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A mother’s burden reverberates off steel machinery, leering fluorescently at creation’s karma spilled out, canvas unbound.
A place couldn’t screw you over if it didn’t have a name.

I had only been out on my own for a few hours—no phone, no money, no direction—but that was all it took to find myself in some place new. I had no idea where I was, and, even though I couldn’t exactly explain why, I preferred it that way. Where I was had nothing for me, I found that out earlier that evening after an awkward meeting with Mr. Hunter.

He said, “You’re unimpressive, untalented, and dumb. I’m not sure why we still put up with people like you. You just don’t seem to get it. Why can’t you get it through your thick skull how much of a failure you are here? You obviously can’t do anything by yourself. Just let me take care of it. You’ll just mess things up again”

Those weren’t his real words, though. High school guidance counselors are rarely ever so honest. But I could read between the lines. The subtext was written on the folds of his face, in the wrinkles around his mouth and eyes. They were too deep to just be from old age alone. Bullshitting made them deeper. He sucked in the honesty in like an unwanted gut.
Here was what he really said.

“You’re making this harder than it has to be. Life has all of these little opportunities out there for all sorts of people. Are you going to be the type of person who takes those opportunities by the horns? Or are you going to just let the best in life pass you by? We can help you. Let us help you. We don’t want you to find that you’ve gone and wasted all of your potential.”

Wasted potential? If I had a buck for every time I heard that...

What they didn’t tell you—people like Mr. Hunter here, who had forgotten how exactly to speak without subtext—was that “potential” was really just code for how many times you could repeat twelfth grade before they gave you the adult education pamphlets and a little pat on the back to send you on your merry way.

He kept talking, but I stopped listening. I looked down at the pamphlets. A conveniently staged, multiracial group of thirty-somethings surrounded a computer older than I was. They were smiling in the way people only do in ads.

He said, “Sometimes it seems like you’re better suited for a different kind of environment.”

But I heard, “You’re not even listening to me, are you?” I raised my eyes and gave him a grunt. He stared at me, right in the eye, before pushing over a form to me.

Transfer papers.
He told me it was that or I’d be kicked out.
I told him I’d think about it.
But I was sick of starting this stupid game all over again.
He said, “It’s for the best.”
But he really meant, “You’re somebody else’s problem now.”

§

After leaving the front office for the last time, I didn’t want to go home. There was nowhere else I could go, so I stopped at the last stone step and plopped down. My head fell down into my hands. I wondered how long they’d let me sit here before they kicked me out of here too.

The adult education pamphlet was still in my hand. I wanted to throw it away. The wordart across the top said, “A New Path!”

More like “Try not to mess this up too.”
One of the doors opened behind me. The voice from one of the secretaries called out. “Are you waiting for someone?” But what she meant was “Why don’t you go waste your life somewhere else?” I couldn’t stay here. But getting out wasn’t that easy. It never could be.
The only mark I left behind at the school where I spent the last six years of my life was the pamphlet and transfer papers, crumpled into a misshapen ball at the bottom of the stairs, and my sloppily hashed initials on the bottom of my desk in my remedial English class. I still didn’t want to go home, but Mom and Jack were expecting me. I was just kicked out of school, I didn’t want to be kicked out of my own house for being late to dinner again.

§

I didn’t smoke or drink. Didn’t really have the money. The sophomore junkies at school already knew this, though. They blew their first-course of pot smoke in my face whenever I would walk by the baseball fields on my way home. The path behind home plate, near the dugouts, was the shortest way to the back lot of the trailer park where we lived. Now I took the extra ten minutes to walk around the field. They used to laugh when they noticed I intentionally avoided them. Once, one of them said, “He so poor, he can’t even afford his own escape.” Huh. Story of my life.
The usual gang of mush-heads weren’t there, though. They were probably at the football game, chain-smoking beneath the bleachers, waiting to snatch the wallets that fell between the slats. All the better. I hopped the fence, before I passed through Mrs. Huston’s five-by-four patch of Astroturf to get to the main road.
Mom inherited our trailer from her father after he died of lung cancer. My bedroom/living room smelled like an ashtray. Smoke was embedded into the walls and cheap, balding shag carpeting. Since she owned the trailer, Jack paid the rent on the plot.
Jack moved in right before I started having my regular meetings with Mr. Hunter about “my unique situation”. Mom said that he was my dad, my real dad, but I didn’t think I looked enough like him for that to be true. He was a head shorter than I
was with a stomach so swollen with pork rinds and cheap beer it looked like it was about ready to pop whenever he balanced his Miller Lite on it like it was a tray. Coarse, matted hair clothed his skin like steel wool except for his head where the hair left resembled a fluff of stretched cotton and dust.

He made being in my own home awkward. But he had a good job renting out heavy machinery to contractors and DIY Dads, so he got to stay.

When I got home, he was on the couch, watching an old tape he had of the 1998 Super Bowl. He farted where I usually slept. Mom had just finished dishing out our dinner of Mac-a-Wienie, which was just elbow noodles and hotdog slices drowned in half-melted Velveeta. She carried the three plates stacked and balanced. I swore her mind was always at work. She worked at the diner across the street from our trailer park, pouring coffee for eight bucks an hour. It was the same diner she worked at when she found out she’d been “blessed” with me.

“Hey, Mama.”

She gave me a peck on the cheek as I sat down at the table. She set a plate in front of me before delivering Jack’s plate for him. He grunted as she passed in front of the TV.

“About time,” he said, prodding the air between us with his fork. “We’ve been waiting all evening for your skinny ass to get back. Where were you?”

“School thing,” I said. “Mr. Hunter wanted to talk to me.”

Mom perked, giving a joyous little waggle of the hips as she sat down across from me at the table. “That’s right! You had your meeting today. What did he have to say about my bright young man?” I chewed slowly on a cheesy wienie, stalling. “Did he say you could graduate in December?”

I didn’t answer. I swallowed, and I guess she mistook my little head bob as a nod because she started squealing and covering my cheeks in lipstick-smudged kisses.

“Oh! I just knew this was my baby’s year.”

I didn’t have the heart to correct her.

“Jack, Jack sweetheart, did you hear that? My baby’s finally graduating.”

“Good!” He addressed his answer to a thirteen-year-old commercial for Pepsi. “Does that mean he’s gonna move outta my house?”

“This isn’t your house,” I muttered.

Mom giggled. “Ja-a-ack!” She had a habit of turning his name into a three syllable word when she thought he was joking.
“Stop it. My baby ain’t go’n’ nowhere.”

I kept my eyes on my plate while her eyes lifted up to the wall. Among the shoddy pelican paintings my aunt got as a present for my Mom’s birthday was a picture from her own graduation. In it, she held up her diploma high and proud while I, two years old at the time, chewed on the corner of her tasseled hat by her side. She reached her hand across the table to mine, stroking her thumb across the back of my hand.

“I’m so proud of you, baby.”

Damn it.

§

Late that night, Mom left me alone with Jack while she worked the late night shift. He’d migrated from the couch to his own bedroom the minute the screen door smacked shut behind her. With him finally gone, I cracked the window and doused my pillows in Lysol to get the smell out.

While I breathed in the now lemony freshness of my room, I sat in the darkness, flat on my back, looking up at the faux-wood grain of the ceiling, trying to make sense of the shapes I found.

All through dinner, the look in Mom’s eye didn’t go away. Telling her the truth would break her heart. She was making all of these plans in her head. I could see the gears starting to turn behind her eyes.

Now that I’ve graduated high school, she reasoned, I can be the first in the family to go to college, the first to actually make something of himself. How the hell was I supposed to tell her that I’d given up?

I tried to think of the positives at least.

I’d been alive for twenty years, five months, and six days. I’d never killed anyone. I’d never gotten anybody pregnant; already I was better off than two-thirds of the people I knew. Most everyone I grew up with was either popping out babies or in jail. But at least they had done something with their lives, even if what they did was stupid. I was the only kid in the county with three class rings and no diploma.

The only option that I could think of would be to follow my best friend. He was smart. He realized that school sucked and dropped out the minute he turned sixteen. Somehow, he’d managed to get into the military. He sent me a post card once, before he was shipped off somewhere to be buried in sand and shells.
A “Wish You Were Here!” type card, one of the ones his aunt who didn’t know him very well bought him as a Christmas present. He wanted me to enlist too.

But I didn’t have enough balls for war.
I didn’t even have enough balls to tell my own mother that I was never going to fulfill her plans for me.

Down the hall, I could hear Jack snoring over the rat-tat-tat of his mobster movie. A bag of chips spilled over his stomach, some crumbs hiding in his rolls.
Home wasn’t where I wanted to be anymore.
This town wasn’t where I wanted be.
I needed some air.

§

Walking out on your own with empty pockets and only a threadbare jacket to stave off the cold has a terrifying sort of freedom. I’d lost my sense of direction what seemed like hours ago. Everything looked the same under the piss-yellow streetlights.

The brisk October wind picked up, passing through the sleeves of my jacket like a ghost. For a moment, I thought about turning back to get some clothes or maybe some money, but I pressed on.

Already I felt like I was finally doing something.
I was running away.
The idea sounded better the more ground I put between me and all of my failures. I even started laughing when I spotted the city limit sign off in the distance.
But, then, why did I still feel like when destiny was drawing straws, mine came up short?
I needed to go farther. The farther the better.
All this town was good at was making more people like Mom and Jack and my knocked-up friends. It leached them of their prospects. I’d been there for twenty years. I didn’t want it to get at what little prospect I had left.

Off in the distance, I heard the dings and screams of a train. The bushes around it quivered as it passed by, very slowly, over the hundred-year-old bridge. Right before it crossed the water, I leapt onto a flat, short car. I bounced on the cold, hard steel and rolled. Before I toppled over the edge, I dug the heel of my hand into a rust-corroded hole. Flat on my stomach, my hair cutting dark lines through my vision, and dust and grit jumping up my nose, I stuck on.
I didn’t know where I was going, but the next town couldn’t fail me as much as the old one did. Anywhere would be better.

§

I let the train carry me until I couldn’t recognize anything anymore. I jumped off when it slowed again through a town. It was small, like the one I left, but already I felt more at home. The street was abandoned apart from the subtle rumble of midnight cars trudging the freeway on the other side of the trees. Most of the stores that corralled the slumbering cars on the side of the road were black inside, a few of them boarded up. I continued deeper, though, and I found myself smiling. A paper sign posted in the window of a Mom and Pop hardware store caught my attention. They were hiring, looking for an attendant. I could do that.

I was feeling more successful here already.

The town was pretty dead, but I didn’t expect any more at this hour—sometime around one or maybe two in the morning; I’d left my watch back home. So imagine my surprise when the wail of a lost song found me in the night. I followed it to a tea-colored diner that had seen better days. My feet ached and I was hungry—Mac-a-weenie never filled me up as much as Mom liked to think. A few minutes in wouldn’t hurt.

The diner was a dive, and the two souls who braved the food and shit-water coffee didn’t even turn their heads when I leaned onto the only free stool between them at the counter. The woman to my right looked like she just finished “working her way through grad school” for the night. Cheap sequins fell from beneath the heavy coat draped around her shoulders. She looked older than I thought she was. Sad eyes looked for answers in her stagnant reflection in the coffee. To my left was a man with a potbelly, Urkel glasses, and less hair than Mr. Clean. He didn’t look real. He was reading a book like one Mrs. Tucker, my English teacher, would read while she stuck us with reading packets. A hunchbacked fork absently prodded a sausage link while he turned the page.

The greasy blob beneath a paper hat behind the counter waved his spatula at me while he asked what I wanted. I just asked for a glass of water. Even though I was hungry, I didn’t have any money. And I didn’t want to start somewhere new just to ruin it in the first hour by pulling a quick dine and dash. I told myself that I wanted to be different here.
We sat in silence, the three of us at the counter, half-listening to the 80’s flops that sulked between the booths. I kept my eyes on the empty street behind me, reflected in the mirror above the counter. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the woman looking at me. I couldn’t know what she was thinking, but I had a guess. I sucked on my water. Her eyes ran me up and down as she paid in singles, but she left without saying a word to me. She gave me the same look I’d seen Mom give the scumbags at work who stiffed her on a tip. She could sense when a person didn’t have enough money. She must have smelled it on me, worn into my skin like a scar.

The man beside me sighed “That’s a real shame…” His eyes upturned to the mirror, watching the woman cross the street. “A girl like that wasting her life away.”

I wasn’t really up for conversation, so I grunted tonelessly and drew a line in the cold sweat of my water glass. He didn’t get the hint, though.

“So I know you?”
I shook my head.
“What do you do?”
I gave in. “Nothing yet. I’m going to apply for the job in the window down at the hardware store tomorrow.”

The man’s face squished. “Oh, is that thing still up? I’ve been telling them to take down that sign. Sorry, son, but there’s no job.”

“What?”
“Mr. Monroe, who owns the store, had a stroke last spring. Mrs. Monroe is retiring and doesn’t want it any more. The business is for sale, didn’t you notice?”

I hadn’t, but it was typical, going by how the day had already screwed me over. The man noticed my disappointment.

“You don’t need to worry about getting a job yet anyway. You can’t be much older than eighteen, wait until you’re done with school first. Then go find a job.”

“I dropped out of school.”

He was the first and only person I had told. I also realized that was the first time I had ever said it aloud. I didn’t like it, the way the words felt on my tongue. They tasted like dirty fingers after handling hot change picked up from the back of a downtown bus. I washed it away with some of my water.

The man at my side closed his book. “Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.”

I swallowed the last of my water. “Don’t be. It wasn’t for me.”
“Is that why you’re here in the middle of the night?”

This man was odd. He didn’t speak with subtext like Mr. Hunter. He said what he meant, like Jack. But, if he spoke like Jack, then why wasn’t each of his words pissing me off? It was weird. He sounded concerned.

“Yeah,” I said.

He shook his head and sighed, but didn’t explain why. He started cleaning up, popping the last few hash browns into his mouth and stuffing his book into a leather case at his feet. The music returned and I found my hands curling into fists.

“I know what I’m doing.” I said.

The man looked up and paused.

“I know what I’m doing,” I repeated. I needed to hear it for myself as much as for him.

He continued as if nothing happened.

“There was nothing for me back home. Here will be better for me.”

“Will it really?”

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

“What does this place have that wasn’t for you back home?” I looked around at the empty diner, the boarded up shops across the street, the meaningless sign in the hardware store window. I couldn’t answer, so I didn’t.

“Let me tell you something,” He sat back down on the stool beside me. “Here’s a life secret that most people don’t find out until it is much too late, believe me. Everywhere is the same. No matter where you go—people, places, drama, problems, everything—it all will follow you.”

I backed away from him. “You don’t know, man.”

“Yes I do. I’ve been all over this world. I’ve seen so many people like you, so many people like that poor girl who just left. People who think the world owes them something instead of working for the good things in life. No one owes you anything. If anything, you owe it. You’re screwing yourself if you think anything different.”

Maybe he had a point. Even though at the time I ran away, anywhere seemed better where I was. I was hungry, cold, and alone. At least at home I had someone to disappoint. Here, I only disappointed myself.

“You know what makes a place different? What makes a place really matter?”

But he never told me. He opened his mouth, eyes blazing, but it all suddenly fell, like he thought, like all of my teachers
at school, that I wasn’t listening.

“What’s the point?” he asked. He left without another word or look to me. He didn’t want to waste any more time on me. I didn’t blame him.

The greasy blob behind the counter kicked me out when I said I wasn’t going to order anything other than the water I already had. Back out on the streets, I started walking beside the train tracks, following them through the little town back home.

The more I saw, the more I realized the man was right. This place was no different. What made me think that it would be? The only thing different was that I was there. This town was full of just as many dipshits and sluts as the one I just left.

Then I realized the answer to his questions. The two questions that buzzed around my ears.

It was me.

Places don’t change, but I could.

I just had to make the most of where I was.

Maybe adult ed. would help me realize that.
It may seem like only yesterday, but when we were sitting by the old rotary like electric doves that must have been the day before Charley spat the old oak straight onto the back porch, and gouged a hole above where the TV was supposed to be. Or maybe it was a week before that, when your father had laid on the floor, his bypass scar held so carefully by neat bars of stitches as he tore into a fresh pack and we sipped on icy sodas. Had it had been a month since we made the scorching walk from the corner store, straining under the weight of water jugs and hot dogs, Dr. Peppers and sour gummies, the cheap plastic bags nearly tearing? Then there was the day we ran home to miss the rain in our gym clothes, Charley’s hole still patched with blue tarp, only to find ourselves in a hospital’s silent parking lot, or in the tiny house that was my truck, heading toward some place they handed you a black box covered in ashes. Then, it was March. Then, we were twenty.
Not everyone that dies goes to heaven. They say heaven is for the good, God-fearing folk. The kind of folk who attend church in the sweltering sun of the summer mainly ‘cause they can afford cars to drive them there. White folk. Maybe the dedicated coloreds who walked nine miles on the country roads of Georgia to the Colored Methodist Church of Christ would get to go to the edges of heaven. The rest of us would just have to work. Working was all we could do ‘til we died.

Most of the colored women in Oradew, Georgia worked as some sort of help to the white folk during the 1940’s, though the white folk never saw it as help. We were treated as problems before were treated as people.

“You done had enough schooling,” Mama said going over the bills one night. She was right. I was almost sixteen and hadn’t ever had to work a day in my life. Spoiled was what they called me on the corner. The family had bills and I had to help pay them.

Mama had spent most her life on her knees scrubbing floors; a job passed on by my granma. It wasn’t hard for Mama to find me a place to wait on people. It was wartime, but Mama knew one or two families that needed help and could afford it. She was one of them good colored girls. She was even trusted to shop in the grocery store that the
white folk used. The one where not even the fruit had any brown
spots on it, but she only got to go there when she was buying
groceries for white folk. We had to get our groceries from the
corner store on the edge of town.

All the white folk lived near the center of town. That way
they wouldn’t have to see how poor people were living. The stars
were our street lights.

To get to work, we had to walk about three miles to the
center of town. Our dirt roads gave way to neatly, lined streets.
Their houses looked like what I imagined heaven to be, big and
pretty. Filled with white people. Keeping them clean was a full
time chore ‘cause they sure knew how to get them dirty.

“You done press your shirt with extra starch?” Mama
asked as she stood by the doorway looking me over. She was
walking me into town to make sure I made a good impression on
the Geranges, the family she got to give me work.

“Starched it twice, just like you told me.”

“Good. Don’t need to be giving white folks even more
of a reason to look down their noses at negroes.” That was my
mama. She wasn’t the most educated colored in the land, but
she knew how to put her best foot forward. She had one dress to
her name that she wore to church every Sunday. She washed and
pressed it every Sunday night.

Mama had always wanted us to go to school. She her-
self, never learned to read ‘til she was in her thirties with three
children. Her and Daddy worked every day to make sure we had
at least one, hot meal a day. Then the war came around and
Daddy went to fight. That was three years ago and we ain’t heard
from him for two Decembers.

“I know, Mama.”

The Geranges lived in a two story house near the other
end of town, a six bedroom house lived in by two people. Mister
Gerange wasn’t a young man anymore. He missed the draft age
by ten years. That did not stop him from riding his horse through
the town, mostly at night. Mostly in the negro parts when he was
dressed in all white. Most of us never looked him in the eye.

Misses Gerange might have been twice as old as Mama,
but I was never going to ask. No one really saw her much after
the sickness got her. She married late and then got sick. Never
was healthy enough to have babies. Was hardly well enough to
leave the house.

Mama knocked on the door, then stepped back down
the stairs. I followed close behind. After a few minutes, Mister
Gerange met us at the door, gun in hand.
“Wasn’t expecting you so early,” Mister Gerange said, eyeing Mama.
I started to sweat.
“Sorry, sir.” Mama said, head bowed. “I just wanted to make sure Lizbeth here showed up looking her best.”
Mister Gerange turned his attention to me, stared me down, eyes lingering. “She best not steal anything,” he said walking away from the door. “Or she might lose something.”
Mister Gerange led us through the house. Mama walked ahead of me, used to being in real houses. I tried to pay attention, but I had never seen the inside of a real house before. There were chairs in every room. In the kitchen, fruit was on the table and nobody was fighting over who got what. The cabinets filled with bowls, and there was food on all the shelves.
The upstairs was next. Most of the bedrooms were on the second floor, including Mister Gerange’s. Misses Gerange had a room on the first floor on account of her being too weak to walk the stairs and her husband being too uncaring to move downstairs with her. We ended up in the living room, a door away from Misses Gerange’s bedroom. In the living room, Misses Gerange in the rocking chair, Bible in hand. She rocked back and forth without a care.
“This here is Laura,” Mister Gerange said as he pointed to the living room without even turning to look at his wife. “She don’t do nothing round here ‘cept eat, sleep, and cost me mon-ey.” Misses Gerange barely stirred. The first day went by like that. Mister Gerange barked his orders, Misses Gerange barely answered. I’m not sure if she even heard him most of the times. I wish I didn’t.

§

Over the next two weeks, I learned that Misses Gerange could move. She could do quite a few things by herself. She had been making a quilt for the past five years. She tried to do a patch every other day. She could also walk. Not fast, but she didn’t need much help getting anywhere. She even spoke. It surprised me the first time I heard her.
“This tea is too hot,” she whispered. It sounded like she had just come down with a cold or she really needed some water.
“I’m sorry, Ma’am.” I took the cup from her hand to set it aside to cool. She watched me for awhile.
“I like you,” she said. Her whisper sounded like a smile.
The conversations became more frequent over the days.
“It’s been so long since somebody listened,” she said. I understood what she meant. As soon as the grandfather clock sitting in the corner of the dining room struck three, the house would become silent. No one spoke, just listened. Mister Gerenge was on his way home.

It was hard to tell what mood Mister Gerange would be in. It was never happy, but we always hoped. On most days, he just slammed doors or hit the wall. On bad days, he hit faces. I had been working for the Geranges for five days before I got in the way on one of his bad days. I was supposed to bring up his tea to his room as soon as he got in, but I had been washing the dishes and was late.

“Dammit. All I ask for is a cup of tea and some food after working all day,” he said snatching the tray from my hands soon as I entered the room. He took a sip of the tea then threw the brew on me. “Too damn bitter,” he said. My clothes were wet and the skin underneath felt like a burn was forming, but I went downstairs and poured another cup. I brought the sugar up with me this time.

“A nigger with some brains,” Mister Gerange said as looked me up and down. He stared at my tea-soaked chest. “I like you.” I tried my hardest not to run out the room.

“We used to have other help.” Mister Gerange said at the one afternoon. I had brought him his tea and was waiting in the chair he kept in the corner while he ate. He didn’t like dirty dishes to stay in his room. “Yep, bunch of colored girls been in this house before. None of them lasted.” Food fell from his mouth as he spoke.

“Misses Gerange never told me that.” I stared straight at the floor.

“Course not. She don’t know nothing bout nothing.” I kept looking at the floor.

“She never talked with them, hardly noticed when they left. Long as you keep doing what I ask, we’re gonna be just fine.”

That night, I asked Mama bout the other colored girls.

“That don’t concern you none,” Mama said, shaking her head like it was about to fall off. She shooed my brothers out the room. Closed the door as they left. “Those girls just talked too much. White folk like their business to stay their business. And they definitely don’t need no negroes telling lies ‘bout them. Don’t
let me catch you running off that mouth of yours again. Or else.” I made it a point to never talk about the Geranges with anyone ever again, not even Mama.

§

Misses Gerange’s quilt was probably big enough to fit over all the beds in the house combined, but she kept on making her patches. Most of the errands she would ask me to do was going down to the store to get needle and thread.

“I gotta put my memories somewhere,” she said, when I asked after a month of working for them. “I might be kept up in this house, but I’m still alive. I got stories to tell, too.” Every day, I asked her to tell me a quilt story. Every day over lunch, she told it. Most of them weren’t long, but all of them were interesting.

“This one here is made out of the dress I wore on my wedding day,” she said one day. It was the third patch in the quilt. The lily white lace covered tiny pink pearls stuck on to it. “It was a hot, summer day. Most of the town was down at the swimming hole. We got married to a crowd of no one.”

“We’re ya’ll in love?” I asked, but covered my mouth with my hands for speaking out of turn.

“No. I don’t think we were.” The glazed-over look in her eyes made me hang my head down lower. “We were mighty cordial to one another, but I wouldn’t call it love. He knew my daddy well, and agreements were made. Daddy was getting a business partner. I think I was getting married.”

“What about this one?” I pointed to a summer-sunset red patch a few stories down.

“We had a lot of girls come through here,” she said. “This one was for Anbelle. She was one of the nicest one. Almost as nice as you. When she helped me through the house, she did it with a smile,” Misses Gerange said slowly. “Then I heard her crying upstairs one day. Never saw her again. But you’re here now.” She cheered back up again at the end. “And, you brew a better teapot.”

§

I had been working for the Geranges for two months before I started to hate the house and the man that lived in it. I had already feared him, but it turned into hate. And I hated myself for letting it happen.

I had brought him his tea at three o’clock as usual. He was sitting in the bed, naked except for the white sheet around
his waist.

“Come here, girl.” I kept my eyes to the floor and blindly placed his tea on the table. I wanted to get out of that room before I had even entered it. “Sit down,” he said and patted the place on his bed. I sat there shaking, wishing I had an excuse to leave; to leave and never come back. He put his hand on my thigh, the other on my chest. I wiped the tears out of my eyes. “If you make noise, I’ll give you a reason to holler.”

When it was over, the white sheets were red. “I expect these to be washed out before you leave,” he said. I knew he was serious, too. I sat up and put my clothes back on. As I was pulling his sheets off, he threw a dollar down on them. I never had no real money in my hands before, just a few cents Mama let me go to the store with. He threw down that dollar like it was worthless. He threw it down at me.

“The way I see it, this can work out for us both,” he said. I made the mistake of looking him in the eye. I have never seen a look so cold before. “I give you a dollar every day. And you give me what I want.” I froze under his look. I hadn’t made a sound since I realized what was happening, just let the tears roll down my face. I nodded.

“Or you could go running that mouth and I bet I run you out of town. Or even up a tree.”

I never thought of hell being anything but hot. Lots of lakes of fire and twelve burning suns. Not anymore. Hell was a cold, empty place. Where you froze from the inside out. Where you prayed for some sunshine. Where wished you would just die. I picked up the dollar and walked out the door, body completely numb.

It became almost a ritual. Every day, I made a pot of tea. Misses Gerange would get hers first. I’d pour her a cup and sit up with in her bedroom ‘til she started to fall asleep. I’d take my time washing out her cup before I turned the kettle back on. Then the kettle would whistle and my everything would slow down. It was usually around three by then. The chiming clock made my entire body shake. The chattering cup matched my teeth. More tea ended up on the counter than in the cup. Every day, I laid with the devil. Every day I left with enough money to feed my family. I was never hungry.

§

“You know, if I had ever had daughter, I would want her to be like you.” Misses Gerange said on our way to the gro-
cery store. “Not a negro. Lord, no. But a nice girl, like you,” she coughed out. Misses Gerange never left the house, but the doctors who came round all the time told her she needed to be out in the sun. Laying up in the shut off room was causing her to age something fierce. She started walking around outside the next day.

At first, it had been just out to the yard. She would sit on the back porch and drink her tea. Then she started walking the whole yard, saying hello to the neighbors. The sun was her new best friend. Today was her first day going into town.

“You would have made a good mother.” I said, matching the slow pace she had made. The walk to the store was less than a mile away, but we had been walking for over an hour. Misses Gerange was out of breath when we got to there, but she’d looked the happiest I had ever seen. I got the groceries while she sat out front and waited. I got fruit with no brown spots.

I came back after getting her supplies to find Misses Gerange missing. I went through the lanes looking for her and found her in the back.

“They even got food for the rats up in here,” she said, eyes never leaving the shelf in front of her. “It’s been so long since I been at a grocery store.” She took in everything in the six lane store, from the house cleaning stuff to the bags of sugar next to them. “You would hand the checker your list and they would hand you your groceries. Now you do everything for yourself.” “I guess things change,” I said.

“Yessum, they do,” she said. “Things have to change.”

§

Mister Gerange was mad today. The swelling of my eye was enough to prove it. “It’s because of niggers like you that I’m missing money,” he said as he punched me again, this time in the stomach. He came back and found an empty house when he was expecting to find food. “Why two of y’all gotta go to town for?”

It had become a part of my daily chores to take Misses Gerange into town. Some days, we would go to the store. Some days we would go by the white church. I stood outside. Most days, we just walked around, like today. We walked so much, we lost track of time ‘til we heard the church bells. They rang out three times.

Mister Gerange wasn’t looking at me; he was looking at what he was going to do to me. He got me soon as I walked through the door, dragged me upstairs by my dress. Misses Ge-
range went to go make the tea.  
I thought about running out. The door to his room was open, and he didn’t seem to care. There was no place to run to.  
No one to help me. Who was going to stop him?  
“Now take off your clothes.”
I sometimes thought I wanted to die. The thought of heaven being filled with Christians like Mister Gerange was enough to keep me living. Hell couldn’t be no worse than this either. Leaving the house, I gave the Bible in their living room a look only Jesus would understand. Misses Gerange was in the kitchen brewing tea. She didn’t look at me either.

I walked the three miles back home in silent pain. My eye was swollen, my body was beat up, my pocket was lined with a crisp dollar bill. Mama was at the door waiting for me. Her eyes took in my face, but she still held her hand out.

“God sees everything,” she said. I cried in her arms for an hour.

§

“I need to go to the store today.” Misses Gerange said. The sun wasn’t even up, but she was dressed when I got to the house. “I saw something there the last time that we need.”

“We all stock up on groceries, Ma’am.”

“I need to go to the store today.” She was in the living room, sitting in the chair I had first saw her in. The Bible was missing from the table.

“Alright, Misses Gerange. We might have to wait though. At least ‘til the sun comes up. I don’t think the store is open yet.”

Misses Gerange nodded her head, and turned to look out the window. I got to cleaning up the house. Everything had to be spotless.

Mister Gerange left without a word that morning. He came up behind me and smacked my rear so hard, I had to take a step forward to keep from falling over. He went out the front door, never looking at his wife, still in the living room. Still staring out the window.

We went to the grocery store later on that day. The walk still took an hour, but Misses Gerange asked me to wait for her outside the store. Most coloreds were supposed to do that anyways. I sat on the ground across from the store and waited for her to come back out. I was expecting it to take at least a half hour on account how slow Misses Gerange walked, but she came back out in a matter of minutes; a smile on her face, a
small, brown paper bag in her hand.

“There is a pest problem in that house. Been seeing it a lot more lately.”

§

Misses Gerange was getting healthier. She still looked like she could blow away with a strong enough wind, but she was walking more, faster than ever before. She even tried to help with the some of the chores.

“At least let me make the tea,” she insisted. I gave up protesting after a week. She knew how she wanted her tea any-way. It gave me more time to make sure the house was spotless by the time Mister Gerange came home. She’d pour herself a cup and sit down to chat for awhile. When the clocked struck three, she would heat back up the kettle, and pour a perfect cup for Mister Gerange. I guess she got tired of the mess I was making every day. She would always go back to her room without a word and I wouldn’t see her for rest of the day.

Mister Gerange was even happy about it. “Bout time that woman had some use.” His tea was always ready, always sweet-ened to perfection by his wife. I put it on the stand next to his bed and waited in the corner with my clothes off. He mumbled to him-self about his tea being too cold. Nothing ever made him happy. I left the room an hour later, a dollar richer.

The next day Misses Gerange made the tea again. I had even let her dust a table earlier. It took her breath away almost as soon as she started, but she managed to finish. Making the tea was easier and she took to it like it was her job and not mine. She poured herself a cup, and then fussed over Mister Geranges’. She had to make it just sweet enough. She fixed his cup then went to her room.

Mister Gerange came home exactly at three. “Think I’m coming down with something,” he said, mostly to himself. “That my tea? Need something to settle my stomach.” He grabbed the cup off the counter and headed to his room. “Meet me upstairs.” I went upstairs after I put the tea pot away. Mister Gerange was not a patient man and taking any longer might have cost some-thing terrible. He was always ready when I walked in the room.

Today was different. I went upstairs and he still had his underclothes on. He was sitting on his bed, but his lap was covered in red. Those white sheets looked scarier than ever before. I started to take off my clothes but he stopped me. “You don’t even deserve this, but take your money and get.” The dollar
he handed me was covered in blood.

Mister Gerange hadn’t been to work in a week. I got to the house early every morning, expecting to see him go, but he never left his room. His booming voice became a weak whisper. “Make sure he eats.” Misses Gerange said. She never went up to his room, but always made sure his cup of tea was on his tray. “If he’s still sick in a few days, I’ll call up the doctor.” After a week him not leaving his room, the doctor showed up.

“I’ve never seen anything like it, Misses Gerange,” the doctor said. They were in the living room, talking over Mister Gerange’s situation. I tried real hard to finish up with the cleaning without listening, but I couldn’t.

“Do you know what’s wrong with him?” Misses Gerange asked, her voice firm.

“Might be the polio going around the Carolinas. Must have made its way down here to Georgia. It’d account for the vomiting.”

“Do I have time to call the family?” Mrs Gerange asked.

“I don’t think he’s making it past the night.”

The grandfather clock in the dining room struck three. I took the tea up the stairs without much thought.

The man I met lying in the bed was a dead man breathing. His face was hollow and his hair was barely hanging on. The room reeked of his insides.

“I brought your tea, sir.” He turned towards my voice, but I don’t think he saw me. I don’t think he saw anything. I sat in my usual chair in the corner. My clothes stayed on this time.

“Laura, is that you?” His voice came out like a whisper. His body started twisting up and he grabbed his stomach.

“Laura. I know you hear me.” He must have been running a fever cause he kept mumbling crazy things I didn’t understand. I sat there, and watched him struggle.

After a few minutes, the mumbling stopped, and eventually, so did his breathing. I went downstairs to let Misses Gerange know and she nodded her slowly to the news.

“Remember Lizbeth, God sees everything,” she said softly, back turned towards the doctor. Her whisper sounded like a smile.
“What was she wearing?” He looked up at me, and all the sympathy he might have had sighed out of him.

“A blue shirt, with a flower on it. Or was it a toad?” Dear God what was it? A fish? Something on it was red. I tried for the third time to grab my coffee on the side table, but brown tears burned me as it shook in my hand. I put it back.

“I think it might have been a lady bug. Yes, it had to be. And her jeweled jeans.” I sewed my skirt between my fingers. I was still wearing my apron.

“Don’t touch that.” The man jumped as I said it, or maybe it was the way I said it? He put the drawing back on the fridge: two licorice bats. Or was it a cat? They just walked around the house touching things, like everything was helpful. No, I don’t think examining my oak mantelpiece will lead you any closer to where you are now.

“Ma’am, is this the most current?” The fat one held out her first grade photo still in the frame.

I could smell the tears coming, but it didn’t matter. They expected it like paychecks. I walked to the bathroom to get some toilet
paper, since there are never any goddamn tissues. And another one was in there.

“What are you going to do with that?” I said.
He held up her purple Sleeping Beauty toothbrush, and sealed it in the same Ziplocs I used for her lunch.

“Forensics, Ma’am.”
I could feel my skin ripping off my lips as they trembled. I reached for the sink and threw up on the handle. Then he nodded his apologies and left. How thoughtful.
The shaggy rug felt like Christmas on my face. It soaked away my outer sorrows, and didn’t ask me any questions.

After a few minutes a knock interrupted the slideshow in my head. I groaned.

“Mrs. Pollack, we still have more to discuss.” This was the horseradish man. He could rot the wooden door with that smell.
I opened it and stood back, making sure I had enough room to breathe my own air.
He motioned me back to the red armchair, which had been my savior ever since it happened. I knew every stain and groove it harbored. As I sat down with my toilet paper, I wondered which I would become.

“Did she normally walk back with anyone?”
I looked though the window and saw Mrs. Trelly watering the Gerber daisies. “Sometimes with Alma Trelly.” As if she heard me, she looked up and put the hose near her chest, and a hand on her mouth. I could see she had been crying too, but her’s were more for the safety of her daughter.

“Mrs. Trelly told me that Alma had a dentist appointment, and that she had picked her up early instead of having her ride the bus.”

“Has your daughter ever been late from coming home before?”
I studied the wrinkles on his forehead as he spoke. “Only once, and that was because she skinned her knee.” I shook my head at what other things could be happening now.
My eyelids felt like sandpaper, and every blink made them bleed. I rested my head on the palm of my hand, and the officer touched my shoulder.
He whispered words of encouragement, dipped in the coating of depression. Kind of like those commercials, “Depression hurts, but you don’t have to.”

“Was there a typical route she took to come home?”
“The bus would drop her off at Cypress Glenn, and she walked from the beginning of the development to our cul-de-sac. It’s about a mile.” Anyone could have taken her, and he knew it too.

“Do you know of anyone who would have seen her walking alone and picked her up? A fellow parent maybe? Or a neighbor?

“No, I don’t know. She never would have gotten into a stranger’s car. She knew better.” I felt a shiver run down my spine, one that I would never stop feeling against my soul.

With that they were gone, and left no hope with me. I sat back in my chair, and could feel her arms spread through the house.

Help me mom.
I’m not that strong.

I opened the screen door and sat down on the porch. The sun was getting low and I was sure we would be having dinner at this time, Spaghetti and steamed broccoli.

A picture of a girl was drawn in orange chalk, my girl. She had written her name next to it, and a little dog that we don’t have.
NOTICE:

Certificate of Marriage:

This little piece of paper, how can it mean so much? Until right now, I'd never seen it before, and after one, two, three, four signatures, I'll probably never see it again. People waste their lives away attempting to gain or avoid that little slip of paper. My best man is one for avoiding. He looks at me with omen-black eyes that affirm my suspicion that he believes his signature witnesses a fatal union. He knows this woman will ruin me long before I do. Perhaps I knew, but could never say it out loud—not with a little one on the way. The chinks in her battlement armor revealed a raw, venomous quality, a malignance, a contemptuous lizard clothed in festive plumage. Sharp teeth made to rip flesh flashed behind a curtain of honey-soaked lips when cornered, and marriage, motherhood, these were the ultimate corner. I scrawl an inky promise on a scrap of state-issued parchment that symbolizes my commitment tame a wild animal, to give my children what I never had—a family.

Signed, Husband
Certificate of Birth:

Tiny fingers and toes. Height. Weight. Eye color. Mother’s maiden name. Name of Father. Numbers and labels, input, a serial number for fresh product. I’m holding new life, the closest thing to a miracle I’ve ever known—but the State wants an invoice, evidence of quality and point of origin. Despite my distaste for archaic paper-ritual, I make a great ceremony in my heart. Angels guide my pen while seraphim intone ancient rites. My name is proof of attendance. Kilroy was here. Somehow that indelible ink on this vellum sheet proves that I will always be there. It’s a certificate of ownership—I am owned by somebody. I will love him.

Signed, Dad

Final Order for Dissolution of Marriage:

Bitter fear throbs in my throat. Conviction. I said “’Til death do we part.” She said it too—I think. She must have. I can’t remember. Did she mean it? Did she ever mean it? I did, didn’t I? Signing this tome of disease feels like giving up, but she gave up a long time ago. When the honey stopped flowing, nothing remained but evisceration. A lamb tied to the alter, sacrificed, bleeding. I’m signing away one half of their childhoods, one half of their innocence. I won’t get them back. They were all right, but they’re all gone now. Conviction. Convicted. Why do my release papers feel like transfer forms? A little bit of ink and my family ceases to exist. Like it never happened. How can one signature erase another? Is ink so lacking in value or permanence? If I sign these, do I invalidate every document I’ve ever signed? Do my children cease to exist? Do I cease to exist?

Signed, ..
“I just don’t know what’s wrong.”

I look out the open window at Daddy, leaning over the exposed engine of his green, fifty Chevy pickup as he repeats himself for the umpteenth time.

“Is there gas in the tank?” I ask him. Although I’ve been surrounded by classic cars since birth, that was all my fourth grade mind knew about cars and motors. No matter how many times Daddy showed me which parts did what, I could never remember or understand.

“Oh course there’s gas in the tank. I filled it up the other day.” He turns to me. “Sorry, baby. It looks like you’re going to miss your appointment.”

I nod, trying to ignore the realization that is slowly appearing in my mind; that since Mama is at work and she doesn’t allow Daddy to have a cell phone since he always breaks them, that means we would have to hike home with me wearing my Sunday School dress and shoes. Why did Mama want me to dress up for the doctors again?

“When we get home I’ll have to call a tow truck, then I’ll call Papa and ask him to come over and help me fix it. I think it might be the carburetor.”

“Daddy, I don’t think there’s any gas in the tank.”
“Leah, there is gas in the truck. It’s the motor that’s the problem.” He opens my door. Old car doors are always hard to open, I can never do it myself. “Come on, we better start walking.”

The next two hours or so are spent crossing busy roads in Orlando, and then walking beside them. Because there are no sidewalks we have to walk in the grass, which is not easy considering the grass is up to my knees, and I’m walking in a dress that’s just as long. Daddy keeps muttering to himself about what might be wrong, apologizing to me, keeping me away from the road, and speculating on what can be done about the Chevy.

“What are you going to do, Daddy?”

“I don’t know yet. Gotta get it home to find out. Might have to order another part, maybe a fuel pump. Your mom’s going to love that.”

There is no doubt in my mind that Daddy will fix it. He can fix anything, and he’s especially good with cars. It takes a lot to take care of them, and although people think he can be a crazy driver, I’m never afraid when he’s in control of the antique machines, Buddy Holly and Johnny Cash playing over the radio, just like when Daddy went to sock hops when he was in school in the fifties. Whenever we ride in his truck, I always feel like we’re back in that time, driving the back roads of North Carolina. He says he was even a crazier driver back then. I could believe it.

Daddy is staying up late, trying to fix the truck. I hug Snow White, the teddy bear that he gave me for Valentine’s Day, as I fall asleep listening to my Daddy working in the garage below my room with Merle Haggard singing through the carpet; “But somehow we made a home of this old farmhouse . . . and love was all my baby ever knew.”

“Leah, wake up.”

I wake up to Daddy’s voice, surprised that it’s already morning. “Morning, Daddy.”

“Morning, baby. Hey, I got the truck fixed. You want to come with me to Old Town tonight?”

I jump up excitedly. “Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!”

Smiling, Daddy kisses my forehead. “Okay, get dressed and we’ll go here in a little bit.”

I climb down from bed and stop him before he leaves. Although I know I won’t understand the answer, I still have to ask. “Daddy, what was wrong with the truck?”

He looks back at me, his face blank. “There was no gas in the tank.”
Did you know you can become a tree when you die?

A sapling mixed with your ashes.

You can be planted, dad, instead of buried.

Did you know you can even choose the type of tree?

Oak, Spruce, Palm, Orange.

If all goes according to plan, the cancer is benign,

If all goes according to plan, you grow from your ashes.
My grandfather was the sturdy plywood of the two-person boat we took off shore. Shining, dagger-like muscles jutted from the rocks, clumped like families.

He was the dark, stained hull of the pirate ship that came every night. He said, “Look, here’s a footprint,” and pointed at the freshly unearthed sand.

My grandfather was the steel plating of the jewelry box he buried the night before. He told me, “Never lie to anyone, words are the most valuable thing you own.”

But every night, small pieces were taken with the rolling, foam-filled tide. He no longer owned his own words. He no longer owned the unearthed sand.

My grandfather was the crumbling coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts.
Darling,

loving you did give the impression by the sea like Shelley was washed away by the tattered love.
Darling,
loving you
Did give the impression
we were
by the sea like
swept away by the
tide
suspended in
tatterd love.
It's not over— sun takes a dip in Clearwater's spray
Waves push greased-backed island deeper into bay.
Who can hold what time disrupts?
Carmin slurps shadows from a Styrofoam cup.
Shipwrecked in the bar’s fog, we shoot pool

Plastic pirate girl threads dreams peripheral:
Tides can’t escape the second hand’s tight pull.
Still, what’s drowned always comes up.
(It’s not over).

Now I watch the darkness engrave
Mirrors until morning pervades.
Outside rain returns, wrecks memories patched up
Forcing open what hope sews shut;
It’s not over.
On the base of the ribbon,
curving, end taped to emptied spool,
& framing fake grout in the linoleum,
my grandfather thumbs the scales of a fish.
In browns and blacks and negatives,
a ghost outlined in fluorescent,
he begins his arthritis on the curve
of the coiled film, his hand bending
for the camera, shadowed by a ledge
of my grandmother smiling, my uncle
bending below the frame.
Blueprinted, faint, below:
ghost of my aunt’s horse,
head pressed against the in-between
of my mother’s fingers while she waves.
Spiraling, mobius, grandfather in browns
stop-actions to the end of the film, bent cloudy
and cataracted on the floor, holding a fish,
dim-scaled and threading through roll,
and never recovered.
I met Laysha a week after Bobby broke up with me. I was twenty-three and watching one of those shows on Fx for the third time that night, when I spilled a tear of Chai latte on the pocket of my shirt. Looking down at it, I felt ruined and ugly. Seventeen minutes later I and found myself staring at a bird printed dress in Target, and wondering if I could pull it off.

My mom would have said it wasn’t me, and that I needed to lose the flabs in my arms before wearing something like that. But I took it to the dressing room anyway, along with a pair of rose printed hip-huggers. I hadn’t even made it into the stall before the one across from me opened and a girl asked for the smaller size of the jeans she was handing me. She was wearing nothing but a purple bra and a faded jean skirt, and I felt too embarrassed for staring at her umbrella shaped birthmark to say that I didn’t work here.

When I got back she was hanging up her clothes on the discard rack. She thanked me for the jeans and told me her name was Laysha. And while I was wondering whether or not to explain, she asked me if I knew any good bars and I ended up shrugging away suggestions. “I was asking more for you than for me,” she said. And then she picked up a scarlet red pencil skirt and told me to buy it.

We spent most of our Thursday nights watching old movies we
rented from one of the last standing Blockbusters in town, while she ranted about the customers she had during her shift at Ihop. Most of the time it was about some middle-schooler trying to touch her ass as she cleaned a booth, or some lady refusing to pay the bill for her empty plate because she didn’t think the food tasted good.

We had decided that night on the 1958 version of The Blob, and were just at the scene when the homeless man was devoured by the goo, when Laysha turned to me and said we needed another world war or something to keep us sane.

“Just think about it. We haven’t had anything tragic happen to us in a long time. Nothing to bring our generation together by the knees of our bones and make us care.” She was staring at me with eyes so unfamiliar in seriousness that I had to laugh. And she picked up some popcorn and threw it at me.

“Really though, Marnie. Just think about it. Nobody cares anymore. I had a lady yelling at me today because I couldn’t take her god-damned daughter’s order. I told her that all of our stuff had to be keyed into the chef digitally, and that there was no way I could make something that wasn’t on the menu.”

I could hear her breath quickening as she got revved, and I took that chance to pause the movie and wait.

“And do you think she listened? She called me an idiot and demanded to speak to the manager. The fucking manager over a strawberry-chocolate sundae, like she was appalled her daughter couldn’t have it all.”

I stuffed a M’n’M in my mouth and tried to defend the little girl who ordered without knowing it was going to cause a problem. And we watched the movie mostly in silence after that, both knowing that the world would be a little better if we all had something sweet to care about.

§

After seven months I got a job as a bank teller and I moved into the city, with the promise that Laysha was going to visit at least once every two weeks. We spent most of the time trying to tan on my deck in the backyard, or going for a swim in Mr. Gallinger’s pool when he went to the store.

But since it had rained last night, all the worms had made
their travel to the cement, and we couldn’t do either without stepping on one. I picked up my right flip-flop and saw a partially smushed one still wiggling on it, and tried to shake it off before joining Laysha on my lawn chairs.

After we peeled off our clothes we watched a bird take one of the worms away, and I couldn’t help but physically shake the thought from my head. Laysha laughed for a while and asked me if I ever thought about being anything other than myself.

I hated these conversations. Laysha always seemed to make me feel like I didn’t think enough about others, which none of us do but never want to admit. Sometimes I thought about what it would be like to be one of those kids on the starving kid commercials, you know the one. But I usually forgot about that once my show came on, so I said no and waited for her speech.

She stared at a worm that was close to her for a while before answering, and asked me if I remembered that scene in Gone With the Wind where they are riding the horse across the country and it dies on their way home.

I admitted that I never knew why people loved the movie so much, and that I didn’t remember much about it other than Scarlett eating a carrot coated in dirt.

“There’s this part though, when they are just about to reach the house, and they have been riding the horse nonstop through the night.” She paused and I saw goose bumps appear on her arms.

“The poor horse had this disgusting slime dripping from its mouth, and you could tell it was exhausted. It was moving very slowly. And then all of a sudden it fell over, and it died. And I remember crying, I was only eight then, and remembering how upset I had been for them taking advantage of the poor thing. And they didn’t even care. They were just pissed they still had to walk a mile or two to get to the house.”

I could see where Laysha was going with it, and wasn’t quite sure if I would want to hear it myself.

“Could you just imagine though, Marnie? From the day that horse was born, it was going to work every day of its life until it died.”

We tanned the rest in silence, not admitting what we were thinking about. And when she called me a few weeks later, I couldn’t find it in me to answer.
Brett met Sarah over a meatloaf shaped like a wild boar, on a night that Jeopardy was a rerun. The boar had celery stalk tusks and a coonskin party cap just like each of the children there celebrating his boss’s son. He went because he was invited and thought that sometime in the future it’d show to have been a good move. Plus, how bad could a Davy Crockett-themed party be? It was original, at least.

So Brett stood there, staring just beyond the tusks, catching the eyes of a girl who wouldn’t move the plastic wine glass away from her lips. She held it there like a too-heavy lip ring that wouldn’t be supported. Brett thought that was cute, how she hid behind it.

Later, after the kids had stuffed themselves on meat and potatoes, they piled like party peanuts onto the couch to watch a movie. Brett made his way around the table through the few adults who hadn’t wandered outside for a cigarette, and stood next to the girl. Sarah, he found out.

“Yes, I would like some more wine,” she said, not to him but to the space in front of him, them. It took Brett a moment to register that she was talking to him and when he did it was slow, like honey sliding down a spoon. Sarah laughed, holding out her cup. He took it.

“I was wondering if that thing came away from your lips,” Brett
“You sure know how to talk to women,” Sarah said. “You know, they’re playing the latest superhero movie in there—I think it’s about a dog and a hamster—I’m sure you could squeeze in between the two chunk monsters on the end there.”

Brett coughed and looked down at the two empty cups in his hand. He could smell the ghost of Beefeater that stuck to the ice cubes in his.

“You must be family,” he said, “if you can get away with calling Jackson’s kid fat.”

Sarah laughed. “Pour me a drink and I’ll tell you.”

They watched Jeopardy every night after they started officially dating, four months after the party. By then, Sarah had decided to move into the city proper, away from the dilapidated farmhouse that she had occupied for the better part of the half-decade after college. After three months of nightly viewing, they decided to make a game out of it. They alternated keeping score, tallying the points and following all the official Jeopardy rules. They’d slap their thighs, the muted thump of skin against denim a buzzer stand-in. They sat side-by-side on the couch, dinners cooling rapidly on TV trays just outside their peripheral vision. It was Sarah, three weeks after they started keep score, who suggested they push dinner back by a half hour. She was tired, she said, of cold chicken.

Jeopardy wasn’t all they did—there were day trips to art galleries and picnics in state parks and the occasional 5k—but the trivia was by gar their favorite part in the early months when there were never enough text messages to fill the daytime hours they were apart. They made sure to be together each night, switching yoga classes and pushing back or cancelling happy hours with friends in order to speak in the form of a question for twenty-two minutes per night, five nights per week.

One month into scorekeeping, Brett was ahead in points while Sarah had the edge in games won. They kept score on a yellow pad stuck to the fridge door with a koala magnet from their first trip to the zoo together.

It was Christmas then, days and weeks falling away like holiday wrapping paper. Brett and Sarah decided to have their own celebra-
tion before each went home to parents and questions about jobs, apartments, and waistlines. Sarah’s parents were ecstatic. A nerd, just like you, they said. Brett didn’t tell his parents. The issue just didn’t come up between his father’s kidney stones and Aunt Harriet’s new online craft-a-quilt business that was, according to his mother, booming, doll, booming.

Sarah knocked on the door at quarter to seven, early as always. Jeopardy was on holiday break, so they weren’t worried about missing it. She wore a red dress that made her look like an elf out for a night on the town, all frills and sparkles, and Brett told her so. She smiled and punched him in the arm before stepping inside and shucking her coat off in his arms.

“So what did you make for dinner?” Sarah asked. She had slipped her shoes off and sat down at the table. In Brett’s loft apartment, the table straddled the carpet that marked the end of the living room and beginning of the dining room and kitchen. She looked around. There was a picture of a fireplace taped to the wall next to a foot-tall Christmas tree. Three stockings striped tube socks were stapled to the wall.

“Just in case Saint Nick is feeling generous,” Brett said when asked about it.

Hanging from strings all around the living room, as if frozen in time and space were computer paper snowflakes. Just below them, a red and green throw blanket was folded and placed on the end of the couch.

Brett was in the kitchen and Sarah turned to him when she heard a cork pop. It was the sound of victory, according to her father. “Greek,” Brett said, setting down a plate of what looked like green pillows and lemon slices. “Dolmadakia. Stuffed grape leaves. Try one.”

He knew she was adventurous enough to try at least one in part because she wanted to try knew things so she would know more, so she’d be ready for the game. Between her third and fourth, she conceded that they were better than they looked. Brett smiled then set down a glass of wine, showing her the bottle and explaining where in Greece it came from.

“I thought about getting retsina,” he said, “but I figured you wouldn’t want something made with pine resin.”

Sarah smiled, stood up, and kissed him on the nose.

“Smart boy.”

“It’s why I’m leading in Jeopardy. Duh,” he said, backstepping away from a flick to the forehead.

“You may have more points, but remember who’s win-
ning in games. I can’t help you refuse to never not bet a true daily double.”

Brett’s lips bunched for a moment, like someone had stuffed them with tissue paper, then relaxed. “It’s strategy, my dear. Strategy.”

Dinner, dessert and more wine followed. Brett felt the tops of his eyelids grow warm, followed by his cheeks. Throughout the meal, they held hands and played footsie. Sarah smiled at all points when she wasn’t chewing and Brett found himself not tapping his foot like he did through most meals. Between bites he kissed her hand and after kisses she’d wipe off the droplets of fish oil that had been left by his beard.

After their meal was done—the only thing left on the plates being grouper bones and grease—Brett clear the plates and brought out loukomathes, piled like golden rocks on the plate.

Sarah gave him a look, waiting for the name. She always wanted to know the names of things, in case it came up in a clue.

“Honey-covered doughnuts,” Brett said, savoring the look of disappointment on Sarah’s face when he didn’t immediately give her what she wanted. He picked one up, watching a string of honey hang like sweet spittle. “Loukomathes.”

There was one left on the plate, ripped in two, when Brett excused himself. He grabbed two six-inch square boxed from under the table where the tree sat and places them in front of her. Sarah took a moment to admire the ice dancing bears wrapping paper while Brett rubbed his forefingers against his thumbs, feeling the buildup of sweat.

“Merry Christmas,” Brett said as he pushed the dessert plates away from her end of the table.

Sarah bit the bottom lip of her smile and slowly, almost reverentially, Brett thought, unwrapped the boxes to find two buzzers, the names Brett and Sarah painted on top in the blocky swabs of someone who had never taken an art class in his life.

§

Brett got home from work one day in early March, just after they replaced the batteries in the buzzers for the first time. They used the buzzers outside of the game, too, like when Brett would use them to wake Sarah before running into the shower, knowing she’d chase him into the steam.

There was a computer printout sitting atop the mail.
Jeopardy testing would take place in two weeks. The words Good Luck were written at the bottom on the page in purple ink. Brett always thought Sarah’s breezy script belonged on beachscape paintings, not expense reports.

The night of the test, they both had their laptops on the table. Sarah was skimming an almanac and Brett swirled whiskey around in a tumbler. Every few seconds he would catch her eye, smirk, and go back to his drink. She was taking this much more seriously than he was. While he still enjoyed the game at night, the number of times he had to cancel, and the number of looks he got from coworkers and friends for doing so were piling up. His need to push things back was wearing thin and he was beginning to hate having to do it in the first place.

“Problem?” she asked, putting an index finger in the book before closing it.

“You’re cute.”

“Say that after I beat you and I’ll believe you.”

A minute later, Sarah’s phone alarm went off and she slid the book under her chair. Brett swallowed what was left of his drink and slid a set of headphones on.

“Cheating, I see,” Sarah said as she stretched her arms above her head, fingers intertwined. She rolled her neck from side to side, the bones popping like far away balloons.

“You wish.”

The next fifteen minutes were filled with keyboard clicks, sighs and Brett’s fist occasionally thumping the table, shaking both laptops. When he finished, Brett closed his computer to see Sarah’s head resting on her arms. He poked her elbow.

“How’d you do?”

Sarah laughed.

“Me too,” Brett said, standing and stretching. He took her hand and pulled her toward the couch and a waiting bottle of chilled wine.

§

They tried again and again. The game had lost its fire after the first year for Brett, but he soldiered on. Everyone had to make sacrifices, he told himself. This was his. He’d smile and postpone drinks and answer questions with Sarah every night. Those years saw job changes and promotions, family deaths and thousands upon thousands of accrued points. They only missed three weeks’ worth of new episodes and when they missed, they
missed them together. If anything, they were consistent. Sarah had begun to pull away in points and games, but she didn’t seem to realize that Brett wasn’t flustered about it.

The dinners that he knew could leave to bonuses were the ones that hurt Brett the most to miss. His friends would mention it around the water cooler or on the weekends when he did get to go out, but all he could muster was a tight smile or a shrug. They didn’t see how fanatical Sarah had gotten about the game. They didn’t see her index finger shake as it hovered over the buzzer, her name long ago worn away.

Sarah had begun to collect almanacs and encyclopedias. Whenever she saw one in a thrift store or at a garage sale—that was one of their only new traditions, garage sales, so Sarah could hunt for knowledge—she’d pick it up. There were piles of disordered facts around the apartment they now shared. She hadn’t renewed her lease and when she moved in, she brought all her books. Brett’s suggestion of a storage shed was shot down. What if she needed one for a certain category? Her eyes looked bloodshot more often. She was often up before him and stayed awake later at night. He had, in the beginning of all this, tried to be supportive. He’d make sure coffee was made while she showed and that she had plenty of fuel to get her through the day, but Brett stopped that when she stopped recognizing the effort.

“You need more sleep, babe,” he tried at one point.

“No, I need to read more. They had Expressionist painters on the other night and I don’t know Expressionist painters. I need to keep reading.”

“Studies say…” Brett began, but was cut off with a hand raised and two fingers pressed to his lips. Sarah’s eyes were on the book in her lap.

“I’ll go to sleep earlier tonight,” she’d say. She rarely followed through.

Sarah began to use Haydn to tune Brett out. When he heard one of the composer’s symphonies, he knew he shouldn’t even bother talking, Sarah wouldn’t hear him. She also never picked up on the nights that Brett spent speaking entirely in questions, sarcasm stuck to the bottoms of his words like old gum.

§

It was a Thursday during the Kid’s Tournament week and Brett had been invited out by some coworkers to celebrate an
older employee’s retirement. The man, McCormick, had helped Brett out when he first started and Brett looked up to him. He not only wanted to go, but felt he had to. Dinner and drinks were going to be free and downtown at a tapas bar McCormick helped part ownership in. Brett told Sarah a week in advance and she shrugged him off. She had been at the table, diagrams of a building Brett didn’t recognize spread out before her. Without taking her eyes off the arches, she flicked the nearby CD player up a notch.

The night of the party, Brett called Sarah from work to remind her about it. There was no way out of it, he told her. He tried to make it seem like he was being forced into it when in reality, he had done more to convince his coworkers to show up than anyone in the office. The man needed to be celebrated. He needed to go out in style.

Sarah picked up on the third ring. Brett heard classical strings in the background and imagined her sitting at the table, straight-backed and using a finger to slowly make her way down each page of whatever book she was reading. He frankly didn’t care. He had stopped trying weeks earlier. It was too much for him. He got home as close to game time as possible and, after the game and dinner, would usually make up an excuse to get out of the house—the gym, a tight deadline at work—just to spend time away from her and her books. Talk of marriage and kids had stalled as the books had begun to pile up. They were high enough to be used as extra coffee tables now. When he tried to bring it up, Sarah wouldn’t even entertain the idea of a pet. We just don’t have time, baby, she’d said.

“Game’s on soon, sweetie, you better get home. Is there traffic?” she asked.

“I won’t be home, remember?” Brett said.

There was a pause on the other end. He had intended to try once more to invite her out. This would be the first time only one of them had missed a game and Brett had borrowed an airplane bottle of vodka from his coworker Tommy before he made the call. He wasn’t sure how Sarah would handle it, but he wanted to be prepared.

“You didn’t tell me anything.”

Brett sighed. “I did. It’s McCormick’s retirement party. At Bolero. You can still come if you want. I’ll save you a seat so you don’t have to worry about being late. We’ll be there a while. I’m sure he’d love to see you, too.”

Brett paced his cubicle as he spoke. Terry, in the next
cube, poked his head and hands around the corner. He raised his eyebrows at Brett, then pointed to his watch. Brett held a finger up and turned his back.

“Really, sweetie. Please come out. It would mean a lot to me. I’m sure we can TiVo the episode for later or something.”

“We don’t have TiVo, we’ll miss it. And it would mean a lot to me if you came home so we could do this together.

“It isn’t like we’ve never missed before. We have. The world isn’t going to end. Alex Trebek will go on without us.”

Brett wondered for the briefest moment if by him missing the game the world would end.

“No,” Sarah said. “No. I’m not coming. I have to study. You’re going to lose tonight. You’re just going to lose. It’ll be a zero in our column. I need to study. See you later maybe. Bye.”

Sarah hung up before Brett could ask where she thought either of them might go so as not to see each other later. Terry rolled his chair around the corner to stare at Brett as he picked up his messenger bag and coat. They walked to the elevator together and as they reached the ground floor Brett turned his phone off. If she didn’t care, neither would he.

§

It was almost time for the next test, the fourth they’d take together in the same apartment at the same kitchen table. The veneer had faded away, but that was low on Sarah’s list of things to do on any given day. She was solely focused on the test and Brett was solely focused on wanting to beat her to just shut her up. He hoped that, if he was selected and she wasn’t, she’d give up. The fight would be taken from her. She took his studying to be preparing like old times and she loved it. Brett studied harder than he had in months because he was trying to end it all, once and for all. He didn’t want Jeopardy to be the reason they broke up. He really didn’t. He didn’t want to have to explain to people that he ended it because he lost out to a television show. Shit like that only happened on TV, not in real life. No, he was going to beat her and end this.

He borrowed her books, reading and rereading and rereading again. He downloaded trivia apps to his phone, playing between conference calls and while he was in the bathroom. He never felt more ready for anything. Brett couldn’t tell if it was vigor born from feeling like old times, when Jeopardy was a great way to end the day or energy he created from wanting to see Sarah
fail, but he didn’t care. He read. He memorized. He was ready.

The night of the test, Brett sat quietly across from Sarah as she sipped tea. An encyclopedia was open on her lap in addition to the one on the table. She had started wearing glasses in the past few weeks.

She looked up, a smile on her face. Test day was like Christmas for her, so full of promise and hope. It was the smile from before Jeopardy. “Ready, honey?”

He made a noise of assent. In his head, Brett ran through the lists of facts he had made.

§

Brett didn’t get the email. From the shower, though, he heard Sarah scream. A chill ran through him. He both had and hadn’t been looking forward to this day. He never wanted the shower to end just then. He wanted to stay in it forever, pruning up and not having to confront her. What was going to happen? She got it, he guessed, but what now? Neither of them had ever gotten this far.

He had studied, damn it. Harder than her, too. He should’ve gotten the email. Now the game would never end. She’d want to ramp everything up. She’d study more. He’d never see her outside in public. Hell, she probably wouldn’t even go out to celebrate. Books were her celebration now.

When Brett stepped out of the shower a few minutes later, Sarah had two beers in hand. They were from a pack he kept for special occasions and she had already downed half of hers. Was this how it was going to end? A semi-expensive beer in their kitchen?

“I can’t believe I got it,” she said. Her smile was as wide as the garbage dump in their town was tall.

“Great,” he said, popping the top of the bottle. “Great.” His voice, flat like paper, belied his words.

“Why aren’t you happier?” She asked. Her tone changed quickly as she stood to face him, fists knuckled against her hips.

“I am happy,” he said. He knew he didn’t sound it, but he also knew she didn’t know it was over.

“Liar. You’re not happy because you didn’t get it,” Sarah said. The last few words were sing-song and teasing.

“I’m sure it’s just a callback for the interview part. Isn’t that what happens? It isn’t like you’re on the show. Lots of people get those.”
“Yeah, but you didn’t.”

Sarah stuck her tongue at him, a playful gesture that Brett did not return. Instead, he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was still in a towel and could feel the fold that kept it cinched around his waist loosen. He became aware of his breathing, loud in his ears. His chest began to pound, like it had when he found out his father had died during a routine procedure the year before. He felt his heart could pop out, shredded by the force of being pushed through his rib cage. He knew that couldn’t happen, though. He’d read it was physically impossible. Brett felt his tonsils swell and twist in the back of his throat—the sign his body had used since childhood to tell him he was about to cry. “Oh well,” he said. Brett looked down at his beer and drained it in one long swig. What was he going to do now? He had no clue. There was no question he could ask that would yield a sufficient response. He decided on looking for more to drink. The alcohol would at least delay whatever was to come next. He pulled the Johnnie Walker Black Label out of the closet and grabbed a glass with Mickey Mouse etched into the side. He filled it to Mickey’s ears, making it look like he was drowning the mouse. He wasn’t unhappy with the thought.

Sarah was behind him, sliding her arms under his and around his waist, her head on his back. Brett smelled her lavender-mint body spray come over him like a hood. Sarah squeezed and Brett pushed a hit and shoulder out, trying to push her off. “What’s wrong?” “What?” he said. “Nothing.” “You’ve got the Johnnie Black out because you felt like it?” “Yeah,” Brett said. He drank half the glass and closed his eyes to ward off the burn. “I’m celebrating. Celebrating you.” He coughed, raised the glass. “Right,” she said. “Right.” “I can understand if you had won, if you were the one getting the call back, but you weren’t. I am. I wish you would be fucking happy for me here, Brett.” Sarah pushed off him and he turned to face her. How could she not see what was happening? How could she not see that he wouldn’t really have a girlfriend until this was all over? “Just leave it alone, okay? I’m celebrating you. I’m happy for you,” Brett said. “Why don’t you get that?” “I hear what you’re saying, but forgive me if I don’t be-
lieve you.”

She took a step toward him, but backed up just as quickly. When she spoke again, her tone was softer.

“We did this together. Remember? Think of all the times you helped me. Think of all that. This isn’t about me. This is about us.” Sarah paused. “Us.”

It didn’t feel like they had done it together. Not one bit.

“We didn’t do it together,” he said. “You won. I get it. You’re happy. All those games, all those half-hours and for what? Nothing. Nothing is in it for me. Think of all that time I could’ve been productive.”

The missed dinners and drinks and all that time came rushing back to him. Why had he let himself get suckered into this stupid game in the first place? Why hadn’t he put a stop to it sooner, before the first test? It was because he loved her, he knew, but it didn’t seem like that was worth much in the moment. She had, after all that time, gotten her way. She had gotten the prize. Now she’d never want to stop.
The words stung Sarah and it showed on her face. Her knuckles were white around the bottle neck and her eyes were wide.

“How could you even say that? What aren’t you getting about this? Why are you being like this, Brett?”

Brett wanted to ask her the same questions. What wasn’t she getting? Why was she being like this? He couldn’t though, for as soon as she finished her beer, she slammed the bottle in the sink—it struck Brett as almost funny that it didn’t break and he didn’t know why—and she stomped into their bedroom. He heard the door slam.

What was he left with? What was next? Those were the only questions he had left. He didn’t know. Brett grabbed another beer from the fridge and sat on the couch, staring at the piles of books. He had been given the answers for so long, he didn’t even know where to look to the one he needed.
...these new consorts were no mere children sneaking out of their parents’ homes late at night, nor were they self-pitying individuals morosely searching for something they’d lost along the way in the bottom of a bottle or a pipe. These people were broken, perhaps more so than most. But, rather than wallow alone in self pity, they had formed an asylum of like-minds, a collective consciousness that forgave all sins—nay, encouraged them. These people, no strangers to tragedy, chose rage over defeat. These were the roving bands of Clockwork hooligans for which crowds of Normals parted like the Red Sea on the rare occasions they were seen in daylight. These were anarchists—the Lost Boys bound together by organized chaos, obsession, and despair—these were the Devil’s familiars. And they wanted me.

I wasn’t quite sure how I’d fallen in with this crowd. Was my need for human connection so desperate that I could stray so far from my Christian upbringing? Was my soul so corrupted that I could deny the virtues of pious abstinence? Was I really so lucky? All I knew for certain was that multiple personal crises, many of my own doing, had led me to this repurposed church peopled with the most dazzlingly beautiful denizens of Hell; my Crises of Conscience, of Faith, and Identity. This place, with its stone walls reverberating gothic punk and industrial music through three stone stories of velvet and vinyl, leather and feathers, this was a place where you could raise a big middle finger to whatever force
had ever oppressed you with its version of Order. Every sweaty, sparkly, sinewy body on the dance floor screamed out in belligerent defiance, saying “Fuck you, Mom and Dad! Fuck you Society, and Fuck God too! I’ll make my own way without you!” For tonight at least, I would join in this rebel yell.

I’d never been one for theatricality, and dance had always been to me a form of societal oppression with too many rules to be a form of self-expression. Dance in a line, dance in a square, dance with a partner, lead and follow—but always get it right, never step on anyone’s toes, and stay in your box. But, in this place, lesser demons wore their angst on the outside as identifying marks, proclaiming at once “I am nothing like you or anyone else,” and “We are kindred spirits on this journey together.” On any given night, the ghastly uniforms could range from elaborate Steampunk to tattered black rags, from nymphic specters to monster-movie magic. Glasses clinked with tones of sanguine liquids or translucent spirits. Stages and dances floors everywhere undulated and gyrated with masses of nonconformity and inebriation of every sort. I might at any moment find myself engulfed in a decadent industrial orgy of body paint and leather, or swaying in solitude to the primal forces of Carmina Burana.

Every second of existence was then reduced to a singular focus on the contents of that second; this was living in the now, this was freedom from the burdens that plagued the righteous. This was the redemptive power of ultimate acceptance that healed wounds inflicted by a malicious and judgmental society. In the embraces of strangers, my social dysfunction was cured. In the arms of a goddess wearing nothing but silver dust and stilettos, I could not recall the torment of being turned out by my family. At the crack of a cat o’ nine tails, my sins against God were redeemed. For a precious, brilliant, resplendent moment in time, the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders and responsibility was unknown to my soul.

I would catch a glimpse of something in the flash of an eye when, by chance, I might happen upon another outside of our communal refuge. There was an unspoken, denied, but common sense among us that this was a transitional period, not a permanent way of life. Tomorrow, we would wake, recover, scrape smeared make-up from our faces, and prepare to conform to the humdrum of whatever our Monday morning existence might require. But for tonight, and for many tonights in the coming months, this congregation of misfits would be my sanctuary. This would be my strange convalescence.
LAYER ONE: CICADA

Tymbals jump
start - ‘57 Chevy
ingine

LAYER TWO: CEASAR SALAD

watch tongs toss lettuce to vinegar

learn to eat

LAYER THREE: TREE RINGS

Beetle’s record.
Bugs needle their way across
muggy air.

LAYER FOUR: PLANES

too short to be a flight attendant

too poor to board Seattle

LAYER FIVE: CICADA

[exit into humid heat]

LAYER SIX: SHORT RED JUMPER

Striped.

My father smiles.

LAYER SEVEN: CICADA

associate childhood Japan;
open forest apartments
White tiles reflecting the shoes click-clacking upon them stared blankly up to the white ceiling as two patrons sandwiched between them focused their attention on the few paintings hung upon the blank white walls of the Museum of Modern Art.

“This is awesome. It’s so striking.” Valerie stopped in front of a piece by Matisse, her husband Tim walked to join her.

“What does it mean?” Tim’s left cheek crowded his eye as he focused on it.

“Le rideau jaune; the yellow curtain, it says. It’s obviously a painting of a yellow curtain but I think that it’s an allegory of something more.” Valerie’s voice trailed off into the room as she refused to break her stare from the painting.

Tim leaned in and squinted his eyes at the strange arrangement of turquoise and yellow lines. “Well, that doesn’t look like a yellow curtain to me.” He laughed and turned to Valerie. “I don’t understand this modern art stuff.”

“It means something more than what’s portrayed, the colors mean something. It’s not about looking like anything but saying something important.”

“Hon, it’s just a painting.” Tim pulled himself closer and slid his
hand down her back as she stiffed up, resting it on her waist.

“I think it’s a statement on rebirth.” Valerie shrugged him off. “Just the use of colors and, and the shapes seem to call out for something new, you know? It’s as if the artist is calling the audience to action. It wants us to change the world.”

Tim’s eyes lost focus. Valerie’s arms extended and began to jut out towards the piece and Tim with her explanation. “Before we can change our world we have to change ourselves. This painting is calling us to start the process by changing ourselves. It wants us to improve ourselves. Matisse is calling for self-improvement with this painting. Matisse wants us to take up new hobbies, cut the toxic people out of our lives, move to different places. Can’t you see any of that?”

“All I see is a fucking painting. You always have to do this. You always have to look so deeply into every-fucking-thing.” His voice fell upon her ears like the soft Kentucky rain upon a riding lawnmower.

“You don’t respect me.”

“When the hell did I say that? Jesus Christ, you read into everything I fucking say.” The lawnmower was getting closer. “Every time we go someplace you do something stupid and make things into a bigger issue than they are. I just don’t like the fucking painting, it’s not like I’m saying anything about you.”

“Don’t raise your voice to me.”

Tim looked at Valerie.

“I’m sorry.” His calloused hand reached out to her shoulder. Valerie could smell the grass, the rain, and the buzzing that twisted into her head like a knife.

“Don’t touch me.”

The hand dropped to the side and balled up. “Why do you have to be such a coldass bitch? I’m not trying to get into a fucking argument here.”

“I don’t want to get into an argument eith—”

“Then why the fuck do you have to start this shit?”

“You’re the one who started it. I was just trying to explain the painting to you”

“Hon, I don’t give a fuck about that goddamn painting.”

Tim rolled his eyes and dropped his shoulders. “You’re the one making it out to be some amazing work of art.”

“You always do this. You always make this about me.”

“You started it.”

“You’re the one that raised your voice and started curs-
“Jesus Christ.” Tim shook his head.
“I resent you taking God’s name in vain.”
Tim drew away towards the other paintings in the hall. They didn’t make sense, they looked pretty but they just didn’t have any real meaning to him. He remembered his home in Kentucky. The cats that all came out whenever his dad put out pans of milk on the side of the whitewashed house. The feel of the cool dirt crushing under his feet when he was a kid. Smoking weed in the ditch by the forest and throwing some seeds from the bag into the whispering creek. Drinking Jack with his buddies. The time he wrapped his car around the tree and how unreal the world seemed after that. His eyes returned to Valerie.

Valerie stood in front of the painting. Focusing on it and drawing her thoughts around its stencil. Trying to suck the psychic energy from it. She tuned out Tim’s approach as her mind took her down the road of assessing the situation. She wasn’t going to apologize to him. He had to come to her. He was the one who was wrong here, not her. She would not submit to him, not again. Break him down, once she did that she could rebuild him in her own image.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Valerie forced her eyes to meet his.
Whatever path she seemed to be pondering had just lead to a fork.

“I just wish you would listen to me.” Her voice cracked at the edges.

“Why can’t you take a joke? Why does everything have to be so serious? I agree it’s a pretty picture.” He tried a tan smile. Valerie looked back at the picture and forced back a cry that refused to be stifled. “It’s more than just a pretty picture. Why can’t you understand?” She began to search her bag for the wad of crumbling tissues as tears started to roll down her reddened face.

“Hon,” He moved closer to her with an embrace in mind but Valerie strutted back, her short heels clicking as she attempted to maintain balance.

“I’m alright.” She dabbed the wadded tissues at her eyes.
“I don’t know what you want.” Valerie smiled, with a laugh, “Well that makes two of us.”

“Can you explain again what this painting means?” Straightening up, Valerie looked once more at the piece.
“Well, it’s obviously about new life. New beginnings. The colors he used are very bright and life affirming.” Her excited little fists popped open like exploding fireworks. The whole scene dripped of a certain false charisma that Tim found endearing.
“Matisse is obviously a very avant-garde artist who had a vision. It’s clear that he wanted to start a revolution with his art.” Valerie looked at Tim and clenched her fists. “He wanted to light the world ablaze with his beliefs.”

“So he was a communist?” Tim cracked a smile.

“I don’t know, probably, most artists had beliefs like that. But that doesn’t really matter, what matters is what he hoped to achieve with this. I don’t think he really wanted to start a revolution with this piece. Or maybe it was meant to be a revolution of the mind. Or a personal revolution.” Valerie’s voice sank but her eyes remained on the picture, holding back the waterfall in her head.

Tim sidled up to her once more and put his arm around her. He tried to press her to him but she refused.

“Stop.”

“Honey, what’s wrong?” His eyes searched for hers but she remained elusive. His hand dragged itself to the back of her head and attempted to turn it toward him. She threw him off.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” she said. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“You’re my goddamn wife and you won’t even look at me. What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Don’t touch me like that, just, just stop trying to get so close. Just give me some space.”

Tim’s hands balled up once more but he took a deep breath. “What’s the problem? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t start shit about nothing and expect me to say nothing while you prance around in one of your bitchy moods.”

“I don’t love you.”

“Fuck you.”

As Tim turned and walked away, all Valerie could remember was how they always fought. It was just about stupid things, things that really never mattered though it always seemed so strange how differently they saw them. Valerie wished Tim read more. She wished he went to college. She wished he wasn’t from bumfuck, nowhere. She wished for so many things at that instant that her head started to hurt. As the clicking of Tim’s shoes become more distant, she tried to think of something to say to bring him back. All she could think about was the Yellow Curtain.

The city was a blur for Tim. It always was but today felt even more so. After paying highway robbery for a pack of Marlboros and a lighter, he stood on the sidewalk and tried to smoke
his tension away. His thoughts returned to his home, was there anything left there? He tried to envision the girls of his hometown. He sunk their faces, added some weight, even some bruises around the eyes for a few. He shuddered. For some reason, he couldn’t ever imagine going home. So where would he go now?

He could feel his phone vibrate. He didn’t want to pick up. He just wanted to forget her. For some reason he started to feel sicker with each drag than he had before. It’d been awhile. Looking at the screen, his heart started to sink as he thought of Valerie.

Valerie called him and called him and called him as she stood outside the Museum of Modern Art. After the third attempt, she sat down at a bench and tried to cry. Her eyes watered but she couldn’t muster a sound. She thought about what she saw in Tim. Rough, large, calloused hands had impressed her in an urban gardening class. She wanted to start growing her own fruit and vegetables, just to be a bit more self-sufficient. Instead, she found herself enraptured by Tim’s deep voice that rang like a mallet between two Kentucky hills. It was a voice coming from a blue-eyed, brown-haired country boy who seemed to strike her as what a man should be. After class she found herself flirting with this man who was sort of funny. He attempted to make her laugh, and sometimes missed the mark. Well, he missed the mark a bit. He was too conservative, that was it. But he wasn’t as firm as some other people she had known. He could probably change. Valerie had one hand on the bench while she tried to regain her composure.

He made her feel good. He made her feel warm in bed and drove away the loneliness. His embrace was sometimes smothering, but she did feel safe. Yeah, she felt safe. He did a lot for her. Even though he didn’t go to church he agreed to get married in a chapel. That was a compromise, right? He even let her choose where they went on honeymoon and they had a really good time on St. Thomas. Holding her hand as they braved chilled water, she lost herself in his roaring laugh and real, genuine, smile.

Their wedding was a good moment. Tim looked so sharp standing by the altar. He never accompanied her to church afterwards though. That burned her. Sometimes she just couldn’t keep quiet about it. God was important. He had helped her so many times in her life. She needed to be thankful. Her mind went back a few weeks to a Sunday breakfast. She had just gotten back from morning Mass and Tim was sitting at the table, reading
“Hey honey, how was church?”

“It was really interesting. The priest had this sermon on how we should…” His eyes never left the paper. They just scanned the lines as her voice brushed off him.

“Excuse me?”

Tim looked up, “Can you make breakfast?”

Valerie bit her lip. “You’re a wicked man.”

And so kicked off several days of fighting. Valerie couldn’t even really explain the fight, it just seemed to happen. Once it got started, they would just throw things at each other. She’d try to hurt him as much as she could, just to show she wasn’t some submissive Southern Belle. He didn’t seem to understand that she wasn’t willing to put up with his shit. She deserved his respect, even if she had to demand it. Valerie started to control her breathing and looked at her phone again: One missed call. Tim.

Tim wandered through the crowds on the sidewalk with a fuzzy mind. He didn’t want to call her. He knew he shouldn’t, but he ended up calling. Valerie seemed so broken to him. She seemed too needy. But she would try to camouflage this. He remembered how she first came up to him after a class he was teaching. She tried flirting with him, but was just so… scared? Maybe. The memory was fuzzy. Most of his memories before meeting Valerie were. He drank a lot back then. Why had he come to the city? He wanted more from life but he didn’t have the tools to take it. He didn’t have a degree, he didn’t have connections or the eloquence of a lot of the big movers. Maybe this limited him but he had tried to do his best with what he had.

He could grow fruit and vegetables, corn, soy. He could grow fat, round tomatoes and juicy, bulging blackberries. He could also fix and build things with his hands. But so could a million other guys. He had thrown himself into projects to make a living and try to make something. Sometimes he had to squat but the job at a continuing education center was a Godsend. It started when he’d met some hippies who were big on growing their own food, but didn’t know how. The hydroponic setup they used for their weed didn’t work well for tomatoes, carrots, squash and the other vegetables. But they had all this space on the roof of their building they didn’t use. Seeing an easy solution, Tim went to work on setting up a garden on the roof and ended up making a name for himself. Hippies, students, old ladies would pay him for his services and he loved the job. It was safer than dealing and felt more real. He had established himself in the city.
against whatever odds he faced. Then he met Valerie.

Tim looked at his phone again. No missed calls. He tried to recall what he loved about Valerie and walked into somebody. Stumbling back, he turned into a corner and took out another cigg. Valerie had gotten him to quit. She could be so cold sometimes. She would sometimes just snap and try to break him down. Was this what a relationship was supposed to be like? Was this a marriage? His mother never spoke to his father like Valerie did to him. His mother also didn’t have a career like Valerie did. She was a secretary, no, an administrative assistant. She would get mad whenever he confused them and God help him if he ever made a joke. That woman was immune to humor. He couldn’t live without laughing. Why the fuck did she take everything so seriously? It was like she had a stick up her ass. He was joking at the museum. He didn’t care about the fucking painting. She didn’t want to just make fun of it, she had to act like she knew everything. Tim felt his phone vibrate again. Hesitating, he picked it up.

“Hey, where are you?”
“Smoking.”
“Where are you smoking?”
“Outside”
Valerie’s voice started to waver. “Can we talk? Can we just talk? I don’t want to play any games.”
“You’ve been playing games all fucking day.” Tim caught himself. “I’m sorry. I… I don’t know what to say.”
Tim waited. There was dead air. “Wanna meet back at the apartment?”
“Sure.”
“OK, I’ll see you then.” He hung up on her and started to make his way back. The crowds always disoriented him. Sometimes the only way he felt good walking around the city would be when he was drunk. When he came to the city, he found out it wasn’t very acceptable to be drunk during the day. For some reason, he and his friends tended to find themselves in that situation a lot back home.

To say that life was easier back home would be a lie. Tim knew life was just as hard as it was in the city, maybe harder, especially since there were fewer jobs. Somehow Tim found it easier to make things work in Kentucky than in New York though. Whether it was working as a handyman or selling pot to students at nearby colleges, he always had enough. Enough for a party with his friends, or a night out with a girl. Now, even when he
worked a full week, he had a hard time getting into a nice restaurant with Valerie.

Valerie entered the apartment with unease. Tim wasn’t there, so she had time to compose herself. She had time to prepare herself. Valerie tidied up their kitchen table while she tried to think of what to say. Looking at some invoices, she felt a jolt of jealousy. She had always hated that Tim owned his own business. It was good. It was good that he owned his own business but it made her feel so down. She had always had ideas, but those around her would always beat her down. At her work, her suggestions were ignored, growing up she was ignored, with her friends… Valerie felt tired. It was a shitty day.

Valerie took a seat on their couch and looked around the apartment. She tried to think of what to do. She had ideas, but no one ever wanted to help her put them in action. Maybe that was a sign. Tim never really considered her ideas; he always told her that she never thought things through. And she didn’t, if she was being honest with herself, she always had a vague plan but had a hard time realizing it. That had to change. If it didn’t, she would be stuck in this place forever. Stuck being called “hon” and listening to stupid jokes about shit she cared about. Stuck being held in housewife hostage by the man who just walked in.

“Hello.”

Valerie looked at him, “I’m sorry for what I said, but we need to talk.”

“Just say what you want to say, I’m not stopping you. I’ve never tried to stop you.”

Valerie stood up. “I want you to respect me.”

Tim’s eyes widened. “I do fucking respect you! You’re my wife, I respect you a lot. What the hell do I have to do to let you know?”

“Encourage me. Help me out with a project. I don’t know, just be supportive.”

“Honey, I don’t know what to tell you. If you want to do something, you need to do it yourself. If this is about one of your dumb little ideas—“

“They’re not dumb, don’t you dare talk down to me.”

“Babe, you wanted to make mosaics once, you didn’t even know where to get the tiles, you can’t even fucking draw! I’m trying to be realistic.”

“I could learn though! You don’t believe I can do anything!” Valerie started to walk around the couch toward Tim.

Tim kept his distance, “That’s because you haven’t done
anything. You always talk about your plans but then give up, you don’t ever follow through. You can’t expect people to just help you with everything you want. You need to fucking work on shit to get it done!”

Valerie paused. She was standing by the window. “How can people expect me to do things if they’re always trying to bring me down?”

Tim started to walk towards her, softening his eyes, “Honey, you need to ignore what other people say.”

“Yeah.” Valerie was looking out the window.

Tim got close and put his hands around her. He didn’t draw her close. “I love you. I’m sorry if I don’t always show it in the best ways, but I try my hardest.” His words washed over her in his stumbling, rugged drawl. “I can’t read you all the time I guess. You mean a lot to me, you really do.”

Valerie looked at him. “I’m sorry, I just don’t love you.”

Tim’s hands fell off her and he stepped back. “I want to smack you, you cruel fucking bitch. I want to fucking smack you, you fucking bitch, where the fuck do you get off saying that?” Valerie teared up. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I ever loved you”

“So it meant nothing? Fuck you.” Tim’s hand flew to his head as he spun around trying to comprehend what was happening. He looked and hit his thighs with his clenched fists as he took deep breaths. He saw a lamp on a table, picked it up, and flung it against a wall.

“You’re nice, you tried to be there for me but I just can’t do it. I can’t devote my life to someone else. At least for now.” Valerie put her hand on the window and leaned on it.

“Fuck you, just fuck you, just…” Tim’s hands tore at his hair.

“We need to get a divorce.”

Tim walked to the kitchen counter, “I thought the church was against divorce.”

“I can get an annulment” Tim started laughing. “Jesus Christ, I don’t understand you.” He turned to face her, “I don’t know what you want. Do you think you’re going to do something big with your life? Do you think this is like a movie? Am I just a fucking bad guy standing between you and your dream? Have I ever hit you?” He grabbed the side of the counter and twisted his head towards Valerie.

Valerie looked at the shattered lamp. Tim locked his gaze on her. “Answer me, have I ever hit you?”
“It isn’t about that.”
“Have I ever fucking hit you?”
“No.”
“So I’m not the bad guy?”
Valerie looked across the livingroom into his soft blue eyes and tried to see what she first saw in them, but all she could see was Tim. “It isn’t like that.”
Tim started laughing again, “I don’t know what to tell you, you do whatever you want and when you realize that you can’t, you can come back.”
Valerie started walking towards the door, “I’m going to be staying at my sister’s.”
“Does she know yet?”
Valerie opened the door and looked back, “I’m sorry.”
“Just go.”
As she shut the door, Tim looked around at the apartment. It seemed colder now that Valerie left. Maybe it wasn’t Valerie. He looked at the lamp, pieces scattered below a yellow curtain. He’d spend some time picking it up, and then he’d watch the game.
Hallways hinder each move. 
Is this what you were hoping for?
Take me to the enclosed
where bones feel bones — it’s only natural.
Yellow walls as our green-light...

Anticipated driveways give way
to summer evenings’ hesitant intoxication,
norepinephrine and dopamine
on the table beside the whiskey.
My excessive smile is proof...

Rationale crumbles with flavor
Is this what I was hoping for?
Tortellini and celestial bodies
settle between ours.
We sway with confetti plastered chests...

With tirades beneath us,
your being is certainty.
The universe’s glitch,
our salvation.
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