

Unsettled

BY

JENNIFER BERNER

B.A., Brown University, 2000

Ed.M., Harvard University, 2003

M.Phil., University of Glasgow, 2004

THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2013

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:

Cris Mazza, Chair and Advisor

Mark Canuel

Christopher Grimes

Walter Benn Michaels

Doug Ischar, Photography

Dedicated to Theodor Arran Aitchison.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Cris Mazza, and the rest of my committee in the English Department – Mark Canuel, Christopher Grimes, and Walter Benn Michaels – for their invaluable guidance, encouragement, and wisdom. The UIC English Department, as a whole, provided an inspiring and thought-provoking environment for my writing and research, and I cannot imagine having completed this thesis anywhere else. I am also indebted to Doug Ischar in the UIC Photography Department, without whom the images that appear in this thesis never would have been created.

My fellow graduate students at UIC offered a tremendous amount of support and feedback on my stories over the years. My friends and family made a very challenging chapter in my life equally enjoyable. Most of all, I want to thank my husband, David Aitchison, whose conversation, criticism, and love kept me grounded and grateful every day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
BLUE TAPE	1
UNSETTLED	13
THE PINK SOLUTION	29
JOHNS WITH OTHER ENDINGS	46
THE REST	56
THE NEW LEASE	69
COMMUTE	80
CROCODILE RACER	92
THE QUANTUM EVENT	105
VITA	150

BLUE TAPE



I made myself at home: kicked off my shoes, strapped my purse over the doorknob, set the kettle to boil. I dug into my purse for the electric-blue tape I bought special, for this occasion.

REMOVES CLEANLY AND EASILY, the packaging boasted. LEAVES NO RESIDUE. I tore off a small piece and stuck it on the back burner, seven o'clock. I scored the tape with my fingernail: *k* for kettle.

The evidence of Karl's morning routine was scant, but reassuring. Coffee grounds – Sumatra, his favorite – sank in the trash, still percolating the ruffled filter, a yellow mug waited in the basin, and a sugar spoon lay face-down on a saucer.

Karl was particular about spoons. More than once, I had made the mistake of leaving one “face-up,” as he called it. He hated how this caused the coffee to pool in the hollow.

“Now when I go to use it for my cup, there's a ring of cold coffee caked on it,” he would say. Though his fussiness was irritating, I never objected. This was a lesson Karl told me he had learned in the army and, as such, it was off-limits. We didn't talk about his service. At least, we hadn't since the early days of our relationship, since before I had introduced him to Sue.

That night of their first meeting seemed ages ago, but the effects had never quite worn off. At first, I had thought the two of them were having a blast. They certainly doled out plenty of laughter. Later, they corrected me.

“I didn't appreciate her making fun of the army,” Karl had said once she was gone. “I wish you'd said something.”

“Oh, she wasn't making fun. It just seemed that way, because one of her eyebrows is naturally darker than the other,” I explained. It was true: her eyebrows gave her an air of perpetual cynicism that could be unsettling to those who didn't know her.

The next day, Sue and I had worked the same shift at the bookstore. “I can’t believe you’re seeing that guy,” she had said, all the while slipping security tags into art books. “He is so not your type. I mean, the army? The mustache? Your values are totally different.”

“The mustache could be ironic,” I said.

She didn’t have to make the look. Her eyebrows did it for her.

Maybe Sue had been right. Maybe there is a certain kind of guy who serves his country and grows a mustache, and maybe I’m not the girl for him. But I have to admit, that single image he gave me of his military days – a set of men sipping coffee in uniform, the small courtesies and spoons they shared – really did something for me.

It’s possible that I vaguely thought about all of this as I studied the spoon and the mug on Karl’s counter. More likely, I was still too nervy to reminisce. Almost as nervy as yesterday. I had to note the crucial details: the mug’s handle pointed at eight o’clock; the spoon more like four. Only this time, thanks to the tape, I wouldn’t have to scramble to remember the original positions of the objects. I stuck one piece to the counter, as close as possible to the point where the spoon handle made contact. S, I initialed. Then I dropped the spoon in the mug, removed the mug from the basin, and affixed another square to the precise spot where the mug had been centered. I notched the tape at eight o’clock and stepped back. They looked nice, those touches of blue.

In the pantry, I found my box of Earl Grey tea. Karl only drank coffee, regular. Tea was prissy. So I always kept a stash of my own. I wasn’t sure how I felt about the fact that the tea was still there, now that we were broken up. Maybe it meant he was distraught. He was having trouble letting go. This would have satisfied me. But there were other possibilities, too. Maybe he was planning on keeping the tea. He would serve it to future guests, future girlfriends. They

would compliment him on his taste. One day, he might even become something he swore he never would: a bona fide tea-drinker. He would frequent specialty stores in search of exotic blends with names like “Dandelion Detox” and “China Harvest” and carefully monitor steeping times. Of course, that wasn’t even the worst scenario. The worst was that he simply wouldn’t notice the tea was there.

I prepared the tea in his mug, stirred the sugar with his spoon. Sure, it was riskier this way, but it heightened the strange sense of intimacy I felt being in his apartment alone. I wrapped the tea bag in a tissue and tucked it inside my purse. My nerves were starting to settle. The day before, I had been so much more anxious. It was a wonder I had even made it to Karl’s building. On the walk over, I had been tormented with the thought of what might happen if I ran into him, or someone else I knew, like my nosy coworker Crystal, who lived a block down from him. I nearly turned back. Although Karl’s street wasn’t, in any sense, out-of-the-way, it was set back just enough from the center of town that there was really no reason to be on it unless, of course, you lived there, or had a boyfriend who lived there, or needed to go to the post office. This time, I brought letters to mail, as a precaution. The letters were just normal bills, and not even late. But no one could tell the difference.

I sat on his sofa with my tea. It was eight fifty, about three hours until I would need to leave for my shift at the bookstore. Karl would be halfway through teaching the first of his four survival skills classes. Up until a month ago, Karl had been a kayaking instructor at an all-boys prep school. Sometimes, in bed, we would pretend that I was one of his students, caught up in the turbulent rapids and stranded on an isolated bank, drenched and ravaged like on the cover of a harlequin romance. Once, I even used the puffy red vest I kept at his place as a life-preserver. All

of this was ok, so long as he didn't actually have any female students. But when he began to consider a new job that had opened up at the sister school, I began to worry.

"It just feels wrong, knowing the fantasies you've had," I had said.

"I've had!" He threw up his hands. I mean, literally threw up his hands. I remember, because it's not something you see a lot in real life. "Those fantasies are always yours," he said. "I just play along."

He had a point there. I tried a different tactic.

"Wouldn't you rather go somewhere coed?" I asked. At the very least, I wanted him to have some younger male competition.

"This position is a unique opportunity," he said. "It's not like every high school has a survival program."

"But if it's an all-girls school, shouldn't they be looking for a woman?" I asked. "I mean, the girls should have good female role models. With you there, they'll assume that only men are qualified to teach survival skills."

My name, "Renee," was all he said.

I stayed with him long enough to learn the grim details of his new position. In the fall, he would teach survival skills and train the girls into shape. In the spring, the cohort – about forty girls in total – would take a week-long wilderness expedition in the Appalachians. Meanwhile, I hung onto a remote hope that Karl and I could work something out, by which I really meant a remote hope that he could still change his mind, and return to kayaking. I liked our old routine.

When he didn't, I called it quits.

"Our values are totally different," I said, echoing Sue's sentiments exactly. "I can't support what you're doing to those poor girls' self-esteem."

In reality, I had very little interest in high school girls' self esteem. In fact, I think that self esteem in general is overrated, and particularly the self-esteem of girls who are over ten years my junior. I just couldn't stand the thought of those classes, of Karl guiding his students' slight hands as they mastered intricate knots and supervising their exertions on the rowing machine. Thus, it makes no sense, or every kind of sense, depending on how you look at it, that this was what I thought about, what I pictured him doing, as I sat on his sofa sipping tea.

I left for work at noon, making sure before I went that I had returned to their original locations the mug, the spoon, and every other item I had handled. The pieces of blue tape peeled off easy. I shoved them in my purse, praising myself for a job well-done.

I arrived at the bookstore early. Sue was eating a sandwich in the break-room, a tiny loft-space with a futon and a mini-fridge. It offered a great birds-eye view of the store, a view of which the customers were oblivious.

"Look, do you think that guy could be stealing?" Sue asked, motioning with her sandwich towards a man in the history section.

"Nah. I've seen him before," I said. "He's harmless. Why?"

"Crystal said she saw him removing a security tag this morning."

Crystal was the coworker who lived near Karl. Actually, she was more than a coworker. She was a friend. I might even say good friend, though that might be pushing it. Everyone in the bookstore, including Crystal herself, was under the impression that Crystal, Sue, and I were bosom buddies. The guys down in shipping and receiving referred to us as "the threesome," and our most frequent buyer, a retired professor, called us "Charlie's Angels," apparently on account of our different hair colors. But the truth was, Sue and I were close friends. Crystal was just Crystal. And though Sue and I were happy to spend time with the girl – this young 20-year old

girl who could coin catchy abbreviations like “reg” (for “register”) and wink at customers without looking creepy – we also had our own private times, when Crystal wasn’t invited.

“So Crystal’s here today?” I asked.

Sue nodded. “She’s on till two. But she was suggesting we could meet up later, after you get off. We want to know how you’re doing.”

I knew what she meant: Crystal wanted to know how I was coping without Karl. Crystal’s father wrote self-help books, some of which we carried in our Mind/Body section. So she knew all the stages, all the signs, everything about breaking up properly. Sue claimed Crystal was a genius. Of course, Sue never had a real boyfriend.

“I’m not so sure about tonight,” I said. “But maybe you and I could see a movie on Friday?”

“If that’s what you want,” said Sue. “But I agree with Crystal. It would help you to talk.”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I said. “You were right about him. We just didn’t have that much in common. You keep forgetting that I was the one who broke up with him.”

I couldn’t tell whether Sue was raising one eyebrow.

I didn’t go out with them that night, nor did I see a movie with Sue on Friday. But I did sneak back into Karl’s apartment two more times that week, and three times the week after. I knew I was being psycho. I didn’t need anyone telling me, certainly not self-help Crystal. That’s part of what I liked about it. I didn’t have to worry about whether it was healthy, at this certain stage in our breakup, to burn things or wait by the phone or sleep around. Breaking into your ex-boyfriend’s apartment while he’s away is just sick, period. I reveled in the certainty.

Slowly, I began to create my own routine. To cover my tracks, I invented new and innovative methods involving diagrams, blue tape, and plastic wrap. All was going perfectly, I

was moving on, I hardly even thought about Karl anymore. It was as if he didn't live there. Then, one day, I left a teabag in the mug. I didn't realize my blunder until I reached the crosswalk by the after-school enrichment center. I turned around in the middle of the street and dug into my purse, just to be sure – no teabag. The crossing guard, an older woman wearing a light-reflective vest, gave me a frown, then held up her mini-stopsign for the second time.

“I forgot something,” I shouted as I rushed away down the street.

When I reached Karl's apartment, his car was parked in the driveway. I panicked. It wasn't even three yet. Why was he home? His figure appeared at the window. Was he looking for me? I sprinted as fast as I could back towards the crosswalk.

“Did you get what you needed?” the crossing guard asked.

“Yes,” I lied.

“Good. Now, I want you to stay here for a minute,” she said.

“Sorry, I'm kind of in a hurry,” I replied. I didn't dare look back.

“Wait.” She held out her sign in front of me to block the way. Cars whizzed by. “When you forget something like that, it's God's way of helping you avoid danger. So you have to make sure you allow enough time to let the danger pass. Say a prayer, maybe.”

I didn't say a prayer. Instead, I stood there staring at this woman, whose job it was to cross me, with all the hate I could conjure.

That evening, I braced myself for Karl's angry phone call. But the phone never rang. Was it possible he hadn't noticed the teabag? Or that he had found some normal explanation? Or did he simply figure that he didn't have to call me – that now I would surely know I had gone too far? I didn't go to Karl's the next day, or the day after. I spent my spare time in the break-room, spying on customers and listening to Crystal talk about experiments in developmental

psychology. Crystal had been using her father's books to run a battery of tests on her eight year old cousin, just for kicks. According to Crystal, her cousin was in what's called "the Period of Concrete Operations." He could not yet understand the concept of conservation. A tall glass of water transferred into a shallow container appeared to be a different quantity altogether. I didn't let her run the tests on me.

By the next Monday, I was infuriated with Karl. It was bad enough waiting for his call. It was worse admitting it would never come. I knew I had to return to his place.

For the first time, the sight of his door filled me with dread. I wondered whether he might have changed his lock. But my key fit same as always, then turned with a click. The mug, of all things, was still there. The mug with my old teabag, now dry and shriveled. There was no question: it was in the exact same place I had left it, that is to say, the exact same place he had left it originally. Maybe if Karl had been messy, I would have accepted the oversight. But this was the guy who bristled if his dresser drawers were open just a sliver.

I decided to set up my own test. I left a dirty spoon face-up on the counter. When I returned the next day, they were still there, the mug and the spoon, untouched. I left a tissue on Tuesday, a bookmark on Wednesday. On Thursday, I left blue tape everywhere. Friday, I had had enough. I started by whipping up a broccoli omelet. I made sure to burn the cheese. When I spilled ketchup on the floor, I stomped in it. The tracks followed me into the bathroom. I cleaned my teeth with my old toothbrush, taking care to leave toothpaste marks in the sink. I shaved my legs in the bath. I rummaged through his dresser for my old red vest, then draped it over a chair.

As I was tugging at the bedspread, I happened to glimpse the room in the full-length mirror. It had lost all composure. Drawers lay half-open, clothes strewn about, as if a small storm had struck. I wouldn't have recognized the scene for what it was had I not, finally, noticed the

vest, in the middle of it all, like an anchor. I thought about putting it on, about walking away in it. But clearly, it had accustomed itself to its home in the drawer: its once-puffy shape had deflated, and its fabric held onto deep wrinkles and folds.

I didn't stop to look at my own reflection. Carefully, I folded the vest and replaced it in the drawer. I scrubbed the sink and bathtub, mopped the floor. I did the dishes. Next, I vacuumed everything, every corner, every surface, every stray hair. I didn't even care whose hairs they were. I wiped the windows, the doorknobs. I removed every fingerprint.

Finally, after three weeks, I was done.

On the way home, I ran into Sue and Crystal as they were leaving Crystal's apartment.

"What are you doing here?" Sue asked.

"Going to the post office," I replied. Only, this time I didn't have my letters with me. Over the past week, I had abandoned all method, all strategy. "I'm picking up a package," I added.

"Cool," said Crystal. "We'll join you."

I could have asked them where they were going, but I didn't. It was enough just knowing they had been at Crystal's together, and that I hadn't been invited.

At the post office, Sue and Crystal waited in line with me. I felt like I was leading them to some sublime river I would plunge myself into and drown. But I felt good about it.

"I'm expecting a package," I said confidently when I reached the counter.

"Did you get a pink slip?" the man asked.

"No."

"Do you have a tracking number?"

"No."

“Then you’ll have to come back another time.”

“It’s important,” I said. “Can’t you just take a look?”

He examined me over the top of his glasses. “ID?”

While he was away, searching for the package, Sue and Crystal questioned me.

“Who’s it from?”

“Karl,” I speculated. “It’s from Karl. He mailed me some of my old things because I wouldn’t pick them up.”

“That’s kind of funny, he sends you a package and it ends up here right by his apartment.” Sue’s eyebrows were killing me.

I scanned the post office. High in the wall sat a window, like the one in the break-room, where a figure watched the activity, sipping coffee or tea. Directly below lay a tall, wide barrier. This was the same barrier behind which the man had disappeared with my ID. From time to time, sounds escaped – a clanging, a scuff. I tried to picture the other side – a row of metal shelves, assorted boxes, a lift machine. The man was surely taking his time.

“It must be heavy.” As I said this, I imagined a large box, meant just for me.

“What’s in it?” Crystal asked.

I didn’t know. My toothbrush, perhaps. My vest, my tea. Could there be more? As I waited, the package expanded in all dimensions. Clearly it was too big for the man to handle. He had to get assistance to lower it from the shelf to the ground. And now? Well, now he was pushing it slowly down the concrete hall, inching it forward with all his might. Any minute, I would see it. We all would. In color, no less – electric-blue. Karl had taped it up tight. It would take me forever to peel off the layers of tape to get inside. It was just like him to do that.

I thought about how surprised Sue and Crystal would be when they saw the package. They would laugh and say, “We didn’t believe you! We thought you were stuck in ‘the Period of such-and-such Operations.’”

They would help me carry the package to my apartment.

I glimpsed the figure in the high window again. From that vantage point, anyone could see it coming. Even I could see it on its way.

UNSETTLED



Browsing the online classifieds at work, Jack discovered a thumbnail photograph of what appeared to be his bedroom under ROOMS FOR RENT. He zoomed in. From the gray bedspread to the glass block windows to the IKEA bookshelf in the corner, the effect was nondescript, but not unflattering. Indeed, the room was tidier than he usually kept it, the walls free of post-its, the bed expertly made. The side table had been moved to the window to showcase an anomalous vase of dried flowers. He zoomed in again, hoping to pick out the titles of his books, but everything pixilated. He zoomed out and scrolled down.

HIGHLAND: 1BR available in 3BR apt. Great location, walk to green line & 56 bus. Friendly, responsible grad student or young professional preferred. No pets, no smoking, no attitude. \$375/mo. + utilities. 3592@citylistings.com.

It was short, but to the point. For *friendly*, he read *mind-numbingly upbeat*. For *no attitude*, he read *spineless*. For *grad student or young professional*, he read *part-time temps need not inquire*. The implications were clear: his roommates were trying to replace him.

He sent the listing to the nearest printer and closed the browser. He wasn't supposed to use the computer for personal business, but one of the few perks of the first shift was that no one paid attention this early, if anyone was even around. Sure, the sunny courtyard was already full of patients, visitors, and med students consuming breakfasts on plastic trays; the University hospital was open 24 hours. But its division of physical therapy, where Jack temped, didn't open for appointments until 9 a.m., and the therapists wouldn't arrive until at least 8. Jack, however, had to show up at 7:30 to prepare the paperwork and run inventory on a small shelf of therapeutic merchandise: pillows, heat packs, foam rollers, and insoles.

Before he could get up to retrieve the printout, Ingrid, the office manager, walked in with a box of coffee.

“Is that the schedule?” she asked, swiping it up with her free hand.

“No,” he said. “It’s printing next.”

“I didn’t know you were looking for an apartment.”

“It’s complicated.” He fought the urge to grab the printout from her.

Admittedly, Jack had been following the apartment listings for the past few weeks in hopes he might find a better living situation. But he hadn’t informed Frances and Monique, his roommates, for fear of being preempted. The unit was owned by Monique’s elderly uncle, and the lease allowed for only two tenants. To save money, Monique fraudulently rented the dining room to Jack, and since he’d never signed the lease or paid a deposit, he imagined they could evict him without notice.

He wouldn’t have put it past them. The past six months had been rocky. Frances and Monique were longtime friends and part-time graduate students in childhood literacy who were always hanging out together, and apparently wanted a roommate who would join them. They even made cleaning a social activity every Saturday morning. When Jack invariably said he preferred to do things on his own time, and retreated to his room for some online poker, they were not happy. He had no idea why they’d chosen him, of all people, in the first place. It wasn’t as if he radiated friendliness. Maybe they’d been as desperate to find a roommate as he’d been to find a room.

To make matters worse, his room had no door. Frances and Monique watched TV in the adjacent living room almost every night, and though the TV itself didn’t bother him, their running commentaries did. They were forever analyzing the antics of their favorite characters and reality stars. When he pulled the curtain on them, they turned down the TV volume, but when he asked them to quiet their voices, they accused him of being antisocial. The noise was

particularly inconvenient now that Jack was working so early. He tried to catch up on sleep after work, but his mid-day naps were hindered by the Greek gyro guys on the corner, who called out orders with a muffled loudspeaker, like the police apprehending someone.

Today, as usual, Jack was eager for the coffee. Ingrid deposited the box on top of the mini-fridge behind the reception desk while Jack printed the schedule. Instead of retreating to her office in the back, she sat at the front desk with him. Her presence made him uncomfortable. He wasn't used to company.

"Do you need something?" he asked.

"Not that I can think of."

Jack fixed his coffee, then sorted through files, glancing up at Ingrid now and then. She had long white-blonde hair, always wore something outdoorsy (on this occasion, a fleece and cargo pants), and was extraordinarily hard to read. On his first day of work, she'd bought him a Lime Rickey from the sandwich shop next door. On his second day, she acted as if she'd never met him. Two weeks later, she was still referring to him (affectionately?) as "the new temp," not to be confused with "the temp" who worked the second shift. She was supposedly Danish, but had no trace of an accent. She was significantly younger than the rest of the staff, who for the most part didn't seem to like her.

For the next half-hour, Ingrid fooled around on the computer, played with a misplaced stress ball, and borrowed his favorite pen to doodle on some post-its. She almost seemed to be begging for a reprimand. Of course, Jack was in no position to give her one. Finally, she swiveled on her stool to face him and planted a post-it on his knee. He stared at it for a moment, as if the knee were not quite his. Then he peeled it off. On the post-it was his signature, the *J* a slanted hook, the other letters sharp and narrow, albeit much larger than he'd ever write them.

“Did I get it?” she asked.

“How...?”

“I’m good, right? Look –” She turned her monitor in his direction to reveal a patient file onscreen – *his* patient file – complete with his signature, date of matriculation, and the photo from his old student ID. “I didn’t know you went here,” she said.

It was a detail he’d failed to mention to his coworkers, out of modesty perhaps (he assumed that the other administrators hadn’t gone to college) or pride (it didn’t reflect well on him that nearly three years after graduation, the best job he could find was as a temporary receptionist at his alma mater). He hadn’t realized he’d still be in the database.

“You were so fresh-faced,” she said.

Jack tried to look amused, despite his discomfort. People usually didn’t pry this much into his business. Not to mention, it was unethical to look through patient files without a specific work-related reason. But he didn’t say anything. It wasn’t as if she’d pulled up his medical history.

Once the physical therapists arrived, Ingrid went back-and-forth between the front and back offices. Every so often, she left him post-its, demonstrating how she could replicate any font, forge any handwriting. She said the trick was to write it upside-down and backwards, to forget what it said.

When his shift was over, Jack printed another copy of the apartment listing, which he’d lost that morning amidst the paperwork. Then he bought a set of earplugs from the merchandise shelf. The other temp hadn’t yet arrived, so Ingrid rang the purchase up, giving Jack a wink and the maximum discount, ordinarily reserved for damaged items.

Back at home, Jack unfolded the listing and compared the thumbnail photo to his actual bedroom. They were almost identical, though the dimensions of the photograph appeared to have been warped by the lens, a portion of the glass block windows eclipsed by a flash. Knowing that Monique and Frances wouldn't be home for several hours, he rummaged around the apartment for more evidence. But it seemed they'd covered their tracks. He couldn't even find the vase.

Once Monique and Frances got in, Jack feigned innocence. He watched TV with them for a couple of hours, contributing to their commentary as best he could, not necessarily to please them, or even to make them feel guilty about their scheming, but rather to mislead them for the time being. After all, the apartment listing alone wasn't enough. If he were to show them the listing, they'd probably just deny it, call him paranoid. Or worse, they'd just admit to it, as if it were their right to kick him out at any time, and he'd be back in his family's basement in no time, confirming his parents' worries that he was unequipped to make it on his own. No, he would have to force his roommates into a more compromising situation. He needed the upper hand.

The next morning, he opened an email account under a pseudonym to inquire about the apartment listing. He received a non-delivery notification. He emailed himself, and it too bounced back. Things were not going his way. Something was wrong with the new account. Back at the apartment, he tried to keep his room as untidy as possible, not an easy task considering his lack of possessions. He watched out for signs that the room had been tidied in his absence, but for several days found none. He kept browsing the classifieds for new apartment listings, but always came back to the same one.

Soon it was spring break, and the division of physical therapy went relatively quiet. On an especially slow day, Jack was sent home early. When he arrived at the apartment, he heard Monique and Frances speaking to someone in the kitchen. Before he got far enough to see who it was, Frances intercepted him.

“Why are you home?” she asked, blocking the way to the kitchen. “I thought you worked until three.”

“Who’s here?” Jack demanded.

“This guy Monique knows. He should be leaving in a second. Did you have a good day at work? Monique convinced me to skip lecture since it’s so nice out. We were thinking of having lunch at the café if you want to join us. You know, that one with the gourmet tacos. They had a review in the paper about it. I think I have it. I’ll show you.”

While Frances steered him away down the hall into her bedroom, Jack tried to catch the conversation in the kitchen, albeit unsuccessfully. The gyro guys on the corner were going at it with their loudspeaker.

“Here,” said Frances, putting a newspaper into Jack’s hand.

He stared at the article, still straining to hear the now-distant conversation. He was almost certain the guy was his potential replacement.

“You’re not even reading it, are you?” Frances said. She gave him a wounded look and snatched the paper away.

He was about to apologize, when down the hall, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Monique steal out of the apartment. This was his chance. He left Frances’s bedroom and surprised Monique and the replacement on the landing. They turned to look up at him.

Jack returned their gaze, suddenly unsure of what to say.

“What is it?” asked Monique. “Is something wrong?”

Jack collected himself. “I wanted to introduce myself,” he addressed himself to the replacement. “I’m Monique’s other roommate. Jack.”

The replacement was striking in a male-model kind of way. His longish hair was feathered away from his face by a pair of sunglasses he wore like a girl’s headband. A gauzy ethnic scarf encircled his neck. He hesitated for a moment, exchanging a puzzled look with Monique. Then he stepped forward to shake Jack’s hand.

“Beautiful day,” said Jack.

“Yeah man, it’s getting really warm out.”

What had Jack expected? That the replacement would instantly reveal himself as such? Clearly it wouldn’t be that easy.

Jack tried a different approach. “How do you two know each other?”

“505. Early Literacy.”

Jack sensed pretext. “What were you here for, a study session?” His question sounded slightly more hostile than he intended, and he realized at once what he was insinuating.

“Jack,” Monique objected. She turned to the replacement. “Don’t answer that.”

The replacement laughed uncertainly. “Uh, nice meeting you, buddy, but I’ve got to go. Some other time. Later, Monique.” He kissed her on the cheek.

Jack slowly retreated. Frances was standing in the doorway.

“Jealous a little?” she said. Apparently she’d been listening.

“Yeah, what’s wrong with you?” said Monique, trailing up the stairs.

“I was just being friendly,” said Jack.

“You have a strange way of showing it,” Monique responded.

“So what’s his deal?” Jack inquired one more time, half-heartedly, his hopes of exposing his roommates’ scheme quickly fading.

“Why do you care?” asked Monique.

“I don’t know,” he said, suddenly defensive. “He seems like a tool. I mean, what guy wears a scarf like that?”

“It’s called fashion,” said Monique. “And personality.”

“But he *is* kind of a tool,” Frances whispered.

“You think?” Monique frowned.

“Forget it,” said Frances. “I’m teasing. Let’s get going.” She caught Jack’s eye. “You in or out?”

“I’ll get my wallet,” he said.

They went to the gourmet taco café. Frances and Monique made a running joke out of Jack’s scene on the stairs, which they seemed to appreciate as a kind of hyper-masculine aggressiveness reminiscent of some favorite TV actor Jack had never heard of. For his own part, Jack paid the tacos far too many compliments, overcompensating for his incompetent behavior, perhaps. An hour passed inoffensively.

When Jack returned to work, he found on his desk a large post-it with his address written in ten different hands, but no Ingrid. In fact, Ingrid didn’t show up the next day, or the day after. He assumed she was sick or on vacation. It wasn’t his business to ask.

At the end of the week, however, he needed Ingrid's signature on his timecard. He waited around for the second shift to ask the other temp about it.

"Who's supposed to sign our timecards when Ingrid isn't around?"

"No clue," the temp said. He was a nondescript type of guy. Thanks to Ingrid, Jack couldn't quite bring himself to call him "Bob."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"There's no telling with her," the temp laughed. "But at least she makes things interesting."

Jack didn't respond.

"The temp you replaced was totally into her."

"What happened to him?"

"*Her*. I don't know, some other job. She's around." The temp gazed absently into the courtyard. "She's actually having a party this weekend," he said slowly.

"Ingrid?"

"No, the other temp. But Ingrid might be there. If you want to come..."

"That's a lot of effort for a signature," Jack joked. But he had to admit he was curious.

The temp gave Jack a ride to the party. Just past 9 p.m., they pulled up to a building under construction, its façade obscured by a layer of scaffolding. No one greeted them at the door. The temp glanced around the dark interior, presumably trying to locate the temp Jack had replaced. The room was loud and crowded, the furnishings having been moved to the edges of the room to accommodate more people. Jack caught sight of Ingrid dancing around in an uncharacteristic

gold sequined tank top. He felt suddenly out of place in his checked shirt and khakis. It had been years since he'd been to a proper party.

“Look, there –” Jack said.

The temp looked. “Ingrid!”

She turned toward the entrance. “You two!” She danced over and hugged them. “What is this, like a temp party?”

Jack suddenly imagined that the room was full of temps, just temps and Ingrid.

“So what do you want?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” asked the temp.

“To drink,” said Ingrid.

“I don’t know,” said the temp. “Whatever you’re having.”

“The same,” added Jack.

Ingrid disappeared into the kitchen.

They waited by the door, but after awhile they realized she wasn’t returning. They went to the kitchen and got themselves beers. The early part of the night they spent talking to each other, and then a pretty Mexican girl joined them, and eventually the temp migrated to another conversation. After Jack had more than enough drinks and was probably boring the Mexican girl, Ingrid finally reappeared. First he spotted her by the stereo, dancing with a few other girls. Later, she joined the other temp on an overstuffed couch. Jack went to the kitchen for water, somewhat sick to his stomach. To his surprise, Ingrid was right behind him. By some indeterminate chain of events, they ended up making out by the stove, and then crashed in someone’s bedroom, not on the bed – which was occupied by another couple – but an inflatable mattress. He’d never really made out with a girl in such a careless way before, but he was so drunk, he went with it.

Ingrid's cellphone woke them up early the next morning. Jack watched with half-closed eyes as Ingrid combed her hair and buttoned up a khaki shirt over her gold top.

"You don't have to work today, do you?" he asked when she was about to leave. "I didn't see you on the schedule."

She rubbed her eyes. "Do you want to get a quick breakfast?"

He rolled off the mattress.

Breakfast consisted of mini-donuts, a jar of jam, and cans of guava juice that Ingrid got at the convenience store downstairs. They sat quietly on a park bench and Jack copied Ingrid as she took jam on a pocketknife and spread it on the mini-donuts. When they were done, she put the lid back on the jam and left it on top of a trashcan, as if someone might pass by and want to use it.

"Want to split a cab downtown?" she asked.

"I'm going the other direction."

"I thought you lived in Downtown Center."

"Used to. I'm in Highland now." He didn't mention that the old address was his parents'.

"Oh," she frowned. "Well, see you." With that, she hailed a cab, and Jack rode three buses home.

Back at the apartment, Frances and Monique were cleaning.

Monique turned off the vacuum and moved the chord out of his way. "Someone had a long night."

Frances pulled a cushion off the sofa. "Yeah, trying to make us jealous?"

He smiled sheepishly and parted the curtain to his room. The vacuum started up again. He stopped. Something was not right. The furniture was slightly out-of-place. His bed was made.

Jack turned around. "Have you been in my room?" he shouted over the vacuum.

“Sorry?” said Monique.

He yanked the chord from the outlet by his door. The room silenced. “I said have you been in my room?”

Monique and Frances exchanged uncertain glances.

“It was me,” Frances said. “I cleaned it up a little.”

“Why?” he demanded. “Who’s going to see it?”

“You don’t have to get mad,” said Monique.

“I didn’t think it would bother you,” said Frances.

“You should be thanking her for it,” said Monique. “Your room was a pit.”

“Well I’d prefer if you didn’t trespass without my permission,” he said.

Monique laughed. “Trespass?”

He pulled the curtain and sulked on his bed for ten minutes. He heard Frances and Monique moving around, but the vacuum didn’t go on again. Finally, when all was still, he opened the curtain. The vacuum was sitting near his door. He plugged it in and finished the living room rug. Then he added an attachment to clean the cushions. He found Frances and Monique in the kitchen, washing and drying dishes. He put the dry ones back on the shelves for them.

It was a couple of days until Jack’s next shift at the physical therapy center, and he was glad for the intermission. He figured the more time passed, the less awkward it would be to see Ingrid. It wasn’t that he regretted his actions; he simply couldn’t predict how she would respond, whether she would embrace or ignore him, call him “Jack” or “the new temp,” or all of the above.

Saturday afternoon, he'd ended up telling his roommates about the party and Ingrid, and somehow the act of telling had made it seem more real and urgent. On Sunday, feeling aimless, he'd gone shopping with them. They'd helped him pick out a new shirt.

He wore the new shirt to work on Monday, but as it happened, Ingrid wasn't there. Nor did her name appear on the schedule for the next week. Jack played it cool, resisting the urge to ask his coworkers about Ingrid's absence. He didn't want anyone to assume he had a special interest in her.

But come the second shift, the temp made no bones about it. "Are you totally bummed now?" he asked.

"About what?" Jack felt queasy.

"Ingrid getting fired."

Jack looked out into the courtyard.

"Didn't she tell you at the party?"

"Yeah," he lied. "Of course."

Rumors quickly spread: Ingrid had embezzled money from the register, had violated the privacy act in order to find out whether an acquaintance had an abortion, had flashed a sports medicine doctor, had forged official documents. Everyone offered his or her own example of Ingrid's outrageous behavior, and though he never would have expected it, somehow she seemed capable of it all.

The revelations that resonated with Jack the most, however, were the small ones. A resident said Ingrid had stolen dozens of promotional tote bags from the office storeroom to

make a DIY tent. Jack recalled a skirt Ingrid had once worn: heavy canvass, handmade, bearing the University crest. A physical therapist explained how Ingrid occasionally took cabs to work and didn't pay. Jack recalled how an angry cab driver had burst into the reception area one day, searching for a delinquent rider. For a full ten minutes, the driver held a stakeout near the merchandise shelf, where he pretended to read about shiatsu massage.

Meanwhile at the apartment, Frances and Monique pressed Jack for updates regularly.

"Do you think you'll ever see her again?" they asked. "Do you have her number? Is she legitimately crazy?" They compared her to various characters on TV.

As the rumors died down, work became increasingly predictable. The other temp came by early some days to chat. He was sure their days in the division of physical therapy were numbered. The receptionist for whom they were temping would take over Ingrid's job as office manager once she got back from maternity leave in a few weeks, and the University would be looking for a full-time receptionist as her replacement. "I'm going to apply for the permanent position," the temp would say. "You should too."

"Nah," Jack would say. Secretly, he was thinking maybe.

Jack saved every post-it Ingrid had left him. When work was slow, he practiced his address upside-down and backwards in her ten different hands. He searched the internet for her full name. There were tens of thousands of results. She was cited for her impressive record on a soccer team five years ago in California, for volunteering at a soup kitchen in the South End, for marrying a Pete Menkes in Sweden. While some of the results were more plausibly hers than

others, it was only rarely that he could rule one out, for instance based on age, an accompanying photograph, or premature death. He didn't try to contact her.

Then one day he searched himself. His top nine namesakes dominated the results. He found himself only once, in a reference to his graduation from the University. He looked up his patient file, the one Ingrid had shown him. The screen betrayed his fresh face, his signature, his parents' address in Downtown Center. He wondered where she'd gotten his new address, and then he remembered the apartment listing.

He rummaged through Ingrid's old desk, imagining he might find the offending printout. In his head, he repeated the excuse he'd give his coworkers if they asked him what he was doing: *She was always borrowing my supplies*. But no one asked him, and he found nothing of interest, except of course his favorite pen and ten others, favorite pens of temps past, he imagined. Before leaving work, he browsed the online classifieds again, but the listing was gone, not even archived.

It was some time later, weeks perhaps, or even months, that a familiar vase surfaced in the living room, filled with dried flowers. Jack happened to knock it over one Saturday morning, vacuuming. Frances and Monique helped him pick up the pieces.

THE PINK SOLUTION



1.

Outside, the neighborhood children were making themselves faint. It was the small one's turn, Kayla or Gayla. Standing in the middle of the lawn, she straddled her legs and leaned forward, resting her elbows just above her knees. She dropped her head towards the ground and began to rub her temples in small, sharp circles. The redheaded girl, the one who'd been a volcano for Halloween the night before, crouched in front, hands flexed, ready to break the fall. The two boys – brothers or twins, it seemed – waited.

Courtney turned off the faucet but lingered at the window. She could hear the children's voices clearly through the screen.

"Hold your breath," ordered the redhead.

"I am," said Kayla. She let go of her temples. "I'm ready."

One of the twins approached Kayla from behind, reached around her waist, and made a fist at her ribs. He pumped the fist into her stomach and released. Kayla crumpled to the ground at the redhead's feet. The children stared. She lay for a moment, eyes closed, before slowly sitting up.

"You faked it!" the redhead complained.

"No, I didn't."

"Did too."

It went back and forth like this for some time, yet Courtney kept watching. After a week of near-isolation, she felt oddly invested in the quarrel, as if it had some bearing on her own fate.

Last night, Halloween had caught Courtney off-guard. Back home in her apartment building, she never had to worry about trick-or-treaters. But here, house-sitting in the suburbs, she'd been suddenly responsible for feeding legions of them. It was as if they materialized all at

once; the whole week, she'd hardly seen anyone in the neighborhood – outside of cars, that is. She'd ransacked the cabinets for candy, to no avail. Maxine, the old friend of her mom's, for whom she was house-sitting, clearly didn't eat many sweets. To the first group of children, Courtney handed Zip-Lock bags of granola. After consulting with their parents at the foot of the walkway, the children promptly returned them. Later, she tried to ignore the doorbell. But some of the children – especially the older, unchaperoned ones – were persistent.

They yelled through the window, *We know you're in there!* then sniggered to each other, *Look at her – what's she doing? She thinks we can't see her.*

With the next group of children, Courtney had tried a more direct approach. She answered the door.

It was Kayla (a frilly princess or fairy), the volcanic redhead, and the twins (pirate and bloody hockey player).

Sorry, guys. I don't have anything.

It's trick or treat, said the bloody hockey player twin. *TRICK or treat.*

Courtney didn't know what to say. Was that really a thing? She shut the door as they made off down the path, but kept watch through the window. At the sidewalk, they stopped in a conspiratorial huddle around their candy. Every so often, they would raise their masked and painted faces towards the house, as if weighing its vulnerabilities, and Courtney would back against the wall to escape detection.

The children finally left without doing a thing, but Courtney couldn't shake the feeling that something was coming. She'd stayed up late, vigilantly waiting for a trick to transpire, almost wishing the children would pick something from the typical Halloween arsenal and be done with it. She had no pumpkins for them to smash, of course, but shit or eggs on the front

door could work, or toilet paper in the trees. Were the children too young for that kind of thing? Was that even popular? In the morning, she'd walked two miles to the nearest convenience store (Courtney didn't own a car, and Maxine hadn't entrusted her with keys to hers) and bought a whole pile of candy, variety-packs, individually wrapped, in hopes it would ward off any lingering trickery. The children had returned, of course, but not for the bait. They simply occupied the yard, and played.

"Prove it," said the redhead. "Do it again."

Reluctantly, Kayla stood up and prepared to faint. Courtney held her breath in support. The doorbell rang.

Courtney stiffened. It would be Edie. Courtney had avoided calling her sister for the past few days to prove that she could take care of herself. But it would be just like Edie to spoil that effort. Courtney opened the door. Sure enough, there was Edie, dressed in a tailored linen pantsuit and large wooden earrings, carrying a paper bag stapled with a tell-tale receipt. Defeated though she was, Courtney had to admit she was hungry.

"Look at you, getting into the holiday spirit," Edie motioned to the bowl of Halloween candy on the stoop.

Courtney tried to gauge whether any of the candy was gone. It didn't look like it. Maybe she should move it to a more prominent location at the foot of the lawn.

"I gave out some bags of granola first," she explained, holding open the door. "They weren't having it."

"No kidding," said Edie. "That's dangerous."

“I didn’t put razors in,” said Courtney. She closed the door and followed Edie to the kitchen.

Edie opened the bag and started arranging the contents on the counter. Dinner: Chinese. Courtney didn’t know whether to appreciate or object to her sister’s recent favors. After all, had it not been for Edie, Courtney would’ve never pursued the series of missteps that made her lose her job at the call-center – and have to resort to house-sitting – in the first place. It had all started a few months ago, when the call-center secured a new client, a pharmaceutical company that sold a cosmetic wrinkle-filler called *Marionique*. From the beginning, Courtney had noticed that a large percentage of callers had little interest in the product; instead, they wanted to purchase masks and figurines of the two characters featured in the commercials: Marionette, who had unsightly marionette lines around her mouth (and incidentally, was rigged up to the usual set of strings), and Marionique, whose skin was supple and smooth, and whose limbs were unaccountably free. Courtney mentioned to Edie that she thought the pharmaceutical company would make a fortune if it started merchandising.

Why don’t they? Edie asked.

I don’t know, Courtney reflected. *We’re not supposed to say much about those calls in our reports.*

You should tell them, said Edie. *Be a little ambitious.*

I don’t think the call-center rewards ambition.

If that’s what you want to tell yourself.

So Courtney, despite her reservations, had conducted informal surveys with callers regarding Marionique brand recognition, and presented the results in an email to the CEO of the pharmaceutical company. The company had replied with a patronizing email reminding her that

she was a call-center employee, and any *willful corruption of the script* was *wholly unprofessional and presumptuous*, not to mention *potentially detrimental* to their company.

Courtney was not fired immediately; but two weeks later, she was laid off. She couldn't say she was surprised. In fact, some part of her suspected she'd planned it all that way – had committed career suicide – to spite her sister. Of course, Edie didn't seem too dissatisfied with the outcome either. *Now you can think about going to college* she said, as if that had always been the expectation.

Courtney put some crab rangoons on a plate. Outside, the children were still playing.

"What are they doing out there?" Edie asked.

"Making themselves faint."

"You're not serious."

"It's just a game."

Edie tore open a packet of soy sauce. "That's not a game. One of them could get hurt. You know Uncle Eli's friend had a kid who died that way. Asphyxiation." She put the empty packet on the counter.

"I thought he hanged himself," said Courtney.

Edie looked hard at her.

Courtney put the packet of soy sauce in the trash and sponged the counter. Before Edie arrived, she'd rinsed nearly all the dirty dishes and stacked them in an orderly pile on the counter, ready for the dishwasher. She'd scrubbed last night's frying pan and colander, Windexed the windows, dusted the sill, re-refrigerated the milk, put away the cereal, unplugged the coffeepot, completed a whole sequence of necessary and gratuitous tasks that added up to housekeeping.

“My job is to take care of the house,” she said, “not to reform the neighbors’ children.”

“Well, if you’re not going to say anything, I will.”

“Edie.”

Edie waited. They were used to this routine.

“Okay, fine.” Courtney exited through the patio door and approached the children.

Kayla was sprawled on the lawn, eyes shut. One of the twins was getting ready to faint. They froze the instant they saw her. “Run!” the redhead shouted. Her hair was disheveled with autumn leaves. The twins laughed and darted around the side of the garage. The redhead chased after them, yelling something unintelligible. Meanwhile, Kayla hadn’t budged. Courtney walked up next to her and gently kicked her foot. Still, she didn’t stir. Courtney knelt on the grass. Up close, the girl looked slightly older than she’d expected, maybe twelve or thirteen. Courtney was bad with ages.

“Are you okay?” she whispered. She glanced back at the house, but Edie wasn’t there.

What was she supposed to do? She pinched Kayla on the arm.

“Ow!” Kayla opened her eyes and glared at Courtney, but made no effort to move.

“It’s getting dark,” said Courtney. “You should go home.”

The girl closed her eyes again, an elusive smile on her face. Courtney waited until the smile faded, then went back inside.

After Edie left that night, Courtney wandered the house. Compared to others in the neighborhood, Maxine’s house was modest and old-fashioned, with detailed railings and finials and a leaded glass window facing the street. For one person, it was large: two full stories and a finished basement. Maxine was divorced, with a daughter in college about Courtney’s age.

Nearly every room boasted a portrait of the girl: some candid shots at the farm or the beach, some studio shots of mother and daughter posing together or superimposed. Maxine had arranged for Courtney to sleep in the daughter's bedroom, which now doubled as the guest room. Some of the daughter's personal effects remained: a leather-bound high-school diploma, outdated sweaters, a few dolls and stuffed animals, a collection of glittery handmade clay bowls with the daughter's initials carved on the underside. Yet clearly Maxine had made a careful effort to neutralize the room, divesting it of all personal excess. The sweaters were dry-cleaned and sharply folded, the stuffed animals generic and orderly. It evoked a bed-and-breakfast, designed to feel at once like everyone's and no one's home.

Before going to bed, Courtney looked out the window at the green-black lawn. All was quiet and still. But she remembered that elusive look on Kayla's face, a look that had something beneath it. The yard wore that same kind of look in the darkness: mysterious, but sharply and definitely so.

2.

Outside, the neighborhood children were holding still. They had been holding still for some time now. Kayla was lying down, the redhead stretched out on top of her, face to face, despite their considerable difference in size. One twin was lying on top of the other. No one was talking. Everyone's eyes were closed. Courtney could not tell exactly what they were doing, or whether she should stop them. Was this some kind of game too? It didn't look dangerous, not like fainting at least. But there was something not quite right about it. And why always in this yard? It was now three days after Halloween, and still they kept returning.

She would rake the lawn, she decided. The lawn didn't exactly need raking; but she wanted to make her presence known. She found a rake in the basement and went to it. She raked around the patio. The children did not budge. She raked a little closer to them, making dry metallic scrapes across the grass. The ground seemed unusually lumpy. She stopped to prod one of the lumps with the tip of her shoe. She kicked it. Something was definitely there. With each kick, it loosened from the sod. She knelt down and turned it over: a whitish ball of something like fungus, the size of an apple. She glanced across the lawn. The whole thing was lumpy.

Kayla peeked out of one eye. Courtney startled.

"Kayla opened her eyes!" the redhead shouted, rolling off Kayla.

"No I didn't!"

One twin climbed off the other. All eyes were on Kayla now. Courtney felt sorry for having been the source of her defeat.

"How did you even know, if your eyes were closed?" asked Kayla.

“Because I only opened my eyes to see if yours were open,” the redhead retorted. Then she noticed Courtney watching. She whispered something to Kayla, and ran away, the twins at her heels.

Kayla opened her mouth as if to say something.

“What?” asked Courtney, moving closer.

Kayla bit her bottom lip.

“Is there something you want?”

Kayla shook her head weakly.

“You better go after your friends. They’ll wonder where you are.”

Kayla didn’t move. Courtney gave up, dragging the rake behind her.

An hour later, Kayla was still in the yard, cross-legged under a tree, examining the unearthed ball of fungus. The other children had not returned. In their absence, she looked innocent. The redhead, after all, seemed to be the one pulling the strings. Courtney wondered if she should try to find the girl’s family. But she didn’t know the neighbors, didn’t know whose house was whose.

She went outside. “Can I walk you home?”

“What is this?” asked Kayla, holding out the fungus ball.

“I don’t know. You shouldn’t play with it. It could be poisonous.”

Kayla dropped the fungus, and rubbed her hands violently across the grass.

“Do you want to come in and use the sink?” asked Courtney.

Kayla nodded.

Courtney led her across the patio into the house. Kayla washed up diligently, with five pumps of soap, like she was preparing for surgery. She dried her hands with a wad of paper towels, examining the clutter on the fridge.

“Who’s this?” she asked, pointing to a photograph of a baby.

“No idea. I don’t live here. I’m house-sitting.”

Kayla raised her eyebrows. “I don’t live here either,” she said. “I mean in the neighborhood.”

“Do you want to call your parents to come get you?” Courtney motioned to the phone on the wall.

Kayla reached into her pocket and took out a cell phone. Courtney should have figured. Kayla dialed and put the phone to her ear. Courtney slid a mini-bag of chocolate corn across the counter towards her.

“Hello,” Kayla said, ignoring the candy. “It’s me. I’m in.”

Courtney’s stomach dropped. “Let me talk,” she said, trying to take the phone from Kayla.

Kayla held tight.

“Seriously, Kayla, give me the phone,” said Courtney.

Kayla swiveled on the stool so her back faced Courtney. “Okay. Yeah. Bye,” she snapped the phone shut and turned to Courtney. “How do you know my name?”

Courtney shrugged. “That wasn’t your mom, was it?”

“No.”

“Your friends.”

“Yes.”

Courtney's questioning was having an adverse effect: Kayla seemed to be growing more and more satisfied.

"All right, enough," said Courtney. "It's time to leave."

Kayla tossed the mini-bag of chocolate corn like a beanbag from hand to hand. Courtney was about to grab the girl by the arm and drag her out of the house, when the doorbell rang. It would be the rest of the children, maybe, or Edie. Courtney didn't know which would be worse.

"Stay right here," she warned Kayla, getting up from her seat.

The figure in the hall window was neither the children nor Edie. It was a young blonde woman with a wide face and narrow features. Courtney was about to step away from the window when it occurred to her: What if it was Kayla's mom or someone looking for her? Cautiously, she opened the door.

"Hi. My name is June," the woman said, flashing a big smile.

"Yes?" said Courtney.

"And you are?"

"Courtney."

"Courtney. Okay," she closed her eyes for a moment, as if committing the name to memory. "Tell me, Courtney: Do you ever get one of those days where you wonder why keeping house has to be such a chore? One of those days where basic household tasks become simply undoable?"

In an instant, everything moved into focus. First, the familiar strategies plucked right from the call-center training manual. (Strategy #1: The Smile. Strategy #4: First Name Basis. Strategy #2: "Yes" Questions.) Then, several large, nondescript jugs at the woman's feet beside

the candy bowl (which, astonishingly, was empty). Courtney should have known from the beginning. Still, she was relieved.

“Well, I work for The Pink Solution, an all-purpose household cleaning product that I promise will change your outlook.” June motioned to the jugs. “Are you familiar with The Pink Solution, Courtney?”

“No.”

“I’ll show you how it works.”

“Thanks, but I’m busy.” Courtney thought of Kayla in the kitchen.

“I’ll only take a moment, Courtney. Just wait until you see what this stuff can do.” She picked up a jug. “You have a beautiful house here.” She unscrewed the cap. “But I bet it can be hard work, too.”

“This isn’t my house.”

“Oh.” June frowned. “Well, that’s okay.” She pulled a white rag out of her back pocket and wet it with the bright pink liquid. “You are over eighteen, right?”

“Yes, but –”

“Great. So how about this doorknob, here?” She turned the knob back and forth. “It’s pretty clean. But I bet we could make it better.” She wiped the rag over the brass knob a few times. “Presto!”

Courtney was not sure if she had ever heard anyone say *presto* before, but she supposed this was the time for it, if any. One half of the knob was astoundingly luminous.

“Pretty good, huh?”

Courtney nodded.

“You’re not convinced.”

“It’s not that. I just really need to be going.”

“I see you have some artwork there, Courtney.” June motioned inside the house, apparently referencing a ceramic duck, one of Maxine’s numerous bird figurines. “Artwork can be very difficult to clean. You don’t want anything too abrasive.” She wet the cloth again. “Despite its strength, The Pink Solution is incredibly safe and gentle. Do you mind?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” Courtney guarded the door.

“Don’t believe me?” June paused, as if considering a new approach. “Let me ask, do you have kids?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, that’s okay. You know people who have kids, though? Or if you don’t know them, you see them around, right? Or put it this way, you had a childhood.”

“I guess.” Courtney glanced behind her. She thought she heard a noise, but Kayla was out of sight.

“And let’s say these kids, they happen to be at your house, or this house, playing in the kitchen, or the bathroom, and they see these cleaning products. Now, kids don’t know what’s good or bad for them. So they see this pink stuff, and maybe they want to try it. Girls like pink, you know.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t color it pink then,” said Courtney.

“That’s what you’d think, right? But watch.” June produced a floral Dixie Cup from her bag and filled it with the pink liquid. “The Pink Solution is so safe and gentle, it’s completely non-toxic. You can even drink it.”

“Please don’t.”

June downed it like a shot. “You see, Courtney? Now, if I’m willing to put it in my stomach, you can certainly try it out on your artwork.”

Courtney had to give it to June: the pitch was better than decent. She stepped aside and let her go at it. A few swipes, and the duck gleamed.

“Best thing? Look at this.” June held out the dirty rag. “No more pink. You spill it, no worries. Dries clear.”

“Can I try?” Came a voice behind them. It was Kayla, watching from the hall.

How long had she been there? Kayla seized the dirty rag and pink jug from June and began to pour some solution.

“Don’t do that,” said Courtney.

Kayla screwed the cap back on. “Buy it,” she said, clutching the jug to her chest.

“I don’t think so,” said Courtney. Instantly, she regretted it: Kayla absconded upstairs with the jug. Courtney hesitated: she couldn’t chase after Kayla when June was still there.

If June noticed her impatience, she didn’t show it. “See, kids love it,” said June. “And you’re in luck because we’re having a sale. Buy one, get one free.” She handed Courtney a coupon. “Now, if you’re a fan of the environment, there’s always The Green Solution, which happens to be all natural and biodegradable. I have some of that in my car. But just between us, I think the Pink Solution is more effective.”

At this point, Courtney was barely listening. “I’ll just have the one,” she said quickly, eager to shut the door and go upstairs. The sooner she paid, the sooner June would leave.

“One Pink Solution,” said June, writing a receipt. “And one free.” She exchanged Courtney’s cash for a handshake.

3.

Outside, the neighborhood children were kicking at dirt or some other thing. Courtney had spent over an hour that morning digging up the fungus that had overtaken the lawn, leaving the ground pocked and uneven. The children looked downright lethargic. Edie was on her way with groceries. Kayla happened to be missing.

As soon as June had left the day before, Courtney had rushed upstairs to get Kayla. She'd gone from room to room, closet to closet, searching – but to no avail. *This isn't hide-and-go-seek*, she'd shouted, not quite believing. How could she have been so foolish, inviting Kayla inside, leaving her unattended. She tried to reassure herself that there was nothing to panic about. What was the worry – Kayla was going to start cleaning? Still, she grew increasingly anxious. She'd checked the first floor and the basement too, eyeing every table, curtain, and cushion along the way. *You can come out now*, she'd said, *You've won*. She wondered if she could rig some kind of a simple trap or alert, like a bucket of water over a doorway. Then it occurred to her that Kayla might have snuck out on her own, leaving some kind of trick underway. The house might already be rigged.

“What did you do to the lawn?” asked Edie when she came in.

“Gardening,” said Courtney.

“And that is...?” Edie motioned skeptically to the Pink Solution Courtney was using to wipe down the kitchen counter.

“Cleaning solution. It's good for almost anything. There's an extra bottle if you want. It was buy one, get one free.”

Having set the groceries on the counter, Edie picked up the Pink Solution and examined the label.

“It’s non-toxic,” said Courtney, echoing June’s pitch. “It’s totally safe to drink.”

“Why does it say *not for consumption* on the bottle then?”

Courtney hadn’t noticed the label. “I think they just mean that’s not its purpose. See, it doesn’t say anything about what you have to do if you swallow it, like drink a glass of milk or induce vomiting or contact a poison control center immediately.”

“That’s reassuring,” said Edie.

Courtney continued to scrub the counter. All night, she’d moved through every inch of the house and yard, systematically defusing everything. The kitchen was her last responsibility. She neglected to mention it to Edie. Edie went about her business, opening doors and cabinets, turning on light-switches, running faucets, handling everything.

JOHNS WITH OTHER ENDINGS



It began at the airport the morning after I'd introduced my parents to John. They were flying home to Providence at noon, which left them time for brunch at an airport restaurant. I'd left John in bed, assuring him that he'd nicely endured enough of their scrutiny already.

We were seated near the back of the restaurant next to a bar with bentwood stools and glassware that crystallized the glare of the terminal. I could barely read the menu, I was so anxious to hear what my parents were going to say. This was the first time they'd met one of my boyfriends, so I was feeling more like a teenager than a thirty-something. Sure, I'd had my share of relationships in the past, but none that justified meeting-the-parents. Now that John had moved in, however, I had no excuse. More to the point, I sensed that until my parents had vetted him, our relationship would remain somewhat provisional. When they told me they'd be in D.C. for a funeral, I'd invited them over.

The meeting had gone as awkwardly as might've been expected, but as far as I could tell, nothing had gone wrong. The week before their visit, I'd gone through a D.C. guidebook cover-to-cover, underlining potentially useful trivia and starring a number of possible tourist sites, many of which I'd never – despite my ten year residence – seen. When I mentioned some of the sites to my parents, they'd said, "We're not here to see the city." But of course we had to do something. So we shared a bottle of wine on our balcony, admired cherry blossoms along the tidal basin, took pictures in front of a new memorial, and finished off the evening with a congested drive through Georgetown. The worst thing I could say was that it felt like acting: D.C. passed by like so many backdrops, and when John held my hand, we were like costars holding hands at a school play.

Now all that was left was my parents' reaction.

"So?" I asked.

“I don’t know,” said my dad. “I’m leaning towards the linguini.”

“That’s not brunch,” my mom objected.

When the waitress arrived, we all ordered the frittata.

In retrospect, I wonder whether that was the crucial moment, whether things would’ve been different if I’d asked about John directly. Instead, I let the moment pass, certain that it was only a matter of time before they brought him up on their own.

Meanwhile, they talked about the funeral they’d attended, and then about Mick, my younger brother, a former financier who’d been convicted for involvement in a Ponzi scheme about a year before. Over the past seven years, Mick had persuaded dozens of investors – mostly family and friends – to buy stock in a nonexistent offshore business. “The rich get richer,” he’d say when I told him I didn’t have money to spare. The scheme collapsed when one of our uncles asked for a payout to cover his daughter’s law school tuition, which Mick couldn’t deliver. After six months in jail, he’d moved back in with our parents (whom he’d also defrauded), but disappeared in the middle of the night a few weeks later, leaving an angst-ridden note to the effect that he couldn’t bear to live by their rules.

For the life of me, I couldn’t recall my parents ever having rules – especially when it came to Mick. I’d always played the role of the responsible older sibling, gauging my parents’ expectations before they’d expressed them as such and – if not always living up to them – at least appearing to. This not only demanded a fair amount of secrecy on my part (I never mentioned anything of which they might disapprove) but also generated quite a bit of guilt, invariably putting a damper on my enjoyment of whatever it was – a cigarette, a thick application of

eyeliner, a party. Then, several years behind me, Mick would come along and behave in complete disregard of whatever expectations I had imagined: skipping class, staying out late, bringing his girlfriends home when the house was empty. As it turned out, my parents tolerated just about all of it.

It was now two months since Mick's disappearance, and no one had heard from him. In his absence, my parents had gathered a wealth of information. He was most likely in Atlanta, they explained, the origin of some anomalous charges on their credit card. Rather than crack down on these purchases, they let them go in hopes of generating a paper trail leading to him. The more details they filled me in on, the more despairing they became, and soon the tone of the conversation was not exactly hospitable.

But as we waited for the check, their spirits seemed to improve, and once again I thought about mentioning John. A moment's hesitation, however, and my intentions were waylaid by a small but distracting scene:

At the next table, a mother was readying her large family to leave, passing jackets and carry-ons to her children, securing a ten-dollar tip with the saltshaker, fishing a camera from her purse.

The mother hailed a nearby waitress. "I'd like a picture if you don't mind."

Without saying a word, the waitress backed up a few steps and perched expertly on one of the bar stools. She draped her long hair over one shoulder and smiled.

The mother hesitated. "No, sorry, I think you misunderstood. I'd like you to take a picture of us."

The waitress's smile faded. "Of course." She accepted the camera, snapped an uncomfortable picture, and quickly fled.

My parents, who'd watched the whole scene unfold, proceeded to share a good laugh with the mother at the waitress's expense. I smiled in resignation.

On the drive home from the airport, I tried to process what had happened. Surely it was no coincidence that my parents hadn't said one word about John. But I couldn't quite understand why. As far as I could see, he was unobjectionable. The son of an economist and a librarian, he'd been raised in an upper-middle class suburb of Chicago with two siblings and a dog. He was relatively athletic, of above-average height, and very handsome when he smiled. He had a steady job at the Fed and a decent number of friends. He got along with everyone.

Had I known my parents to be hypercritical or just plain touchy, maybe I could've dug deeper and accounted for their silence. But I never heard them say a bad word about anyone. God knows Mick had introduced them to his share of questionable girlfriends (and, in college, one boyfriend), and they'd always been more than accepting. When he decided to marry a foreign friend so she could get a green card, they'd even helped stage a few family portraits for the INS. My parents had been thrilled about the prospect of meeting John in the weeks leading up to their visit. How had he fallen so short of their expectations?

When I arrived back home, I pretended nothing was wrong. I crawled back into bed (John was a late sleeper) and felt, for the first time, I'd betrayed him.

For the remainder of the spring and into the summer, my parents phoned every few weeks with new details about Mick's whereabouts. He'd booked a flight to Raleigh. He'd ordered unspecified electronics to be delivered to an address in Tennessee. My parents had spoken to a few people of interest: employers, landlords, and ex-girlfriends. They hoped they'd be in touch with Mick by Thanksgiving.

During these calls, I'd tentatively fill them in on details of my own life – a movie I'd seen, a trip to the emergency room for a sprained ankle, a weekend at the beach – hoping something would prompt them to mention John before I did. But as time passed, nothing changed, not with them at least. Soon, I stopped hoping and started dreading. How could I confide in them now, if I couldn't when things with John had been easy? I generalized the events of my life until they were unrecognizable. "Things are fine. Things are ok," I'd tell them, "Things have been better." "I'm going out tonight," or "I'm staying in," or "I've been busy." At all costs, I avoided the pronoun "we."

In September, I went to Providence for an aunt's wedding. I didn't take John with me. The invitation didn't allow for a plus-one. While John was disappointed, I was secretly relieved.

The wedding took place in a large tent in my aunt's backyard. It was her second wedding, her first having been nearly forty years ago – before I was born – to a man whom I remembered fondly as Uncle John. I hadn't seen Uncle John since I was about ten, when he and my aunt were divorced for reasons that my parents never explained to me, but that I'd always imagined – based on their tone of voice – to be rather risqué. I'd never expected to see my now-ex-Uncle John

again, but there he was, the first person I recognized as we approached the makeshift altar – older yes, but wearing the same unmistakable salt-and-pepper beard.

My mom spotted him too. “Look – ” she said in that old tone of voice. “It’s you-know who.”

My dad squinted in the general direction, then smiled. “The old dog.”

“I heard they’d reconciled, but I never thought she would want him at her *wedding*,” she said. “Can you imagine?”

We made our way up the aisle of beribboned folding chairs and found a seat as far away as possible from Uncle John, where my mom continued to remark upon his unlikely invitation. Despite their surprise, my parents seemed happy to see him. Not once, however, did they say his name. They spoke deftly – but obviously – around it. It is possible, of course, that they were merely being discreet, aware that they ought not to be gossiping about my aunt’s ex-husband at her wedding. But I had the distinct feeling that wasn’t quite it – rather, they were avoiding *John* on account of me.

Following the ceremony, my parents took the opportunity to fill everyone in on their devastating search for Mick. They didn’t always get sympathy.

“Do you know how much he screwed us over?” said Kate, the cousin whose law school tuition had been squandered.

My dad and I were standing with her in line for the buffet.

“He didn’t mean it,” my dad responded.

“Are you kidding?” she said.

I was impressed by her audacity.

“You don’t understand,” said my dad. “It’s like a disease.”

“Whatever.”

The line didn’t budge. There was some sort of a holdup – the caterers had run out of an entrée. My dad stared down at his empty plate. But it wasn’t until Kate turned to me and said, “Madeira, how have you been? I hear you’re seeing someone?” that he put the plate back down and excused himself in the direction of the drinks.

While I was staying at my parents’ house, I took long walks by the river to call John. I’d taken a similar route when I needed my space as a teenager, only back then the river had been newly unearthed from under concrete, the sidewalks not yet crowded with the bikes and strollers of today. John didn’t understand why I was always outside. I sounded small and far away, he complained.

The last night of my trip, I stayed up late in my parents’ family room, flipping through their newest photo album. I could have sworn they’d taken some pictures during their trip to D.C. in the spring. I remembered posing with John, uncertain of how affectionate to be. But I couldn’t find any evidence of that meeting.

When my mom came to say goodnight, I shut the album quickly.

“What are you looking at?” she asked. She was wearing a bathrobe, and her skin was scrubbed raw and clean.

“Nothing,” I said.

“It always seems like you’re not telling us things.”

I wasn't sure whether it was an accusation or an invitation.

"You don't ask me about things," I responded. I tried to be equally accusatory and inviting, but must have conveyed more of the former, because she left without another word.

I sat there alone. My parents' new dog came and sat down next to me. It was a different breed than we'd had growing up, a collie. I felt, strangely, like I didn't quite know how to pet it.

When I returned to D.C., John was gone. He'd left a document open on the computer, a brief letter explaining that he was staying with a friend for the time being. I printed off a hard copy and brought it out onto the balcony where I tried to muster a suitable response: Regret? Relief? Sadness? Anger? Nothing came to me.

He stopped by the apartment the next week to collect a few belongings. I'd lived on my own in the apartment several years before he'd moved in, and nearly all the furnishings were mine. Had we simply thrown his things into a few boxes, he would've been in and out in no time; but somehow that didn't seem quite adequate to the situation. So I meticulously bubble-wrapped some hair gel, a stapler, a bottle-opener: the most ridiculous things.

My parents happened to phone that evening. "I've been cleaning up a little, redecorating," I said. "I switched the bedroom and the office." It was true, after John was gone, I'd decided to rearrange what was left. Doing it alone wasn't easy. The heavier furniture I had to lift and drag one side at a time. The loveseat I had to shimmy down the hall tipped on one end. But as I explained the new layout to my parents, it struck me at once: as far as they knew, "I" was still "we," John and me.

Weeks passed, and I didn't mention the break-up. Maybe I didn't want to give them the satisfaction. But that wasn't the whole story. How could I end something that never made it past the beginning? What could I say? "John and I broke up"? There was no John as such – he'd been suspended indefinitely. So what began that day at the airport never really ended. To this day, Johns everywhere (neighbors, politicians, characters on TV) go unnamed by my family – even Johns (Jonathan, Johnny, Johnson) with other endings.

Two months after John left, my parents followed a paper trail to Reno, and surprised Mick for Thanksgiving.

THE REST



The dinner guests had tracked dust from the screen porch into the house. You couldn't see it, but you could smell it. It smelled like coarse rope.

Kell didn't often use the porch. She reserved it mainly for summer entertaining. It was an intermediate space not quite inside the house, not quite outside, sharing a window and a door with the kitchen. She'd sponged the vinyl cushions and glass tabletops earlier that day but had neglected other surfaces: the tile floor, the leaves of the overgrown houseplants, the crevices of the brick wall.

It was late. You were getting tired: tired of waiting for the evening to end, tired of your discretion. Kell had positioned you on the daybed in the den, an isolated room at the opposite end of the house that contained the fish tank and little else. Weeks ago, when she'd brought you back from the hospital, you'd conducted a thorough search. Most of your things were tidied away now in the hall closet, but she'd left your wheelchair and bedpan close at hand. The fish were starting to make you delirious.

Meanwhile, out on the porch, Colin was the only guest left. He sat on a weatherproof armchair, stacking shallow bowls and spoons smeared with cobbler syrup.

"Please, leave that to me," said Kell. "I'll be right back." She brought the dishes into the kitchen.

Colin was a fellow prosecutor, a man in his mid-forties with an unbelievably low hairline and pleated pants. At the office, he was in the habit of performing unnecessary favors for Kell: dropping her mail off at her desk, peeling the lid from her creamer at meetings. She had to thank him constantly.

Some of this you found out later. The rest, you're finding out now. Prior to that evening, Kell hadn't mentioned Colin, or anyone for that matter. She'd said, simply, that it was a

prearranged office party, and she didn't want to have to explain your situation. She'd explained too much already. Could you keep to yourself?

She returned to the porch and playfully pirouetted into her seat.

"I've never seen you like this," said Colin.

At the office, Kell was professional and systematic. She assigned consequences where they were due. But this evening, she'd been joking and laughing, giddy like only you could remember. Her earrings were ridiculously dangly.

"I'm not really myself at work," she admitted.

"Is that so?" Colin's voice registered disappointment, or perhaps suspicion. "Frankly, none of this is quite what I expected."

"Oh?"

"This is..." he waved his hand in the air, "this is all very nice." He stopped and met her eyes. "I'm only thinking about how fortunate I am to be familiar with your work. Your record is extraordinary," he said, "brutally so."

He was going to kiss her. She crossed her legs, inadvertently flustering the coffee table.

"Sorry," she said. She was on her fourth glass of sangria.

"Not at all," he returned.

From inside the house came a sound like a wheel or a pulley. Colin ignored it. Kell peered through the window into the kitchen, her gaze uneasy. It might have been you. But it was only Hailey, appearing behind the glass, a plastic helicopter in hand and a bored expression on her eight-year-old face. You'd occupied her in the den for a couple of hours, but the fish had eventually frightened her off.

"My daughter is spying on us," said Kell.

“It must be past her bedtime,” Colin said. “I should go.”

“Wait,” said Kell. “Stay a minute longer.”

He stood. “Not tonight.” He pruned a scrawny leaf from the ficus and handed it to her.

She thanked him.

You didn’t see any of this. But you watched his car pull away.

You remember that evening not so much for the party, but for what was happening to the fish, of all things. There were three of them: Eric, Big Eric, and Lulu. Their names meant nothing to you. They all looked the same. If someone had asked, you would’ve said they were relatively small and brightly colored, yellow perhaps. You would have recalled gravel, rocks, seaweed, dead coral. You slept in the same room with them, on the daybed for the time being, while Kell and Hailey were upstairs. But it was Kell who’d purchased them during your absence, and Hailey who fed and tended to them. Until that evening, that is.

It began innocently enough.

“What’s wrong with Big Eric?” Hailey asked. She’d been keeping an eye on the tank while the two of you played rummy.

Not without some effort, you inched your way to the far edge of the daybed and peered into the water. It was true, something was wrong with one fish. It had become unusually slow and bony, its fin ragged. The other two were trying to avoid all contact with it. Yet try as they might, they couldn’t get out of its way. In fact, it seemed as if Big Eric, despite his lethargy, was perpetually stalking his companions, cornering them against rock and glass.

Never before had you paid the fish such undivided attention.

Hailey absentmindedly rested her small hand on your knee. “I don’t like it.”

“We’ll tell your mom when the party’s over,” you said.

Big Eric gained on Lulu and Eric. Lulu and Eric darted away.

“Can we go somewhere else?” she asked.

“I have to stay here,” you said. “But you can go. Don’t disturb your mom.”

Once Hailey was gone, the activity in the tank seemed, if not to increase, then to intensify. Big Eric loomed through the water, a shadow. You tried to distract yourself. You read an old *National Geographic*. You completed a set of exercises prescribed by the physical therapist. You peed in the bedpan. You lost at solitaire five times before you realized: Hailey had carried one card – the nine of clubs – away.

Kell took Hailey to the pet store the following morning. You couldn’t accompany them in your condition. The clerk posed a series of questions about the fishes’ behavior and appearance, about scratching and fighting, discoloration and abrasions. Kell answered as accurately as she could.

The clerk paused. “That’s pretty fishy,” he said.

“Can you help me or not?” Kell asked.

“It may be finrot,” he said. “Maybe ich. Maybe not.”

He sold Kell a new water filter and a course of antibiotics. “Try not to stress the fish,” he said.

Back at the house, Kell and Hailey found you halfway up the staircase. You’d collapsed there after losing your strength.

“How did you get up there?” Hailey asked.

“If there’s something you need, I can get it,” said Kell.

They helped you down and recounted their trip to the pet store.

For some time thereafter, Hailey refused to go near the fish. You spent most days with her in the kitchen. Kell monitored the water temperature and pH. She administered antibiotics. She did everything by the book.

Weeks went by, and things started to progress between Kell and Colin at the office under the pretense of work. Colin relished the force of law and especially loved to hear about cases that resulted in perversions of justice: an Armenian immigrant who applied for U.S. citizenship after twenty-five years in the country, only to bring to light a minor offense twenty years earlier that would demand her deportation; an undocumented Mexican smuggled across the border as an infant, forced to return to Mexico where he knew no one, nothing, not even the language; a Russian college freshman who lost his visa for having sex with his barely illegal girlfriend.

“Most people couldn’t do what you do,” Colin would commend her.

But for Kell, practicing law was a matter of indifference. The methods were uncompromising so she didn’t have to be.

Eventually things progressed further, into the parking lot and Colin’s loft. But Kell didn’t bring him to the house. She told no one. When she called to say she’d be home late, you didn’t demand explanations. You knew better.

She listed the tasks that would go undone: “Hailey needs some dinner.” “I’m supposed to put a few drops of that solution in the tank.” These were not apologies.

Of course, you couldn't cook dinner or tend to the fish properly. So for some hours a few times a week, Big Eric would languish in the tank, and Hailey would eat pizza pockets you microwaved in a cardboard sleeve. Soon Kell began to work weekends.

It was during this period that Eric came down with Big Eric's affliction, and the two of them took to pursuing Lulu with unreasonable calm. Napping as you did in the den, you were the first to notice. But you didn't tell Hailey. When Kell returned home, she went first, as usual, to feed and treat the fish. You heard her urgent footsteps on the floors, which had been stripped of rugs for your convenience.

"Did you see this?" you heard her shouting down the hall.

You were in the kitchen with Hailey, who gave you a suspicious look. You backed out of the table and wheeled yourself into the den. Kell was wearing a fresh application of lipstick, which, along with the scowl on her face, made her appear slightly unhinged.

"When did this happen?" she asked. "I checked them this morning."

"Calm down," you said. "Let's not make Hailey upset."

Kell sat on the daybed. The shadows of the fish moved across the room. She stood and left. Cupboards banged in the kitchen, and though you couldn't hear Hailey's small voice filled with questions, you could imagine it. You were about to leave the den when Kell returned just as abruptly as she'd left, carrying a large punch bowl full of water. She set the bowl on an end table, found a net among the fish supplies, and proceeded to quarantine Lulu.

One evening, Colin arrived unexpectedly at the house and pounded loudly on the door before trying the bell. The first bar of the *I Love Lucy* theme song – Kell’s doing – chimed. Hailey, playing out in the backyard, didn’t seem to notice. You maneuvered your wheelchair into the den, where you could see Colin through the window. He was glancing nervously at the house, the lawn, the door, his car behind him, everything but you. You didn’t recognize him as the same man you’d watched leaving the dinner party months ago.

Kell came down the stairs and into the den. She glanced out the window. “Shit,” she said. She left in a hurry, pulling the door to the den closed behind her.

You didn’t have time to say anything. The front door opened, and you lost sight of Colin as he stepped into the house. Their words were quiet at first, too quiet to carry through the door. Then they grew louder but distant. Colin was pacing through the house, Kell trailing after him. He took the stairs two at a time. The ceiling thumped and creaked.

Colin, of course, had known about you for years. But he’d been led to believe it was over. You were gone for good. Kell had told you nothing about him, yet you knew plenty. As they went from room to room, Kell tried to reassure Colin of your innocence, describing the mechanics – if not the cause – of the accident, the damage to your spine, your convalescence. He wasn’t listening. He wanted a scene.

Finally, inevitably, the door to the den opened, and for an instant, his eye fell on you sharply. His face was slick, you thought. But as quickly as he’d entered, his eyes flattened and his hands loosened at his sides.

“Excuse me, I –” he said. “You –” He stumbled past Kell and exited the house.

It occurred to you, an instant too late, how bad you must have looked, your hair still growing back over the laceration you’d forgotten all about, it being the lesser of your injuries.

Kell came up beside you to look out the window, followed by Hailey – out of nowhere – on your other side. You wondered when she'd come inside, how much she'd seen. The three of you watched Colin drive away. Then Kell tended to the fish and left. You were satisfied.

You'd expected, for some time, that Eric and Big Eric would die. And then they didn't.

Hailey's fears gave way to impatience. "Lula's lonely," she would say. "She's bored without them."

Kell sought your advice about what to do. Was it too risky to reunite them? She thought she'd been protecting Hailey, protecting Lulu. But without Lulu in the tank, Eric and Big Eric looked relatively harmless, frail even. You refused to get involved. The options seemed embarrassingly and uniformly loaded.

Kell took matters into her own hands. While you were sleeping, she returned Lulu from the punch bowl to the tank. Despite intense persecution by her slow, skeletal companions, Lulu resisted. At three a.m., Kell drained half the water from the tank, then half again at four, hoping that the closer quarters would hasten Lulu's conversion. The fish could barely swim. Still, there was no change. She drained some more. The fish breathed heavily on their sides, Lulu more frantically than the others. At dawn Kell drained the water completely. They grew still with suffocation. Finally, she refilled the water. Eric and Big Eric returned to half-life and – mercifully – Lulu joined them.

When you awoke, the fish were companions again, with a difference: a slight loss of motion and matter.

Hailey was unimpressed. "They're still bored," she said.

“You mean *you’re* bored,” you said. “Fish are boring.”

Hailey scrunched up her face. “Yeah.”

You felt sorry for Kell. She needed a nap.

Some nights, you were the one who barely slept: you were determined to master the stairs. Soon you could climb halfway up without needing assistance down. You hid your strength from Kell and Hailey. In time, you made it up to the landing, the site of the accident. You looked down, the whole dark house suspended around you. When you breathed, the house breathed. Ten years you’d lived there. You tried to picture yourself falling, but didn’t stay long. It took you twenty minutes to get back down.

You mentioned daytrips to Hailey – the beach, the zoo, the caverns – in hopes that she, in turn, might mention them to Kell, who was never tied up evenings or weekends at work anymore. But they stayed at home, watching reality TV dance shows and eating well-balanced dinners. You didn’t worry about keeping a suitcase, about packing your belongings out of sight. You were something like a family again. Was this, after all, what you’d been after? You never thought about your condo with its complimentary laundering service, its indoor parking, its view of the manmade lake. Once a week, Kell brought you your mail. Nearly as soon as you’d been awarded your choice of the contents of the house, you’d abandoned it for the original structure.

The stronger you got, the longer you spent upstairs on the dark landing. When you were done with the picture of falling, you would glance down the hall and try to picture Kell with a

handgun. This picture was understandably absurd. Were those curlers in her hair? Since when did she wear a nightgown? The gun was like something from an old movie. You couldn't have seen it coming.

After the accident, you'd regained consciousness in a hospital bed, hooked up to monitors and an IV. It was three in the morning, and only the nurse was in.

"You were shot two days ago," she explained.

"Shot?" You felt like your were remembering a dream.

She nodded. "You're at Saint Ignatius's. We've paged the doctor." As she informed you of your injuries, you made a mental note of each body part. The pain in your head and abdomen were dulled by medication. But you could barely move your toes. The doctor would give you more details and a prognosis.

"Shot?" you repeated before she left. "Really?"

She didn't nod this time.

Awaiting the doctor's arrival, you'd considered the details of your story: Why had you entered the house in the first place? Why hadn't you contacted Kell in advance? Why hadn't you rung the doorbell? Whatever it was, why couldn't it wait until morning? You couldn't have answered these questions truthfully even if you'd wanted. The doctor arrived several hours later. He didn't ask you a thing.

Kell and Hailey visited that afternoon.

“You’re going to come stay with us while you recover,” said Kell. “Don’t even think of saying no. It’s my responsibility. You need the rest.” She managed to say this without sounding guilty or forgiving.

Weeks later, you were discharged under her supervision and brought back to the house, the scene of the accident. It was the first time since the divorce that you’d seen it in daylight. It struck you how quickly Kell had filled it with ridiculous objects in pursuit, it seemed, of some sense of personalization. A digital doorbell. A daybed. A white leather sectional. A fish tank. But the most ridiculous object was, of course, nowhere in sight: the gun. Had she acquired it, you wondered, because she felt unsafe without you? Or, on the contrary, was she afraid of you? Maybe, after all was said and done, she knew you better than you knew yourself.

It won’t take you long to master the stairs. Soon you’ll learn to walk more deliberately than ever. Your feet will learn the patterns of the floorboards, the sections that groan and creak. You’ll creep through the house under the cover of night, searching the second story. You’ll look under beds and dressers, open closets and drawers. You’ll watch Kell and Hailey sleeping. You’ll search their faces for fear or remorse. Sometimes they’ll open their eyes, say a few words, and help you back down to the first story, into your wheelchair, into the daybed in the den.

Even once you leave, you’ll still be searching: if not for the gun, then what? The things you could do with it. But what you’ll come to learn will always be gratuitous. For instance, you’ll see Colin, of all people, on TV one evening. He’ll appear on a split screen beside your local newscaster, wearing a suit and tie, his face clean-shaven and matte. You’ll be in your

condo, surrounded by the best furniture of your first marriage. It will take you a moment to identify him. The newscaster will pose questions about a defendant he's prosecuting.

"Many Americans believe the charges against the defendant are unfair," she'll say. "Yet you seem to portray him as a monster."

"Monster is your word," Colin will respond. "I merely relate the facts."

Colin will become increasingly smug, the newscaster increasingly impatient, their conversation increasingly polemic. It will make for great entertainment. Meanwhile, you'll think about Kell, whom you have barely seen since you regained your full range of motion. About how terrible she'd be there on the split-screen, holding all the cards, utterly impartial. There would be no arguing with her.

You'll tell yourself you're not the first person she loved, the first person she punished and let off, the first person she learned to get on without. Not the first person, or the last.

Go on. Tell yourself.

THE NEW LEASE



The landlord had emphasized, from the start, that the apartment lacked some modern conveniences, and that the ideal tenant would be willing to tolerate its shortcomings for the sake of a low rent. Nora insisted she was more than happy to make the trade-off. She couldn't afford not to. Besides, the most obvious disadvantages – ancient electrical fixtures and a bathroom with no shower, only a giant claw-foot tub – evoked a quaint, old-fashioned charm.

The only thing that gave her slight pause was the wording of the lease. The apartment was referred to as “the demised premises,” which puzzled Nora enough that she felt compelled to check the legal definition. *Demised. (Law.) Transferred by lease or will.* Her confidence restored, she signed.

The apartment's charm didn't last long. Within weeks of moving in, Nora discovered a defunct doorbell, weak faucets, slow drains, and leaky pipes that cultivated a bumpy yellow mold. The first time she preheated the oven, its fumes set off a piercing alarm: an explosive gas alarm, upon closer inspection. She had never seen an alarm for explosive gas before, and its presence in her apartment did little to reassure her.

Every time she uncovered another problem, Nora considered telling the landlord, who lived downstairs. But she inevitably decided against it, sensing an obligation to uphold what might have been an illicit bargain. Instead, she poured gallons of bleach down the drains and stopped using the oven. Soon it would be too hot, anyways, to bake.

As spring gave way to summer, Nora realized her new home was not just old, but actively deteriorating. Paint peeled, windows leaked, and the front steps rotted. In fact, by May, one step had split apart, leaving only a few precarious inches of wood. The landlord's apartment, like hers, had two entrances, and Nora noticed that he started using the back one. She couldn't use

her back door, however, because he'd failed to give her the second key. Still, she refrained from mentioning anything. It wasn't as if he didn't know. He would fix the steps when he saw fit. In the meantime, she could manage to skip one.

Several weeks later, Nora received a note from the mailman. If the step was not replaced, he warned, he would stop delivering her mail. Nora wondered why he had addressed the note to her. Did he think she was the owner? Or had he written the landlord too? She slipped the note into her landlord's mailbox, hoping that he would not consider it presumptuous. Within a week, the steps were repaired. For some reason, this made Nora uneasy.

In early June, Nora awoke to the sound of something rustling and screeching in the heater: a trapped bird, perhaps, or a bat. The heater was an old wall unit, and the sounds issued from an aluminum vent at its top. Indeed, the animal seemed to be right inside the vent, nudging the lid up. Nora banged on the heater. The animal retreated. She waited a moment. The animal returned. Nora found some duct tape and placed a chair by the heater. She banged again, then stood on the chair and quickly duct-taped the lid shut. She put on her robe and some slippers. Then, for the first time, she phoned the landlord.

Fifteen minutes later, he was standing on the chair in his tennis shoes, his shaved head sweating under the overhead light. The animal continued to rustle and screech.

"There's something in there all right," said the landlord. "Do you have a trash-bag or something? We can try and catch it." He started peeling off the duct tape.

Nora retrieved a bag from the kitchen and shook it open. The landlord held it in one hand and lifted the lid with the other. He leaned closer. A furry head poked out of the vent. The landlord flew off the chair in a panic. Nora fled to the next room.

“It’s ok,” the landlord called out a moment later. “I thought it was a rat. It’s a squirrel.”

Nora approached the doorway. The landlord motioned under the desk. There the squirrel sat, its head and limbs frozen, tail twitching, belly heaving.

“I’m going to open the doors,” the landlord said. “Stay where you are so it doesn’t get away.” Cautiously, he opened the front door and descended the stairs.

For a second, it was just Nora and the squirrel. The squirrel looked at her. It looked at the room. It looked at her. Then, inexplicably, it darted after the landlord down the stairs.

“It’s out!” called the landlord.

Nora joined him outside, where the squirrel was clinging to the base of a tree.

“Poor little fella,” said the landlord. “Wonder how it got in there.”

Nora returned to her apartment and re-taped the heating vent, wondering the same thing.

In August, Nora’s mom came to visit. “It smells like gas in here,” she said.

“It’s probably the pilot light,” said Nora. She cleared the pots and pans from the stove, and lifted the range. Sure enough, one of the flames was out. She retrieved a match and relit it.

“Why was it out?” asked her mom.

“I don’t know, wind, maybe. It happens sometimes.”

“That sounds dangerous,” said her mom. “Natural gas can explode.”

“It would have to be leaking for weeks for that to happen, with the windows sealed.”

“It smells strong to me.”

“Mom. I have an explosive gas alarm. If it were that bad, it would go off.” Nora did not mention the oven.

“You should tell your landlord.”

“What? That the pilot light goes out once in awhile? Like he would care.”

“Do it for my sake,” her mom said.

For the next month, Nora’s mom sent her alarmist emails and links to articles describing tragic death and destruction of property by natural gas, sometimes illustrated by photographs or diagrams: a fitness center in Colorado obliterated; grandparents in Arkansas decimated in their bed; a litter of kittens disfigured. Nora deleted the emails. Her mom mailed her an ad for a small, inexpensive oven, accompanied by a check. Nora held onto the check for a few days, but when it came time to pay rent, she was short one hundred thirty-three dollars, and she made the deposit. After that, she felt guilty about using her parents’ money against their wishes. She phoned her landlord.

“I was thinking of getting a new oven,” she said.

“Why?” asked the landlord.

“I can’t use it,” she said. “It sets the alarm off.”

“I see,” he said.

“Also, the pilot light goes out.”

“That doesn’t sound too serious,” he said. “I’ll come up and check it out.”

The landlord inspected the oven. One by one, he turned the burners on and off. “The pilot lights are on,” he said. He peered into the oven. He turned the oven on and off. “Everything seems to be working.”

“Yes, but the oven sets the alarm off.”

He put the oven on BROIL.

“It doesn’t happen right away,” said Nora. “It takes maybe ten minutes or so.”

He looked at the plastic clock on the wall. The clock, which had come with the apartment, was permanently drilled and wired into the wall. Nora didn’t tell him it was broken.

“It will start to smell first,” Nora explained. “But not like gas, like something else. Like propane.”

“This oven runs on gas, not propane,” said the landlord.

“I know,” said Nora. “It’s probably something else, not propane.”

They waited. The clock didn’t move.

“When did this all start?” asked the landlord.

“When I moved in,” she said.

The landlord frowned.

“I’m not much of a cook.” She gestured at a carton of ramen noodles on the floor.

He opened the oven and looked inside.

“Do you smell it?” asked Nora.

The landlord closed the oven and stood for a moment. “It smells like heat,” he said.

“Heat?” The smell was acrid.

“Like hot metal. Like it hasn’t been used for awhile.” The landlord looked at the broken clock. “I forget what time it was,” he said. “What do you think? That must be ten minutes.”

“I’m sorry,” said Nora. “The alarm should have gone off by now.”

“It was probably nothing.”

Nora smiled faintly. “You don’t have to stay around,” she said. “I’ll leave it on a few more minutes and call you if anything happens.”

The landlord left. Nora sat on the couch, watching the alarm, willing it to go off. She watched a sitcom. She looked at the clock on the DVD player. Finally, the alarm sounded: a constant, piercing pitch. Nora went downstairs and knocked on the landlord’s door. He opened it.

“Yep, I hear it,” he said.

The landlord installed a new stove. Fortunately, Nora didn’t have to pay for it. She splurged on food, baking three kinds of muffins and broiling a chicken. Nothing happened. She phoned her parents.

“Thank god. Now I can sleep at night,” said her mom.

Nora, for her part, slept fitfully. Weeks later, at 2 a.m., she heard the alarm. She flung off the covers and rushed into the living room. The sound was deafening. The LED display flashed GAS in red digits. She pushed the buttons: TEST/RESET and PEAK LEVEL. The sound continued. She unplugged the alarm from the wall, wrenched out the battery, and pondered what to do next.

The apartment didn’t smell like anything. Were there other kinds of explosive gas that didn’t smell? Carbon monoxide, for instance, was an odorless killer. She opened the windows and sat on the bed. She studied the alarm. Fine print covered the back: WARNING DO NOT INSTALL IN HAZARDOUS CONDITIONS KEEP AWAY FROM DUST AND HUMIDITY IF ALARM SOUNDS MOVE TO FRESH AIR IMMEDIATELY DIAL 911 MODEL 900-0227

CONFIDENCE PLUS. She replaced the battery and pressed TEST/RESET. The alarm went off again. She tore out the battery.

Pulling the covers around her, she thought about going to sleep. But she couldn't sleep. What was the point of having an alarm, after all, if she was going to ignore it? Fitness centers and grandparents and kittens flashed through her mind. She considered dialing 911, but it didn't seem like a certifiable emergency. She went to the kitchen and got the phonebook. She flipped to the section called GAS. Her gas company listed an around-the-clock hotline, so she tried that. The operator assured her a technician would be there shortly.

Since the doorbell didn't work, Nora waited outside. The night was sharp. Even though it was only November, a few inches of snow covered the ground, slushy and gray on the sidewalk and street, but pristine – save for a few animal tracks – everywhere else. She removed a lawn chair holding someone's space so the technician would have somewhere to park. She sat on the renovated steps and glanced up and down the quiet street. Eventually, a white truck arrived, painted with the gas company's logo. She waved it to the empty parking space. The technician carried a flashlight in one hand and some sort of meter in the other. She led him up the stairs. His footsteps were heavy, and she worried about waking the landlord. Though most of the lights were on, the technician beamed the flashlight across the walls, moving from room to room. She was embarrassed for the bed, its blankets all lumpy, sheets not quite fitting.

"Do you smell gas here?" asked the technician.

"No," she said.

The technician narrowed his eyes. "You called for a gas leak?"

"Not because I smelled it. The alarm went off."

"Where is it?" he asked.

She retrieved the disabled alarm from the other room.

“Explosive gas,” he read. He connected the battery. The alarm didn’t go off. He pointed his meter at the oven. “Were you cooking anything?” he asked.

“No.”

He pointed the meter at the heater. He shined his flashlight over the duct tape on the vent, suspiciously. “Was the heater going?”

“No. It’s off.”

“It’s cold,” he said.

“I’m trying to save on my gas bill,” she explained.

“Let’s turn it on just in case.”

She adjusted the thermostat. The fan kicked in. It made a hollow sound, louder than she imagined. They waited. Nothing happened. He opened the back door onto the back stairs and shined his flashlight around.

“Everything checks out,” said the technician. “Do you have access to the gas meter?”

“No. It’s in my landlord’s apartment,” she said. “But that’s ok. It seems like it was just a false alarm.”

“Standard procedure,” he said.

Nora’s stomach churned as she sat at the top of the staircase. The technician descended, and knocked on the landlord’s door. She listened: another knock, a stirring, some incoherent shouting. It occurred to her that she should’ve had the technician use the front stairs, the front door. The anger in her landlord’s voice caught Nora off guard; he’d always been so agreeable with her. She wondered if she should show herself. Although she’d lived under his roof for eight months now, she had never stepped foot in his apartment, nor caught a glance through the

window. He always had a set of sheer curtains drawn. She'd pictured his apartment as a nicer, updated version of her own, with new fixtures, appliances, and caulking. Yet now it occurred to her that his was possibly as dilapidated as hers, and that it would appear that she'd sent this technician to check up on him.

She was about to call out when she heard the gunshot. The bullet tore through the floor of the landing just feet from where Nora was sitting and exited out the clapboard wall leaving two small clean holes. He'd fired it upwards, a warning shot apparently, not realizing Nora was there. She froze in disbelief. Her ears rang. More than anything, she wanted to run inside and call the police, but she didn't want to move from the staircase for fear of being heard.

Now the shouting was escalating back and forth between the landlord and the technician. What if the technician was in danger? She pictured the landlord waving his gun in the air, ready to fire again. She pictured the technician gently setting down his meter and flashlight on the floor, raising his hands in surrender.

But she was imagining things. The men, after all, now seemed to be laughing. Gradually, the voices died down. She heard a door shut, and waited, and heard a door open, and waited, and heard the technician leave.

The next day, Nora texted her landlord, apologizing for the disturbance. She told him it was all her fault, and she would get a new alarm. She didn't say a word about the bullet holes in the rear stairs. He texted back immediately.

"I'll get an alarm," he said. "It's my responsibility." That was it.

A week later, a box appeared at the foot of her door. "Multi-Hazard Alarm," it read. "Another quality product from Confidence Plus." The box had been opened, and the foam

supports and directions were missing. The front of the alarm was covered with buttons, and the LED display was huge, like a screen.

Nora went to a hardware store to see if she could find a similar model, and copy the directions. The store had a whole aisle of devices detecting everything – gas, carbon monoxide, smoke, radon, humidity, spores, motion, heat – but nothing quite like the model she had received. Eventually, a salesman approached her. He asked what she was looking for, but she couldn't say. So one by one, he compared the hazards, the alarms, the price of everything.

COMMUTE



Nine a.m., and the attendants were making the rounds again, placing and replacing orange cones in the garage. Cole pulled up to the entrance – obstructed by a single cone – and waited. He couldn't help but notice something offhand, almost cavalier, about the attendants' efforts. The nearest one was facing away from the entrance, apparently oblivious to the line of cars that was quickly developing. A second was strolling across the garage with a stack of cones under his arm. At the stairwell, a third was sharing a good laugh with someone, presumably a fourth attendant hidden behind a thick column. A fifth near the ramp practiced his golf swing with a cone, sending a paper cup into the air.

“Come on,” Cole said. “Can't they just build another garage instead of redoing this one over and over?”

His passenger, Beverly, flipped down the visor against the windshield and studied her face in the small mirror. She was dressed, uncharacteristically, in light colors today – white blouse, yellow and white striped skirt – and was particularly aloof, having spoken only a word or two on the ride over. Cole exercised his own indifference, avoiding any mention of last night.

It was a mystery to Cole why the garage had to be redrawn so often. The structure, after all, was pretty straightforward. There were five identical levels and two circular ramps at opposite corners, one up, one down. Cole tended to use the 2nd Street entrance, but there was also another entrance on 3rd Street. Each entrance was adjacent to a pay-station and a set of stairs. Sure, the irregular imposition of several concrete columns prohibited a perfectly regular grid of parking spaces. But surely some elementary geometry could reveal the best layout. Had someone failed to do his job the first (and second, and third...) time around? And even if so, was it worth the money and inconvenience to gain another space or two? Cole tried not to think about it.

Construction workers were gutting an old building nearby. Below the automated pay-station, pigeons fought for a crust of bread. A group of pedestrians in green t-shirts, some kind of club or team, planted a few thumps on the trunk of Cole's car, which happened to be obstructing the sidewalk. At last, the nearest attendant moved the cone aside and, with his triangular flag, waved Cole onward. Cole maneuvered the car through the network of cones and columns. On the opposite side of the garage, separated from him by a single row of cones, cars were finding parking left and right. He gave a loud sigh.

Beverly flipped up the visor. "Don't start," she warned.

The break in silence felt, for Cole, like a small victory.

It would have been easier to tell Beverly that she could leave, that he could find parking on his own, thereby relieving himself of what could hardly be called her company, at least until the evening. But today he was happy to prolong the commute indefinitely. Besides, she probably would've refused to leave. While they referred to their arrangement as carpooling, Cole was more or less Beverly's unpaid chauffeur. Enduring the frustrations of parking in his agency's mismanaged garage was, if not her obligation, at least a matter of courtesy.

The detour brought them to the ramp up. Like Level 1, Level 2 was blocked off by a single cone. He braked. In the nearest corner, two attendants in reflective vests stooped over the pavement, painting a small section of yellow lines black. In the distance, across an expanse of empty spaces, several headlights beamed, more vehicles that apparently had been permitted entry.

"Look at all those spots," Cole said.

"Uh-huh." Beverly was speaking again.

He eyed the cones.

“Really,” she said. “Don’t stop here. Someone might drive up behind us.”

He pulled over alongside the cone, leaving the ramp clear. A car passed them by. One of the attendants dropped his paintbrush and picked up a flag.

“He’s coming over,” Cole pointed out.

“Please,” said Beverly. “Don’t do your usual.”

He eased off the brake and merged back onto the ramp, satisfied for the moment.

In the few months they’d been carpooling, these kinds of exchanges had become routine: Cole protested the injustices of his commute; Beverly cringed and discouraged him. Indeed, these were the only exchanges they carried on, and as a result, he knew scarcely a thing about her, apart from what he gathered from their carpooling arrangements. That is to say, she lived in his apartment building and also commuted to Government Center – though when he’d inquired if she had decent employee parking they could use instead of his, she’d frowned at him as if the question were somehow unseemly.

Granted, from the beginning Beverly had been completely forthcoming about her otherwise unforthcoming nature. The flyer she’d posted on their apartment building’s bulletin board, soliciting a carpool – or, to be more precise, a ride to work in exchange for gas money – had flatly stipulated no conversation. On their first ride together, Cole had attempted to entertain her with the story of how his father had given him the car several years ago as a graduation gift, along with a life-size blow-up doll to put in the passenger seat so he could use the high-occupancy lane on the highway. The doll was slightly amusing, mostly mortifying, Cole had explained, but he thought it would be disrespectful to throw it away. His father clearly prided himself on the personal touch it added to the gift, having taken care to dress the doll colorfully in old clothes Cole formerly had seen on his mother and sister.

Cole would never forget the look Beverly had given him after he finished the story, not unkind but wholly impassive.

“You don’t have to talk for my benefit,” she’d said.

Apparently Beverly had no sense for awkward silence, but Cole had felt it keenly on their first commutes. Unconsciously, he’d begun to fill the air with general exclamations and invectives, addressed to careless pedestrians, drivers, traffic controllers: anyone, really, but Beverly. In the process, he’d given her the impression that he had a quick temper, which – though not exactly true – was fun to maintain. Indeed, the more he acted the part of the hotheaded driver, the more he appreciated Beverly, if not for her complete submission to daily injustices, then at least for her unique ability to wear that submission like a badge of rebellion. While they remained strangers on most accounts, Cole detected a peculiar intimacy between them, though he couldn’t decide if she was pretty.

After last night, however, the stakes had changed. He’d found Beverly in the basement laundry room, struggling to sort a pile of clothes on the collapsible table, her cheeks mottled, her eyes vicious, her hair pulled back into a sharp, stumpy approximation of a ponytail. He’d never seen her so angry before, nor imagined she might not be as unflappable as she made herself out to be.

“Is everything all right?” he’d asked, casually, averting his eyes from her formless nightshirt, unloading his own clothes into the nearest machine.

“I can’t sort this,” she’d answered. Then she’d dropped the dark, indistinguishable mass of clothes in her basket and fled the room.

The car ascended more levels, all blocked with cones, each one emptier than the next. When they reached the top, into the cloudless morning, the lot was vacant, save for a white sedan

parked along the opposite wall near the stairwell and the other ramp leading back down. At least the attendants had finished repainting the pavement, their sharp yellow lines contradicting a network of thick black deletions. Cole pulled into a space near the sedan. An attendant appeared in the stairwell and whistled at them. Cole silently mouthed profanities through the windshield and threw up his hands for effect.

“Here we go,” said Beverly.

The attendant approached the car. Cole put down his window.

“The stairwells are out of service for the next half-hour,” the attendant explained.

“Both of them?”

The attendant nodded. “You’re advised to use Level 1.”

“That’s where we came from,” said Cole. He could sense Beverly’s discomfort.

“That ramp will take you back down,” the attendant pointed across the garage.

“What about them?” Cole motioned to the white sedan.

The attendant shrugged. “You know how some people get.”

Cole jerked the car in reverse.

Down the ramp’s first turn, his headlights spotted the apparent parking offender: an older woman in a camouflage-print dress. She was walking down the ramp, or rather limping, carrying a shoe in one hand. Cole slammed on the brakes with unnecessary force. The car jolted to a stop. Beverly readjusted her seatbelt.

“Sorry,” he said.

“You could have hit her,” said Beverly.

Cole couldn't determine whether she was scolding him or regretting a lost opportunity, and as the older woman slid from his rearview mirror, he almost wished, for a moment, that he had hit her, not fatally or even seriously, but a brush, just to see.

Around the next turn, a car appeared, and then another, a whole line of cars at a near standstill, red brake lights curving along the ramp wall. Cole slowed, stopped, advanced a few lengths, and stopped again. The older woman with the shoe reappeared. Someone honked. Someone stalled and restarted. The cars were getting frustrated. Cole joined in the honking. They moved forward. They stopped. Slowly, as this went on, the older woman began to advance on them. She looked distracted, possibly thirsty.

"Maybe I should ask her if she wants a lift," said Cole.

Beverly ignored him. He leaned his head out the window. Beverly sunk low into her seat like a teenager who found it intolerable to watch adults communicate.

He turned away from the window. "Just kidding."

The woman shooed a pigeon and kept walking.

They continued the descent past Level 4 and, little by little, Level 3. Soon, the woman had overtaken them considerably, in time disappearing altogether down the ramp. But other pedestrians had replaced her, once-impatient drivers who'd parked, unadvisedly, on Level 3 or Level 4 and were now walking down the ramp too. Indeed, here came a procession of his coworkers, one after another, Tom, Mollie, Keisha, and Yves, bonding over the terrible garage, it seemed. Cole lowered his head, not wanting to be seen. He hadn't mentioned Beverly to his coworkers, and the idea of introducing her to them was not particularly inviting.

In fact, the only person to whom he'd mentioned her was his father, and those conversations were indirect, to say the least.

“How’s your doll?” his father would ask.

“Kind of quiet,” Cole would respond.

“That’s a doll for you.”

Cole knew it was creepy to speak of Beverly as a doll while her stand-in, dressed as his sister, slowly deflated in the trunk. But he didn’t have the heart to admit to his father that the real doll had become redundant.

Finally they were at Level 1, but it was chaos now, all the spaces filled already, and none of the commuters prepared to leave without one. Cole loosened his tie. The car was sweltering. Beverly looked cool as could be.

Last night, Cole had waited in the laundry room until midnight. After he’d finished with his load, he went over to examine Beverly’s. It was a load of darks. She’d managed to sort out several shirts and leave them neatly to the side. But the rest of the pile was caught in an impossible tangle of gray elastic thread, a pair of tights, it seemed, that had snagged and unwound itself around everything. He couldn’t believe she’d left the clothes behind – it was both dramatic and confessional, two traits that went against everything he knew about her. He laid his hand on the pile, which was still slightly warm from the dryer. Then he reached for one of the knots. Loosening the clothes was mean work, the lighting in the laundry room so poor he could barely distinguish one item from another. He’d assumed that she was angry about something else, that the laundry had merely revealed her own tangled emotions. But as he wrestled with the load for nearly twenty minutes, he felt himself on the verge of tears. Finally, he succeeded.

Placing the shredded tights to the side, he doubted, for the first time, what he’d done. As long as the tangle had been the focus, he’d overlooked the specificity of the clothing. But now he recognized it all, everything he shouldn’t have been handling, the rough lace bras and flimsy

tees. He folded the clothes in her basket and, on second thought, messed them up. He was about to leave the basket there in the basement. It was too late, after all, to call or knock on her door. Even if she was still up, she hardly seemed in the mood to see anybody. But then he considered the possibility that she might want to talk, for once. Who better to be there for her than he? He took out his cell phone and dialed her number. Then he came to his senses. More likely, she'd withdraw from him even further. She'd never carpool again. He hung up before two rings. Yet there was the laundry again, tugging like a slight gray thread between them. He tucked his laundry bag under one arm and carried her basket to his apartment, planning to return it to her personally in the morning.

Now the line of cars was at a complete standstill. He honked again.

"No one can go anywhere," said Beverly.

"Doesn't your boss care if you're late?" he asked. It was already nine seventeen.

She shrugged, as if the question were a rhetorical one.

"Screw it," he said. He turned the steering wheel sharply to the side, in the direction of the exit. He couldn't stand being in line anymore.

"You can't go that way," said Beverly. "You have to follow the cones."

He let go of the break and maneuvered out of the line of cars, around a column. An orange cone thumped underneath them.

"Where are you going?"

"Out." Beyond that, Cole wasn't sure.

An attendant was rushing towards him, waving his triangular flag. As the car thumped over another cone, someone started shouting: another attendant from out of nowhere. His shouting was furious, pained even.

“What’s all that about? Is he – Did I hit him?”

“I thought it was a cone.” She looked behind them. “Yeah, it was a cone alright.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’s fine. He just wants you to stop.”

They had reached the exit.

“But there’s nowhere to park,” he said.

He hadn’t returned Beverly’s clothes to her that morning, as originally intended. He’d gone to her apartment a few minutes early with the basket in hand, but hesitated at her door. He’d never been to her apartment before; in fact, he’d had to look up the number in the mailroom. She might think he was prying into her business. He carried the basket outside to his car and waited there a few minutes. He imagined her face with different expressions – happiness, surprise, gratitude. But something was still wrong. It wasn’t the right moment. She couldn’t just find him here with the basket at his feet. The timing had to be perfect; otherwise it would look like he was breaking some unspoken promise between them.

He was about to bring the basket back to his apartment when he saw her leave the building. There wasn’t time. Quickly, he opened the trunk. The blow-up doll was still there, albeit a bit deflated. He shoved her towards the back to make room for the laundry. He wondered if Beverly had noticed. In any case, she’d have to say something about the laundry room during their commute. There was no way around it, he’d assumed.

Yet here they were at the exit, another commute nearing its end.

He thought he ought to let her out. “There’s nowhere to park,” he said again.

“Then don’t park,” she said.

“Don’t park...?” He looked at her. She was looking out the window, her face as serious as ever. But there were those clothes again, bright white and yellow like nothing he’d seen her in. Had she washed every dark item she owned all at once? Would she resign herself to whites now and forever? It was a ridiculous thought, of course; yet somehow it would be just like her to submit, wholly and without affect, to a new pattern of behavior that was nothing like her.

Don’t park, Cole repeated to himself. The attendants were waving and shouting behind them, their voices and bodies diminishing with each second, and there they were, he and Beverly, driving off together. Out of habit, he turned left and passed by the old gutted building, but at the corner he abandoned their usual route and headed southbound on the highway. Beverly stared at the new sights out the window, her face giving nothing away. He’d never felt so free.

They merged into the high-occupancy lane and sped onward. Large orange signs rushed past them: ROAD WORK AHEAD and PREPARE TO STOP. Traffic closed in, but no one was slowing. LEFT LANE CLOSED AHEAD came another. Roadworkers – some on the ground, some driving asphalt pavers – were fixing the highway. Cole gripped the steering wheel, then loosened his grip. When a string of profanities crossed his mind, he let it pass. He relaxed the muscles in his face. He observed the signs and began to merge.

“Don’t!” said Beverly.

“I haven’t even started.”

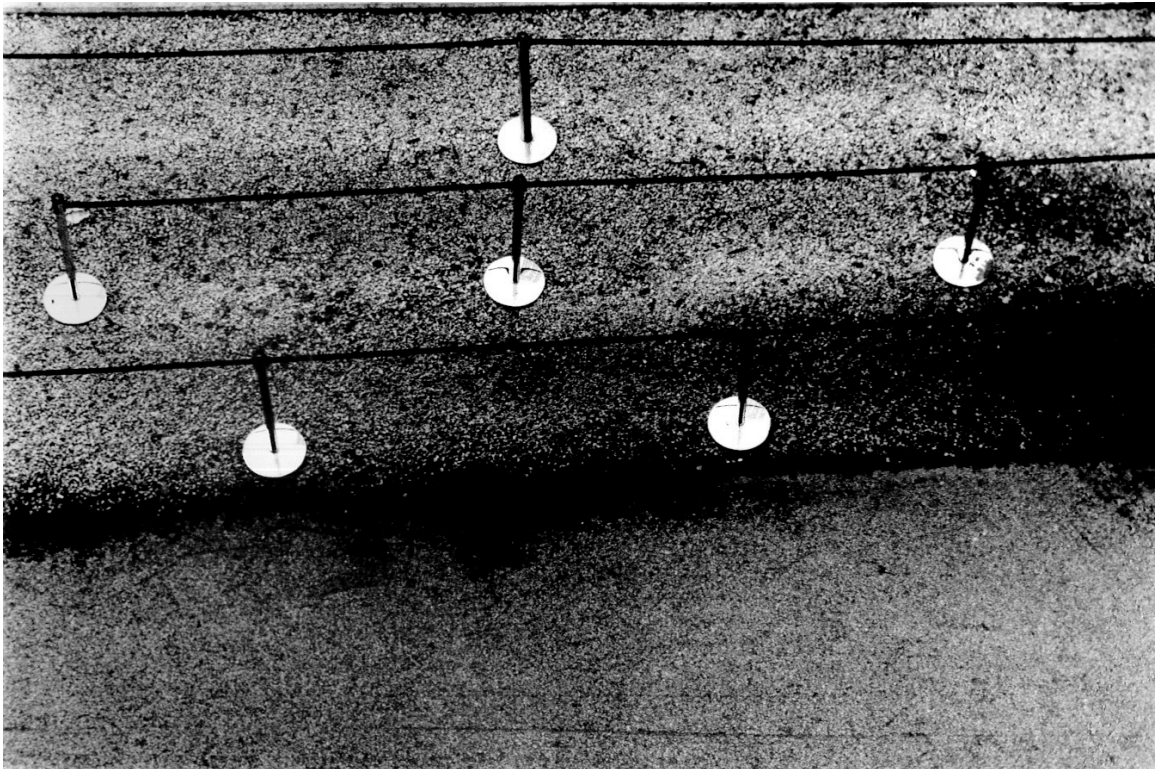
“No.” She was looking out the window behind her. “Don’t –”

It was too late. A pickup truck emerged from his blind spot. Cole swerved back into his lane to avoid it, but there was a row of orange cones ahead signaling the end of the merge. He steered left and slammed on the break. They lurched off the road down the rough embankment. There was a flurry of sky and brush and the sun’s low glare, then stillness.

Cole opened his eyes. The car had landed in a ditch, tilted at a slight angle, driver's-side up. The hood was buckled inward, obscuring his view of the landscape ahead, but he could see the sky through the side window. His head ached, and his back was burning. In the wing mirror, he spotted a body: a woman in a colorful blouse, dark clothes strewn all around her. No, the blow-up doll, he assured himself. The trunk had popped open. He managed to turn his head in the other direction. There was Beverly, buckled in her seat, her head resting on her side window, a crush of dense shrubbery beneath. A sliver of blood spread across her bottom lip. Had she bitten it? Her clothes were immaculate. Her eyes were open, but she didn't look at him. She seemed to be gazing into the rearview mirror. At what? The doll? The laundry? It was nine twenty-eight. She didn't blink.

You don't understand, he wanted to shout at her. You're overreacting. But his throat was choked and dry, and his mouth wouldn't work. He looked back at the sky, which seemed to be filling with clouds, or birds perhaps, or people in reflective vests busying themselves around them. Sirens sounded in the distance.

CROCODILE RACER



Brynn scooted across the padded vinyl seat and lowered the safety bar. Although the sides of the car were painted crocodile, all sharp teeth and scales, each seat also came equipped with an imitation dashboard, steering wheel, and gearshift. *Ready, set...* came a recorded voice over the PA system, accompanied by the simulated bellow of crocodiles.

For two months, Brynn had been working at the photo booth for the Crocodile Racer, a rollercoaster that featured two cars running simultaneously – racing, as it were – on parallel tracks. But this was the first time she was riding it herself. It wasn't that she had been avoiding it; she simply never came to the amusement park except to work. Things might have been different if her boyfriend Seth had a stronger stomach, or if her old high school friends hadn't decided to spend the summer with their new college friends, or if she'd been friendly with the park's other seasonal employees, many of whom took full advantage of the free admission. But, as it happened, Brynn had made only one friend at work: Annette, a jaded manager of the year-round aquarium, who unaccountably had taken Brynn under her wing. Annette had a master's degree in marine ecology, and was one of the few employees at Jungleland who knew something about jungles. She preferred to hang out at more remote locations, most often the steakhouse off exit 36.

Still, Brynn had an uncommon knowledge of the Crocodile Racer. On the wall of the photo booth hung a laminated review clipped from the local newspaper on opening day, nearly a century ago. "Not one, but two thrills await riders of the Gravity Racer," read the headline, Gravity Racer being the original name of the ride before the park thematized into Jungleland. The review was written, oddly enough, by a psychologist who explained how the illusion of speed, height, and danger was achieved via perspective and pacing. She'd read the review so

many times, she almost had it memorized. A more recent article featured photographs from Brynn's booth, each one a vine-framed grid of two cars, and eight riders in various states of amusement, hair shocked upright by the sudden drop. The photographs captured roughly three types of riders: those who were unselfconsciously thrilled (or terrified); those who were glancing at the car beside them to see who was winning; and those who were posing for the camera.

Owen, the fidgety eleven-year old who was riding shotgun next to Brynn, fell into this last type. He and his friends had ridden the coaster so many times they knew exactly where the camera was perched, high up on a lamppost. Sometimes, they approached the booth to see who had the best pose, and laugh at the other unsuspecting riders. But they never bought a photo. In fact, prior to this afternoon, none of them had uttered more than a word to Brynn, not even Owen, whom Brynn had once babysat and who showed vague recognition when their eyes met.

It was Owen who had finally intercepted her as she was leaving the booth for the day to ask if she would ride with him. She was stunned he'd remembered her name. He must have been seven or eight the last time she babysat.

"We're trying to get a thousand tickets for walkie-talkies," he'd explained with a kind of desperation. The Crocodile Racer awarded ten tickets to each winning rider, tickets that could be exchanged for cheap treasures at the prize booth. "Our team only has three people. More weight helps."

Brynn hesitated. She was nineteen. These kids were preteens. Plus, she had plans to sleep over at Seth's apartment later that evening.

"I bet you're good," Owen said, motioning to her Crocodile Racer t-shirt.

"I've never been."

He opened his palms to the sky and gave her a grave look, as if he was feeling the weight of her confession, or else presenting her with an invisible platter. She gave in. “I got one!” he’d called to his friends, who were nearing the platform.

The ride began with a slow ascent. Every inch they moved was accompanied by a suspenseful click of the pulley system. Ten feet over, their competition egged them on. Brynn and Owen’s teammates in the front seat hollered back.

Brynn gripped her knees, digging her fingernails into the flesh in anticipation of what lay beyond: a swift fifty-foot drop, the same drop that would be captured on the photo booth camera. She knew, through Crocodile Racer lore, that at least three riders had died on the coaster by defying posted safety rules, standing up in the car at inopportune moments. But that was many decades ago, she assured herself, back before they installed high-tech safety bars. She gripped the bar, her knuckles going white. No good. She crossed her arms.

“You scared?” Owen asked.

“Kind of.”

“You’re pinching yourself,” he said.

And so she was, pinching the crook of her arm, a nervous habit.

“It helps,” she said.

“I bet I could do it harder,” he said, snapping his hands at her like little jaws.

“Please don’t.”

They were almost at the top. He snapped closer.

“Owen.”

The track vanished in front of them. They both grabbed for the bar.

Later that evening, Brynn studied their faces at that first moment: Owen and his friends' eyes, triumphant and open, hers flinched closed. In fact, she saved the photo for herself, rescued it from the fate that awaited the other unbought photos in the dumpster. Her boss had refused to install a new digital system because he believed that people were more likely to buy them already printed. Despite the photo, Brynn couldn't remember having closed her eyes. She could picture it all: the crosshatched wooden structure, the blur of twilight, the backs of the other riders' heads.

Of course, it was possible she was remembering one of their subsequent rides. Having lost the first race, Owen and his friends invited Brynn to stay on for a rematch, and then another, and another. It was absurd, she knew, but addictive nonetheless. Each time, she felt the thump of her heart, the drop of her stomach, the lurch of her body; and somewhere, between the feeling and the foreknowledge, the thrill multiplied.

Winning seemed to be a matter mostly of chance, a fluke. The steering wheels and gearshifts served no purpose, and even the cars' weight differential (clearly in favor of Brynn's team) had negligible effects. But if the riders couldn't master the race, at least they could master their performance of it, coordinating their steering wheels with the curves of the track, ducking at crucial intervals to avoid wind resistance, anticipating every transition. Eventually, Brynn even joined in as Owen and his friends reached their hands towards the branches that hung over the track at the sharp turn, branches that looked close enough to touch, though she knew that the groundskeepers periodically trimmed them to a regulation distance.

By the time they called it a night, Brynn's team was ahead. Their car had won the race three times, the other car, only twice. Brynn gave Owen her thirty tickets.

"Rematch tomorrow," one of the friends from the losing car had said as they were leaving, clapping Owen on the shoulder.

Owen smiled at Brynn, but she pretended she hadn't heard. Though she wouldn't have minded going on the ride another day, she knew it wouldn't be with this crowd. After all, not everything about the evening had been that fantastic. For one thing, the line for the rollercoaster was interminably long. As they waited, Owen's friends had tossed out stories about classmates, evil teachers, and sports in a kind of offhanded way. They seemed to be bored with the stories, but quite attached to the endless shoves and jabs they inspired. Even worse were Brynn's awkward exchanges with Kai, a shy but popular ride operator who always managed to look stylish in the requisite Jungleland t-shirt.

"Where's Annette?" Kai had asked the first time he came around to secure the safety bar.

"I don't know." Brynn resented the assumption that she and Annette were inseparable.

"Is this your brother?" he'd asked a ride or two later.

"No way," Owen had responded on Brynn's behalf.

"A few of us are going swimming tonight after closing, if you want to come," Kai had tried one last time.

Things would have been different had Brynn been there with her boyfriend, Seth. Kai wouldn't have looked at her so pityingly. Brynn and Seth would have played rudimentary games to pass the time, counting or naming things. Seth always suggested unusual categories for their name games, like fonts or Feminists. Never foods or animals or cities.

But in retrospect, when Brynn admired the Crocodile Racer photo, she didn't see the long lines or the awkward conversations. Mostly what she saw was the slight gap between hands and metal, almost imperceptible, as she and Owen reached an instant too late for the safety bar. And she remembered how, as the evening wore on, his friends had started slouching against the handrail or kicking at dirt and finally settled down. And how once, in a moment of quiet, as Brynn watched riders ahead reach that first dip, Owen had pinched her arm, gently at first, gradually increasing the pressure; and she played the game, ignoring him, unflinching, until finally she had to gasp and bat his arm away. They laughed, admiring the red blotch left behind.

It was after nine when Brynn got to Seth's apartment. He was reading, barefoot, in the living room, his face bronzed by the low light. Three books stood upright on the coffee-table in front of him, propped open with three chunky candles. It was Seth's new idea, hatched soon after he inherited a crate of old, musty books from a great-uncle: take the offending book, and air it out, page-by-page, until it smelled of lavender or marzipan. Though she teased him about it, she also loved him for it.

She kissed him hello. "Sorry I'm late. Have you eaten?"

"No, I was waiting for you."

"I should've called. You want to go get takeout? I'm Here, maybe?" It was the name of their favorite Vietnamese restaurant.

He reached for his keys.

In the car, Brynn mentioned to him, in passing, that she had gone on the Crocodile Racer, but she left out the number of times and the circumstances out of sheer embarrassment. Seth

nodded, and smiled, and didn't press her about why she was quite so late. At the restaurant, they waited next to a potted waterfall for their food. Seth suggested a name game. Category: transitions.

"Therefore," he started.

"However," said Brynn.

"Nevertheless."

"Alternatively."

"On the one hand."

"On the contrary."

"Good one," said Seth. "Regardless."

They continued this way until they had exhausted their vocabularies. Then they waited some more. The server appeared at the counter with a paper bag in a plastic bag. Brynn pinched Seth's bicep.

"Ow!" he said.

She let go.

"What did you do that for?"

"Did it hurt?" she asked.

He stood up. "No."

As Brynn lay in bed that night, she felt the motion of the rollercoaster. At work the following day, she kept her eye on the line for the Crocodile Racer. The riders irritated her more than ever, aimlessly amusing themselves in their crocodile cars while she was stuck in the booth. Owen

arrived around six, as expected, this time with enough friends to fill every seat. Brynn turned away. Of course, even if the seat had been empty, she wouldn't have filled it, not a second time around. Still, her heart beat, not faster, but louder.

When she got off work, she phoned Seth.

"I was thinking we could do something."

"I thought your dad wanted you home tonight."

"I can't sleep over. But why don't you come and meet me at the park? We could go on the rollercoaster. Get our pictures taken. It'll be fun."

"I don't know," said Seth. "Rollercoasters aren't really my thing. How about a movie instead?"

"We always see movies," she said, though it wasn't really the case. "This'll be something different," she said.

"Sorry, Brynn. I'm just not up for it."

"Then I'll stay here by myself," Brynn insisted.

"Why would you do that? You're not going to have fun there alone."

"Well, I'll get Annette to come with me." Brynn didn't wait for his answer. She hung up the phone.

Brynn made her way through Rainforest River, a blue painted walkway that meandered through tropical plants and live canaries, then swiped her card for access to the aquarium maintenance room. Brynn hoped Annette hadn't left for the day. Luckily, she found her standing on a chair, leaning over the aquarium, hat off, hair tied in a low ponytail down her back. On the visitor's side of the aquarium, a blurry family watched.

"What are you doing there?" Brynn asked.

“Trying to get rid of a peacock mantis shrimp,” said Annette. “Apparently it smuggled itself in on this live rock.” She jabbed at a mossy crevice with a straightened clothes hanger.

“Hm,” said Brynn, unimpressed. “Want to go on the Crocodile Racer with me?”

Annette gave her an arch look. “Are you serious?”

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“Sorry. I’m probably going to be here all night as it is trying to get this little menace. See that?” Annette motioned with the hanger to a cluster of nicks and gouges in the aquarium glass. “It’s been attacking its own reflection. Soon it’ll break through the glass entirely. I’ve seen videos.” She jabbed at the rock again.

The mantis shrimp darted out. Its segmented body was a translucent green, its eyes bright orange. Annette dropped the hanger and grabbed a net.

“Is that it?” asked Brynn. “It doesn’t look that bad. It’s got cute eyes.”

“Cute, yeah right. Just be glad it’s not attacking the other creatures yet. These mantis shrimp have a reputation for being pretty vicious, smashing their prey to bits. Have a look at the computer.”

Brynn leaned over the computer, which was opened to a website called *Odontodactylus Scyllarus: Pet or Pest?* The immediate page was titled “How to Trap a Mantis Shrimp,” but a bar on the left listed a set of other topics: HABITAT, DIET, BEHAVIOR, REPRODUCTION, etc. She clicked on VISION.

The mantis shrimp has the most complex eyes of any animal. It can perceive depth even with one eye closed and see types of light that humans can only detect with scientific equipment. Experts are still puzzling over why this relatively simple creature has such sophisticated vision. One theory has it that the mantis shrimp’s brain is so small, it cannot possibly analyze

complicated sensory data. The eye compensates for the brain, so the mantis shrimp can react without thinking. This may explain the mantis shrimp's reputation for striking at aquarium glass. The mantis shrimp has no choice but to treat its own reflection as it would an enemy.

Annette came down off the ladder.

“What are you going to do when you catch it?” asked Brynn.

“Destroy it.”

“No,” said Brynn. “That’s too sad. Seriously, just leave it alone for a minute. I’ll help you trap it later, and we can keep it for company.”

“I don’t think so,” Annette laughed.

Brynn frowned. “See you later then.”

“Let’s do dinner tomorrow night,” said Annette.

Brynn smiled insincerely. They always did dinner.

Brynn approached the Crocodile Racer determined, desperate even, but alone. She waited in line with strangers, ignored Kai on the platform, climbed into an empty seat, and rode, and then rode again, and again once more. Each ascent, she dug her fingernail into the thick dashboard paint, leaving tiny crescent marks. And each descent, as gravity took hold, she gloated at her oblivious co-workers in the camera, then went through the practiced motions, carefully, distinguishing them from the thumps of her heart.

On her third go, she reached for the branch. Just as she thought she had fallen short again, a hot pain scored her fingertips. She pulled back. The branch had skinned the pads of her first two fingers, not deeply, but enough that blood was beginning to appear. The car jolted around a

corner, then dropped ten feet. She held onto the safety bar with her good hand, and rested the other, palm-up, in her lap. When the ride ended, she retrieved her bag from the complimentary locker.

She checked her cell-phone: no calls. She dialed Seth. His voicemail picked up. She left a message, a frustrated and rambling and inappropriate one. She pressed * to hear it back. Blood was seeping across the lines on her palm. It looked bad, worse than it really was. But she didn't clean it up with a tissue from her bag, didn't apply pressure. At the end of the message, she pressed 4 to rerecord. This time, she left a sad message about love and understanding, but when she pressed * to hear it back, it was overly-sweet and bitter underneath. She closed and opened her fist until the blood spread all over. She wished someone would notice, but the crowds strolled by, oblivious. She pressed 4 to rerecord, but didn't say anything this time. She pressed * and listened to the silence. The blood dried.

Brynn washed her hands in the public restroom. When she came out, Seth was there, waiting for her.

She was astonished. "How long have you been here?"

"A little while." He held out a set of CROCODILE RACER photos. "Your boss gave me a discount."

As they walked to the parking lot, she flipped through the photos. Each of them showed a grid of eight riders: seven strangers in various states of shock and amusement, plus Brynn, staring directly, knowingly, at the camera. Except for the last one, that is, which showed Brynn with Owen and his friends the day before.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

“You left it at my place,” he said. “It’s my favorite. You look so happy and brave. You’re not even holding on.”

“But my eyes are closed,” she said.

“That’s just blinking.”

As they drove, they recounted transitions they had missed the night before: Incidentally. Consequently. Inevitably.

THE QUANTUM EVENT



It had recently come to Adam's attention that the best days of his life were no longer the best days of his friends' lives. In fact, they'd been demoted, by everyone but Adam, to the most foolish, reckless, and aimless of days.

The days in question had ended badly, no doubt. Late one summer night after the bars closed, Gregor and Brandon had climbed onto the roof of the public boathouse, and Brandon had either dived or fallen off the roof into the river, hit his head on something, and drowned. That was over a decade ago. Since then, Adam and his friends had drifted apart, or at least pretended to drift apart: in reality, their estrangement had been quick and immediate. In time, Anita, Joe, and Patrick Murphy moved away. Those who remained – namely Adam, Gregor, and Justine – met up for dinner several times a year. But the talk was small, preoccupied with obvious milestones: graduations, engagements, promotions, vacations, etc. Gregor, in particular, had lived an eventful ten years, encompassing four jobs, a baby, a marriage, a divorce, and continuingly precarious sobriety. His milestones were almost inexhaustible. On the unlikely occasions when they were exhausted, Justine could be counted on to bring up a popular news item. This pattern of conversation was by now so predictable, it felt, to Adam, almost scripted.

Granted, he could no longer remember what they talked about before Brandon's death. Adam was never one for keeping a journal or saving emails. The only material record he had of those days was a series of videos he'd filmed as a master's student in cognitive psychology. For the cash equivalent of a few beers, his friends had agreed to be subjects. The videos showed them responding to various prompts while rearranging colored shapes on a table.

Still, Adam was sure his friends never used to concern themselves with news and milestones. They spoke, on the contrary, of random things, like what kind of rice they preferred, whether it be puffed, sticky, or wild, and by some curious alchemy they'd sometimes managed to

elevate these conversations to the status of inside jokes, though of course they'd never joked about rice; that was only an example.

Adam missed those conversations, missed random things. It was Justine who'd been responsible for popularizing the term *random* in 1991 when they were in junior high, back in the good old days, though not yet the best days. Now the term was passé, and Justine worked as an event planner. But given the chance, Adam would've happily resurrected it. Indeed, he was forever trying to get random things to happen. He entered marginally inaccurate data into his online dating profile, hoping to trick the computer into setting him up with someone unexpected. He neglected certain protocols at the lab where he worked. Despite his efforts, nothing legitimately random seemed to happen anymore. It was as if the utter randomness of Brandon's death had shorted the circuit. Sometimes Adam saw a pretentious imitation on, say, someone's status update, and if he was bored enough, he would comment or like it. Sometimes he would invent his own. Truthfully, he disliked these updates as much as the ones about news and milestones. Adam was glad that the best days of his life had passed – and continued to pass – without remark.

He'd assumed his friends felt similarly. Lately, however, the past had begun to creep back into their conversations. It was a past as vague as Adam's, but far inferior. Justine reminded them of how self-centered she'd been, how ignorant of the broader world. Gregor regretted how he let people influence and manipulate him, how he followed them into all kinds of trouble. Every allusion the two of them made to the past demonstrated a change for the better. To Adam, however, they hadn't changed much at all. Sure, Gregor may have learned to stand up to some people, but only at the bidding of others. These days, he was answerable, above all, to his ex-wife and daughter. And sure, Justine had become a news fanatic. But she had a way of showing

off her knowledge like a possession, turning it into something about herself. Of course, Adam wasn't exactly complaining. He liked his friends as they'd been. He just wished they felt the same.

It was this wish – and indeed the promise of a new era of unremarkable, eventless days – that passed through Adam's mind as he waited in the paneled elevator lobby to welcome Gregor up to the lab.

But when the doors opened, it was Justine, not Gregor, who greeted him first. He couldn't believe it. Had she changed her mind? He was delighted.

"Adam," she smiled. "Looking good," she motioned to his lab coat.

Gregor emerged from the elevator after her. "Very sharp," he concurred.

They were both wearing black puffy jackets like everyone else in the city.

"Thanks," said Adam. "But I should confess I put it on just to impress you." He was half-joking. He didn't normally wear the lab coat; but this week – the week leading up to his boss, Dr. Christopher's, sleep study – was different. All participants were required to stop by for biometrics, a tour of the lab, and preliminary instructions. He was expected to look professional.

"Justine, I didn't think you were –"

"I'm not," she checked his assumption, too good to be true, he should've known. "I'm giving Gregor a lift. Is it okay if I hang out until he's done?"

Adam tried not to show his disappointment. "I don't see why not." He led them down the hall to the entrance of the lab and unlocked the door with his ID.

"This is nice," said Gregor as they passed through the lounge.

The lab took care to make the living space comfortable and homey, with rugs, soft lamps, and a fake window that simulated outdoor light. The last thing the investigators wanted was for

the participants to suffer insomnia or depression. But that's exactly what often happened the minute participants became over-conscious of being monitored. No one can pressure you to go to sleep, after all; you have to be pretty ambivalent in order to slip off in the first place.

This, of course, was the basic problem of any behavioral study, whether sleep-related or not: getting people to do things without being aware they were doing them. Often, the solution was to distract subjects with one behavior in order to get them to do something else unselfconsciously, seemingly at random. (Nothing in an experiment was really random, but unnoticeable was close enough.) In fact, Adam knew that the current study was actually about hunger, not sleep, *per se*. Dr. Christopher and her assistants (Adam included) would be tracking and counting every calorie Gregor and the five other subjects consumed. The written consent forms disclosed this fact just enough (*metabolism* appeared in one sentence), but hopefully not so much that the subjects registered it.

"I'll give you the full tour in a few minutes," said Adam. "I just want to get the blood test out of the way first since that's the worst of it." He led them around the corner and into the small exam room. "Gregor, if you could take a seat here," he motioned to the clinical armchair, "and roll up your sleeve..."

Gregor looked surprised. "Isn't there an assistant or something?"

"I am the assistant," said Adam.

Gregor's surprise was understandable. Other labs were typically affiliated with a hospital and had specialized nurses or phlebotomy technicians to perform blood draws. Adam's lab wasn't. But Adam had been trained in grad school – albeit primarily on other grad students – so the task fell to him.

Gregor sat in the chair, took off his jacket, and rolled up his sleeve. Justine stood near the door, her jacket still on, her long, black ponytail draped over one shoulder. Adam sat beside Gregor and arranged the contents of the blood draw cart. He rarely drew blood, so the process wasn't as intuitive as it could have been. Saliva samples – which registered melatonin – were much more common. But Dr. Christopher needed to measure metabolic hormones for the current study. Adam grasped Gregor's forearm and located a good vein at the bend of his elbow. He tied the tourniquet.

“Okay, make a fist,” Adam said.

Gregor made a fist. Adam put on gloves and disinfected the site. He anchored the vein and slid the needle in. Gregor looked away. It felt at once intimate and clinical to watch the blood flow into the syringe.

“So what happened to your car?” Adam asked, hoping to distract Gregor from the needle.

“I had to sell it,” he answered.

“That sucks.” Adam knew Gregor was having financial troubles – that, after all, was how he'd convinced him to do the sleep study – but he hadn't known it was quite that bad. Gregor didn't respond, but Adam could tell by the tension in his arm that the conversation was not exactly relaxing him.

“How's Tom?” Adam asked Justine, changing the topic.

“Good,” she said. “Great.”

“We've got to get together one of these days.” Adam had never met Justine's boyfriend of two years. “Maybe when Gregor gets out.”

“Tom's away this month.”

“The whole month? That's rough.”

“Well, three weeks of it. Recruiting.”

Adam released the tourniquet and withdrew the needle from Gregor’s arm. A tiny drop of blood beaded up on the injection site. He pressed a cotton ball over it. “Keep pressure on this,” he said.

Gregor held the cotton ball to his arm.

“You know, I could still probably get you into the study if you wanted,” said Adam as he discarded the needle and syringe. “Another participant cancelled. We’re prepared to rush the paperwork. Three thousand dollars for a week, and the company of two excellent friends. Think about it.”

“Um, I have a job.” She said *job* with a condescending tone, then immediately went red-in-the-face, apparently realizing her insensitivity to Gregor’s unemployment.

“Gregor has a daughter,” said Adam.

“Dude, I’m not exactly proud to be shirking that responsibility,” said Gregor.

Adam had to keep reminding himself that Gregor wasn’t looking forward to the week like he was. Still, he was all but certain Gregor would enjoy himself in the end. His daughter would cope without him. He would return to the real world no time, the only measurable change being the size of his bank account.

“I’m probably not mentally fit for the study anyway,” Justine added, perhaps trying to correct her blunder with some self-effacement. “You know how I am. I get stir-crazy.”

Adam would give her that. While the lab was comfortable enough, it was also pretty claustrophobic. The participants weren’t allowed to leave the lab or have visitors for a week. And they weren’t supposed to know the time of day or day of the week, so things like cell-phones, the internet, and TV were off-limits. Once the study began, even Adam’s contact with

Gregor would be carefully regulated. He couldn't just pop in anytime he wanted. He, Dr. Christopher, and the other assistants would maintain odd hours, controlling the subjects' patterns of sleeping and waking with light from the artificial windows.

Adam peeled off his gloves and washed his hands. He could tell Justine was getting impatient. She seemed to have decided against taking off her coat. He wondered if she considered it a burden giving Gregor a lift. In any case, she'd have to wait: Adam still needed to finish the biometrics, review the pre-study diet and sleep schedule, fit Gregor with a wrist activity monitor, and give him a tour of the living space. Justine preferred to fill every moment of her day with strategic activity. But in science, sometimes there was waiting. The form of the experiment had to unfold. And while they were waiting, who knew what would happen? Adam took his time double-checking the labels on the blood sample, entering a few details onto the computer. At this rate, the best days of his life might be still to come.

Justine checked her phone. She had to stop by the copy center to pick up a banner before her meeting at eleven. It was already nine twenty. She could swear Adam was deliberately keeping them longer than necessary. She was tempted to ask if she could step out to run the errand and come back, but it would sound like she was boasting about her busy job again. Plus, she'd feel bad leaving Gregor stranded. Of course, he'd have to get used to being stranded with Adam sooner or later – he'd be spending a whole week in the lab.

Adam had finished putting the blood away and was at the computer now doing who knows what. Clicking his mouse. His face was podgy and unlined, his hair going downy and thin all over like a baby's. She'd about reached her limit.

It was only because she'd known him since junior high – and because Gregor insisted – that she still agreed to an occasional get-together with Adam. But she hadn't considered him a good friend since high school. He must have sensed they weren't close anymore. Nevertheless, he continued to act as though they had some deep irrevocable bond. Granted, after college they'd reconnected, and ended up in the same circle, and shared plenty of drunken conversations at bars and parties. But that was about it. Adam had always been more of a partier than Justine. He'd had so much fun in his twenties, he ultimately flunked out of his Ph.D. program. They could've easily gone their separate ways. In fact, she was certain they would've had it not been for Brandon's death, which somehow suspended them in this unfortunate limbo.

"Are we going to be here a few more minutes?" she asked. Maybe if she contacted the caterers, she could rearrange her schedule and pick up the banner in the afternoon.

"Is that a problem?" asked Adam.

"No. But I should make a call."

"Take your time. We'll be here."

Justine glanced at Gregor. His sleeve was still rolled up, exposing the band-aid where his blood had been drawn. He looked uncomfortable. She hated seeing him like this, at the mercy of Adam. It was only out of desperation that Gregor had agreed to hole up in a lab with him for a week. It was certainly the last thing she would ever do.

"I won't be long," she said.

She left the exam room and found her way back to the lounge. She sat at a large round table and phoned the caterers, who were preparing the menu for a benefit for one of her biggest clients – a children’s foundation – in a couple of months. She’d worked on events for the foundation for three years now, and the relationship had always been a good one. Her primary contact was the brand coordinator, a serious but pleasant man with tinted hair. The early planning for the benefit had gone as smoothly as ever. But what had begun as a relatively straightforward event quickly became an organizational nightmare.

The problem was that the benefit was happening on the brand coordinator’s fiftieth birthday. Justine was alerted to this coincidence by the foundation’s controller, who wanted to surprise the brand coordinator with a mini-birthday party: the caterers would wheel a large cake into the atrium where dinner was being served, and everyone would sing. It sounded simple enough, so Justine had agreed to the surprise. She instantly regretted it. Since the brand coordinator was so involved in the event planning, Justine had to practice quite a bit of deception to keep the surprise a secret. She had to come up with excuses, for instance, to explain why more time needed to be added into the schedule following dinner, and why they needed to rent additional forks and dessert plates. What worried her most, however, was the possibility that the brand coordinator wouldn’t appreciate the surprise, and that she would feel responsible. He was by all accounts a very private man. She thought about expressing her concerns to the controller. But what happened at the benefit wasn’t really up to her: the controller was the brand coordinator’s superior, and Justine was answerable, above all, to her.

The phone call to the caterers concerned the birthday cake order. Justine had to keep two separate accounts with the caterers so the brand coordinator wouldn’t notice the cake. She’d informed the caterers of the need for a second account already. Yet according to their most

recent email, the cake had been added to the primary account. Fortunately, the brand coordinator hadn't been cc'd. But she couldn't take that risk again. After being placed on hold three times, she finally spoke to the manager and sorted out the issue. She was roasting when she got off the phone. She checked her makeup in a large mirror on the wall and unzipped her jacket.

It was about twenty minutes since she'd left the exam room. But Adam and Gregor were still there when she returned. Adam was pushing some buttons on a black plastic watch. Gregor was flipping through a large black binder.

"Everything okay?" asked Gregor.

"Eventful as usual."

"Don't you ever want to plan something that's not an event?" Adam looked up from the watch. "Like an event that no one's expecting? Or with some element of chance?"

"Funny you ask," she said. She proceeded to tell them the story of the brand coordinator's surprise birthday party.

"Interesting," Adam said when she was done. "But what I meant was if you ever do anything less... planned."

"You're asking her if she ever plans something unplanned?" Gregor clarified.

Justine didn't say anything, not because she didn't know what he was getting at (which she didn't), or because the question seemed rhetorical (which it did), but because she grasped its implication: Adam thought event planning was banal, and he wanted her to know it. She was tempted to remind him that he watched people sleep for a living.

"I don't know. I was just thinking how, in the sciences, some of the biggest breakthroughs are the results of accidents," Adam continued. "It's cliché. But it's true. A small mistake in an otherwise controlled environment..."

“Your lab must be having breakthroughs all the time,” she said.

Adam didn’t seem to register the insult. “We’re doing some pretty important work,” he admitted. “Did I mention we just got a five hundred thousand dollar grant last year?”

“Impressive,” said Gregor, always the one to humor Adam.

There had been a period, after Brandon died, when Adam didn’t seem to do anything or see anyone. Despite – or perhaps on account of – his own mounting problems, Gregor had been particularly concerned. At first, Justine had suggested that maybe it was good for Adam to lie low awhile. They should give him some space. But Gregor had disagreed. He insisted they take Adam out every so often. Eventually, Adam had landed the job at the lab and got back on track with his professional life. But his personal life had never recovered. While the old crowd was moving on into new relationships, he depended on them more than ever. And when Joe, Pat Murphy, and Anita had moved away, he was left like a stray to Gregor and Justine.

“Okay, this is all ready to go,” said Adam, approaching Gregor with the watch.

Gregor snapped it around his wrist and Adam double-checked it.

“Call me if it does anything weird,” said Adam.

“Is that it then?” asked Justine.

“Almost. Just a little tour and then you can be on your way.”

Justine and Gregor followed Adam back into the lounge. She had already gotten a good look at it during her call: its brown micro-suede couches and small kitchenette.

“We have some stuff in here you can use if you get bored,” said Adam, opening a cabinet to reveal some board games, books, and a stereo system. “But you should also probably bring some things of your own. The binder I gave you lists what’s allowed.”

Around the next corner was a small alcove with a treadmill, some free weights, and a mat.

“I can get back in shape,” Gregor remarked as they passed.

“Oh, that,” said Adam. “We’ve used the machines for other studies. But you won’t be able to do much more than some gentle stretching. You can use the mat.”

Gregor frowned.

“But wait until you see the bedrooms,” Adam added. “I think we’re putting you in 1F.”

In all fairness, 1F did look nice enough. It was like a three-star hotel room, with a blue printed bedspread, pine furniture, soft lamps, framed watercolors, and wall-to-wall carpeting. It even had its own small bathroom.

“The mattresses are unbelievable,” Adam said.

“Do you mind if I try?” asked Gregor.

“Be my guest.”

Gregor stretched out on the bed. “Ah,” he said, clasping his hands behind his head. He was about the same height as Justine, but probably twice as broad through the torso and shoulders thanks to years of wrestling. He did look comfortable. He closed his eyes.

Justine looked around. It was only on closer inspection that the trappings of a lab emerged: panels of fluorescent overhead lighting, unusual and excessive outlets in the wall.

“Is that a camera?” she asked, referring to a small black box perched high in one corner.

“Yeah, there are cameras in all the bedrooms and the lounge,” Adam explained. “But there’s no sound. Just image. Here, I’ll show you. Last stop, I promise.”

Gregor climbed off the bed, and they followed Adam to the end of the hall, where they entered a long, narrow room with a row of desks and computers on one side and a large window overlooking the lounge on the other.

“A two-way mirror,” said Justine. “I should’ve guessed.”

Adam turned on one of the monitors and showed them a grainy, live, black-and-white image of one of the empty bedrooms. They stared at it for a moment like they were waiting for something to happen.

After they said their good-byes to Adam, and as they walked across the parking lot to her car, Justine waited for Gregor to say something. They climbed into the car, and she started the engine. He held the large black binder on his lap.

“Heavy reading,” she finally said.

He laughed. “It says I’ve got to go to bed at nine and cut out caffeine. I haven’t had rules like that since I was thirteen. And they check on me: I have to call the lab before I go to sleep and when I wake up every morning.”

“You really don’t have to do this,” said Justine.

“No, I do.”

Justine was aware of the seriousness of Gregor’s financial problems. He hadn’t really sold his car: it had been liquidated. He’d filed for personal bankruptcy. He’d told her on the ride to the lab. At first, she’d been surprised – and flattered – that he felt comfortable confiding in her. He’d made it very clear he didn’t want Adam knowing. But when she thought more about it, she realized that the surprising thing was not that he’d confided in her, but that he was keeping it a secret from anyone. In the past, he’d never been too proud to acknowledge his troubles quite openly. In fact, it was kind of his thing. He was the guy whose life never ceased to be

complicated. It made him interesting. It was only more recently that he'd started acting ashamed – and cagey. Somewhere, it seemed, he'd crossed a line: he was no longer accumulating interesting complications; he was just plain losing everything.

She pulled up to the parking booth and handed the attendant her ticket. The gate went up, and she drove through.

"Isolating yourself from the world for a week isn't really going to solve your problems," she said.

"It'll solve at least one of them," said Gregor.

"There are lots of ways to make money."

"Believe me, I've looked into them."

They drove through a mile of commercial sprawl and merged onto the highway.

"Did I tell you I got a gig playing at the mall?" he said, looking out the window.

"That doesn't sound so bad. I thought you wanted to get back into playing. Maybe they'll let you do some of your own stuff."

"Unlikely. It's just for the holidays. It'll be Christmas songs. Besides, I can't play any of my own fucking compositions. Only my computer can."

This type of complaining wasn't new to Justine. Although Gregor was a great pianist and composer, his talent had never earned him a living. For the past several years before losing his job, he'd worked – reluctantly – as an audio software engineer, a job that, from his perspective, contributed to the decline of virtuosity and the sorry state of the recording industry. While he ended up using the software as much as anyone, he was a purist at heart.

"Can you imagine?" he continued. "All those people shopping. What if I run into somebody?"

“They’ll think you’re doing a good deed for the holidays. They won’t even know.”

Gregor didn’t say anything. She didn’t know what to do when he was being so negative about everything. They drove a few more miles in silence.

“That’s my exit,” he finally said.

She put on her blinker and moved two lanes to the right.

“I guess there’s a part of me that’s actually looking forward to the study,” Gregor confessed. “Being unreachable for a week doesn’t sound all that bad. There are a few people I’d rather not deal with right now.”

Justine had no idea who he was talking about.

“Besides, how much ever happens in a week?”

“Sometimes nothing. Sometimes a lot,” she said.

“Exactly,” said Gregor. “Oh, and I hope you know that whatever happens, I’m counting on you for the official lowdown of all the week’s news when I get out.”

She laughed.

“You can set me straight about those guys at Quantum. I don’t know what to make of them.”

“Where?” she said. She must have misunderstood.

“Quantum,” he repeated. “You know, the Quantum event. It’s a little hard to believe, isn’t it? It doesn’t stop.”

Justine was at a loss. She racked her brain for an appropriately neutral response, something that would disguise her ignorance.

“No, it doesn’t. It’s hard to believe,” she said his words back.

“You missed it,” he said.

She could feel herself going red in the face. “I don’t think –”

“No, you did,” he said. “It’s back there. Just stop here and I can walk back.”

He was referring to his building.

“Sorry!” she exclaimed, secretly relieved. She pulled over to the side of the road.

Gregor climbed out of the car clutching the black binder. “Thanks again. Good luck with the party.”

“Good luck with the sleeping,” she returned. “I’ll see you Monday.”

As Justine drove away, she repeated the word to herself: *quantum*. She knew what it meant in standard terms, of course, something to do with particles or bursts of energy. But Gregor had initially used it like a proper noun: *Can you believe those guys at Quantum?* and then as a proper adjective: *The Quantum event*. As the relief of escaping the conversation faded, it was replaced by a deeper sense of unease. Justine prided herself on being, if not an expert on the news, at least fluent with it. Her clients – mostly large businesses and corporations – expected as much.

When she got home, she typed *quantum* into the computer: over a million results. She skimmed down the page. Most often Quantum was paired with *event*, but she also found references to the Quantum *affair*, the Quantum *incident*, the Quantum *crisis*, and the Quantum *dilemma*. It was all the same thing. Quantum, she quickly learned, was a company that dealt in transcontinental communication technologies and strategies. The company had recently convened a summit in Brazil, at Anhembi. It allegedly had ties to politicians, businessmen, insurgents, and religious leaders in at least a dozen countries.

Justine didn’t read any further. She went to the kitchen. The table was still papered with the morning’s news. Although she got a lot of her news online these days, she still subscribed to

the print edition of the newspaper. It seemed useful, somehow, to have it scattered across the table. The news felt closer, more personal. The kitchen looked homier.

The Quantum event was front-page. PRESIDENT URGES “AGGRESSIVE CAUTION” IN WAKE OF BRAZILIAN SUMMIT, the headline announced. One photograph showed the president at a podium. Another showed several men in suits boarding a plane.

At breakfast, of course, Justine had glanced at the front page in passing, but she hadn’t read the article. She’d assumed it was another business summit following in the wake of the IMF and World Bank’s annual meeting, which she’d read up on already. Plus, she assumed that front-page news was so widespread, you didn’t have to place that close attention to it – you’d inevitably absorb it via the internet, email, social networking, etc. This morning she’d made the mistake of turning to some of the more obscure articles.

She retrieved the week’s newspapers from the recycling bin to trace the event to its inception. To her dismay, she found that it had been around for at least five days. The earliest mention was tucked away in the sports section, of all places. A popular Brazilian footballer was being suspended for some off-color and perhaps ethnically-charged remarks he’d made regarding the Quantum Summit. It was no wonder Justine had missed the article. She rarely checked the sports section; she didn’t really consider it news.

Since then, there had been at least a dozen major articles in nearly every section of the paper. The deeper she went, the more convinced she became that the vague diversity of the headlines was what had blinded her from seeing the Quantum event in its entirety, as such. Indeed, the word *Quantum* rarely figured in the headlines themselves. *Brazil* and *Anhembi* were mentioned just as often, as were the surnames of three Quantum executives: Feierabend, Hale, and Bello.

“RECKLESS IMPUNITY” DEFENDED AT TECHNOLOGY SUMMIT
 FEIERABEND PLEDGES TO EXAMINE COMMUNICATION LAPSE
 QUANTUM CHARTER REVOKED AMID GLOBAL SCANDAL
 SEVERE WEATHER DELAYS BELLO’S EXTRADITION
 HALE GREETED WITH MIXED APPLAUSE IN NEW ZEALAND
 “BAD ROOTS RUN DEEP,” SAYS TECH INDUSTRY INSIDER
 MISSING JOURNALIST TIED TO FEIERABEND SEX ALLEGATIONS
 WILL HALE BE EXONERATED?
 VIOLENCE A “REAL POSSIBILITY” ACCORDING TO ANHEMBI PROTESTERS
 ANONYMOUS LEAKS RAISE NEW QUESTIONS FOR FEIERABEND

Justine folded the newspapers back up. She felt a little vindicated now that she’d identified imprecise headline-writing as a partial cause for her ignorance. Still, she was baffled by the fact that she hadn’t heard about the event from another source. Why hadn’t Tom mentioned it? Sure, they hadn’t spoken a lot lately – he was in New Jersey for several weeks for his job. But they’d talked for at least an hour on the phone last night. As she thought back to the topics of their conversation – wedding invitations, table rentals, catering – her spirit began to sink. Was it possible she’d gotten too carried away with wedding details? Had she become that woman?

She went back to the computer and logged into her news feed, which, as it happened, was buzzing about the Quantum event. Admittedly, Justine hadn’t checked the feed for a while. Earlier in the day, before dinner with Gregor and Adam, she’d been preoccupied with a retirement banquet for one of her biggest clients. Now that she thought of it, she remembered that the retiree had peppered his speech with phrases like “in light of recent events,” and “in contrast to the behavior of some now-infamous executives,” which elicited laughter from his audience. Justine had assumed he was alluding to office politics she wouldn’t be expected to know about. She was disappointed in herself.

As she scrolled down to reveal status updates from earlier in the week, the Quantum posts became rare, but they were still there. Some of her friends, for instance, had posted links to an episode of a TV program that offered in-depth coverage of the event. It was a program Justine usually watched, a program covering a broad spectrum of modern life. But she'd decided not to watch it this week because the listings indicated it was supposed to be about celebrities who kill. She'd read a book Tom had given her instead.

She scrolled down more. The real problem with the news feed, she soon determined, was that the Quantum event had been all but buried in a blitz of baby posts. Four acquaintances had given birth the past weekend, and their congratulations and photos had overwhelmed the feed. She clicked on a few images of amorphous infants, then turned off the computer. Her engagement ring was still in her dresser upstairs. She'd removed it before dinner because she couldn't bear to invite (or not invite) Adam to the wedding. She hadn't posted the news on her feed either, for the same reason. She sat there staring at the blank finger. She felt guilty and confused. But she didn't know where to begin.

During the first few days of Dr. Christopher's study, Adam had limited contact with Gregor, but he watched him through the two-way mirror that overlooked the lounge. He'd never felt such license to stare. Gregor was a decent-looking guy, tan and muscular, if a little on the short side. He'd always been friendly and charming – and at times opinionated – and he was no different in the lab. He spent much of his time in the lounge laughing, chatting, and playing board games with the other participants. He even got into an occasional debate. From his seat in the control

room, Adam couldn't hear, but he could tell from all the gesticulating. Indeed, Gregor looked remarkably authentic, much more natural than he looked when Adam and Justine met him for the occasional dinner.

The six participants – Gregor included – were all more-or less healthy, drug-free men and women aged eighteen to thirty-five. The three youngest were college students, all girls. One of them was Dr. Christopher's niece. They'd decided to do the study together. Or rather, two of them had decided to do it together. Then, when another participant cancelled at the last minute, they'd talked a third friend into joining them. It was clear that the third friend was an afterthought. The first two were inseparable in the lounge, often cozying up to page through outdated magazines on the two-seater couch. The third would sit in the adjacent armchair, too far away to see the pictures. The first two even looked remarkably alike, with long brown hair that they twisted and tied into different configurations throughout the day. He had to keep checking their charts to remind himself which one was which. They were attractive enough – a little on the chubby side for his tastes, but they carried it well with their youth. They reminded him of girls he'd fucked in his early twenties; but in the confines of the lab, he couldn't think of a single thing to say to them.

There was also a fourth woman in the study – a thirty year-old postdoc at another lab who was a former student of Dr. Christopher's – who'd placed a framed photo of her husband and cat on her bedside table. She spent most of her time in the lounge with Gregor, Dr. Christopher (when she was in) and the lab coordinator, Leah. Gregor was the oldest participant, and one of only two men. The other one was a tall blonde guy just out of college, unemployed, who'd brought nothing but a small backpack. Despite the diversity of the group, they all seemed to get

along well. But there was no telling if that would last for a week. Adam knew, from observing past studies, that the microcosm of the lab could make and/or break friendships in record time.

While Adam was glad to see Gregor having fun, he was frustrated that he wasn't able to join in. The circumstances of this particular study required quite a bit of behind-the-scenes work in the control room. Adam's contact with the participants tended to be limited to fifteen or twenty minute intervals several times a day, when he visited them one-by-one to administer performance tests on a computer he wheeled on a cart into their rooms. These tests were scheduled at specific times, most often when participants woke up in the morning and after mealtimes.

Not surprisingly, the participants were not always at their most sociable when they woke up. The study demanded a rigid sleep schedule. Most nights, the participants got a good eight to nine hours a night. But twice over the course of the week, they would experience a bout of compromised sleep – no more than two to three hours. It wasn't all that bad as far as sleep studies went: participants in other studies were sometimes kept up for days at a time. But there was no use telling that to a group of people who'd been woken up at one in the morning.

The participants, of course, were not aware of what time it was or how much sleep they were getting. But they knew how they felt. And the second morning of the study – following their first bout of compromised sleep – most had felt pretty miserable. “Can I go back to sleep after this?” Dr. Christopher's niece had asked. The answer was a definitive “no.” “That couldn't have been a full night of sleep,” the postdoc had ventured. Adam declined to respond. Others just rubbed their eyes and went through the performance test like zombies, clicking the mouse when they saw a letter appear in an empty box, clicking right or left for particular numbers in a series, and so on. At the end of the test, they rated their mood. They were almost all less *lively*, *happy*,

content, active, and peppy than usual, and more *tired, drowsy, grouchy, and fed up. Sad, caring, nervous, calm, gloomy, jittery, and loving* varied widely across the board.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the participants weren't always sociable when Adam visited them after mealtimes either. Performance tests were not foremost on their minds: they wanted to know when they'd be allowed out of their rooms again. They'd often been isolated in their bedrooms – indeed, locked in from the outside – for hours: they weren't allowed to eat together, lest the social dynamics of eating skew the results. And their mealtimes, like their bedtimes, had to be staggered over a length of time so the assistants and technicians could make their rounds. The participants had been advised, of course, to bring approved personal items to pass the time alone: books, magazines, crossword puzzles, music. Even so, most participants found that things got monotonous pretty soon.

And while the food was good (Dr. Christopher didn't want anyone refusing to eat), it was hardly a cure for the monotony. Each meal was roughly the same – cereal, fruit, sausage or meatloaf, a salad, bread with cheese or butter, a cookie or cake, and milk, juice, and coffee, or some variation thereof – so the participants would eat according to their appetites, and not according to their expectations of better food to come. Once again, Adam was tempted to remind them that they were lucky. In some studies, participants never left their bedrooms at all. But everything was relative. Especially after the first day of getting to know each other, they were eager to hang out again.

Adam wouldn't have been bothered by this eagerness if he'd been more of a part of it. He'd expected the participants, after hours alone, would be eager to see him. Laura, one of the lab technicians, often played cards with them when she had extra time on her hands. Adam carried a deck in his pocket, hoping he might too. But so far every participant had declined his

invitation to a game of Blackjack or Egyptian Ratscrew. Adam would return to the control room and find out what they were doing instead: picking at their cuticles, staring off into space, redoing their hair.

Gregor, of course, was the exception. He often made an effort to engage in a little small talk after the performance tests were finished. Adam, in turn, would fill him in on whatever phone calls he'd received: not the content, but the numbers. Gregor's ex-wife kept Dr. Christopher's phone number in case of an emergency, but Gregor had given Adam his cell phone to check every so often. Adam thought it a little curious that Gregor was so anxious about who might be calling him. But then again, Gregor probably had more of a life than Adam even out of work.

At first, Adam had refused to accept the phone. It was against the lab's policies. It was plausible, for instance, that a participant's mom phoned every Wednesday, and that by relaying the message that she'd called, the lab would be leaking restricted information. Besides, the participants wouldn't be able to respond to any calls or emails until the study was over anyway. Adam had advised Gregor to record a voicemail message stating he'd be unable to take calls for the week. But Gregor had insisted that wasn't an option. He didn't feel comfortable disclosing the fact that he was away. It was like leaving the lights off in your house for a week or letting the papers pile up on your doorstep. It was a matter of safety.

"Fair enough," Adam had said. But he still couldn't convey any voicemails to him.

"I don't need the messages," Gregor had responded. "Just the numbers. That's it."

Adam had given in. While he wasn't exactly comfortable with the idea that he was potentially compromising the study, it came down to a matter of competing interests. He sensed that Gregor would've dropped out of the study if he'd refused to take down the calls. Besides, he

really didn't think that a list of phone numbers would give too much away. It's not as if Gregor was intending to sit down and piece together what time of day or day of the week it was, based on a few calls.

Initially, he'd assumed Gregor meant he wanted the names of his callers, not their numbers. But he soon found that there were no names on his list of recent calls.

"My contacts got erased," Gregor explained. "I couldn't be bothered putting them back in."

"You've memorized everyone's phone number?" Adam asked.

"The important ones." To Adam's delight, he recited his own.

So a few times a day, Adam would scribble the numbers – sometimes six or seven of them in as many hours – onto a scrap of paper and give it to Gregor after the performance tests. Gregor would nod, but never showed much of a reaction. Then they'd return to some small talk. It was a start, at least. Still, compared to what Adam saw of Gregor through the two-way mirror, it was next-to-nothing. If not surprised, Adam was a little disappointed. He felt like he'd been given the opportunity to generate a new pattern of behavior, but was failing miserably.

It wasn't the first time he'd had the feeling. Adam's background was in cognitive psychology – specifically, attention – not sleep or neurology like Dr. Christopher's, and his doctoral research had involved doodling. One of his professors had alerted him to some informal preliminary studies in Europe, which showed that doodling enhanced college students' retention of lecture information, most likely by reducing daydreaming. In fact, doodlers retained information much better than diligent note-takers. If note-takers were better students overall, it was only because they returned to the information again and again, and not because they walked out of lecture any more knowledgeable. Adam had wanted to reproduce these results in a lab

environment, but he had a hard time figuring out how to get subjects to start doodling in the first place.

The problem was that doodling, by its very nature, had to be more or less involuntary. If he told subjects to doodle, they'd inevitably draw pictures, which clearly was not the same as doodling. Nor could he try to find subjects inclined to doodle on their own – innate doodlers might share other traits in common that make them learn better or worse. Somehow, he had to coerce his subjects, whether doodlers or not, into doodling.

But then Brandon had died, and Adam dropped out of his program before finding a solution. At least, that's the way he tended to explain the blip on his resumé. Who knew, it might have been the other way around. At the time of Brandon's death, after all, he hadn't gone to class in three weeks. The day before the accident, he'd received a call from the dean, who wanted to set up a meeting to discuss his progress (or lack thereof) in the program. He never went to that meeting – mourning was an easy excuse. To this day, he couldn't decide whether he would've gone to the meeting, would've ultimately pulled himself together enough to complete the degree if circumstances had been different – or whether his career as a grad student had effectively ended long before.

Considering his poor academic record, he'd been fortunate to find a job as a lab assistant, let alone a decent-paying one. It wasn't that his job demanded a graduate education; you didn't need more than a bachelor's degree. But you did need someone to recommend you. And when Adam had dropped out of grad school, he wasn't exactly on good terms with the professors. Nor did his nearly two-years of unemployment (most of which he'd spent holed up in his parents' house) help things.

Of course, it hadn't escaped him that Dr. Christopher's willingness to hire him might speak less to his own good fortune and more to her poor managerial skills. She offered so little oversight, he couldn't believe the lab hadn't been shut down yet. The studies themselves even seemed a bit shady to Adam, offering too much compensation for what they involved. He was surprised the Institutional Review Board hadn't accused Dr. Christopher of coercion or undue influence. Sometimes, Adam fantasized that there were unthinkable experiments going on around him, or even that he was the subject of one. God knows he'd signed his share of releases to get his access card.

When he was done administering the performance tests, and was about to unlock the doors and inform the participants that they could leave their rooms, Adam would sometimes spend a few minutes watching Gregor alone in his room. Gregor had brought along his keyboard, and – unlike some of the other participants, who'd brought watercolors, knitting needles, journals they never used – he actually spent a fair amount of time playing it. The angle of the camera, looking down on the keyboard from above, gave an unqualified view of Gregor's hands. But Adam couldn't see his expression.

Gregor had always had a love/hate relationship with the piano. Well, maybe not always. Not back in the best days. But ever since he'd realized he couldn't make a living playing it. "Not everyone gets to do what they love," he'd once told Adam. "So instead, they learn to hate it." Adam couldn't remember the context.

How much of Gregor's playing was a performance intended for him, Adam wondered. In all of the sciences, it was a fact that subjects alter their behavior when being watched. In the social sciences, subjects tended to try to impress the investigators and/or give them the results they wanted. Hence Gregor's graciousness, his small talk. In the hard sciences, it was the

technology involved in viewing that inevitably changed the system. *The Observer Effect*, the phenomenon was called. There was no solution, only constant correction: the observer had to be taken into account as part of the system being observed.

The TV was broadcasting footage of a well-dressed man making his way through a crowd of reporters, his gray hair disheveled, his face shielded by a newspaper. *Breaking News* was printed at the bottom of the screen.

Justine had read enough by now to identify the man as Louis Feierabend, Quantum's Vice-President. And she knew that the crimes of which he was accused concerned his involvement with not only Quantum, but also a small technology incubator. But she had a hard time summoning an image of what this meant, practically speaking.

Her career had taught her to be comfortable with the fact that she would never understand the day-to-day operations of most companies. When she'd first begun event planning, she'd tried to get to know the ins and outs of each business or corporation she worked with. She soon realized the task was both unmanageable and unnecessary. Events were tailored to the client, yes, but it was a rather narrow form of tailoring. After all, there were only a limited number of variables: type of venue, type of meal service, color scheme, and such. When clients commended her on how well she'd customized an event, what they usually meant was that they were happy the flowers matched their trademark packaging, or the programs used the same typeface as their logo. The truth was, event planners didn't need to support, or even understand, their clients' missions. It wasn't like anyone was holding the Quantum Summit's event planners responsible

for the substance of that event. By the same token, Justine's clients didn't need to know the ins and outs of what she did either. If she came across as intelligent and dependable, they would defer to her expertise.

This lesson happened to apply in her personal life too. She didn't need to know much about what Tom did, and vice versa. A couple didn't have to be involved in the same pursuits, or see eye-to-eye on everything, or search each other's souls too deeply. If they could merely choose, from a small set of variables, what would fit them the best, they could make each other happy. Of course, she knew the basics about Tom's job: he was a recruiter for an industrial automation company – aka a “Talent Acquisition Specialist,” according to his business card. But she understood very little about what he did at the office, or what kind of “talent” his company sought.

She'd asked him once about it.

“Isn't it more of a certain set of skills or credentials you're looking for, rather than talent?”

“Not necessarily,” he'd replied. “We offer a lot of training, so sometimes we're just looking for a quick study.”

“Is that really the same thing as talent?”

“Justine,” he said in all seriousness. “People are talented in many ways.”

When she thought of talent, she thought of someone like Gregor, with his music. She hadn't heard him play the piano for years. But she'd been reminded of it when he mentioned his job at the mall, and again when she helped him transport his keyboard to the lab.

“I didn't realize you still had a keyboard,” she'd said.

“You mean you’re surprised they didn’t liquidate it along with everything else?” he said. “Thankfully, there’s an exemption for what they call *tools of the trade*. They took my car, my pool table, that fucking rug I bought on our trip to Turkey. But they couldn’t touch the keyboard. Who knows, maybe they wouldn’t have wanted it anyway. It’s hardly worth anything.”

“I wasn’t even thinking about that,” Justine responded. “I just thought keyboards were kind of eighties. I thought you did everything on the computer these days.”

The rest of the ride, she’d tried to avoid serious topics. She could tell he was preoccupied with his problems, edgy. She talked instead about her plans for her own wedding. It was a fluffy subject, involving lanterns and ribbons and things.

Ever since she and Tom had gotten engaged last spring, people had been telling her they couldn’t wait to see what she’d do for the wedding. While her experience with event planning certainly gave her some insight into the logistics that might be involved, it also dampened her excitement. She was used to being the one asking the questions. She was good at it. As it turned out, she wasn’t so good at being on the other end. What was her color scheme? Did she have a theme? Would the wedding be casual, semi-formal, formal, or black tie? Should the cake be served before or after dancing? What type of neckline did she find most flattering? When she answered, she felt like she was guessing.

The worst was a list the photographer had emailed her, a seven-page document that inventoried the traditional shots wedding photographers try to capture:

☐Bride's gown on hanger ☐Bride’s hair and makeup ☐Mother arranging bride’s veil
☐Bride’s reflection in mirror ☐Bride’s shoes ☐Bride’s garter ☐Something old ☐New
☐Borrowed ☐Blue ☐Groom tying his tie ☐Groom’s boutonniere ☐Groom chatting with
 Father and best man ☐Groom checking the time ☐Bride and groom on their way to
 ceremony ☐Ceremony site exterior and interior ☐Guests taking their seats ☐Groom
 awaiting bride’s entrance ☐Bridesmaids and groomsmen walking down aisle ☐Flower

girl/ ring bearer walking down aisle ☐ Miscellaneous wedding party walking down aisle
☐ Bride just before her entrance ☐ Bride being escorted down the aisle ☐ Bride and groom
 exchanging vows ☐ Bride and groom exchanging rings ☐ The kiss ☐ Bride and groom
 walking up aisle ☐ Guests congratulating the new couple ☐ Bride and groom being
 showered with confetti ☐ Bride and groom inside limo ☐ Reception site exterior and
 interior ☐ Place cards ☐ Guest book ☐ Centerpieces ☐ Decorations ☐ Table settings ☐ Food
☐ Receiving line ☐ Bride and groom at head table ☐ Guests at tables ☐ Toasts ☐ Bride and
 groom chatting with guests ☐ First dance ☐ Bride and Father dance ☐ Groom and Mother
 dance ☐ Wedding party dancing ☐ Parents and grandparents dancing ☐ Children dancing
☐ Miscellaneous dancing ☐ Band or DJ ☐ Cake table ☐ Cake cutting ☐ Bride and groom
 feeding each other cake ☐ Bouquet toss. Garter toss ☐ Bride and groom departing, waving
☐ Getaway car driving away

The list made her heart sink. There was a box next to each item so she could check off what she wanted. She could also put a star next to the items that were high-priority. If, for some reason, the photographer missed them, there was always the option to restage them. The list was spaced widely so there was room to inform the photographer about significant details about each item: that her hair pin would be borrowed and her earrings would be blue, for instance, or that the limo would actually be a vintage pickup truck, or that the mother of the bride was deceased. At the end of the list was one final instruction: “Please attach photos of important people in your family and wedding party. On the back of each photo, write the person’s full name and his or her relationship to you and/or the groom.”

It wasn’t just that the list was so scripted that it left little room for personalization. On the contrary, it was that Justine was at a loss for how to personalize what little room there was. She wished she didn’t have to answer any questions.

Maybe she would’ve felt more competent if her first decision – her choice of a wedding photography package – hadn’t produced such humiliating results. She knew Tom wanted to pull out all the stops, so she’d chosen the most complete package, which included not only twelve-hour coverage of their wedding day, but also a short engagement session for the two of them and

a boudoir session for herself. She'd scheduled the boudoir session right away, on the photographer's recommendation. Once the holiday season arrived, the studio tended to fill up.

Posing nude wasn't something she'd ever imagined herself doing, but according to the client testimonials, it would make the groom's honeymoon unforgettable. There could be no better surprise. So she'd purchased a few props – scarves, lingerie, jewelry – and had herself professionally waxed and groomed, as advised.

From a list of styles – *classic, sexy, cute, vintage, playful, artsy, erotic, sporty, bondage*, and so on – she chose *tasteful*. The photographer suggested some “implied nudes”: she would be naked, but she wouldn't be showing off anything. Justine went along. She assumed several poses: sitting up with her back to the camera; lying down on her stomach, propped up on her arms; angled sideways with one arm draped across her breasts, the other her hips. The photographer kept moving the lights around to create strategic shadows.

Justine hid the proofs in a hatbox in her closet; but Tom found them within days. She knew something was wrong immediately. He was a thin, wiry guy, and when he clenched his jaw or tensed even a single muscle in anger, it was as if there was a chord tugging at his whole body. She didn't think to ask why he'd been in her closet in the first place.

“They're for you,” she explained. “They were supposed to be a surprise. It was part of the wedding package.”

“Since when does a wedding package include porn?”

“It's a new thing. I thought you'd like them. They're just implied nudes.”

The professional term only made it worse: “In other words, you undressed for the photographer, but not for me.”

Justine didn't know what to say, except she was sorry.

“What if someone else had found them, not me?” he demanded. “Reputations get ruined these days.”

That night, after he’d showered and wrapped himself in his robe, he’d ordered her to take off her clothes and pose for him like she’d posed for the photographs, and he pretended he was the photographer, assessing her in different lights and from different angles. He called her a slut and fucked her like he was disgusted with her. It wasn’t what she’d expected. But the photos had served their purpose, in a way.

Of course, Justine didn’t tell Gregor that story. She told him the wedding planning was going smoothly. Their colors were cranberry and bold pink. They were scouting out a few alternative locations for their engagement session: a drive-in movie theater, a water tower, an airplane graveyard. Gregor seemed to be listening, but he didn’t say much. He probably thought she was one of those brides with tunnel vision. She wished she could change the topic to some news item instead, but she didn’t want the conversation to turn towards the Quantum event. She still had a long way to go before she’d be fluent with it.

Then it occurred to her that there might be another explanation for Gregor’s aloofness: it wasn’t exactly considerate of her to be describing all these expenses to someone who’d recently declared bankruptcy.

“I don’t really care about all of the details,” she confessed. “I just want people to have a good time.” She added, “You had a great wedding.”

She should have known that was the wrong thing to say. His whole demeanor changed instantly. Now that she’d broached the topic, she felt as though she couldn’t ignore it.

“Have you seen her lately?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “The hardest thing is not being there for Sam.”

Sam was short for Samantha, Gregor's daughter.

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to share some sob story," he'd continued. "I just want them to be safe."

After she'd dropped him off at the lab, and intermittently for the rest of the workday, and then at home as she watched the news, Justine kept returning to that word, *safe*. What did he mean? She recalled, last week, how he'd mentioned something about people he wanted to avoid. She'd assumed he was talking about lawyers or creditors, maybe. It was unlikely they'd be a threat to his safety. Was it possible that something else was going on – that he and his family were in real danger?

On the TV, a new set of images appeared: not of Quantum executives, the summit's participants, or various international leaders, but rather of two women with whom Feierabend had been linked. One of the women, Vera Parker, was an Argentinian journalist, a friendly and clean-cut twenty-something brunette, going by her professional headshot. The other woman, Trina Sanford, was a Canadian prostitute, a bleary and disheveled thirty-something blonde, going by her mugshot.

Footage of the journalist's lawyer at a press conference appeared onscreen. He was trying to distinguish the journalist from the prostitute.

"My client," he insisted, "is a well-respected member of her community and one of the foremost journalists in her country. She's been arrested for no crimes, nor has been charged with any."

Footage of the prostitute's mother outside of her family's home in Toronto appeared next. The mother kept comparing her daughter to the journalist, referring to them both as "poor, unknowing victims."

It was the type of thing Justine might have ordinarily turned off. Now, she kept watching.

On the fourth day of the study, Adam arrived early to his shift. He was supposed to show up at two a.m., so he'd decided not to sleep. Instead, he'd gone to his gym, which was open twenty-four hours. At odd hours, the gym was at its best – the locker rooms were empty, there were no classes going on, and the custodians had wiped down all the equipment in preparation for the morning rush. The receptionists even seemed friendlier, like they were happy to have company at such an unreasonable hour. He'd taken the subway to the gym at midnight, forgetting that public transportation was suspended from one a.m. to three. He could waste money taking a cab back home, or cobble together an outfit with what he happened to have in his locker (some khakis and a t-shirt) and his office (a lab coat and a pair of snow boots he'd left there last winter). After ten minutes on the street with no sign of a cab, he'd decided on the latter. His gym was in walking distance to the lab, after all.

The participants had been sleeping since roughly nine p.m., and would be allowed to stay asleep until six, so Adam didn't expect to have much to do. The first couple of hours were unremarkable. He sorted through some data and browsed the news online.

At four a.m., the control room phone rang. It was Gregor calling from his bedroom.

"I have to use the bathroom," he said.

"I'll be right there."

Participants had to call for assistance to get up at night because they were connected to so much equipment. It was a hassle, but it was better than some other studies, where participants had to wear an IV or a rectal thermometer at all times.

When Adam entered, Gregor was sitting upright in his bed. An elaborate network of sensors and electrodes punctuated his scalp, face, throat, chest, fingers, and legs.

He rubbed his eyes. "Oh, it's you."

Adam disconnected the main cable from the monitors as quickly as he could, and Gregor disappeared into the bathroom.

When he was climbing back into bed, Gregor noticed Adam's boots. "Is it snowing?" he asked. He was still groggy.

"Yeah," said Adam. "Not much. A little." It wasn't snowing at all. But the story of why he was wearing his boots would've given away the time of day. It would also wake Gregor up, interfering with his sleep. Besides, it wasn't even a story worth telling.

Gregor wanted to know how much had been predicted, whether it was sticking. Adam admitted that it wasn't sticking, not wanting to get caught out if Gregor mentioned it to Dr. Christopher or another assistant later in the day. Gregor was interested. Adam added high winds, freezing temperatures, and a few icy patches to the image. Everyone else was home asleep, after all. Who were they to dispute a brief flurry of unusual weather at two a.m.? In any case, they wouldn't be able to correct Adam, since they weren't supposed to be saying anything about the world outside either. Then Adam added that there was talk of a big snowfall later in the week. This was also untrue, but weathermen were always changing their predictions. Gregor listened eagerly and speculated about how happy Samantha would be if school closed. Sidetracked by the

conversation, Adam ended up keeping Gregor longer than he needed. At these times, they were supposed to keep conversation to a minimum.

When Adam returned to the control room, Leah, the lab coordinator, was there.

“What was that about?” she asked. She’d been watching them on the monitor.

“He was just in a chatty mood.”

“Well, don’t you be. You know the rules.”

Despite the minor scolding, Adam felt satisfied, happy even. Weather was the most mundane small talk imaginable. But the tangibility of it genuinely seemed to appeal to Gregor now that he was cooped up inside. The intangibility of it appealed to Adam. He was making progress.

Newsweek ran a special issue on the Quantum Event that included a two-page spread connecting the key figures (each with his or her own candid headshot) in a complex web. The web’s lines were color-coded: blue indicated political relations; green, business relations; and red, sexual relations. Dotted lines were used when relations were rumored, but not proven. Small captions offered more specific details about each figure and connection.

In the center of the web was a photograph of Louis Feierabend. He was stone-faced, his eyes angled upwards in the direction of a photograph of an unknown, missing woman. A solid blue and dotted red line connected him to Parker, the journalist, and a dotted blue line to Sanford, the prostitute. The two women were connected to each other by solid green. The remaining photographs were men, most of whom were connected to Feierabend with at least one line or

another: Hale, Bello, Kehoe, Greuber. The caption under Feierabend's photograph – *The Godfather* – may or may not have been a reference to a recent interview:

F: Can God create a stone so heavy he can't lift it?

I: You're comparing yourself to God?

F: God has nothing to do with it.

The quote was typical of Feierabend, from what Justine had seen. The man had the ability to endlessly qualify, complicate, and evade his own statements such that no one could ever pin him down on what he was saying. He spoke with such assurance that he somehow displaced whatever misgivings his audience might have with him onto whomever was asking the questions. It made the whole web incoherent, having him at the center.

This was not the first of such webs Justine had seen. The press was preoccupied with schematics of all types: maps, timelines, Venn diagrams. Anything that could reduce the Quantum event to a discrete image. In fact, everyone seemed to be more interested in the possibility of an impressive superstructure behind the various crimes and scandals than about the specific details of each. Of course, with each new schematic that emerged, the less understandable the event became: it was impossible to reconcile one with the next. Justine was no closer to understanding the Quantum event than she was eleven days ago, when she'd accompanied Gregor to and from Adam's lab.

Meanwhile, everyone else was worrying about the event constantly. On account of the Quantum executives, national tensions were supposedly flaring, the threat of war was intensifying; the public's confidence in political and religious leaders was eroding. Justine wished she could muster some sense of urgency about it too. She'd never been the type of person who followed the news simply to be informed about the world. She had opinions, and she liked

to exercise them. Over the years, she and Gregor had butted heads – amicably – on a number of issues. But now, for the first time in years, the news was becoming a matter of indifference to her. She didn't care if she really knew what was going on with the Quantum event, she just wanted to a decent synopsis for Gregor already. She'd started searching for summaries, rather than full articles, but each summary summarized something different – and none seemed particularly newsworthy. Surely Gregor wouldn't expect her to fill him in on Feierabend's extra-professional life like some tabloid.

Justine took one last glance at the web. It almost reminded her of the drama of her early twenties, all of the different lines connecting and separating everyone. Like Adam, Justine had moved back to their hometown after college, and – missing the company of their college friends – they'd ended up hanging out again. Their introduction to Gregor and Brandon had been a bit more random. She and Adam had been searching for a protest downtown – protesting what, she couldn't remember. She'd heard that it was taking place near one of the monuments, but when they arrived, no one was there. She was certain she had the right time and day. So they'd walked the streets searching. She was determined to find it.

That's when they'd run into Gregor and Brandon, who happened to be searching for the protest too. Justine had identified them immediately by their picket signs. Gregor had made an instant impression on her. He was charming and attractive, and they ended up deep in conversation as they walked through the streets. Brandon must have made an equally good impression on Adam. The four of them searched the city for another hour or two before realizing they weren't searching for anything anymore. They went back to Gregor and Brandon's place (the two were roommates), where they may or may not have met Anita. In any case, Justine eventually found out that Gregor was dating Anita. But by that time, they were already friends.

From there, things got complicated. Justine started seeing Joe. Anita broke up with Gregor. Brandon met Pat Murphy at a party. Pat Murphy made a pass at Justine. Adam made a pass at Anita. Gregor and Anita got back together. And so on. The middle was all a blur, but she knew without a doubt how it ended: Brandon died.

She turned the page. Following the special section on the Quantum event was a story about the social dynamics of men and women's self-image. An informal study had recently been conducted: a group of men and women were given a microphone and asked to record physical descriptions of themselves. Some were told to describe themselves in the first person, others in the third person. Sketch artists then listened to the recordings and drew the participants. Women, as it turned out, tended to downplay their appearance when they spoke in the first person; but the opposite was true of the men. The magazine had printed several sketches for comparison.

Did this count as news too? Justine wondered. She thought of Gregor in Adam's lab, being turned into a statistic, a generalization, while his life back home accumulated more complications without him.

During the last days of the study, Adam slipped more white lies into his conversations with Gregor – slowly at first, and then, as he gained confidence, more hurriedly. *White lies* wasn't even the right term for them. Whether good or bad, lies implied intention. Adam was merely modifying insignificant details – how crowded it'd been on the subway, what he'd cooked for dinner, which of their common friends had posted more pictures of their baby or wedding or vacation online – for the sake of aimless conversation. By the end of the week, he'd fully

abandoned the lab's communication policy. If Leah noticed how much time he was spending with Gregor in his room, she didn't say anything.

The Quantum event was one of Adam's favorite topics: the story changed every day as new sources emerged and old sources were discredited as opportunists and ex-wives. For no particular reason – or perhaps the sake of consistency – Adam also rearranged the order of the calls Gregor was receiving on his cellphone. Sometimes he even botched the numbers. Adam figured that if Gregor ever noticed irregularities, he'd attribute them to mistakes or bad memory. Their small talk increased exponentially.

Just when Adam was starting notice their small talk approach the more natural, spontaneous quality of the small talk in the lounge, the talk in the lounge suddenly ceased being small. Drama set in. The blonde guy who'd brought nothing but a backpack had hooked up with one of the college girls. The other two friends weren't speaking. Gregor and the postdoc were having a disagreement. These types of things always happened, but this was worse than usual. Adam should've predicted it. Gregor's life was always eventful.

When Gregor was alone in his room with Adam, he replaced the small talk with episodes from the lounge illustrating his side of the story. The new pattern was familiar. All of the drama: Adam had forgotten that. It had been there from the beginning. He and Justine had met Gregor while searching for a protest where some guy Justine liked was supposed to be. Justine gave up on the guy as soon as she laid eyes on Gregor. She didn't know he had a girlfriend. While the two of them walked ahead, the drama brewing, it was Brandon – Gregor's roommate – who had entertained Adam with the most random topics: how they didn't sell cans of Sterno at the hardware store anymore, how moths had flown out of his DustBuster, how someone's papasan

had gone missing on their floor. Though of course they'd never talked about Sterno, moths, or papasans; those were only examples.

Adam and Brandon's lives were never that dramatic. They were more or less random. Brandon's death was the same. Adam recalled a conversation he'd had with Gregor shortly after Brandon died. Gregor had asked him about the police investigation.

"They kept asking whether he jumped or fell, as if that makes any difference," Adam had said. "But no one ever asked if I pushed him."

"Why would you have done that?" asked Gregor.

"No reason."

"Some story that would be."

It was common for people to feel responsible for their friends and loved ones' unexpected deaths: if only they hadn't done this, or that, or the other thing, their friends and loved ones would still be alive. But Adam didn't feel responsible for Brandon's death. He tried to guilt himself with all the things he could've done to prevent them from being out late at night or on the roof in the first place. It wasn't enough – he couldn't muster any feeling of responsibility. The only thing that worked a little was imagining a lie: the act of pushing.

The day before the sleep study was over, Justine realized she'd forgotten something: Gregor had asked her to pick up the newspapers and junkmail from his front yard as a favor.

She drove to his rowhouse, where she gathered up a few free Gazettes, as well as some take-out menus rubber-banded to the chain-link fence. She peered into the front window, but she couldn't see anything.

On a whim, she swung by his old house on the way home, which was only about a mile away. She'd been inside once, for a meet-the-baby party. His ex-wife and daughter still lived there. The downstairs lights were on. She parked outside and pictured the ex-wife and daughter reviewing educational flashcards together at the kitchen table or snacking on cheese and crackers in front of the fireplace. What did she know about domestic scenes? The house looked like it belonged in a home security commercial.

She heard a knock on her car window. It was Gregor's ex-wife.

"Justine."

"Martha."

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Gregor." The lie wasn't too far from the truth.

Martha looked perplexed. "We spilt up over a year ago. I thought you knew."

"I haven't heard from him in awhile."

"Have you tried calling him?" Martha seemed suspicious at first, but then a look of realization crossed her face. "He didn't call you back, did he? He's away this week for work. I forgot, he said he wouldn't have access to phone or email. You should try him again next week."

A little girl pulling a toy alligator on a string appeared behind Martha. It was Gregor's daughter Samantha. She had her dad's dark eyes.

"Well, we better get inside," said Martha. "Sam here got hurt pretty bad. We just got back from the hospital."

Justine looked for an injury, but didn't notice any.

"Call him next week," Martha repeated as she ushered Sam away. "He'll be happy to hear from you."

As Justine drove home, she turned on the radio. The station was playing a Christmas song already. She was reminded of his upcoming gig at the mall. Most of the song was unlistenable, but there was one part – a few notes at the end of the chorus – that was just right. Gregor had always known how to do something with those bits, how to isolate them from the rest, looping them over and over until they sounded, if not like a song, then like the soundtrack to some event of which you wanted to be a part.

After the study was over, and Gregor and the other participants were all gone, Dr. Christopher called Adam into her office. Her expression was serious. Adam expected the worst.

"Something's been brought to my attention," she said. "And I'm not too happy about it."

Here it comes, he thought. She directed him to her laptop, where he found a photograph of a young woman's forearm, punctured and bruised.

"Liz." Adam identified Dr. Christopher's niece.

Adam knew he'd botched her blood draw yesterday. He couldn't find a good vein. But he hadn't realized his prodding with the needle had been quite so bad. It looked like he must have sliced a vein.

"Her parents are very upset," Dr. Christopher explained.

"Understandably."

Adam would have to undergo more training.

Meanwhile, he thought about Gregor. Dr. Christopher had received an urgent call from his ex-wife, Martha, while he was in the lab. A desk drawer had fallen on Samantha's foot at school, and she'd lost one of her toenails. Dr. Christopher had asked Martha if she wanted Gregor to be pulled from the study. Martha said of course not. Dr. Christopher had kept the call a secret from both Gregor and Adam.

How much did anyone really know? Gregor had missed the snow, the rain, and gale-force winds. He'd missed a shooting in a small town in Nevada, or maybe Utah. He'd missed a dramatic episode of one of his favorite TV shows (Adam had filled him in on some of the details). He'd missed a bad cold that was going around. He'd missed out-of-state calls from area codes 201, 206, 610, and 872. He'd missed a heated argument between two women in the sleep lab's parking lot. He'd missed a recall of applesauce. He'd missed key developments in the Quantum event. A former business partner had accused Hale of embezzlement. Bello had admitted using an escort service. Leaked emails implied Feierabend had paid off a Canadian journalist for her silence.

Someone might set the record straight, of course: Justine, say. But the details didn't matter anyway: Adam had kept to the form of reality. The week might as well have been eventless.

VITA

NAME: JENNIFER J. BERNER

EDUCATION: Ph.D., Creative Writing, University of Illinois at Chicago,
Chicago, Illinois, 2013
M.Phil, Creative Writing, University of Glasgow, Glasgow,
Scotland, 2004

Ed.M., Arts in Education, Harvard University, Cambridge,
Massachusetts, 2003

A.B., English, Brown University, Providence, RI, 2000

HONORS: Kogan Bonus Award, Department of English, UIC, 2011

University Fellowship, Graduate College, UIC, 2009-2010

Travel Awards, UIC Graduate Student Council and Graduate
College, 2009

University Fellowship, Graduate College, UIC, 2005-2006

James E. Rice, Jr. Award, Cornell University, 1997

TEACHING: Department of English, North Central College, First-Year Writing,
2013.

Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago,
Literature, Fiction Writing, and First-Year Writing, 2007-2013.

Project Prime Summer Bridge Program, Roosevelt University,
English, 2012.

Summer Academic Learning Community, University of Illinois at
Chicago, Writing, 2011.

Chicago Civic Leadership Certificate Program, University of
Illinois at Chicago, Rhetoric and Academic Writing, 2008-2009.

- PUBLICATIONS: Berner, Jennie: Blue Tape. The Coachella Review. Fall 2010.
- Berner, Jennie: The Dance. Boston Review. July/August 2006.
- Berner, Jennie: From Stenotype to Tintype: C.D. Wright's Technologies of "Type." Postmodern Culture. January 2013.
- Berner, Jennie: Proof. The Journal. Fall/Winter 2005.
- Berner, Jennie: Practice and This Way of Floating is Transparent. Crazyhorse. Fall/Winter 2005.
- Berner, Jennie: Review of Giraffes in Hiding by Carol Novack, American Book Review. May/June 2011.
- Berner, Jennie: Review of The Tattered Lion by Juana Culhane, American Book Review. July/August 2012.