
transferred all the bags over to her left hand, the twisting plastic digging into her wrist, and
strode purposefully over to give each child a one-armed hug, quick and affectionate, no-
nonsense, accompanied by a kiss to the top of the girl’s head. She smelled of bubblegum and
watermelon, and her My Little Pony video game murmured weak beeps that were drowned out
by the explosions from the television. “Hey kiddos, I’m home. Your dad should be here in a
couple of hours. David, I’ve told you about watching that garbage, if you want to keep any TV
privileges at all. I want you two to play a board game instead. Paige, will you help him pick one
out?”

The kids assumed practiced airs of weary obedience, the boy sighing, the girl smacking
her gum, clicking off the Gameboy and the television and looking around for the board games.
They finally spotted what Gillian had seen – a bookshelf near the piano with stacks of puzzles
and games. Gillian clutched at a bottle of wine nearly spilling out of one of her bags, a purchase
she had vacillated on a half dozen times in the store, transferring the bottle from the shelf to her
cart and back each time she passed the aisle. She eventually told herself it was an appropriate piece of ambiance, but when she carried it into the kitchen she pushed it to the back of the counter, half obscured by canisters of sugar and flour and a gleaming, chrome espresso machine. She took heaving breaths, the other bags still hanging from her wrist and slowly spinning like the condemned on a rope. She was startled at how much it had taken out of her to talk to the kids in character. Cooking dinner – a task she had never excelled at, telling herself that no professional woman did anymore, that it was a sign of her upward mobility – now seemed such a monumental task that she could not bring herself to even examine the ingredients, the puzzle pieces waiting for assembly.

From the living room drifted the children’s argument over who could use which color for Checkers, both claiming red from the sound of it. Gillian put the bags on the counter and went twice to the doorway, both times retreating, unsure of the best motherly approach, wishing it could be dredged up from somewhere even deeper within than her twisting stomach and other uncooperative inner parts. She rehearsed in her head but couldn’t find the right tone of voice. Their eyes slid over to her and she backed into the kitchen until she struck up against the island, where an arrangement of spring flowers stood perfect, lovely, and artificial. She wished she had simply bought take-out.

*

He didn’t look much different. Short-cropped hair, lean smile, with wire-frame glasses and circles under his eyes. He wore a polo shirt and pressed khakis. She knew Mark worked for a public relations firm that dealt almost exclusively with non-profits, which could apparently be quite profitable, if this were his house. She had convinced Jim to let her peek at Mark’s client dossier, despite the fact that she was not coordinating this event, that she in fact had to fill out a
stack of paperwork asserting that she did not represent the company in any capacity in this case, that she was under no obligation to violate any laws, codes, or personal standards of behavior, and that any choices she made were personal decisions that in no way reflected upon her employer. She had stepped many people through filling these out – sometimes friends, family, or lovers agreed to play along for a client, and sometimes they didn’t. If Gillian had declined, she knew that Jim’s next step would have been to offer an actress to play her part, and some part of her had refused to allow that possibility.

Mark had been recently divorced after five years of marriage, which explained, she thought, the sudden interest in recapturing whatever might have been with Gillian. His firm was successful, allowing him to afford the service, which he had likely found out about, she suspected, through attempts to track her down. Did he think it would be this easy? That she would fall in love with him all over again in a night, remember what they had, and determine to reclaim it? She realized she was clutching her cherry-patterned dishtowel like a life raft as she looked at him, while a confusing jumble of thoughts fought for expression.

“Gillian,” he said from the foyer, but he said it like he was trying it out, like he wasn’t sure if that’s what he should call her, like she might have changed her name if they had stayed together, gone by “Gilly,” or something else ridiculous. She wanted to slap him.

“Daddy!” the kids yelled in tandem, jumping up from the deep berber carpet in the living room and running over to give him hugs. Unrealistic, Gillian thought, but effective.

Mark hugged them back, scooping Anna – Paige, Gillian reminded herself – up onto his hip. The girl gave him a kiss on the cheek, leaving a pale imprint of cotton candy lip gloss, then wriggled out of his arms and rejoined the boy at their game board, where Checkers were scattered across the floor before the cold fireplace. Gillian had wanted to have a fire waiting to
greet him, but she had run out of time, and left it barren. “Welcome home, sweetheart,” she said,
drying her hands now on the dishtowel as she walked over and rose up on her toes to kiss him for
the first time in eight years. It was all one-sided; he seemed to be in shock. She swallowed
several questions and hooked her arm through his. “I made your favorite. Come on, let’s eat
before it gets cold.”

* 

It wasn’t that unusual, Gillian told herself as she forked a bite of baby spinach, thankful
that eating seemed to preclude conversation by the way Mark was shoveling it in. Certainly she
had made arrangements for other clients hung up on a lost love, desiring reunion with an ex or
simply a day to answer that “What if?” question. But there had been no contact leading up to
this, not a word exchanged between them in the intervening years since that morning when they
both spontaneously began to pack, an unvoiced agreement that resulted in another argument over
who would be responsible for the lease, for the apartment with its extra bedroom kept ready.
They both wished to depart in such a way that she had never known who had been the one
leaving the other. “This doesn’t have to happen,” he had said, but he already had all of his shirts
and pants in boxes when she had just started on her socks. They split the cost of breaking their
lease, and she heard nothing of him for three years until a friend showed Gillian his wedding
announcement in the paper, a month before she moved to a new city – a coincidence, she
promised her friends. With a bachelor’s in hospitality and five years of concierge experience,
she eventually hired on with her current company, which she saw as merely an extension of her
time fulfilling wishes for others. Some days she feared that she was losing herself in the lives of
others – or worse yet, avoiding her own life – but other days she felt she was doing some real
good, and it paid far more than any hotel position she had held, because they could charge such
exorbitant amounts to their clients. Despite his clear discomposure, exhaustion, and lingering dejection from his second divorce, Mark still looked successful. Where had all of his money been back when they had needed it? Gillian stared at her fork, the tines piercing the tender chicken breast as she stabbed it with excess force. She longed to slip out of character.

“How is it?” she eventually asked him, watching the way he still separated his food before eating it, only to allow it to run together as the meal progressed. The kids were eating rapidly and in silence, whether from nervousness or hunger she couldn’t tell.

“Delicious. Just like you used to make it.” Mark smiled at her, a grateful smile, like she was doing this all as a tremendous favor, like she wasn’t a paid professional or his fantasy wife, but rather an old love who was indulging him because of past affections. Gillian remembered with a jolt that she wasn’t being paid for this, that it was optional, which opened the possibility that he was right, but this only reinforced her determination to remain professional and perform her role.

She dropped her fork loudly on her plate, then dabbed at her mouth with a cloth napkin embroidered with an ‘R’, the first initial of his last name, Russell. “I made it just last week. You remember.”

He nodded, his head tucking down, his fork and knife clumsy in their efforts to secure the pasta. “I forgot. It’s been such a crazy work week – I don’t know where my head is.” He paused, his eyes roving over her in a way that made her annoyed rather than offended, if only because she saw more curiosity than desire. Desire she could defuse. “Gillian, I do notice that you’re wearing the shirt I gave you last month for your birthday.”

She loosened her grip on her sweating glass of lemonade, smiling. Technically, it couldn’t have been given to her last month for her birthday, because that would mean this was
eight years ago, and then where did these kids come from? When asked, he had chosen a possible present, not a re-enacted past, according to her supervisor – still, he was trying. “It’s one of my favorites.” She looked down to brush her hand over the yellow peasant blouse she hadn’t worn in half a decade, her hand finishing its motion by smoothing out the lap of her black skirt. On arrival to the house, she had passed a mirror hanging in the foyer and had a sudden horror that she looked like a bumblebee; he seemed to like it, though, and at least he was starting to get how this worked. She had been forced to buy new black sandals to finish the outfit, as nothing she owned felt homey enough.

“David, Paige, what have the two of you been studying in school?” he asked.

Gillian stopped chewing, watching them. She wondered what they had been told about their parts. Before Anna could open her mouth, Chad straightened and launched into a practiced monologue. “I’m on the Honor Roll again, and I was just chosen to be Student of the Month. I do community service every afternoon after school, and all the teachers love me. I have A’s in every class.”

That was over the top, Gillian thought, feeling something shift and uncoil inside. Chad could simply be himself – Mark would never know the difference – and besides, this was setting up a false expectation for their imagined present, wasn’t it? Their kids wouldn’t have been that successful, would they, with her as a mother? “David’s got a bit of an imagination,” Gillian rejoined, sliding the boy a fond, tight-lipped smile. “He got in another fight this week and they’ve threatened again to suspend him. I spent two hours arguing with Principal Wilson. David’s about to fail out of both math and English, and frankly, I don’t know what to do.”
Chad colored, and Anna tittered. Mark pushed a piece of chicken around on his plate like he was looking for an opening, avoiding her eyes. “That sounds serious. Could you help him with his homework?”

So even their imaginary children with imaginary problems were somehow her fault, were the way they were because she couldn’t find time to help them, to be a good mother. Gillian dropped her napkin on the table. “It’s hard enough making it to my job, picking up the kids, taking them to every damn soccer match, band practice, and doctor’s appointment, cleaning this huge house, doing the shopping, and somehow cooking for all of us. Maybe if you were ever around, you could help him yourself.”

Mark appeared to sink into himself. “Gillian,” he said, with that soft inflection he had used in their most private of moments, the final syllable arching like an intimate question, like the rest of the world called her something that was very close to her true name but not quite the same. She remembered a night he had said her name like a mantra, curled behind her, repeating it until the word lost all meaning and was simply one more term for the impossible. He had insisted that night that he could drop out of school, take on another job, that they could even sell their wedding rings if they had to. She had told herself that this was the perfect symbol for putting their marriage second.

“Mark,” she said, staring across the dinner table at him, across the remains of their meal. She wondered if there was any point in saving leftovers, wrapping them in tinfoil for some imaginary tomorrow. She found she could not finish the sentence she had started, guilt rising up for her sharp words a moment before, and she stood to gather up the children’s dishes. They had cleared their plates three minutes ago. “Can I get anybody anything else?”
The children shook their heads in silence, perhaps afraid to speak up again, and Mark ate the last bite of his chicken. Gillian placed the dishes in the sink, then went to the freezer to see if it contained ice cream or popsicles. She had not thought to buy dessert. The freezer held TV dinners, a bag of snow peas, and a whole chicken, but she saw nothing sweet. “Kids, I think it’s time for bed.”

They pushed back from the table without argument. Mark started to rise and then hesitated, his arm flinching like he might put it around Anna as she passed, but he didn’t, and the children went to the doorway and paused there. “Up the stairs and to the left,” Mark offered, his eyes darting to Gillian, who let it pass.

“Goodnight,” she said. “Don’t forget to brush your teeth.” She had no idea if this house normally held kids, whose toothbrushes would be up there, but she hoped that Chad and Anna had brought their own, as that was not the sort of thing one should borrow. She wondered if they had come prepared to spend the night. Gillian had not brought an overnight bag, packing one at home just in case and then leaving it on the bed at the last minute.

Mark was watching her, like he used to do whenever she did paint by numbers, or fell asleep holding the television remote, or re-arranged their tiny kitchen for the dozenth time, watching her with unfeigned interest – not just like he had nothing better to do, but like there was nothing better, as if he were a judge watching a performance for which he would soon give a perfect ten. She felt a pleasant and long-unfamiliar warmth rising to her cheeks, and she surprised herself by producing the bottle of wine. There was no harm in trying a little harder, was there, in giving him his night?

“Would you care for a glass?” When he nodded, his expression unreadable now, she realized she did not know where the wine glasses were, or if there even were any. She had
thought to bring a corkscrew, but not glasses. He stood to help her search the cabinets, his arm passing over her head to open the ones she couldn’t reach, and she knew as he searched that this was not his house. It gave her a feeling of solidarity with him, that they were both in this stranger’s home pretending it was their own, searching for the glasses that would have been above and to the left of the microwave if it were truly their kitchen. They searched all the cabinets and found only tall juice glasses with a pattern of tiny oranges, which she filled with the deep red wine, ignoring the protests of an inner voice that began to insist that there was harm in it, of course there was, and she should simply leave now.

“How has your work been?” she asked him, leaning against the island as he leaned on the counter. She felt the eternally-blooming flowers prick her backside.

“It’s been good.” He swirled the wine in his juice tumbler, his pinkie finger raising out from its base. She smiled. “We’ve gone international this past year,” he said. “I’ve already handled clients based in the Sudan, Vietnam, and Bosnia. It’s really turning into what I’ve always wanted it to be.”

Gillian felt a sudden jealousy then, that he could be himself in this moment, that his imagined and actual selves were merged in this one synchronicity, that he could share himself with her without censorship or fear of verbal misstep. She remembered his passion for this line of work, for humanitarian projects, one of the things she had fallen in love with when they first met on that over-priced, tree-lined campus, her about to graduate, him with three years to go. His drive to change the world. She had applauded it, but wanted some security, a stable place from which to effect that change. So he had achieved both, it seemed.

“I’m happy for you,” she said. “It sounds very fulfilling.” She caught herself then, the tone in her voice, so reminiscent rather than familiar. It came to her as well that she had been
wrong, that he was not allowed to be himself, to have his real job, because if they were living this life with these kids and this family then they had found a way to pay for it, it meant his argument had won out and he had dropped out of school to cover the medical expenses, it meant that the reason that this very moment neither was wearing a wedding ring was because they had hocked them long ago and had apparently never purchased new ones, proving that the children still, still came first. She drank the rest of her glass, not knowing how to expose this breach of performance, only knowing she could not, now, let it pass.

“But of course I know about all that,” she added flatly. “I meant how things are day to day. How you’re getting settled into your new office. And if that woman Bridget is still hitting on you.”

Mark drew back, the counter preventing his further retreat. He drained the rest of his glass as well, silent, and she promptly refilled both of their glasses from the bottle. The attentive wife. There had been a classmate of Mark’s named Bridget many years ago, a wispy red-headed sprite that Gillian had never trusted. She felt quick pleasure at being able to successfully dredge her up without breaking the rules, knowing Mark could do nothing about it.

Mark took another swallow before straightening up. “Well, I’ve told her I’m not interested, but she can’t seem to resist me.” The corner of his mouth curled, that smile that meant he was about to let her in on a secret, but wanted to withhold the punch line a moment longer. Gillian folded her arms tightly, the juice glass held just below her chin. He relented, the smile fading. “But you know me, I never know what to do when it comes to women.”

She heard the note of apology, the self-deprecation, even an acknowledgment of some guilt concerning their own break-up coded in his reply. But she responded before she could help herself, an old anger surfacing. “You’ve certainly proved that, time and again,” she said,
emphasizing the final word. It wasn’t fair, she knew, referring to his recent divorce, something she as his wife would not know because it would never have happened, because here he had stayed successfully married. It was playing out of bounds, but she still sipped her wine, and her eyes flashed, daring him to respond.

He turned from her, and she saw in his posture the old slump of defeat, and hated it, wanting him to fight, to resist, to tell her just how wrong she was and prove all the reasons why. “You just need to stand up to her,” she added, willing him to turn and confront her, to insist, to put her stupid fears and foolish doubts in their place and take charge of them, of her, of the scene. He slid along the counter, toward the doorway, and she chased him, feeling the heat rising to her cheeks again, thrumming in her temples this time, an effect of the wine, she was sure – she caught up and pushed him, her hand shoving his shoulder, their first physical contact since the embrace at the front door. “Stop trying to leave,” she yelled at him, even as she pushed him toward the door.

“This was a bad idea,” he said, adjusting course to move from the counter to the island, and circling around it until she was on the far side. She approached it, taking another swallow of her wine, knowing her face was flushed, just as it looked when she grew embarrassed. “What was? Coming home for dinner?” She started to step around the island, her hand reaching for his, but aggressively, like a cat swatting at a toy.

“You can just drop all of that,” he said, pulling his hand back. “I’m tired of it.”

“I’m tired.” She stood straight, sipped her wine, and tossed her head to clear the bangs from her eyes. “I’m tired of you not putting this marriage first. Your work, your dreams, all these other people. That company – your little baby of a project – it’s all more important.”
“You’re wrong. You’re dead wrong, and you always have been. You can never see the good thing that’s right in front of you.” He spoke the words in anger, but with sincerity, and she latched onto it, heard the firmness in his voice, saw the inflexibility in his eyes. She saw him unwilling to back down from this position, saw his body tensed, and thought him prepared to pursue her, this time, if need be.

“I’ll get my things,” he said, instead retreating, but she had seen the fight in him and would not let it go, wanted to see how far it would take them.

“I’m going up to bed,” she said quickly, setting her juice glass by the flowers. He watched her, startled, as she turned and headed for the stairwell. Her face glowed hot, but the banister felt sturdy and reliable under her palm.

*

He was only a few minutes behind her, shutting the bedroom door carefully once inside, keeping the doorknob from clicking as if this might wake the children. The bedroom had a cherrywood sleigh bed with a large framed photograph above it of a couple kissing in front of the Eiffel Tower. The down comforter was a deep maroon, matching the curtains and throw pillows. Mark watched her as she prepared for bed, removing her curved earrings with precision and arranging them on the nightstand – parentheses ready to be filled in – then walking into the bathroom to take off her makeup. She could see him in the vanity mirror, stock still, his fingertips resting on the comforter like he was about to flatten its wrinkles.

“How was your drive home, honey?” she asked, thinking to start over. She dampened a washcloth and wiped under her eyes, smudging away her eye-shadow. For a moment, her eye looked bruised, like he was a horrible spouse, the reason it all would have failed anyway.
“Fine,” he answered after a moment, as if he had to think it over. “How was yours? What’s it like working such a weird job, anyway?” He spoke the last question with an altered tone of voice, as if to indicate his awareness that he was breaking etiquette, but felt justified in this new, intimate environment.

She refused the bait, feeling more comfortable in her role. She wanted to remain in it, to see where it led, to know that it was simply an exploration of missed possibilities. “Nothing weird about being a concierge.” She ran the water hot, cupped the washcloth under it, then raised the steaming pool to her face, feeling its heat on her skin. “Just a hotel.” She submerged her face, the water already seeping through the washcloth and running back into the sink. She wondered if some other couple had made love in this bathroom, perhaps in that marble garden tub, or made a baby in that cherrywood bed. She and Mark had, too, in this reality, had done so twice. She wrung out the washcloth until only tiny drops fell from the twisted folds, squeezing it dry, dry, dry.

He was in the bathroom now, watching like he’d never seen this night-time ritual before, like he didn’t know that lotion would come next, and then socks to warm her feet. “Okay, fine. How are things as a concierge?” He placed a hand on the side of her waist, then removed it and withdrew until his back was to the wall, a floral pattern where one row of purple irises fit neatly into another row running parallel. The bathroom was nothing like the one in the 580 square foot apartment they had shared for twenty-six months.

“They’re okay. Sometimes I have to do really weird things for my clients, though.” She smiled at that, letting him see it in the mirror, this time presenting the double meaning like an offering that they could share.
“I bet you do. I bet people ask you for some really strange stuff.” He wasn’t quite smiling, but he was playing along with her, and that was something. She reached for a thick purple towel hanging on a wrought iron rod, letting her hand brush his arm as it passed.

“You have no idea. But people need what they need.” She pulled the towel to her face, buried herself in its folds, smelling the soft lavender scent of the detergent. She had bought such things, back when it was the two of them, had worn perfume each day and worried over her hair. She found that she missed it. “Sometimes I just need time to get used to the idea.” She wanted to stay with him then, wanted to go on finding out what it would have been like, wanted to get close enough to see if he still wore cologne or if he had also stopped. When she emerged from the towel, he was no longer in the bathroom, but was standing again near the bed. His hands were in his pockets, which meant he was checking for his keys. She approached him, reaching for his arm, touching it and then stepping back when he didn’t move.

“I should have gone about this differently,” he said. “I should have just called you up, to see if I could sit down and talk with you. The real you.”

“This is the real me,” she said, unsure herself of whether she were still in character or not, but no longer caring.

He stepped back, toward the door. “I wanted to find something out.” He was looking past her now, at the picture on the wall. She felt she had to reclaim his attention at all costs.

“You haven’t yet,” she argued. “Not yet.” She half-turned and began pulling off her clothes and dropping them to the floor. She wanted him to see her. Wanted to assault him with it, at his carefully polite distance. She stripped off her undergarments and spun to face him, nude, letting his gaze drop and raise before she spoke.
“You have to see things through.” His hand dipped into his pocket again for his keys, and she shoved him hard, both hands on his chest. She yelled something wordless at him, and then she was falling against the mattress because he had shoved her back, and he was reaching to be sure she was all right, instantly remorseful, and she pulled him down with her and kissed him. He tried to pull away again but this time she held on, she kept him, until his resistance gave way, until it was replaced with anger. She felt something surging up between them from a distant past, like they were finishing an argument at last, like he were holding her accountable, and it frightened her. He held her down, his hands moving brusquely, searchingly over her arms, her legs, her breasts, her belly, as if seeking something they did not find. She felt the weight of failure sinking her into the bed, she was smothering, and she began apologizing to him for the first time in her memory. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, starting to cry, but perhaps he did not hear her, because he took her roughly then, both of them remaining on top of the comforter until he was shaking as well, until it hurt, and she reached to touch his face but he pulled away. They did not slip under the covers until they parted to their separate sides. She lay bare on the cotton sheets, her face damp with tears and sweat, lacking the courage to search in a stranger’s closet for something to sleep in.

*

The following morning, the four of them gathered for breakfast as if it were their daily routine.

“When am I going home?” Anna asked from the kitchen table. Gillian very nearly answered her by name.

“Paige, sweets, you are home. Did you have a strange dream last night?” It felt impossible to Gillian to cling to anything but her performance. The portrayal avoided other
questions. She carried over a heaping plate of buttermilk pancakes, sliding two in front of the girl. They were homemade, and irregularly shaped – like flat, cancerous tumors, Gillian thought.

“I’m tired of this. I was only ready for one day.” Anna looked from her plate to the syrup, which stood by Mark’s elbow. He uncapped it and handed it to her, and she took it with a small frown. “Sorry, but this is really weird.”

Gillian wondered how much the children might have heard last night. Chad was shoveling in his pancakes in silence. Gillian searched the drawers for another dish towel, and she came across a stack of aprons; the one on top read World’s Best Mom. She couldn’t look at Mark. It was all she could do to keep from throwing up her hands, calling him out, and facing the end of the charade. Instead she stalked over to the table, where Anna was dousing her plate with syrup. “Paige Elizabeth Russell, that is no way to speak to your father, and you had better apologize this second, you hear me?” Anna blinked at her, the full name having no effect.

“It’s all right,” Mark said, reaching over with a paper napkin to dab at the overflow syrup pouring down from Anna’s drowning pancakes.

“It’s most definitely not all right. This is not how I’ve raised my kids to act. This is not how I run my house – disrespectful, wasteful – for crying out loud, Paige, you don’t need the whole bottle.” Gillian grabbed a handful of napkins, smothering Anna’s plate with them, half of them getting stuck in the syrup and peeling away thin layers of pancake when removed.

“Ooh, my sister is in trouble,” Chad crooned, grinning, and again overplaying it. Gillian shot him a look and he withered.

“This has gone on long enough.” Mark stood, his shoulders hunching again like they did in that stupid way that she could never tell if he was contrite or furious.
“Just walk away, then.” Gillian piled the soaked napkins on Anna’s plate, on her uneaten pancakes.

“You’re being selfish.” He carried his dishes toward the sink, but Gillian intercepted, pulling them away and tossing them in herself, a saucer splitting in two on impact, the sound both definitive and satisfying.

“I’m not paid to be selfish. I’m paid to be whatever you want me to be.” That might not be true in this particular case, she realized, but it felt somehow right, saying it. She pulled off her apron and threw it on the counter. “So you tell me what exactly it is that you want.” She hesitated, only a moment. “And I’ll be it.”

“Kids,” Mark said, a neutral term, what he might call children his own or not his own, “go play somewhere else.”

The children pushed away from the table and left, Chad leaving a mess, Anna carrying her dishes to the sink and pushing her chair in. Gillian turned toward a window looking into the backyard, drew deep breaths, and stared at a tire swing, sandbox, and dilapidated jungle gym. She was reminded then that this house was borrowed, maybe from a friend or coworker of Mark’s, that she was breaking a real family’s plates and yelling in its kitchen, and felt sure that the mother doted on her children and marked their height on the wall with a pencil – _shhh, stand still, feet together, back straight_ – that someone had stayed up late one Christmas Eve, assembling that jungle gym in the bitter cold, hands shaking but smiling, smiling, years ago. Before rust devoured it – what was that verse? Something about treasures in heaven, away from rust, and moths, and thieves?
“I thought maybe it could work, if we could both see it again,” Mark intoned, solemnly, with the air of a mourner at a wake. He continued before Gillian could respond. “And then I just wanted to know why it ended.”

Gillian tried to smile, fearing this honesty, but reassured by his un-accusing tone. “Me, too.”

He stood by her at the window as she watched the wind drift the tire swing in lazy circles, some phantom child swinging on it, feet stretched out and hair flying. He rested a hand on the windowsill. “Then I thought if I could just talk to you, the real you, we could figure something out.”

“This is the real me,” she said once more, at the same volume as her apology the night before, remembering the thrill and the agony of his touch. Her words hung in the air, and she feared again that he would see through them, see that under the lives she lived for others there was nothing there, no real Gillian to be produced in the hour of need.

“I know. I realized this has all been the real you.” He spoke it like a verdict, though, like her sentencing depended on reaching this conclusion and only the punishment was left to be meted out. “At least we got to see what our darling children would have looked like.”

She couldn’t match his smile that followed, and couldn’t help him lighten the moment. “This is not who we would have been.” He had to see that, had to see how different it all would have turned out. She could see it now.

“No,” he said. “But it’s who we are.”

She put her hand to the window, wanting to strike it, instead spreading her fingers and flattening her palm on the cool pane. She remembered he used to press his hand to the glass of
their bedroom window each morning, to feel the temperature and determine what to wear that day. “It could be different,” she said.

“You don’t know how to be different. You don’t know how to be yourself.”

She wanted to stop listening then, to tune him out, and wished she were outside under that spreading oak. She stared at the tree. The worn ropes on the idly spinning tire swing stretched up, high into the far branches, out of sight from her vantage point. You would have to take it on trust that they were connected to anything at all, she thought, that the knots would hold firm, that they would safely hold you up when it came down to it.

“You’re living other people’s lives because you’re avoiding your own.”

Her attention came back to Mark and she wrapped an arm across her belly protectively, as if punched. *That’s not true.*

He pressed on, his voice rising and his words coming faster. “And you grant everybody else’s wishes because you can’t come through on your own.”

“No, Mark.” She turned to face him then, her voice unsteady. “Because I couldn’t come through on yours.”

She felt satisfaction at that, like a well-delivered blow, but a part of her murmured that it was only a line and meant nothing, nothing more than her apology last night, and this voice kept repeating his words rather than hers, such that as he turned and left the kitchen she felt wounded inside in a way she had not in several years.

After a moment, Gillian stepped into the living room, where she found the kids sitting in front of the television. She flipped off the set. “Get your stuff, kids. You’re going home.”

Chad already had his bag packed, sitting beside him on the carpet. “Do I get paid for two days?”
“Yeah, I’m sure you do.” She slid her palms to her sides, smoothing her skirt, her trembling hands needing something to do. Chad smiled, appeased. Anna, with a confused frown, was struggling to get her sandals on, putting them on the wrong feet. “Chad, help Anna get her sandals on, would you? It’s Anna, right?”

Anna nodded irritably, as if she wasn’t a helpless infant, and Chad shrugged, reaching over to help her.

“It’s been nice working with you two,” Gillian said, striving to remain composed. Perhaps she was not mother of the year, but she was a professional. She did her job.

“What ever,” Chad said.

Anna stood and grabbed her pink fanny pack, having not brought any pajamas, toiletries, or extra clothes. She shot Gillian a glare as she stalked into the foyer. Gillian caught a whiff of watermelon and bubblegum again, there for a moment and then gone.

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Mark was in his car when she came outside with the kids in tow. His window was rolled down, and he was leaning over it like a soldier about to vault from the trenches. She saw in his eyes that he was on the verge of apology, but she did not feel she could bear his pity without crying again, so she instead went on the offensive.

“Have a good time at work, dear,” she said as she passed. “Enjoy yourself with Bridget.”

“This isn’t what I wanted.” His eyes flicked to the children and back.

“File a complaint.” She tried to smile but couldn’t, and she gave the children each a small shove in the back toward the mini-van.

He started to roll up the window, then lobbed one parting shot over the clear wall. “You would have made a lousy mother.” The window sealed, like an airlock, his private rocketship
and Gillian drifting there in space, and she saw the guilt on his face, that he already regretted his words. She was glad he had said it, that one of them had.

She gave a small wave as he backed out, and when he waved back, just a raising of three fingers from the steering wheel, she felt it was sincere and real and she wondered if she would ever see him again. She herded the kids toward the mini-van, focusing on getting them seated and buckled, not able to watch Mark’s car pass out of sight. She would call her supervisor, and he would let the parents know to come pick the kids up from the office. Maybe things would be okay, she thought. She climbed into the front seat, breathed deeply, and imagined what it would be like if she were taking the kids to school instead, or soccer practice, or a choir rehearsal.

“What’s your real name?” Anna asked suddenly from the back seat.

“Gillian,” she said, watching the girl in the rearview. “It’s really Gillian.”

“Oh.” Anna sounded unimpressed and vaguely disappointed, and she pulled the video game from her pack. Gillian continued to watch her in the rearview, but the girl did not look up again.