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Whatever It Is We're Competing For

Ferris W. McDaniel
University of New Orleans, fmcdan2@gmail.com

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Whatever It Is We're Competing For

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Ferris Wayne McDaniel

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This Is the Final Call for Flight

Rain has begun pelting the windows in the airport as we wait in line for coffee. I listen for the drops' patter against the panes, but it's too loud in the concourse, in the vortex of fractured conversations, and ringing cellphones, and intercom announcements. Basha hasn't stopped looking at her own phone since we passed through security and that little girl asked her if we were married while we slipped our shoes back on. Basha didn't say a word. She scanned the room like she was looking for an exit or something. That's how it seemed. We aren't married, so why couldn't she just say, No, he's my boyfriend, my partner? Now I can't stop asking myself, *Where are we going?*

Right now we're on our way to Chicago. Our performance exhibit there, at The Project Room, might be our riskiest yet. People in underground art circles are referring to us as the

millennial versions of Marina Abramović and Uwe Laysiepen. The plan is for me to be chained underwater, holding my breath. Basha will also be submerged. She'll be the only person who can unlock my binds. We'll maintain eye contact throughout, and she'll provide me with oxygen from a tank, using her mouth, as if we were kissing. She'll be my lungs for half an hour. If she falters, I could suffocate.

The barista asks Basha if she'd like something to drink, but Basha's locked into her phone.

"We'll take two red eyes," I say.

"Make mine a dead eye," Basha says without looking up. "But with four shots of espresso instead of three. Whatever that would be called."

"We haven't slept much," I say.

"You don't have to justify our coffee orders," Basha says.

I tense up from her comment, but I don't respond. Instead, I smile at the barista. She asks for a name for the coffee, and I tell her mine is Sayer.

"Pretty name," she says and turns to grind our espresso beans.

As we wait for our drinks, there's a boy who's a krishna sitting across the walkway. He's eyeing Basha's stockings. I can tell he thinks she looks pretty. She does, but I don't tell her. She always says pretty is the last compliment she wants to receive. So instead, I nudge her. "Hey, Basha." I nod toward the boy.

When she glances at him, he looks away. "What?" she asks.

"He was staring at you," I say.

“So what? Are you jealous? Go get one of his little books to help us with our lives.”

I want to say, “So you recognize something is wrong with our lives,” but I can’t tell if she’s serious or joking.

The barista hands us our coffee, and we find a couple of adjacent seats at our gate. Basha still smells of sleep, and her hair is in a tangle. She begins reading something on her phone again, probably from one of those online, long-form sites she’s obsessed with like *The Atlantic* or *Quartz* or *Byliner*.

“Are you going to spend the entire day inside your phone?” I ask, feeling brave.

“There’s nothing else to do right now.” She doesn’t look at me when she says this. “We’re just waiting.”

“Oh, right,” I say. “Having a conversation would just be absurd.”

“I’m *exhausted*, Sayer” she says. “My teeth feel heavy, I’m so tired. I just want to sort of zone out.”

I keep my mouth shut. It’s hard to argue with that. Between post-performance adrenaline and constant traveling, we’re lucky to get four hours of sleep a night. Sitting down for a few minutes gives new meaning to how worn out I am. The people around us remind me of extras in a movie. There are couples looking fresh in travel clothes and holding hands, an elderly man in a business suit with a comb over that’s getting away from itself, a family of five with three children arguing who’ll get to eat the last miniature cupcake.

I sip my coffee, but it’s still too hot, and I burn my tongue. For some reason, I want to blame Basha.

It's the end of our three-month tour. We've never been around each other this much for this long, even though we live together. Every city looks the same at this point. Conglomerates of steel and flesh, coffeehouses and art galleries, airport runways and chic hostels. The only thing that's different are the performances we put on.

We started in San Francisco at SoEx. All of our friends came to the show, which involved Basha cradling me in her lap like a baby and insulting me for twenty minutes but with the tone of a loving mother. Then she placed me down on the floor and walked around the room while I crawled after her. Eventually, she walked out of the gallery. I followed on all fours. We caught a taxi before anyone could realize the performance was finished and headed straight for the airport.

In Brooklyn, we did this stunt at a gallery called 247365 where we stood on the edge of the roof of the building and used each other as leverage to create a V-shape with our bodies, except Basha's fell toward the roof and mine toward the street below. We did this while simultaneously reciting different E.E. Cummings poems to each other, ending with the same poem, "I Like My Body When It Is With Your."

Then last night in New Orleans at Good Children Gallery, we ate dinner in complete silence in the middle of a packed crowd. When we were finished, Basha moved behind me, kissed me on the neck, and ushered me to a wall, where I stood. She spread my legs, placed an apple on a stool, just below my crotch, and blindfolded me. She positioned herself at the opposite wall thirty feet away and shot the apple with a bow. The crowd whistled and stomped against the hardwood floor, and this group of women shouted their love for Basha, threw roses at her feet. We had sex in the alley outside afterward, sort of as a coda. It was like Basha wanted to absorb me into her body. It's those moments that make me stay, that give me hope, but when they're done, she's gone.

For each performance, we wear small cameras around our foreheads to record the other person. We superimpose the footage from the previous show somewhere in the current show, with the occasional bolded message on the screen that says **THIS IS AN ART PERFORMANCE, THIS IS NOT REAL LIFE**, which, as Basha has pointed out, is the conceit. If she lets go or aims too high or refuses to give me air, it suddenly *is* real life. Anyone can see fragments of our performances online. It was her idea to have people post their pictures and videos of us with tags like #BashaSullivan, #SayerCollins, #AprèsGardeArt, and #RelianceExhibit.

For three months, I've trusted her to keep me safe, and today I'm beyond tired. Each molecule in my body seems to be colliding with the others like I'm a canned torso inside a pneumatic paint shaker.

Basha's voice sounds like it's coming from a tin-can telephone when she speaks. "There's this op-ed online arguing that the internet is making flying inferior. Like, you don't have to fly to experience the world anymore. It'll come to you. If you'd like, quote, *bespoke lopapeysa, you don't need to go to Iceland; you can order it online*, end quote. People will still fly for certain things like visiting families or for vacation, but for, quote, *global connection and fast access, air travel is now largely obsolete*, end quote."

"Doesn't that take the fun out of it?" I ask. "And the meaning? We couldn't get to our art exhibit through the internet and neither could the audience."

"Not true," she says. "Just like we live-stream ourselves having sex at home, we could perform our exhibit that way. People spend most of the time at our shows recording it on their phones anyway."

"So why aren't we doing that, then?"

“Because airplanes aren’t inferior yet,” she says. “It’s a happening. Besides, I like feeling the presence of people watching us at shows. It’s, like, the very *nature* of performance arts. That performative relationship between artist and audience.”

Where are we going?

“Listen, I just had the strangest sensation back there after we passed through security,” I say.

“Was it from there?” She nods at my lap. “Maybe there’s a family restroom somewhere we can mark.”

“Not now,” I say. “It was visceral. A feeling of simultaneous hyperdrive and non-movement. Like, what’re we *doing*? Maybe it’s just me.”

“Sounds too esoteric for the amount of sleep I’ve had,” she says. “My phone’s low on battery. Be right back.”

She leaves me for the charging station, and I wish she would’ve stayed to help me figure this feeling out because it’s about us.

Sometimes I think we just revolve around each other. She used to talk to me, not just relate quotes from articles she’s read, and I don’t know how we changed. Once, I told her how upset I get that people all around me cover up their sadness with ironic jokes about sadness and how I can’t tell anymore if people are really sad or not. She told me about how she used to want to transcend her humanness but now wants nothing more than to be a good human.

There are two birds flying around inside at our gate, from one monitor to another and back. Their flight is a pendulum nobody else seems to be watching except me. Back and forth, back and forth. I wonder, *Where are they flying to?* and make myself laugh. Back and forth, back

and forth. It's so heavy in this airport and no place for birds. Someone should really get them out of—

With the permanent marker I always carry with me, I write my name, *Basha Sullivan*, on the gray wall to my right. Then: *used this toilet as an emotional incubator*. I sniffed Sharpies from time to time when I was in high school. I still love that smell.

Underneath the bathroom stall door ahead of me, there's, like, this moving picture of shoe styles. I imagine what the owner of the ballerina flats looks like, then the owner of the oxfords, then the owner of the tiny sneakers, then the owner of the—

Oh god, why does anyone think it's a good idea to wear those hideous brown gladiator boots that come up to your knee? And look at this woman. She's almost as bad with her leopard print wedge booties. And is this lady really wearing a pair of d'Orsay pumps with *bows on them*? They totally clash with her varicose veins.

I mean, my Chelsea boots are scuffed and a little dusty but they're still undeniably low-key hip while also being durable-slash-comfortable enough for extended travel. I could smash some creep's face in with these if he accosted me. Sayer gave them to me last Christmas.

I told him I was going to charge my phone even though my battery is still at, like, eighty percent but I couldn't sit there for long. He was watching those two birds inside the airport and didn't see me slip away. I think. That question he asked: *What're we doing*? No way dude. Not a conversation I'm getting into right now unless he wants me to freak. I can't handle that

existential yammer slash Complete Emotional Honesty on the day before our diciest performance. The world goes all walls-are-breathing and a hundred people's voices chattering in my ear and skin breaking out in sweat even though it's freezing in this airport.

It's super chill in the bathroom though. Hideous or not, the tapping of the women's shoes as they enter, paired with the white noise from the automatic hand-dryers, fill the space like a tonic. I don't want to leave yet. I want to stay until my phone alerts me that we're boarding but Sayer will start to worry about where I'm at soon so I take a breath and flush even though I only *sat there* on the disposable toilet seat cover. I read somewhere online that these paper liners were first invented because people were scared of getting STDs from some strango's pee. Personally, I just can't stand the feeling of an already-warm toilet seat.

Sayer is conked out when I get back to the charging station. I twist my hair into cute little braids. He's slouched a little lower in his seat every time I look at him. He does this thing of pouting his bottom lip when he sleeps. Reminds me of a cranky little boy but, like, in a way that makes me want to snap a polaroid of him and keep it somewhere safe. Even asleep, he comes off like he's trying to figure something out.

He's basically the reason for this tour. The performances were mostly his ideas. When I first met him, when he explained some of his past public art pieces, I thought he was brilliant—like high-key emotional intelligence. I mean, I still think he is but I was crushing *hard* when he explained how he had once biked around San Fran and chiseled away a little bit of grout in certain brick walls so he could insert USB flash drives with only the plug jutting out of the wall. Then he replaced the grout so the drive was cemented in. People could access them to read files with directions to other drives—if they, like, stopped to smell the roses. It was this next-level scavenger hunt. The drives all had messages on them like, *Do you think you're beautiful?* and

It's okay to be sad about being sad and Sometimes the loss of my childhood is too much to bear.

Real gushy, sentimental, way-too-honest stuff. But I ate it up.

It was everything I wanted to be but couldn't. *Can't*. I don't know.

And the performance tomorrow is, like, Sayer's *baby*. I have to be his lungs for half an hour. That's how he puts it. I've stopped smoking just for this show which is totally ironic because boy could I ever use a cigarette. I keep trying to visualize the steps in my head because, well, we have only ever practiced the whole *dependent breathing thing* in our bathtub. Nobody has ever trusted me the way Sayer has. I don't understand why he does. He could die if I flub. What if, I mean, I could lose my nerve, get too much in my head, emerge from the water, and leave him chained down there. Canceled. What part of him is cool with that? Why did he choose *me* for this?

Our gate is getting crowded. I guess boarding will start soon. We'll be on the move again until after tomorrow when our tour will be done-zo. I'm *so* over traveling but once we're home we will have to, like, live again. Clean our house. Do high tea with our friend group. Whatever else other couples who don't put themselves in potentially-fatal situations do. I'm going to miss our performances. That, like—*oh god*, this is so embarrassing to even think—that feeling I get when he looks at me and we're required to, like, be one entity to achieve what we want. I don't have to think. I can be vulnerable with him and it's chill because it's for our art. It's the same thing with sex. It's like I allow myself to love him and him to love me . . . or something. Like there's an *excuse* for it happening. But it's not like I can just *tell* him that and *expect* him to understand it. I mean, can I? Like . . . I don't even get it.

My phone is at a hundred percent now and Sayer needs to wake up. I walk over to him, plop down in the seat across from his. Admission: it's one of my guilty pleasures to creep on him

while he sleeps. When he can't see me. When he can't want something from me that I, like, *don't know how to give*. Once I wrote a poem I've never shown him—and *never will*—about how in the mornings I travel the curves of his face and sync my breathing with the movements of his chest and all sorts of other embarrassing, romanticized lines that come out of me sometimes from I don't know where.

Watching him sleep now reminds me how zonked I am too but it's time to go. I place my earphones in his ears and pick a song to play softly on my mp3 to rouse him. I loosen the braid I fastened earlier and start again. There's this repetitive dinging noise coming from somewhere overheard, like the sound of an elevator arriving at your floor. I imagine Sayer waking up and not recognizing me with the new hairstyle and I'm a whole different version of myself. I should have taken a photo of my bathroom vandalism to post online.

I wake up to the melody of Jacques Février's "Gnossienne No 1." Basha sits across from me, plaiting her hair like she does when she's nervous. Everything looks brighter and sounds harsher, the world in uncomfortable HD.

"I fell asleep," I say. I hand her the earphones.

A woman on the intercom offers to check people's their carry-ons for free because, something about a full flight.

"I know," Basha says and stares out the windowed-wall at the airplanes shuttling past. The way she sits is childlike, her legs crossed on the seat.

I stopped asking her what she's thinking about a long time ago because she stopped answering me, but it doesn't mean I don't still wish I knew, like right now.

I wonder if she remembers when we were just visiting friends. That's what I called us privately. We ran into each other at coffee shops, and bookstores, and on the sidewalk in our neighborhood but, surprisingly, never at an art gallery. Then one morning, she saw me alone in the botanical garden in the park. She asked me to come over. We got stoned and didn't say much.

She made us white peony tea, and we watched daytime gameshow television with the volume low in her living room. The air was thick from all the smoke and filtered sunlight. Music from an ice cream truck passed by outside, and we smiled at each other. It felt like the only thing we could do was kiss, so we did and didn't stop until it was nighttime, and her bedroom windows were cracked for a breeze, and she fell asleep beside me. I stayed up, staring at her screen-prints on the walls and listening to the rhythm of her breath. It and everything else she did was art to me: the way she opened a door, the way she blinked, the way she undressed me.

When I woke up the next morning, she was playing my favorite album, but she didn't know that yet. I joined her in the kitchen for coffee. She was squeezing fresh grapefruit juice and told me she preferred to be woken up by music than by a person's voice. I should've known then she would have trouble hearing me.

"I'm sick of all this flying," she says. "But I'm not ready to be home and I don't want to see the world for a year."

"Well you can't exist in a vacuum," I say. "We're almost done, and you're going to miss it. We can still have fun for a little while longer."

“I don’t want to have fun,” she says. “I want to sleep.”

A fuzzy voice over the intercom announces boarding for passengers seated in rows twenty through twenty-five. We collect our bags and join the line.

“Remember the first time we flew together?” I ask. “It was, what, sometime at the beginning of last year. It was the first time you had ever been on a plane.”

“It doesn’t make any *sense* to travel thirty thousand feet above the ground.”

“We were late, and I was feeling impatient. There was that family, with the parents who were yelling about how they ordered a Lincoln and received a compact, and their boy was so excited for some reason about them screaming.”

“And there were all those, like, fat nuns holding up departure at that one gate.”

“Yes. Exactly. And we made it just in time for boarding. I hugged you, and you kissed me in line, how we are now, and you smiled and were sort of bouncing. Then you screamed something. Remember that?”

“It’s embarrassing,” she says.

“Come on,” I say. “What did you say?”

“Here we come, Mister Airplane.”

“That’s right. I thought you would get us in trouble, but I didn’t care,” I say. “We were kids on holiday then. We were happy, weren’t we?”

She doesn’t say anything back. She smiles slightly. It’s more like she’s tucking the corners of her mouth into her cheeks. I know she does it for my sake, not because the memory makes her happy but because she pities me.

Then she says, “Did you know American Airlines saved, like, forty thousand dollars in nineteen eighty-seven by removing *one olive* from each salad served in first class?”

“No,” I say. “I didn’t.”

There’s our dialogue track, then there’s a layer of static, then there’s another that makes everything seem waterlogged and another layer that reminds me of a slow, unsteady strum of an acoustic guitar, and it’s the same song on loop. Sometimes I can’t hear her at all, but it’s not because I’m not listening. It’s because she put those layers there.

That’s just what happens when I don’t know what to say. Factoids spout out of me. I know plenty about airports and airlines because I’m so freaked out by flying now and, well, the more you know . . .

Sayer might as well *slap* me in the face when he rolls his eyes like that.

. . . but, for example, all international airline pilots speak English. The human body loses something like thirty-four ounces of water in the body during a three hour flight. Passengers who sit near the tail of the plane are forty percent more likely to survive a crash. Then there’s something about how mercury screws up the chemical structure of aluminum. Which is, like, *basically* what planes are made out of, so if someone happened to have some and spilled it we would all be canceled.

I don't know how to react to Sayer's nostalgia. He's right though. We were happy. Does he mean we aren't happy *now*? Maybe I should hold his hand. To show him I care about his story about our first flight.

He smiles at me when I slip my hand into his. In a confusing way. Like I can't tell if I'm doing what he wants. This used to be easy. Not awkward at all. The night we did our first unofficial performance piece together was a couple of months after our first flight. We had been strolling in the park and all the leaves had fallen off the trees. Sayer started gathering them and stuffing them into the pockets of his corduroys. And then, get this, he started picking up little pieces of trash and made me do the same.

Back at his place he said we were going to make bus connection tickets. Start at stops equidistant to his house. See who made it back first. The tickets were *wicked convincing*. They looked as much like bus passes can when they're made of leaves. Anyway, each of my bus drivers looked at me like I was extraterrestrial but they still let me on. I dialed Sayer when I got back to his place. He was still trying to catch the first bus. I had to drive to pick him up and we cracked up the entire way back with the windows down and twilight swallowing us. He gave me this kiss at the front door that was . . . well, it felt like all the kisses I'd ever had in my life were, like, building up to that *one*. Then we basically fell through the door and I skrogged him on the couch but it was *so* romantic and sensual.

That was the first time I felt I could be with him forever. I had never thought *that* about another person before. It was an exhilarating feeling. But then it, like, ripped the spine out of me. The idea of forever. It seemed absolutely perfect in theory but I didn't believe in it.

I'm still holding Sayer's hand but the line ahead of us is getting shorter. We will have to let go of each other when it's our turn to flash our boarding passes. Sayer might try to hold my

hand again once we settle into our seats but I might not want to then. Don't ask me why. There's this part of me that controls who I am that I can't access. It makes me do things like refuse to hold Sayer's hand sometimes or play stupid games on my phone instead of talking to him or never say I love you back even though he tells me all the time.

Sayer pulls his hand from mine and flashes his boarding pass. I do the same. The gate agent zaps them both with her scanner. She tells us to have a lovely flight. Yeah. Okay. I follow Sayer down the jet bridge. He is so handsome, even from behind. His back cowlick is basically contemporary art. Deep breaths. It's just another flight. I'm overcome by this urge to scream out at Sayer to please don't ever leave me but I don't because in my head that will make him leave me. A Boeing 727 took off in 2003 and has been missing ever since. We will be in Chicago in less than three hours. And then we will be home in two days. The average person can only hold their breath underwater for thirty to forty seconds. This is an art performance, this is not

Basha takes the window seat, and I take the aisle.

"Look at these people," she says. "Who *are* they? I don't want to die with them. They'd sell me for a life raft."

"Nobody is dying on this flight."

She starts to untangle the wires of her earphones, but I ask her not to plug in.

"Why? It's a long flight."

“Because maybe we could talk, like I’ve been saying all day. You’ll put those earplugs in, and you’ll be gone, but that feeling I had earlier is still bothering me. It’s like I’ve been lying to myself and suddenly everything is clear.”

“Everything about what?” she asks.

“About us. It feels like my life is flying by me, and I want you along for the ride, but I don’t know what we’re doing. I feel like you’re getting farther away from me.”

“Do you really think this is the right time? To talk about this. We’re both tired and we’re on a—”

“I won’t do that performance tomorrow without talking about this,” I say. “I don’t know how it happened, but all of a sudden, you seem like a stranger to me. I guess it’s been like this for a while now. We’re two strangers that inhabit the same spaces.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, you need to say something,” I say. “Do you still love me?”

“You know what I think about love. It’s just, like, a chemical reaction in your brain. It’s a biological *con*. If it wasn’t me making your brain feel that way it would be someone else. I can say I love you if you want me to but what would that matter? How could you ever know I mean it?”

“Unbelievable,” I say. “You’re right. I guess I never can know if you’re being sincere, but it doesn’t mean your explanation feels good. How can I love you and you not me?”

“I don’t know, Sayer.”

“I’m just a prop for you,” I say.

A flight attendant makes a final call for passengers to buckle their seat belts and to secure personal and carry-on items.

“Can’t we just, like, continue to do what we’ve been doing?” Basha asks. “We’re doing what we want I thought. You were right earlier. We get to travel and create something we care about. You should be happy.”

And before I can respond, she plugs in her headphones and looks at something on her phone.

She’s right. I should be happy, I’m allowed to be happy, but I’m not. When we’re not having sex or performing, I’m window shopping for her. Those are the only times I ever have her attention, and I don’t know why that’s not enough for me like it seems to be for her. I wish it was. I wish I could be like her, how she interacts with me like a faraway thing, like virtual reality.

I should be happy . . . Where are we going . . . ?

I tap Basha on the shoulder and tell her I’m going to the restroom before we take off.

She says okay and plugs her headphones back in.

“I love you,” I say. I don’t know whether she hears me, but it doesn’t matter. I unbuckle my seatbelt and stand. I look down at her. The sun from outside shines through the plane’s tiny window, and she is beautiful. She acts like I don’t know her, but I do, even though she tries to push me out. I wish I could somehow share with her this feeling I carry about her, make her feel it, too, but I can’t, so I have to learn not to carry it anymore.

I hurry to the front of the plane. I make myself not look back. The flight attendant at the door tells me to please have a seat, that we will be departing shortly. I tell her I have to get off

the plane, an emergency just came up. She asks what kind of emergency. I tell her I don't want to die today. She insists it's too late to deplane, but I tell her it's urgent, really.

It is stifling on this plane, and we have seats next to one of the wings, which I hate because you can, like, see it wobbling in the wind. And stripped paint seems like a sign of potentially dangerous wear and tear. I try to start counting all the little rivets on the biggest turbine but I keep losing—

My music wasn't on yet. I heard him say it and I didn't say it back. I don't have a clue where all this bosh about not believing in love comes from because I *do* love him and now he seems upset in a very real way.

I try to finish reading the article about the internet and air travel but none of the words make sense. I read the same sentence over and over: *The end of our golden age of air travel partly heralds the natural life span of a mechanical technology and an environmentally unsound one, too. The golden age of air travel the natural life span an environmentally unsound one partly heralds mechanical technology air travel span golden age golden age of air travel golden age of air travel one partly heralds The end of—*

When Sayer comes back I'll say it to him. I'll turn to him and say it: I love you. It'll be like in a French love flick. Easy. And I'll try to be better. It won't be easy because we'll get home and not have the performances and he'll want to, like, analyze our feelings and what's ahead for us and why I don't trust him or talk to him or why I act like we're perfect strangers

even though we know more about each other than anyone else. When he comes back I'll tell him nobody has ever loved me like he's loved me. And that he loves me so much it's like ambulance sirens inside my head because vulnerability is *freaking hard* and, like, so is believing I'm worth loving that much. But I want his love. I want it and the problem is I want it so much I'm scared to lose it so I act like I don't have it so he'll keep trying to give it to me and what if tomorrow, I totally, like, lose my chill and accidentally kill Sayer in front of all those people at the exhibit?

But I can't think about that because when he gets back, after I lay those three words on him, I'll tell him how grateful I am we did this tour together. I'll hold his hand. I'll lean into him. I'll listen to him talk about whatever he wants. Like that feeling he had earlier. I might fall asleep on his shoulder feeling like this is it this time. We can be happy like we should have always been. I wish he would come back right now so I can tell him all of this. I feel so good about it I could cry.

The flight attendants begin their little instructional safety demo. Then the pilot's voice comes on the speaker, telling everyone our expected flight time. That it should be an easy flight with good weather conditions. The plane moves into position for takeoff.

Sayer really shouldn't be in the bathroom. Everyone is supposed to be in their seats. I consider going to check on him but the plane is moving. We're gaining speed. I realize how sweaty my palms are from squeezing my arm rests. I tell myself to relax. I lean back in my seat, close my eyes, and wait for him. I imagine him in the bathroom, sitting on that plastic toilet, bracing himself against the walls. The sound of my own laugh surprises me.

Everything is okay.

Begetting

It, this, I don't even know what to call it, started during breakfast with my son, Marcus, and escalated when this woman at the 9/11 Memorial in Lower Manhattan incited a near-riot during the fifteen year remembrance ceremony by responding to a speaker's eulogy with something about September 11th being the best day of her life: an utterance which prompted the people surrounding her to turn and gape, to shout profanities and threats at her until the police were called over because there was a terrorist sympathizer in the crowd.

My team was called in to evaluate her. We would determine if she was a threat to national security: one of those young Americans who spends too much time online and ends up flocking to ISIS out of the anti-American sentiment spreading these days or the need for

adventure or the belief that they're going to help, say, Syrians, or to cope with whatever form of alienation they may be experiencing at home.

Anyway, the responding officers escorted this woman from the memorial site where the towers once stood and into one of the rooms underground where we hold people we might never want to see sunlight again. She was handcuffed to a chair by her wrists and ankles when we arrived, sort of slumped over, but she perked up when the door clicked shut behind us.

She had a jawline you could cut cheese with. Her cheekbones were only slightly less sharp. She was small, had brown hair that hung down her back, lips like cellophane, brown slits for eyes. She wore a mauve sleeveless shirt and baggy blue jeans. No tattoos that we could see. Identification said she was 5'3", 108 pounds. Organ donor. Corrective lenses.

One of my partners held her head in place. I moved behind her to administer a healthy dose of amobarbital to get her talking. I plunged the needle into her neck and asked her name. It slipped out her mouth like it didn't even belong to her.

"Emily," she said. "It's the third most popular girl's name for the nineteen nineties."

I asked if she would like a cigarette. I've learned that people under the influence of a barbiturate derivative prefer to be treated with generosity in such a vulnerable state, whether they realize it or not, and Emily said yes, she would like a smoke. I would only give her one if she promised to remain calm when we removed those handcuffs. She promised she would, and she did.

I let her smoke for a couple of minutes. Halfway through her cigarette, she said, "I like you. You have soft eyes."

Of course, I blushed because I knew she wasn't lying, because of the amobarbital.

She said she wanted to talk to only me but would still cooperate even if the other agents were in the room. My agents were weary at first, but the thing with amobarbital is it'll lower the subject's guard, but it's not truth serum in the way one sees in science fiction or even the really powerful compound the CIA used back in the Sixties. This is a court approved substance, so of course it's not fail-proof with regards to coaxing the subject to bare their soul to someone who wants to indict them. In short, it's not as potent, but it does the job, if supplemented with a modicum of tact from the interrogator.

For this reason, along with the fact that I was, perhaps, feeling soft because of my argument with Marcus earlier in the day, during which I sort of lost my cool, I agreed to Emily's appeal.

My agents left us to it, and I took the seat across from Emily.

"My name is Henry," I said.

"My father's name is Henry," she said.

"How bizarre," I said. "So was my father's."

"Did you know it means, 'Ruler of the household'?" She snuffed her cigarette out on the industrial steel tabletop.

"There's an ashtray right in front of you," I said. "There's no need to act that way."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm a little on edge."

Her apology surprised me. "What's such a polite, willing-to-admit-their-faults sort of young woman like yourself doing disrupting a nice ceremony to remember all of those innocent people who died?"

“Have you ever wanted something you couldn’t have?” she asked “Like the world was toying with you, just because?”

“I think it’s best if I’m the one asking questions,” I said. “What you did today: was it some sort of prank, or did you intend to harm those people?”

“I didn’t mean to say it out loud,” she said.

“But you weren’t lying when you said the day of the attack was the best day of your life?”

“It’s complicated,” she said. “Can I have another cigarette?”

I slid the pack across the table. I should note that it’s not uncommon for subjects under the influence of amobarbital to chain smoke like this. It’s why I even have the cigarettes, as I, myself, am not a smoker.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going to be honest with you, Emily, since you seem to have been honest with me so far and because I’m not having the best of days.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“You’re in this room right now because you’ve been deemed a potential threat to national security. Your declaration at the memorial did not come across as OK. Some people used the word fanaticism. I wasn’t there, so I can’t say. That’s why I need you to explain to me *why* September eleventh was the best day of your life because it’s not exactly a sentiment shared by many.”

“Well,” she said, “because that day freed me.”

“I’m going to need you to expound,” I said.

“It’s a long story,” she said.

“Do you know the definition of the word *expound*? I’ve got plenty of cigarettes. The other option is you’re detained indefinitely.”

She gazed at the tabletop for a while, as if thinking about what to say, where to start. During this interval, I tried not to let my mind wander to the argument I had had with Marcus, which I hadn’t had the time to deconstruct yet and couldn’t now, so I stared at Emily, at the emptiness of her eyes. I could tell she wasn’t in the room with me. She had detached herself from time and place. She was reliving some part of her life that she would live over and over and over, as we tend to do when those memories find their ways into the fabric of our being, and when she came back, she said it all stemmed from her mother, whose name was Kathy-Anne.

I noticed the use of past-tense immediately.

“My mother called me stupid every day of my childhood,” Emily said. “She said things like *You’re almost as sharp as a bowling ball* and *You’ve got a room temperature IQ* or *You’re all wax and no wick*. She said these things like she might be saying, ‘We’re having stroganoff for dinner tonight.’”

Emily explained how her mother never forgot to tell Emily her nose was too big, that it had the perpetual appearance of having been stung by a nest of hornets. Emily’s nose was actually quite small; though, it was hard to tell if it was the product of an impeccable nose job or if her mother was just that cruel.

“There were times when I needed her attention or affection, like when I had a stomach ache from eating lactose, which my mother failed to exclude from my meals even though she

knew I was lactose intolerant, or when I came home from school, having been bullied by the girls because I was quite a reticent child, and my mother couldn't deal with my needs. She couldn't manage to be nurturing. She wouldn't bathe me, wouldn't wipe my runny noses, wouldn't hold me. I got my period the year before my mother died, and she called me a slut. She said she couldn't believe she had a *slut* for a daughter, which I didn't understand. Sometimes she grabbed me by the hair and dragged me outside to our apartment's balcony and told me, 'You're going to make me jump off of this ledge, and you're going to watch me do it.' Eventually I began to think, *Well just do it already*, but I never dared say it because I was scared my mother would haunt me from the grave."

And Emily's father, like Kathy-Anne, worked a lot and was distracted by his career in business development. If he ever commented on bruises Emily might have, Kathy-Anne was quick to interrupt, to explain that Emily was simply a clumsy child, which Emily also began to believe, which Emily now thinks *conditioned* her to become a clumsy adult.

When Emily finished explaining all of this to me, I said I still didn't understand how it related to the disturbance she caused earlier. She asked if she could use the restroom, the cigarettes had given her a stomach ache. I obliged because I was actually beginning to sympathize with Emily. Who wouldn't?

I pointed behind her at the door to a secure lavatory connected to the interrogation room, and while Emily was gone, I got to thinking about Marcus who is eleven years old.

I was sitting in the kitchen, drinking my coffee and reading a story in the paper about compound interest being millennials' guide to a sweet retirement, and Marcus waltzed right in *wearing a sundress*, and, well, one can imagine how I couldn't keep reading my paper, which

irked me because it is a vital part of my morning routine in terms of setting my mood for the day. So, I said to him, “What is that that you’re wearing? And where did you get it?”

By this time, Marcus was placing two slices of pumpernickel, which I usually pick up at the grocery store just for him, into our toaster, acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary here, that he was not wearing a dress or anything, even though he had never worn a dress up to this point in his life, nor had he ever shown interest in other female-oriented items, like Barbie dolls, or makeup or the color pink or whatever. He has always been one to prefer playing soccer and watching old *Godzilla* movies and usually wears nice striped tee-shirts that make him look a little bit like Calvin from the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips. But here he was, wearing a sundress. My son.

“It’s a dress,” he said, plainly. “My friend Jenny let me borrow it.”

I was just about ready to call the school, a very expensive, private, perhaps a bit-too-liberal-minded-at-times school, to ask the principal just what the hell they had been promoting over there that might make my son wear a dress. Then I would demand Jenny’s parents’ phone numbers to inform them their daughter has no business turning my son into some sort of crossdressing sissy. I’ve never spoken that way before, but the sprung-upon-me nature of the sight of my boy in a dress had unleashed something less than pleasant inside me. I realized, thankfully, those measures would have probably been considered Jumping The Gun a little, so I decided to hold back, to try and reason with Marcus, to convince him to change into his normal clothing. After all, *this is my profession*. Reasoning with people. Interrogation. I thought maybe he was playing a prank on me. Marcus has always been a funny kid. One could even classify him as a fool, in the Shakespearean sense, which I’ve always admired about him.

“I can see that it’s a dress,” I said. “But why did you want to borrow it?” I tried to keep my voice lighthearted. “Dresses are for girls, Marcus.” I might’ve even said this last part in the form of a question, now that I think about it.

“That is just a social construct,” Marcus said. “There is no rule that boys can’t wear dresses, too.”

Where was he getting this? That was my first thought. Dresses. A *social construct*.

“Well, you’re right,” I said. “But maybe it’s a social construct for good reason. Now, go back into your room and change, please.”

To be honest, I didn’t quite know what he meant by a *social construct*, and I don’t even know what I meant by *good reason*.

I understand a child’s need for experimentation. I myself underwent these sort of phases, in which I became fascinated with things such as ballet, but I did not wear ballet slippers and a leotard, nor would I have ever dared *try* and wear such things with the risk of my own father walking into the room to ask me to go outside and toss the pigskin and see his son dressed up like a ballerina.

Rather, I enjoyed the classical music of ballet and the way the lovely female forms glided across the stage. It would have been one thing had Marcus been a little younger and perhaps gotten into his mother’s vanity or closet, I thought. That would have even been cute. However, Marcus’ mother passed away when he was only two years old. Therefore, this opportunity had expired. So, anyway, I asked him to change, and he said:

“No.”

That's when his two slices of pumpernickel popped out of the toaster, which he grabbed and proceeded to dress, no pun intended, with an apricot jam. He executed all of this with such control, with such intent, as to scare the daylight out of me, like I was the child and he was the parent. Here, a veteran CIA agent scared by his own boy telling him *No* with the obstinacy of a prisoner refusing food out of protest at Gitmo. I've dealt with that, even, and Marcus' refusal to change out of the dress was something else.

"Marcus," I said. "Please go into your room, and put on some of your normal clothes, and pack your friend's dress in your backpack so you can return it to her."

"No," he said, again. "*Normal* is another social construct, Dad."

By this point, I did not know how to handle the situation. Clearly, I had given him too much leeway over the years, which was, perhaps, a result of my overcompensating for the fact that he only has one parent. That one parent being a father: the parent who does not have that life-giving quality in a relationship a mother has, who grew her child inside her, which leads inevitably to some bond fathers cannot even begin to comprehend. Even though I've always had a loving, open relationship with Marcus. We tell each other we love one another, and I've never told him to stop crying.

But it was clear, I had let Marcus spend too much time on the internet. I'd sent him to a school that was too progressive, had let him hang out with whomever he wanted without any sort of necessary clearance. Now he was wearing a dress in *my kitchen*, telling *me*, the person who has kept him *alive* all these years, that he would not do as I'd politely asked him to do.

Then he started in again, the words cascading from some place inside of him I didn't know existed:

“In America, there is the belief that because a parent gave birth to a child and because the parent is older and has a job and can pay for the child’s basic needs like clothing, food, and shelter, all requirements the child never even *asked* for because the child never even *asked* to be born in the first place, then the child is the parent’s property, and the child is indebted to the parent for being forced into this situation called life that the child has no control over. I’m sorry Dad, but I am not your property. I am an individual, and I am the way of the future, and I am wearing a dress today because shorts really hurt my junk a lot of the times, and dresses feel nice, plus this one is very pretty, and some days, I feel like doing something different.”

One can imagine I was dumbfounded. I didn’t even know if I understood what he had just told me, and there he was, his face straight and severe as a U.S. press secretary’s. He walked right past me, opened the refrigerator, and I swear I thought he was going to reach for one of my Heinekens, crack it with his small, child hands, and drink it in front of me. Instead, he poured himself a glass of almond milk and scarfed down his toast without either of us saying another word.

The door to the bathroom creaked open, and Emily returned to her seat. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, though my throat felt stuffed with large marshmallows. I cleared it several times, with no success. “Where were we?”

“I was telling you about my abusive mother,” Emily said.

“Right,” I said. “Kathy-Anne.”

“You wanted to know what she has to do with what I did today,” Emily said. “Geez, you’re bad at this.”

My body became unbearably heavy. I didn't know where this interrogation was going anymore, nor did I want to continue. I didn't care if Emily was a national threat to security or not. I was tired. I couldn't remember if I had finished my coffee, and for the second time today, I felt as if the roles had been switched on me, that Emily was infiltrating my own brain, cross-examining me about something I didn't even know I did. She asked:

“Do you remember where you were during the September 11th attacks?”

When she posed the question, I thought it would shatter me. I felt guilty even though I hadn't done anything wrong. It's sort of a rhetorical question for a CIA agent, even though I was only a language officer back then instead of a counterterrorism agent.

“Of course I do,” I said. “I was in the same building we're in now.”

“I stayed home sick from school that day,” she said. “I had a fever of 102 or something. Both of my parents went to work. They left me with a bottle of NyQuil and a gallon jug of water. I was a city kid; I was expected to take care of myself. I slept most of that day. I didn't hear a thing about the attack until my father came home from work and woke me up. I don't know how he managed to get home through the chaos, but I asked what he was doing home so early. He said the tower my mother worked in had been struck by an airplane. The fever had been messing with my head all day, and I thought he was kidding, so I laughed and walked back to my room to lie down. The rest of the day was sort of a haze. I would get up every hour and walk around our apartment because I was so physically miserable. I remember him watching the towers burn on television, and he drank Budweiser, and I didn't care about any of that because I was so sick and out of it. Later that night, I woke up, and he was still in the living room, drunk, with his work clothes all wrinkled from sitting on the couch for hours I guess. I felt worlds better. He said my mother was missing, that both towers had fallen, and

that his wife was gone. When I didn't say anything or cry or act sad, he slapped me across the face."

Emily paused, left the room again even though she was still there with me, then continued without being prompted.

"When my mother died, my life changed. I still carried her with me, but she couldn't hurt me anymore. It's terrible what happened that day, but I didn't know those people. Their lives didn't matter to me like my own did. That might be a bad way to live, to feel, to be so selfish, but I didn't choose to be backed into a corner like that. My mother put me there. I experienced more terror from her than any man in the Middle East. While the entire country was burning, was scared of the end times, I was flourishing. I always say I was born when I was eleven years old."

At first, I wanted to give Emily a stern talking-to about how she should respect her late mother because she had provided her a chance to even be alive, but then my son's words came back to me: *sorry, Dad. I am not your property.*

Marcus, thankfully, was not alive when the attacks happened and only has to live in the country shaken by the attacks, sit in the shadows of all that nationalism and fear, while the rest of us still haul it around, like weight we could lose if only we stopped eating dessert and walked more instead of driving. I've always felt the country hardened into some ugly thing after the September 11th attacks, something uglier than either of the World Wars, or Vietnam, or the Cold War, something that turned its back on God, on beauty, became some place where nobody could be vulnerable ever again, and here was this woman who claimed to earn her freedom from the attacks. How absurd! How American and not.

“I still don’t understand why you felt compelled to tell a crowd of mourners that the day they dread the most each year is the one you cherish,” I said.

“The memorial was beautiful,” Emily said, “but the entire thing, all those people feeling one way and me feeling the complete opposite—it’s been my secret for the past fifteen years. I’ve never been able to explain to anyone how I associate the image of those planes crashing into the towers with liberation and how ashamed that’s made me feel because I know it’s not right, but I’ve never been allowed to explain it to anyone. Not my father. Not my friends or boyfriends. A lot of them had family members die, too. Today it just swelled up inside me: memories of my mother and how I don’t have to live that life ever again, and I didn’t know I had said what I said until everyone was shouting at me, but then it was such a relief to have finally said it.”

I considered what kind of hell Emily must have really endured from her mother, a hell her mother was probably ignorant she was enacting, as parents often are—something I’ve learned just today—a hell that was real to Emily. More real than anything else in the world, enough to make tragedy something worth celebrating.

I did not want to create the sort of shame and desperation in Marcus that Kathy-Anne had bred in Emily. I did not want him scaring a crowd of people some day because his father had not recognized him as an individual with a voice, who needed his own specific sort of love and attention, and who would one day live in this world on his own. With no guidance from anyone except what the people who were responsible for him had told him was right and wrong in terms of his character for the first quarter of his life.

“Are you okay?” Emily asked again.

I was gasping for air. I pulled my tie loose and sat back in my chair. I had seen the future, and I was terrified. I didn't know what to tell Emily about her situation, but I believed she was harmless. She was just a child who had grown into a woman nobody could understand unless they sat down with her and let her be painstakingly honest.

A membrane of sweat coated my body. The edge of my vision was warm and rippled. The room was dangerously bright, but I assured her I was fine. I said I didn't think she was a threat to national security, and I was going to grant her clearance to go free but that she shouldn't do what she did today again.

She thanked me but said: "Do you really understand, though? I've never told that story to anyone. You must think I'm crazy."

And as I drove to Marcus' school to pick him up, I wondered if I left her with the right parting words. I thought about her as Marcus browsed the dresses at Macy's, and chose three, and tried them on, and modeled each one as I waited outside the changing room, until he picked a hideous orange cotton dress. We paid for it and went out for dinner, just the two of us, and I listened as he taught me about social constructs, and normality, and dinosaurs, even. I wanted to cry I was so happy to have my boy with me, alive, and healthy, and brave, and still himself, but I couldn't let myself sob, which Marcus might say is due to societal conditioning of the male psyche, which historically has had to maintain austerity as a show of power and has always wanted for nothing, making tears seem melodramatic and unwarranted.

Once we returned home, Marcus fell asleep on the couch, and I carried him to his bed, just a few minutes ago, and he woke up briefly to say he loved me and he is glad I am his dad, before falling asleep again.

Now, as I slip into my own bed, my heart pounds against the whole of me. I inspire a deep, slow breath. It's as if my entire life is imminent, lumping in my throat, quivering on my lips, begging please, please, okay, all right.

Overfull

Today I told myself I would not watch the videos. I would ride bikes with my friends after school like I used to. But when they asked me, I lied. I said I had to babysit my little sister, then I watched a man blow himself up in a restaurant in Pakistan.

I watched the videos until the sun went down and my room was dark except for my computer screen.

The first video I really remember was last year on the tenth anniversary of September 11.

I was twelve.

The news channels showed people jumping from the twin towers so they would not burn to death. They never showed the people hit the ground. It was like they fell forever, which made me nervous because I could not see what happened, but I knew.

Another night the news channel my parents sometimes watch showed a blurry video of terrorists decapitating people. Mom flinched and closed her eyes, like she was scared of the video. Dad did not take his eyes off the screen. My baby sister—who loves when we play hide and seek and I pretend I cannot find her when I know exactly where she is because her little toes are sticking out from a kitchen cabinet—was sleeping between them on the couch.

I did not believe the videos were real until I found the online forums with more of them, the ones they do not show on the news.

I do not understand why people would do that to someone.

Sometimes I imagine I am tied to a pole and someone throws a grenade at my feet, or I am hung upside down and decapitated, or my throat is slit in the middle of the night.

It does not hurt. I like to imagine it does not hurt the people in real life either, but I cannot be sure.

There is a program on the school computers that blocks the videos. I cannot ask my parents to install the program on our home computers.

They would think I am crazy.

After I watch the videos, I eat dinner with my family. I am quiet because I am thinking about the people who died.

I wonder if what happened to them could happen to me and Mom and Dad. I wonder if airstrikes could ever happen in our neighborhood, and if we would have to dig my baby sister out of rubble, and what the blood would look like on her face and in her hair. I wonder about what I would do if what happens in the videos happened in real life, to me. I want to be prepared.

Dad watches people on the TV in the living room argue about a terrorist who drove a truck into a Christmas market and killed twelve people. Mom helps my sister eat. When Dad asks if I am okay, I tell him, “Yes, I am just tired,” but I am not tired. It is so hot in the dining room, and the television is too loud and makes everything bright. I cannot eat my food because it feels like I cannot fit anything else inside of me.

Whatever It Is We're Competing For

When I pull into the driveway at the house, I can't help but think of the "freebie list" Ma and Dad always joked about. They each chose five people they were allowed to have sex with if given the chance. Ma chose the Baltimore Orioles' starting infielders, except the pitcher; she said there was a reason pitchers didn't bat. Dad's choices were the four *Sex and the City* stars and, being a Russophile, any beautiful Russian woman.

Gwen, Oscar, and I knew our parents didn't want to sleep with other people. They adored each other too much. We knew because they slow danced together all the time. We knew because they mailed each other love letters to our own house and often let one another choose what they would eat when we went out for dinner. We knew because they told us that even if they fought, it didn't mean they weren't in love: their devotion was a burning one.

But Ma is dead now, and Dad is waiting inside the house for us to arrive for dinner and to meet his mail-order Russian girlfriend.

I was the first person Dad called the day Ma died. He said Gwen and Oscar didn't know yet, and he needed me with him before he could tell them. When I arrived at the house that day, a carrot rested half-sliced on a cutting board in the kitchen and bossa nova music played on the stereo. I guessed Dad had been cooking them dinner, probably warming up to dance with Ma once she came home. I found him squatting in the backyard in the freezing cold. He wore only his old jeans and a white tee shirt and was staring at the grooves of his palm.

A child never gets used to seeing his father cry.

It's time to go inside before Dad and the Russian woman realize I'm here and make the first move. I kill my car's ignition. I tell myself to breathe, to remember Dad is going through a difficult time, like the rest of us, and is coping with Ma's death in his own way. This has become my mantra over the past week so I don't fly off the rails once dinner starts.

Another breath. I tell myself to get out of the car, to maintain an air of geniality, enough for everyone because I'm the oldest sibling.

The wreath Ma made for the previous Christmas still hangs on the door, all twigs. The first day of summer is a week away, and Ma's sumacs are dying. Her azaleas are dead. I don't even want to see what her herb garden in the back looks like. The specially-made floor mat with *The Youngs* printed on it lies before the threshold, but it isn't the Youngs' house anymore. Just Dad's.

I knock on the front door.

“Davey,” Dad says in a way that pleads, *Please know I still love you; please be on my side*. “My boy.” He already knows I’m unhappy, that I don’t approve of Viktoriya. He smiles like he did when Ma used to make him take pictures even though he didn’t feel like it. During those moments, she asked him if they should go to the doctor to see if he suffered from Early Onset Grumpiness, which always made him grin for real.

Now he could pack the house into the bags under his eyes.

The Russian woman stands close behind him. For some reason, I don’t think she’ll be able to speak, like she’s physically mute. Dad steps aside, places his hand on her elbow, and draws her forward. “This is Viktoriya.”

She is stunning. Undiscovered runway model pretty. I dislike her even more because of her beauty. Why did you ever agree to make that stupid freebie list, Ma?

Viktoriya can’t be older than twenty-one. Had Ma cheated on Dad, I would think, *Nice rebound, Dad*.

Even the quarter-sized birthmark above her left eyebrow is stunning. I imagine her areolae might be the same color. Then: Dad probably *knows* this to be the case.

Viktoriya sticks her slender hand out for me to shake and says hello. All of her seems gilded and not in that overly-tanned Oompa Loompa way. She probably could be wearing a robe of boiled tripe, and it would still look good on her. Just about anything would.

Except for one of Ma’s dresses, which is what she’s wearing. I didn’t realize it at first because it’s swallowing Viktoriya whole, but sure enough it’s Ma’s light-blue, knee-length number with big, white polka dots. It fit Ma like a glove, but on Viktoriya it might as well be a

deflated hot air balloon. I try not to show it, but I hate Viktoriya the most in this moment don't understand how Dad could let her wear Ma's clothes.

Ma was a large lady. Robust. She practiced kickboxing three times a week to stay in shape but always said she wouldn't sacrifice fried chicken, donuts, or cheese for a smaller figure. Dad said she had the body of *a real woman*. He called her his Venus of Willendorf.

When Oscar was a kid, a boy at school made a fat joke about Ma one day, and Oscar came home with a three-day suspension for hitting him. That was before he committed to Zen and took his "personal vow of pacifism."

Ma told Oscar he didn't need to fight her battles, that she might be fat but she was happy, that she loved Oscar before she even knew him, but don't hit people who anger you.

There wasn't a woman more confident in her own skin. If she wasn't, she sure did fool us.

I shake Viktoriya's hand and force a smile. I shoot Dad my best why-is-she-wearing-Ma's-dress face, but he's examining a stain on his shirt and misses it.

"I've made some lemonade," Viktoriya says. Her English is better than I expected. "Should we drink it?"

"We should," Dad says.

They step out of the doorway so I can pass, and I hope Oscar and Gwen show up soon.

Viktoriya pours three glasses of lemonade. She's made it too sour. I drink it anyway. I don't want her to think I don't like her, even though I don't. That would mean she wins whatever it is we're competing for, so I sip and smile.

None of us speaks, except for when Dad says, Davey here just got a job teaching literature to under-privileged children, and Viktoriya responds, That is great, have you read any Russian authors, and I say, Yes.

“Well then,” Dad says and slaps his thighs.

In reality, only a few minutes of silence past, but time feels thick. My discomfort makes me hyper-aware of everything in the room. I swear Viktoriya’s birthmark has moved just a centimeter to the left on her face. I tell myself it’s just anxiety speaking. The lights are off, and dust floats in and out of sun rays filtering through the window’s blinds. Birds sing in rounds outside. Family photos from various years line the walls holding our stillness.

Ma loved taking pictures of us. “For posterity,” she would say. “If you love me, you’ll let me obsess over you.”

I convince myself Ma would get a good laugh out of this scene. I force my memory of her to make light of the situation. Like what if she hadn’t died from a massive heart attack at the grocery store while holding a jar of kosher pickles and walked in the house right now and said, “Wow, who croaked?” Then to Dad: “Oh look, James! You might get to scratch one off your freebie list.” Maybe she would wink at him and unload the groceries from the car while she whistled. “Should I cook for six then? Davey, help your ma bring the groceries inside.” She might chuckle, and the little bit of skin under her chin would jiggle.

The day after she died, Gwen asked me, “How could something with that much joy ever die?”

I didn’t know.

I could kiss Oscar on the lips when he steps out of the cab in front of the house. He sold his car when he hitchhiked to Alaska for a woman. He was in Anchorage a week when Ma died. I paid for him to fly back, even though I couldn't really afford it.

When I picked him up at the airport, he started bawling. I've always admired how open he is with his emotions, but his pain hurt me that day. Oscar: Ma's baby. Her last but not least. Her peanut.

He said the day he got the news, he'd gone on a long hike in the morning, meditated on a rock for half an hour and thought of her, of how lucky he was to have been born to her and to have been loved by her. He was going to call her when he got back to the place he was staying and tell her he loved her, missed her, wanted her to know. Then he hiked home, and the message was waiting for him. He said he considered drowning himself in a nearby lake but heard Ma calling him a fool in his head, so he went for a cheeseburger.

Dad stands to meet Oscar. I gesture for him to stay, tell him and Viktoriya I'll go out to greet Oscar. It's the perfect excuse to escape for a few minutes, and I want to prepare Oscar: we have to play this right if we're going to get rid of Viktoriya. Dad opens his mouth as if to speak but doesn't. Viktoriya smiles. Her birth mark kind of looks like Alaska.

When I go to hug Oscar, he crumples into my arms and reeks of liquor.

"Since when do you get drunk?" I ask.

He stares at the house. "What do you mean?"

"Isn't that against some Buddhist tenet? Wasn't it you who grew up saying you'd never drink to make life better?"

“Things change, Davey.” He spits where the cab had idled. “Dads forget about their dead wives and start fucking—”

“Dad hasn’t forgotten about anyone, and she’s just looking for a better life, I’m sure. She’s not a home wrecker or anything like that.” I don’t believe what I’m saying about Viktoriya, but I’m trying to avoid confrontation. I need Oscar to do the same if we’re going to get our family back to some semblance of normalcy, but he seems wily, won’t stand still. “She’s a child, Oscar. You’ll see. Just a little younger than you.”

“It’s not her I’m the most upset with.”

“I know.” I hug him again. “Wait till you see her.”

Gwen pulls up. She’s on her cellphone when she steps out the car, waves at us, and turns her smile on for a second—then off. She’s wearing sweatpants to dinner. An ink pen juts from her nest of hair. She gathers Vale from the backseat.

“Whatever,” Gwen says into the phone. “Stupid me, right? I’ve got to go. I just got here. All I’m going to say is she’s your daughter, too.”

Gwen hangs up. I wonder if she ever compares the parental example we had to the one Vale won’t. Maybe, in a way, it’s a blessing Gwen is going through a divorce. It gives her less time to think about Ma.

“Geez, Oscar,” Gwen says. “You smell fresh.”

“Good to see you, Gwen.”

Vale hugs Oscar’s leg. “I love you, Oscar,” she says. “Don’t be sad. Mommy said—”

“What Mommy said,” Gwen says, “was you should give Uncle Oscar a little extra love today.”

This makes Oscar smile, and he ruffles Vale’s hair.

I peck Gwen on the cheek and scoop Vale up in my arms. “Now come give your favorite uncle some love,” I say. I pretend to gobble at her neck, then place her down.

She giggles and says, “You’re silly, Uncle Davey.”

It’s the golden hour of the day, when the sun’s light seems to kiss everything. We all look at Vale and smile. She’s barefoot in the grass and twists her body so that her little dress twirls around her knees. It kills me that Ma only knew Vale for four years and that Vale will grow up knowing *who* her Hu Hu was but not *knowing* her.

“Let’s go inside and do this,” I say.

Gwen primps herself in her phone’s front facing camera. “I look like shit,” she says. “But let’s.”

“Mommy,” Vale says. “You said we can’t say shit.”

Gwen tells Vale she’s right but that sometimes grown ups make mistakes.

Oscar picks a white clover from the yard and places it behind Vale’s ear. He groans, and we walk inside.

When Viktoriya brings the food into the dining room and we see it's meatloaf, Gwen looks at me with what I take as a sort of Dad-has-lost-his-fucking-mind face.

Oscar lets out a single *Ha*. He pushes the meatloaf around with his fork. He's the first to reach for the ketchup. We all watch as he squeezes the bottle just hard enough for a slow, steady stream to ruin his meal.

Then he asks, "Anyone else need some?"

I get why he's acting this way. Meatloaf was Ma's famous meal. Growing up, other kids at school didn't eat the meatloaf for lunch because they just didn't like it. We didn't eat it because Ma's had spoiled us. Still, Oscar isn't helping anything with his little stunt. I just want to get through the night, get as far away from it as possible in order to maybe see it clearer from a distance. But Oscar needs to set it on fire.

I don't want to like Viktoriya's meatloaf, but I do. "Thank you for dinner, Viktoriya," I say.

"It is my pleasure," she says. "In Russia, it is every girl's dream to cook for family. To have her own family."

Dad shifts a little in his chair. He keeps folding and unfolding his napkin.

Oscar looks at Viktoriya with his blankest face. "Maybe one day your dream will come true," Oscar says.

"That's what America is for, right?" Viktoriya says. Her voice is quiet and unsure. She looks down at her plate and smiles.

"Why don't you tell them about your hometown?" Dad asks. He's finished the water in his glass but goes to drink from it anyway: a nervous habit I inherited from him.

“Where I am from,” Viktoriya says, “is called Kursk. It is the site of largest tank battle in history.”

“That’s fascinating,” Oscar says. He smacks the table with an open palm, and the dishes rattle. “Truly riveting. How’s it being from a country that idolizes war?” It’s like all of Oscar’s zealous Compassion Cures All speeches he’s given us in the past might as well have never happened.

“It is not much different from United States,” Viktoriya says. “Only there is more money here. Your father is much different from the men I know in Russia. He is so kind and he—”

“What’s for dessert, Dad?” Oscar asks. He pours his third glass of wine. “Maybe some coconut cream pie?”

That was Ma’s favorite dessert.

“Gelato,” Dad says. “Store bought. Save some wine for the rest of us, will you, Oscar?”

“In Kursk” Viktoriya says, “it is hard for women to succeed in life without the help of a man and—”

“I want gelato,” Vale says. “Mommy can I—”

“After you finish your meatloaf,” Gwen says. “Just eat a—”

“But Mommy. Oscar’s not eating his.”

“What were you saying, Viktoriya?” I’m trying to be considerate, to remember my mantra coming into this. I want Dad to see I *tried* but that ultimately, Viktoriya isn’t part of our

family just because Dad chose and paid for her on some website like a commodity, which is wrong in its own way.

“After a certain age, men do not want you anymore,” Viktoriya says. “Women are considered used up after the age of twenty-two. Some a little older. If you have a blemish, even worse.”

“Typical men,” Gwen says.

“Gwen. Don’t turn this into a moment of feminist solidarity,” Oscar says.

Vale looks at me, confused. “What’s wrong with your face, Uncle Davey?”

“So you’re all used up in Russia?” Oscar asks. “Because of the . . .” He rubs at his eyebrow in the same place where Viktoriya’s birthmark is on her face.

Dad makes himself taller in his chair and clears his throat. “Oscar.”

Viktoriya’s cheeks are pink at this point. She stares into her plate with what seems like great worry. I wonder what will happen to her once she can’t make her place in our family, but that’s not our problem.

We’re all pretty much finished eating. So far, it’s the worst dinner party I’ve ever been to. Vale has said more than Dad. Oscar is gunning for the Biggest Prick Ever Award and the Saddest Passive-Aggressive Son Award and, oh yeah, the Meanest Buddhist I Know Award.

Thank God for Gwen. I can’t tell how she’s feeling at this point, but she’s acting level-headed as ever. She tells Viktoriya she will help her put the plates away and get the gelato. “Come on, Vale. Help Mommy and Viktoriya.” She looks at me and subtly jerks her head toward the backdoor when nobody else is looking.

I say I'll clean the dishes if Gwen and Viktoriya bring them to the kitchen, but would Dad and Oscar like to have a smoke in the backyard first?

"I don't smoke," Oscar says.

"Maybe tonight you can start," I say.

He stands, and so does Dad. I follow them to the yard. Right before I slide the backdoor shut, Gwen asks Viktoriya if her idea of America was better or worse than what she has experienced so far, and Vale sings, the eency weency spider climbed up the water

I spark a cigarette and wait to see if Oscar or Dad will talk first. Oscar starts stretching like he's warming up to run a race, and I can't believe how aloof he's acting. He's better than this. He's the one who subscribes to the ideology of Be Here Now, even when Now sucks. He's supposed to be the person who always has a clear head, and takes things in stride, and teaches me lessons about life, even though I'm older. Now he's messing around, and it's making me angry. One of us has to be not-mad.

"Can I have one of those?" Dad asks.

I hold my cigarette pack open for him to take one.

"Fire?" Dad lights the cigarette and puffs a few times. "I know you boys aren't happy with me, but your ma always said she wanted me to find another woman if she died first, so I wouldn't have to—"

"I don't think she wanted you to buy one online," Oscar says. He starts doing his Vinyasa Flow yoga poses.

“The truth is, I don’t want to be with another woman. I couldn’t love another woman, but it’s not always about love. I want your mother. You probably think I’m crazy having Viktoriya cook meatloaf but—”

“So that *was* your choice?” I say. “And she’s wearing Ma’s dress. I’m not judging. I’m just—”

“I’m judging,” Oscar says. He keeps up his Flow, not even looking at me or Dad as he talks. “She’s wearing Ma’s perfume. You know how sick that is? Have you lost your mind?”

“Oscar, listen—”

“No, you listen,” Oscar says. He stands up straight and glares at Dad. “Ma hasn’t even been dead for five months. Seasons take longer to change than it did for you to expedite that bimbo.”

“Be nice to her,” I say.

“Fuck off, Davey,” Oscar says.

“Don’t talk to your brother like that.”

“What’s next?” Oscar asks. “You going to fatten her up so she can be your Venus of Willendorf? You going to call her Wanda when you screw her? You going to make us call her Ma? Because that’s not going to happen.”

“Son. No. Listen to me. We don’t even sleep in—”

“A blow-up doll would’ve been cheaper,” Oscar says. “I could’ve helped you find a nice one online. Life-like. At least that would’ve been some bizarre father-son bonding.”

The volume of his voice steadily rises. I didn't even know he had it in him to tear into someone like this.

"I don't even know who you are," Oscar says. "You think Ma would've wanted this? You think she would walk in the front door right now and tell you this is all right?" Oscar turns away from us and looks up at the sky. "You hear that, Ma?" He's yelling now, and the taut tendons in his neck resemble thick, surfaced tree roots.

Gwen appears behind the sliding glass door. I can tell she's considering coming outside, but I shake my head no. *It's okay*, I mouth to her. I tell Oscar to calm down, that they will hear him inside, but part of me wants him to keep going.

He mimes jerking himself off and keeps shouting at the sky. "Dad's banging a Russian woman he bought online! She's pretty but has a stupid birthmark on her forehead that looks like Alaska, and Dad's fucking her in your bed! You okay with that, Ma? Because Dad thinks—"

"Look, Oscar. I understand you're hurting, but when your wife and best friend of thirty years dies out of the blue one day, you come back and let me know if you think what I'm doing makes sense. Until then, you don't know anything."

Oscar looks at Dad but doesn't seem to be listening to him. He just roars on. "And how did you even afford Viktoriya? Sex workers aren't cheap. Ma leave you specific funds aside to replace her?" He stares at Dad like he wants to nail him to the fence. "Or perhaps you just dipped into her life insurance."

"That's enough, Oscar," Dad says. "You're still my son, and you don't get to talk to me like this."

Oscar takes three quick steps toward Dad, readies his body for some decisive act, and once I sit up and rub my jaw, I realize I jumped in front of Dad without thinking about it. I took Oscar's right hook straight to the side of my head. My own brother hit me. My own brother tried to hit our dad.

Dad kneels beside me and shakes his head. "You should have let him hit me," he says.

I shrug, and Dad helps me up. There's a warm pulse in my jaw, and a steady *womp womp womp* distorts my hearing.

Oscar lies on the lawn maybe ten feet away with a blade of grass in his mouth. The blow to my head has rattled something inside me; the night is getting away from us. I walk over to Oscar, but he just keeps staring at the sky.

"You're acting like a child," I tell him. The pain in my head is spreading. "You showed up wasted, and you've made this entire dinner about you. I've had to keep you under wraps all night."

He looks at me, shocked. "I'm sorry," he says.

"I don't care," I say, the words demanding oxygen, my amiability gone because I'm mad, because *I've lost my mother, too*.

"Come on now, Davey," Dad says.

"No, if Oscar wants to be part of this family," I say, "then he needs to act like it. Ma raised us to care for one another."

Oscar is still staring at me. His head is positioned so he has a slight double chin speckled with stubble.

“Stand up,” I say to him.

He does, and Dad moves closer to us, like I might punch Oscar back.

“Listen boys,” Dad says. “The truth is I don’t know what the hell I’m doing with Viktoriya, but she’s a nice woman and has listened to me ramble on about your Ma. She’s always saying how she wishes she could’ve met your Ma, and she’s been a big help with the chores I can’t make myself care enough about to do right now. She likes it here. She’s taken care of. We’re both better off this way. I miss your Ma every damn minute of the day. I miss the way she always sang Neil Young songs and how she sampled berries at the grocery store before she bought them.”

He turns to the sky like Oscar had.

“I miss how you smelled after working in the garden all morning. I miss how you smelled like peppermint all the other times. I miss your touch. Your Ma was my life, boys. I don’t know how to live alone. That’s why Viktoriya is here. I’m scared that . . . of what will happen to me in here if I live alone.” He points at his head.

None of us says anything for a minute, and I light another cigarette.

Dad sucks his lips in, gets real serious, and shakes his head. “But you boys and your sister are the most important people in my life. After all of you leave tonight, I’m going to tell Viktoriya we have to end our arrangement if that’s what you want. I’ll figure out something to make sure she’ll be okay to live on her own. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Before I can respond, to assure Dad he’s doing the right thing, that none of us have been thinking straight, Oscar says, “No.”

“What do you mean, *No*?” Dad asks.

“This is the strangest thing that’s ever happened to us,” Oscar says. “But you shouldn’t tell her to leave.”

“So you’re fine with this?” Dad asks.

I wonder why he doesn’t ask me this question, too.

“I’m not okay with the situation,” Oscar says. He gazes up at the sky again. “But Davey’s right. I haven’t been acting like part of the family. I want you to be okay.”

Dad looks up, too, and they watch the sky, side by side.

The whole resolution happens so fast and without my input that it makes me dizzy. I feel far away from Oscar and Dad, as if the distance between us is an optical illusion. I glance around the yard. Minor weeds sprout from small lumps of earth where Ma’s herb garden used to grow. In time, there will be no sign she was ever here.

But if she were here now, she’d probably tell me something like, “That’s just how life goes, sugar. We all knew it would have to happen eventually, but the hurt means we did something right along the way.”

I don’t want to hear that now. I only want my family back.

Once, when Oscar, Gwen, and I were young, our family came home from going out for dinner and lay in Ma and Dad’s big bed. I had my head on Ma’s belly, Gwen on Dad’s, Oscar’s on mine. A family chain. Oscar was making Ma and Dad tell him stories about when Gwen and I were younger. After it went silent for a couple of minutes and I could only hear our breathing.

Someone's hand gently squeezes my shoulder from behind. It's Dad. "Let's go in," he says. He looks at me as if we're sharing some sort of victory. "We'll miss out on dessert."

When we return to the dining room, Viktoriya and Gwen are drinking tea, while Vale eats her gelato.

Vale is the first one to speak. "Uncle Davey! How did your face get so fat?"

"It was just an accident," I say.

"Kitchen," Gwen says. "Now."

I follow her. Oscar tracks in right behind me. Gwen hands me a pack of frozen corn wrapped in a hand towel and slaps Oscar across the head. She must've watched the argument from the kitchen window.

I think she's going to tear into Oscar, but instead, she says, "Viktoriya said she's leaving. I didn't even have to say anything. She said she'll either try to get a work visa or go back to Russia."

My heart thumps hard in my chest, rushing blood to my head. "Thank god," I say. "What a relief."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Oscar asks, turning toward me. He gapes at me with the same shrewdness in his eyes as when he first stepped out of the cab earlier: a willingness to do whatever is necessary for those he loves most, and in this moment, I'm not his brother. "We all agreed outside. She's staying."

"She is?" Gwen asks and throws her hands up in the air. She pulls her hair down out of its bun. "Okay," she says. "Fine, good."

And just like that, the night seems too absurd not to laugh, so I do. It hurts the spot on my jaw where Oscar punched me, but I don't care because why am I the only one who doesn't want this, who can't accept that this is happening? I laugh and laugh until I am on the kitchen floor, slouching against the cabinet where Ma and Dad keep their party platters, cackling and howling with Gwen and Oscar looking down at me, confused, for what seems like a long time, until Dad, Viktoriya, and Vale walk in, and Vale asks for another bowl of gelato, which makes me laugh so hard I begin to cry.

The Heart as a Protostar

When I am not exercising or performing space walks, or cleaning, or developing vehicle software, I watch the sun rise sixteen times a day. Sometimes I read. My wife gave me *The Martian Chronicles* to bring up here on the International Space Station, even though our missions are not science fiction and nowhere close to Mars.

There are five of us here in total. One of the other scientists onboard is from Russia. Things are different now, in the new millennium. You can fall in love with a Russian cosmonaut.

Which I have done.

The whole reason this started is because she saw me reading *The Martian Chronicles*. It was one of her favorite books as a child.

Today I woke up and told myself I would not sleep with the Russian cosmonaut again, but by the fourth sunrise, I was inside her cabin asking her—with the timid voice her presence makes me acquire—what she thought about the new supersolids physicists on Earth have created, and by the sixth sunrise we were helping each other slip back into our clothes.

She returns to Earth in a few days.

She said chances are I will never see her again. She will be busy, told me our lovemaking could have only happened up here because down there, she is too married to the job. I told her surely there will be conferences we will both attend back on Earth, which would provide opportunities for rendezvous. That is true, she said, but what about your wife and young daughter?

I do not understand why she is suddenly concerned about them.

My wife, whom, before this space voyage, I never would have dreamt of betraying on Earth. And my daughter, my sweet child. How could I ever face her if she knew what I have done to her mother? Or rather, done without her mother. How would she trust a man to go down to the corner store and not shoot up into Earth's orbit to screw around with some astonishingly brilliant Russian scientist?

Every time the sun rises, I ask myself, "What on Earth are you going to do?"

As I watch one sunrise, I tell myself I could keep the Russian a secret, count it as one of those things I did only because I was a couple hundred miles from Earth, and return to my domestic life.

. . . and then a few sunrises later, as if I am a child picking the petals from a daisy, I am convincing myself that maybe the Russian and I could continue our dalliance back on Earth. It could be romantic: international lovers, yearning for the next chance to be together.

There is a small room on the space station that acts as an antechamber to transition from inside and outside.

Sometimes, I read *The Martian Chronicles* in there, and pause to stare at the control panel, and imagine myself tossing the book at the button to open the exterior door and suffocate immediately.

The thing about the psychological tests they run before you are allowed to come up here is the assessments are done on Earth, not on the International Space Station, and they do not take into account brilliant Russian female scientists, who bring excitement into an only-slightly-above-average American male scientist's life.

I only have myself to blame, really.

When I was a boy, I never imagined I would live in outer space for any amount of time.

When I married my wife, I meant every last word of my vows. Of course, nobody would believe that now, but I am willing to accept that.

When my daughter was born, I promised myself I would be the right example of what a man's love for a woman looks like.

But when I first kissed the Russian scientist's thighs, as she was strapped into the wall of her cabin as to not float around, I forgot everything.

How are humans so flawed as that?

Sometimes the sun rises, and I think of *The Sun Also Rises*, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises, and rises.

The word *rises* begins to take on an odd shape.

Maybe if my wife would have gifted me this novel instead, none of us would be in this situation right now.

After a while, you stop counting how many times the sun rises a day because there is really no daytime. The term *sun rise* is just science at this point, a crossing of horizon.

Oh, who am I kidding? My days here are measured by the intervals between sun rises.

I guess everyone's days are measured in such a way.

I have wondered if the life-cycle of love occurs faster in space, if this tryst between the Russian and me would fizzle out as soon as our feet are on solid ground. Then what would I have?

Self-pity is an awful thing.

My mother used to tell me as a boy when I was upset, “It’s okay, honey. Tomorrow is a new day. The sun will rise again.”

My mother died of cardiac arrest in her sleep.

My father was already dead.

My mother never remarried. She loved him so much.

The worst part of this is the anxiety when I am not with the Russian and the guilt when I am with her, except guilt does not equate to missing my wife, like I already feel I will miss the Russian.

I know I am a terrible man for not missing my wife.

I did not even see any of this coming. It was gradual, like how the sun travels across the sky on Earth, and you do not even think of it.

I know, I know. I keep bringing the sun up.

And even the phrasing *bringing the sun up* is an act of the sun rising. I cannot escape it.

I am glad I had a daughter and not a son to grow into some resemblance of his father, me. Men are terrible beings, even the ones with good intentions. We all turn sour, even for moments. Especially for moments.

Maybe we should all be sent to space. Maybe a woman should discover a way to create sperm in a laboratory. Self-impregnate.

Send all the boys to space with their fathers.

Today after I made love to the Russian, she said, about the sun from up here that, “It is much like a heart. It can only rise, or beat, so many times before it dies. It is easier to see up here how a supernova is the only real threat in life.”

It sure does not seem like the only real threat, though.

The sun seems alive and well.

But the dreaded heart. Mine feels riddled with small, jagged stones.

Making love in space is unlike anything else.

What an obvious statement.

You can do positions up here that you would never dream of on Earth or in middle age, for that matter.

I will tell you where my head is at: I plan to throw this field notebook, in which I am recording all of this, out into the cosmos once I am done with it. Part of me wishes the notebook would make it back to Earth, even though I know it would catch fire upon entering the atmosphere. But I picture it making its way, to say, the moon and then for some reason, circling back. The truth begging to be made real. It would fall out the sky and into my wife’s lap.

This would never happen.

But then, she could be mad at me, could hate me. The decision would be made for me. I would be free to be with the Russian.

But, then again, my wife has always been a practical woman. Maybe she would not be mad at me for sleeping with the Russian up here. Maybe she would say there are a different set of rules when one is orbiting their home planet. Maybe she would cup my face with her hands, call me a fool, and tell me I was simply missing her and our daughter, that I had used the Russian as a surrogate for my family, but it was okay because I was home now.

This thought comforts me.

Maybe she would not hate me, as long as I went home to her.

. . . here comes the sun (doo doo doo doo)

Oftentimes, after putting our daughter to sleep, my wife and I stay up and listen to The Beatles on our record player in the living room with the lights dimmed. We lie on the couch with our heads propped on opposite armrests, smiling at each other. I love that couch.

In my weakest moments up here, I have thought: marriage is like if this space station was knocked out of orbit and propelled into space and the Russian and I were then forced to live out the rest of our days here, until some meteor or something struck us at random, totally innocuous in meaning, and we died in this metal vessel.

That is not something I would have thought back on Earth.

I loved the boredom of marriage, of grocery shopping and repainting the house and balancing the checkbook.

I did not mean to say boredom.

What is the word I am looking for?

I told my wife I could not speak on video chat for a while because we are doing maintenance.

You cannot be caught in a lie this far away.

Nobody should have that sort of leeway, probably.

The sun has just risen for the 736th time. My wife and daughter have only seen forty-six sun rises in the same amount of time.

How can anything in life be simple, ever?

The Russian is gone. Yesterday was her final day. I did not even try to resist the urge to go over to her cabin. I had this feeling; I had to get it out of my system. Afterward, I asked if I could keep a pair of her underwear for posterity.

She declined.

“The best thing for you is to forget about this,” she said. “This is not our lives. But you have made the time here less lonely.”

Notice, she did not say, “You made me feel un-alone.”

Only *less lonely*.

Security. That is the word I meant to use. I enjoy the *security* of marriage.

We should not be out here, in outer space, where it is so easy to forget what it is like to be home. There is a reason it is defined as a void between celestial bodies.

The Martian Chronicles is floating around my cabin. The pages peel away from each other slowly and are taking the appearance of a mushroom's gills.

I have given up reading it.

Right now I am remembering walking barefoot in the grass, and the smell of my daughter when I wake her up for kindergarten, and the sound of my wife's car pulling into the driveway, and grilling on the patio, and the heaviness of gravity, and afternoon showers, and waking up slowly each morning, amazed to still be alive, with light coming in through the curtains, from the sun, just once a day.

l_urking_for_love

It was Friday, and Clark was pushing eighty hours. He considered working the weekend too, since he had no plans. Although, that new film he wanted to see was playing at a theater in Georgetown. He always said he wanted to catch the new movies, but he didn't want to go alone and couldn't think of anyone to accompany him. The last time he watched a movie in theaters, his daughter, Tilda, still lived with him. They had gone to see that movie about an overprotective clownfish who traveled the ocean in search of his abducted fish son. It was one of the few things she and Clark had ever done, just the two of them. Tilda had been so happy when the fish were reunited that she squealed. Afterward, as Clark buckled Tilda into her carseat, she asked if he would travel all the way to Australia to find her if she was lost. Of course he would, Clark had said, you're my daughter.

Clark's day proceeded like any other day, except this particularly busy day forced his afternoon break an hour later than usual. In the employee lounge of Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., he poured sugar into a styrofoam cup of coffee, trying to organize the rest of his day. The voice of Clark's co-worker, Jim, interrupted his concentration. Jim mentioned he had been tracking his wife's affair through her email, social media, and online dating profiles.

"I hacked into the account of the bastard who was screwing her," Jim said. "Verified it from all sides, for when I file for divorce."

Clark finished stirring his coffee and turned to face Jim. He didn't really want to hear all of this, didn't want to possess any level of culpability, but wouldn't it be rude if he didn't at least respond?

"Isn't that a breach of your communication collections clearance?" Clark asked.

"I hate alliteration," Jim said. "I think our job at the base level is a little beyond privacy ethics. We indiscriminately collect people's online data. *You* indiscriminately collect *strangers'* online data. All I'm saying is, it wouldn't hurt to run a check on your own people." He pulled a sandwich out of a paper bag and began to eat.

He looked like a smug cow chewing his cud. Jim was usually a nice guy, but it annoyed Clark that Jim had told him something that could endanger Clark's job.

Clark returned to his office. I can't even find someone to go to the movies with, he thought. Who would I run a check on? He hadn't had a lover for years and didn't care about his ex-wife's love life. To be honest, he would rather not know. He tried to cognitively redact the entire interaction with Jim. He swiveled in his chair, not quite ready to begin work again.

What ever happened to that carseat, Clark thought. It had stayed in his car months after Helen divorced him and moved Tilda to Oregon, where Helen's parents lived. Tilda never sat in it again; then it just disappeared. Maybe he had given it to Helen during one of his visits. Clark could count on his fingers the number of times he had seen Tilda in the past fifteen years. For a while, Clark visited Tilda on holidays, but she acted despondent and asked when he would come to live with them. She was six years old. She didn't understand.

He had missed her baby teeth falling from her mouth and her first school play. He wasn't there when she contracted chickenpox or began reading on her own. He only heard secondhand from Helen or Tilda herself, and the more milestones he missed, the more impossible it felt to find entry into Tilda's life without her thinking he was a fake father. His shame became unbearable, and he stopped visiting altogether a decade ago, when Tilda was ten. It was easier that way, but Clark didn't know for whom.

Tilda would be twenty-one years old in a couple of months. "How does that happen?" he asked himself aloud. The sound of his own voice embarrassed him. He glanced around the room. His computer sat filled with fragments of peoples' lives. His calendar with all the past days struck with red X's hung on the wall. The company's logo gleamed from behind his desk, with the motto, *Start with character and fear not the future.*

Clark seldom let himself think of the future. His chest tightened when he imagined himself older and dead in his apartment, utterly alone. His body might lie undiscovered for days, rotting, until work would begin to pile up at the office, forcing his supervisors to notice his absence.

Maybe Jim was right. It wasn't like Clark had malicious intentions. He just wanted to know who his daughter had grown into, if she was okay, staying out of trouble. That's what fathers did, right?

Seven minutes remained of Clark's break, but he decided he would give them to the company. He returned to his desk, checked his email, and settled in for another long night of work.

* * *

The following morning, Clark commuted to Booz Allen as usual. It was the weekend, and the offices were mostly empty. He performed minor system maintenance, filed required paperwork for the following week, and even helped a new hire customize his surveillance interface.

Then Clark left work early. His limbs seemed enchanted, his blood effervescent, as he skulked down the hall toward the main entrance/exit. How peculiar: the sun was still shining when he clocked out.

Daylight had never felt so incriminating.

He needed somewhere to execute this. He didn't want to go home. A neutral location would work best, a cafe of some sort. Google showed a list of nearby possibilities, and Clark picked a place called Glazed. They served donuts, stayed open around the clock. It felt right.

When he walked through the door of Glazed, a sort of low, mechanical hum greeted him. The soft glow of red, yellow, and blue neon lighting reflected off the sleek white tiles that

lined the cozy eatery from floor to ceiling. A sugary cleanness in the air intoxicated Clark. He stared into the display case of confectionaries near the counter: glazed and cinnamon twists, buttermilk drops, apple fritters, maple bars, crumb cakes, and donuts of many sorts, all illuminated by florescent refulgence. Each treat was childhood embodied.

He ordered a plain glazed donut and a glass of tap water and sat at an open table near the storefront window. He initiated his laptop's boot-up sequence and opened XKEYSCORE, the program Booz Allen used for searching and analyzing global internet data.

SEARCH BY SSID: 430-69-1112. Tilda Marie Johnson. Caucasian/Female/20. Birthplace: Tysons Corner, Virginia. Registered emails: tildajo96@gmail.com.

Clark traced the email to various sites. He accessed Tilda's account usernames and passwords to those profiles: her main public social profile, her music streaming profile, her online forum profiles. They were, except for the music streaming profile, mostly inactive.

Then Clark found Tilda's dating profile. Her most recent login had been that morning.

He raised his donut to his mouth for the last bite when he read Tilda's username: *let_me_call_you_daddy*. He placed the donut on his plate. His appetite faded.

This is wrong, Clark thought, but he couldn't un-see what he saw. He minimized the page and considered forgetting the entire idea. What if he didn't like what he discovered? Or what if Tilda found out?

Then again, it was public information. Tilda had put it out there, and *he collected communication data for a living*. He slugged his water and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He read on.

She wasn't listed as Tilda anywhere on her page. She went by Kitty, twenty years old, heterosexual.

Clark decided to look through her photos first. Until now, Tilda had remained in his mind the little girl smiling from a framed picture in his office. She wasn't smiling in most of her profile photos. One picture wasn't even of her but rather of a tan-colored, alien mannequin sitting in a lawn chair, wearing an afro wig, and holding a marijuana pipe to its mouth. The photo's caption read, *Selfie of me rn*. Clark figured the picture was a joke, but he didn't understand its humor. For the photos in which Tilda was present, she seemed either disgusted at something off camera or possibly asleep. She did appear happy in one picture, though: she straddled a wooden bench with a pile of pitted cherries in front of her, her dress and stained hands the same color as the fruit. Clark wondered who had taken the photograph.

He turned his attention to Tilda's personal essays, and regret jabbed him when he read the opening line of her *About Me* section:

Will Fuck For Pho.

He knew he didn't have the right to be angry at her for the one-liner. He was infuriated with himself for letting his daughter grow up to be some sort of, of, uh, Asian noodle soup sex trader.

The proceeding lines read:

jk, but you can buy me pho, and if you're well-versed (or can pretend to be) in post-postmodern literature and intersectional feminism, then maybe you'll get to see the inside of my shitty apartment. I guess I would describe myself as possibly an indigo child (if you believe

in that sort of thing lol), the bastardization of '80s sass/millennial self-indulgence/zealous normcore, and a babygirl/little/brat who knows what she wants but usually not how to get it.

Clark Googled the words he didn't understand and discovered that:

——According to a pseudoscientific New Age concept, indigo children are believed to possess special, unusual, and sometimes supernatural traits or abilities.

——A common positive theme of current attempts to define post-postmodernism is that faith, trust, dialogue, performance and sincerity can work to transcend postmodern irony.

——Intersectionality is the view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity.

——Normcore is a unisex fashion trend characterized by unpretentious, average-looking clothing or intended to mean 'finding liberation in being nothing special,' citing the characters featured on the television series *Seinfeld* as exemplifying the aesthetics and ethos of normcore fashion.

——Babygirl/little/brat often refers to a female who is sexually into age play; the babygirl/little/brat being the counterpart to a Daddy (Clark preferred not to research this one) or dominant sexual partner.

Tilda concluded her *About Me* section by writing, *the best adjective to describe me might be lithromantic, which I know is a total red flag and incongruity for someone on a dating site, which is why I'll probs be alone forever :)*

Lithromantic, Clark learned, meant:

———A term to describe a person who experiences romantic love but does not want their feelings to be reciprocated.

The other details Tilda used to describe herself fell away when Clark read this last one. Did his own daughter really feel she could experience love but did not want it returned?

He didn't understand and paused for a few minutes before he continued to scroll through Tilda's profile. He slumped in his seat. On the other side of the shop's window, strangers passed Clark without regarding him: flashes of life he would never know. Existing in his own body became uncomfortable, like contracting the flu in a moment, and he read on to shake the sensation.

But Clark's stomach folded in on itself when he read, under the *Looking For* section of Tilda's profile, she listed she was only interested in casual sex with men aged 40-99.

Within the hour, Clark knew more information about Tilda than maybe even her mother or best friend did, but he still didn't *know* her. He needed to balance out this awful feeling, to make the whole venture worth it, to feel closer to his daughter. He signed into Tilda's account and sifted through her personal correspondences.

Men of various ages messaged her, writing things like, "You're hot" or "I am married, is that a problem for you?" or "I'm a very kinky yet romantic guy." Tilda responded to most of these advances with "Fuck off," which made Clark proud, but an extensive look at her messages revealed she also agreed to just as many one-time rendezvous with complete strangers as she denied.

In Tilda's *Deleted Messages* folder, Clark came across a message thread between her and a man named Bernard, who was around Clark's age and lived in Providence, Rhode Island.

The thread was almost a year old. Clark couldn't see the entire conversation because there were so many messages. Only the last few messages were immediately visible. They read, beginning with a message from Bernard:

[Load Previous Messages]

[6:55 p.m.] AreWeGoingInCircles: "I don't know what to say. Wow. I imagined a future together, even if it took some time. I thought you were committed. Guess I judged you wrong. The worst part is how pathetic I am that I still love you, despite this."

[6:55 p.m.] let_me_call_you_daddy: "I don't think we should speak anymore."

[6:57 p.m.] AreWeGoingInCircles: "That's it?"

Clark sensed he had discovered the conclusion of a love story, with Tilda as the protagonist. But could she even have loved this, uh, Bernard guy back? And how could two people seriously love each other on the internet? It was absurd, but Clark couldn't stop clicking *Load Previous Messages*, to read from the beginning.

* * *

SEARCH BY SSID: 721-07-1426. Bernard Thomas Fischer. Caucasian/Male/43. Birthplace: Annapolis, Maryland. Registered emails: btfisch@zillum.com.

Clark reclined in his desk chair and mulled over the data on the screen in front of him. He had run an extensive background check on Bernard and found he was flagged as a

POTENTIAL DOMESTIC TERRORIST for mentioning psychoactive drug use as a tool to conjure theories he shared on a message board surrounding the topic of singularity.

Bernard had posted a topic thread with regards to the idea that the universe is a function that repeatedly expands and collapses, upon which it experiences singularity, and all of existence is condensed into this one point so small you can't fathom, which to Bernard *explains deja vu and the possibility of parallel realities: the results of one's subconscious tapping into a collective consciousness, created in singularity, that has already experienced the past and future numerous times.*

Overall, Bernard was a bit strange but not dangerous, at least not because of his theories.

On his dating profile, Bernard wrote that when he grows up (something Clark found odd, Bernard having, arguably, already done so) *I want to be a farmer of sustainable living with my own plot of land and maybe some friends and a nice lady with whom to share this lifestyle. I think I am a good-looking guy, despite my belly, over abundant chest hair, beginning baldness, and apparently a constant look of tiredness. To be honest, I am a sad man.*

Bernard also provided some *Fun Facts* about himself, including he's *afraid of silverfish; I think Tolstoy was the best author to ever live; I do not enjoy lobster, clams, or oysters; and I can do an impression of Jimmy Fallon doing an impression of Robin Williams.*

Bernard had uploaded only two photos: a black and white close-up of his facial profile and another of him wearing a checkered zoot suit in front of what looked to be a ballroom, pointing his finger at the camera in the fashion of a pretend gun. Under the *Looking For* section of Bernard's profile, he sought short- and long-term dating, friendship, and pen pals.

When looking through Bernard's *Inbox*, Clark found Bernard initiated conversations with women more often than the inverse, and the messages he sent were seldom returned.

So it surprised Clark to learn, upon reaching the beginning of Tilda's exchange with Bernard, that it had been Tilda who messaged Bernard first.

[1:27 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "I have a thing for overabundant chest hair, and *Family Happiness* by Tolstoy is one of my favorite novellas. Have you read it? It's a turbulent story of the love and marriage of a 17-year-old girl, Masha, and a 36-year-old man, Sergey. Maybe you'd like if I call you Sergey?"

[8:12 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "I hope my response doesn't come off as desperate. I know kids these days play all sorts of games with rules like, 'Don't reply to a "come on" message for at least 24 hours.' Not to say you're a kid. From your pictures, you're obviously a woman. And your profile is great. I am taken by your Sergey reference, considering our ages. But to answer your question, yes, you may call me Sergey. (My real name is Bernard. What's yours? Kitty? Masha?) I wish I had something more interesting to say."

[8:17 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "My real name is Tilda, and I'm smitten with your calling me Masha. I find your desperation appealing. Ha. Thank you for the kind words about my profile. I've made at least ten of them, deleting and making new ones. I've perfected it as an art form maybe. I've sworn this is my last. What a joke, right? I'd like to know more about you. Write back soon ~"

And like a television show without commercials, Clark read the messages between the two without having to wait for them as he imagined Bernard and Tilda once had to do, perhaps obsessively checking their inboxes in anticipation for the next message. He pictured Tilda and

Bernard sitting at their respective computers, taking their time to construct the perfect responses, words never meant to be read by anyone but the intended receiver.

* * *

Every night after he clocked out of work, Clark drove to Glazed, sat at the same table, where he ate one or two donuts, and pried into Tilda's life. The sterile ambience of the confectionary combined with the sweetness of fried dough glazed with sugar made Clark forget he was doing something wrong.

Despite his persistent efforts to befriend one of the cashiers at Glazed, whose name he learned was Nat, she acted as if Clark had never visited before.

"Well, Nat," Clark said. "Tonight I'll have a chocolate glazed. I think that should keep me busy."

"Great," Nat said.

"You know," Clark said, "you and my daughter would probably be friends. Both of you look like you don't care about anything in the whole world."

"I'm at work," Nat said. "What do you want from me?"

"Why are you young people always looking so miserable?" Clark asked.

"Why can you old people never mind your own business?"

"For most of us, life becomes terribly boring after forty," Clark said.

Nat rolled her eyes and slid Clark his donut, placed neatly on a square of wax paper on a metal tray.

Back in his seat, Clark checked his watch. Tilda would walk into her small studio apartment any minute now, and he would be there—though, obviously not *there*—to greet her.

The webcam on Tilda's computer provided Clark a panoramic view of her apartment in southern Portland or what she referred to as SoPo. When Tilda wasn't home, Clark watched her from her smartwatch, usually at one of her two jobs.

She worked as a sales associate at Scrub, a store located in a strip mall in downtown Portland that sold soaps, body washes, lotions, and other body care products. Clark heard Tilda say multiple times the only reason she worked at Scrub, besides to help pay rent, was because of her discount. Some nights, Tilda waitressed at SoPo Sushi, a restaurant in her neighborhood that served dishes ranging from \$11-26, according to multiple online restaurant review sites. Clark soon discovered the restaurant was also Tilda's, uh, drug supply source, mostly cocaine and benzodiazepines. Uppers and downers.

He monitored Tilda at her jobs mostly for context for his observations inside her apartment and preferred watching her at home because it seemed personal and real.

The walls of Tilda's apartment in SoPo were painted sunflower yellow. The computer from which Clark watched sat on a desk against a wall, which Clark mentally referred to as the south wall. From this vantage point, he could see a door on the north wall, directly opposite the desk, which led to a bathroom.

One large wooden window, draped with white sheer curtains, anchored the apartment's west wall. Above the window's frame, multi-colored strand lights cast twinkles on the wall at

night. Band posters, Polaroid pictures, artful prints, and tiny pieces of writing decorated this same wall in a sort of shrine-like way. To the right of the window stood a clothes rack of worn-in tee shirts, sundresses, blue jeans, coats and sweaters, short-shorts. Below the window on the floor was Tilda's bed, a lone mattress, which was never made and always messy. She changed her sheets often.

A tinfoil-colored shag rug lay in the center of the room. An overhead light fixture sometimes shined dimly, but Tilda usually used the lamp on a small table near the entrance door on the east wall. A narrow, body-length mirror stood near the table. Clark spotted Tilda's acoustic guitar in various places at differing times.

She played the guitar often, and she sang gently. When Tilda strummed her six string, a suppressed something—Clark couldn't peg what exactly—came alive in her, and it was beautiful in the way a sad film is beautiful.

The second night after Clark began watching Tilda, she stopped mid-song. She stood in front of the mirror in her pajamas and twisted her hips and upper body in opposite directions, like a Barbie doll jointed at the midsection. Her bushy brown eyebrows lowered and grew close. She stared up and down her own figure, seemingly looking for something. She pinched parts of her body: her waist, stomach, inner thighs, under her chin. She squeezed hard, until her skin turned pink. She faced away from the mirror and turned her head around to look over her shoulder at her bottom's reflection.

She stood on her tiptoes and frowned.

When Tilda completed her inspection, her face became distorted. She took one step into the bathroom, reached for something out of Clark's sight, and returned holding a razor blade.

She sat in a chair facing the mirror and glided the razor across her thigh in rows as long as pencils, never looking away from her reflection. She did this with care until red bloomed into sight. She repeated the motion ten times until she had a thigh full of bloody rows.

Clark couldn't stop himself from watching this to the end, even though it made him feel small, and his throat closed up.

Tilda didn't stare at the cuts directly until she finished; then she looked back at the mirror, then at the ceiling. Her eyes were closed. She stood, wiped the blood away with a tissue, and lay face down on her bed.

Clark heard Tilda cry for the first time since she was a child.

He slammed his laptop shut and darted to the bathroom at Glazed, locked himself into a stall, and slapped the toilet seat down. He sat and wrapped his arms around himself, repeating *Tilda, Tilda, Tilda*. He wanted to call her or Helen, to shout that something had to be done, to make them listen to him. He dialed Helen's number on his phone, then paused. How would he explain what he had seen and how he had seen it?

Clark slipped the phone back into his pocket. His heartbeat no longer pounded in his chest and ears, and he returned to his table to collect his things. He drove home, and the image of Tilda cutting herself looped in his head.

Tilda repeated this process of body observation/harm semi-daily, almost always around midnight, and Clark forced himself to watch every time, to make sure she was okay afterward. The burden of being a parent, the incessant fear that something dreadful will happen to one's child, had been absent before now. What kind of man had he been?

He had jumpstarted this mess that was Tilda's life and had no balm for it.

Sometimes, Clark watched Tilda sleep after cutting herself. She often left her window open, and a draft blew the sheer curtains away from the wall. He tried to imagine Tilda breathing in rhythm with the wind, tried to remember her as a child, when he held her, felt her tiny body working, but he couldn't.

* * *

When Clark wasn't watching Tilda, he continued to read through her conversations with Bernard, whose latest message to Tilda described his nightly routine, which involved watching the lottery.

Clark already knew about Bernard's regimen because he had started spying on Bernard. At first, Clark had no interest in Bernard's life, but as the messages between Tilda and Bernard piled up, Clark needed to put an actual person to the textual identity. It took him no time to backdoor the crypto-systems in multiple teleCAMs in Bernard's home, the dash cam in Bernard's car, and, of course, through Bernard's smartwatch, which he wore to his job.

Bernard worked as a cashier at an upscale, organic grocery and retail store called Perma in downtown Providence. Most days, Bernard smiled at and conversed with almost everyone who walked through his checkout line. He had a toothy grin which could have been featured on a brochure for a dentist's office.

He often commented on people's grocery items as he scanned them. He said things like, "I've heard coconut oil makes great overnight hair conditioner," or "Huh! Organic olive ice

cream. I didn't even know we had this, but it sounds fun," or "Did you know the smell of ground coffee is a palate cleanser?"

He took special interest in customers' sub-total plus tax owed to the store. He commented on reoccurring numbers. If multiple customers' totals came to \$19.76, Bernard said aloud to himself, "Huh. Nineteen. Seventy-six. There they are again."

Clark imagined customers accepted this as some general quirkiness, but they didn't know that when Bernard left work, he drove to Hal's, a corner store near his home, and bought a lottery ticket, choosing numbers from grocery totals.

On his drive to and from work, Bernard listened to podcasts such as *Does the Earth Need Saving or Do We?*, *How I Abandoned Being Hip for My Own Identity*, and *Online Dating: Is This What Darwin Had in Mind?* Sometimes he talked to himself, a habit Clark could relate to, as he was often alone.

Each night after work, he cooked himself dinner from groceries he brought home from Perma. By this time, Clark would have also left his job and relocated to Glazed. Some nights, Bernard set a place for another person at his dinner table, with wine, and cutlery, and a plate of food, but he ate dinner alone those nights, like most nights.

Clark couldn't tell if this was because of some, uh, delusion or sad hopefulness on Bernard's part or if he'd been stood up for a date Clark didn't know had been arranged. He tended to lean toward the former, since he could know everything Bernard said on his dating pages, or text messages, or at work, or in the car. Perhaps Bernard made arrangements in person or over voice calls, which Clark missed, but he didn't think so, considering Bernard

preferred non-personal, digital mediums to spontaneous, face-to-face interactions as his main means of serious communication.

After dinner, Clark watched Bernard settle into his living room, where he indulged in sweets and craft beer on his couch while watching the lottery numbers announcement. Bernard's favorite sweets were tiny, individually wrapped, old-fashioned peanut butter bars, and his favorite beer was any sort of quadruplebock. Bernard bought the beer from Perma and the candy from Hal's.

On Mondays Bernard watched *Powerball*. Tuesdays were *Mega Millions*. Wednesdays: *Lucky For Life*. Then there were *Monopoly*, *Wild Money*, and *The Numbers* for Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Bernard was off of work most Sundays and didn't have numbers.

When it came time for the television program to announce the lotto numbers, Bernard lifted his beer in a sort of cheers to the number picker and looked from the television to the slip of paper with his numbers and back at the television and back at the slip.

After none of the numbers matched, Bernard crumpled the paper into a ball and tossed it at the waste basket across the room, where he either made it or missed. Nine times out of ten it was the latter, in which case Bernard stood and walked to place the paper in the basket.

He kept a tidy home from what Clark could tell, but Bernard never had anyone over. Not even friends. He didn't seem to have many friends. Or any, actually.

"We're not so different," Clark said one night after Bernard tossed another losing ticket. In a parallel reality somewhere, Clark, remembering Bernard's forum post, imagined he and Bernard were friends. And Tilda was still in both of their lives.

Clark shut his laptop and scanned Glazed. People were engaged in conversation, and others clattered at their keyboards, headphones covering their ears. Clark had seen some of the people several times before, but he never said hello to them. Other people said hello to each other. There was that group of young people over there who looked like they could be Tilda's friends. Some of them had nodded at Clark before. He wasn't sure, but they seemed to be *normcore* like Tilda said she was. Maybe he could walk over to them, compliment their style, ask about their ethos, so maybe if, or, uh, when he talked to Tilda, he would better understand. Would it be strange to say something now when there had been plenty of chances before? How would he even approach them?

No, he better not say anything. Wait for them to come to him. Another night, maybe.

* * *

[1:37 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "Fathers? They're useless. Maybe that's the wrong thing to say. At least if they're present in your life, they're good for something, even if they beat you or abuse you, at least they can change a lightbulb or help your mother make dinner or carry you to bed when you fall asleep on the couch. Amendment: absent fathers are useless."

[1:42 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "But didn't yours pay alimony at least?"

[1:58 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "He never missed a payment. It almost makes it worse. Like he continued to acknowledge my existence but didn't bother to go beyond that. At least if he would have stopped paying, my mom and I could've forgotten about him. Instead, I'd check the mail when I got home from school, and there was his name on the top left corner

of an envelope with a check inside and some bullshit note about loving me, missing me. I wanted him to die.”

[2:05 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: “My parents were around, but I don’t know how useful they were. Pretty much only encouraged me to be mediocre, now that I think about it. My father is dead now. Aneurysm. My mother is in a home, losing her mind.”

[2:07 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: “Funny. Your mom lost her mind after your dad died, my mom got her mind back after she left mine.”

[2:09 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: “I guess funny is one word to describe it. Why did they split up?”

[2:17 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: “He loved to work more than he loved to be with us. Government job. I don’t even know what exactly. Pulled six figures, blah blah. Made his own hours but chose to be there until after the sun sets. My mother couldn’t stand being married to a ghost anymore. She told him he was doing irreversible psychic damage to me by choosing to ignore me.

[2:22 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: “When’s the last time you talked to him?”

[2:31 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: “Five years ago. It was my birthday. I was fifteen, and this senior boy named Bryce Vickerson dumped me that day at school, a week after taking my virginity. Sorry if you didn’t want to know that. But my dad calls and says how much he misses me, as usual, and how he’s sent me something in the mail. He doesn’t say sorry that he’s not with me because that would be too obvious. You know what I tell him? I tell him he should move on, find a new wife, start a new family with a new little girl. I tell him to never

speak to me again because I hate him. I tell him that when he starts his new family, not to ruin it the second time.”

[2:34 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: “Do you ever you regret saying that?”

[4:11 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: “I don’t know. Sometimes. I mean, it’s my *dad*.”

Two days after that phone call, his present came in the mail. It was a beautiful golden watch with a brown band that matched my hair perfectly. On the back of the face it was inscribed *For Tilda, From Dad*. It never made it to my wrist. I took it outside, set it on the driveway, crushed it with a hammer, and mailed it back to him. After that, he stopped calling. All I ever wanted was for him to be around more, and he was always deciding to disappear. Maybe I sent the wrong message by returning the watch, but I was a teenager, he was the adult. It’s like, read between the lines, dude. I’m not so mad about it anymore. It’s just my life now. I don’t have a father, but it doesn’t mean I wouldn’t like one. I don’t think it’s ever too late for people to make up for their mistakes.”

* * *

It was odd how a person could forget about such things in their own life. Clark had spent an entire bonus on that watch and had been furious when he opened the returned package, but somewhere along the line, he put it out of his head.

In the bathroom of Glazed, Clark balled his hands into fists, punched the button on the hand drier, and shouted. He took a leak, washed his hands, and pushed the drier again. Droplets of water squirmed down his hands from the warm air. He took a deep breath.

When Clark returned to the dining room, Nat glared at him. She must've heard him yelling. He would leave her a big tip tonight.

Clark monitored Tilda's and Bernard's lives as much as his allowed. He gained twenty pounds thanks to Glazed and had to visit the nearest J.C. Penney one night so he could purchase a larger belt. He craved sweets all of the time and worried maybe he was becoming insulin resistant. He returned to his apartment only to shower, change his clothes, and sleep for a few hours.

His obsession overrode his initial worries about losing his job. He kept a live feed of Bernard's activity streaming in the background of his work computer's desktop. He took lunch at his desk to watch Bernard ring up customers' groceries. He even purchased a bag of those peanut butter candies Bernard liked so much and snacked on them throughout the day when he felt restless.

Clark grew confused over the past-tense nature of Tilda's and Bernard's online correspondences and the present-tense actuality of the two on Clark's computer screen. He sometimes thought the two of them were still together, even though the messages had happened months ago, and he had no idea how much Tilda or Bernard still thought about their relationship, even though Clark reflected on it every day.

Terrible tension headaches plagued Clark. They struck him at night, extended down his neck, and kept him awake for hours. When he closed his eyes for sleep, he saw the neon lights in Glazed, a scrolling computer screen of messages he couldn't read, Bernard laughing at him, Tilda cutting herself. When sleep didn't come, he drove aimlessly. He listened to *Online Dating: Is This What Darwin Had in Mind?* and wondered what Bernard thought about the

discussions on the podcast. Sometimes he played recordings he had made of Tilda performing on her guitar and quietly sang along.

At the end of one of these drives, he found himself parked in front of Glazed. He couldn't resist the glowing neon sign indicating *WARM DONUTS, COME ON IN*. As he climbed out of his car, he was overcome by a suspicion that someone was watching him. It was three in the morning. He was the only person on the sidewalk. No other cars were parked on the street, and Glazed was empty. He decided to take a walk around the block. After every left turn, he stopped, peeked his head around the corner, but saw nothing.

If Clark could so easily perform surveillance on Tilda and Bernard, then someone Clark didn't know could be surveilling him, and if anyone knew what he was doing, he would be in major trouble. Like possible-multi-million-dollar-emotional-grievances-lawsuit trouble. Not to mention Tilda and Helen would *really* never speak to him again.

After walking the block, Clark stood in front of Glazed. An image of himself reflected in the storefront window. He looked past it at his usual table. He imagined Bernard sitting there, eating a French cruller, and spying on Tilda. Why are you stalking my daughter, Clark thought. You want her to hate me, don't you?

"What are you doing out here?" It was Nat. She had a new haircut, styled the same as Tilda's: a simple fringe.

"I couldn't sleep," Clark said. He looked back at his usual table inside. It was vacant, waiting for him.

"Well," Nat said, "there's no loitering."

For the second time, Clark considered abandoning his observations, but Tilda's conversations with Bernard were growing more intimate, and Clark needed to know what would happen.

He moved for the door. "I guess it's not too early for breakfast," he said.

* * *

[1:05 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "I just think we as a people have to try our best to move toward sincerity. I'm a firm believer that everyone in the world is hurting so much. I believe that because *I'm* hurting so much. And I could fall victim to solipsistic solipsism and think that I'm the only person hurting like this, but I choose to believe, more than anything, that I'm not the only person hurting like this. We're all hurting in our own unique way. I wish we wouldn't be scared to say that to each other. Is honesty too much to ask for?"

[1:17 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "Well, I know I'm hurting, too. That's one sample for your hypothesis. I turn on my Niceness overdrive to compensate.

[1:33 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "Do you know the reason I first messaged you was because in your profile it says you're sad? I dream of a world where I can go to the people in my life (like you—sadly, you're not *in* my life, please don't take offense), and say 'I'm sad,' and they would say, 'Oh gosh, me too, I'm so glad we've all stopped pretending otherwise.' It's not a solution, of course, but I mean, I would feel a whole lot less alone if I knew everyone else had this fucked-upness inside of them, too. But the thing is, I don't even have it in me to live the way I envision things. I've got this idealistic fantasy but refuse to live idealistically.

And it's not really a refusal, it's that I just *can't*, like I'm programmed to not be able to. Go figure: I've got intimacy/honesty issues. I'm a nutbag, Bernard. A nutbag who simultaneously wants two things out of life: to be completely involved with the world and to be left alone."

[2:02 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "I know I'm not *in* your life. Still, how can something that you and I have together feel this good and exist in a purely disembodied way? I don't think you're a nutbag. You're being honest. I'm the loony bird. I have dreams of winning the lottery and trading in my day job to become a small farmer, who reads about quantum theory by gas lantern at night. I've probably spent enough money on lottery tickets to build a farm by now. Anyway, I've got to get some shut-eye. A bit of rest in this potential existence in which, perhaps, you and I fall in love every time the function of the universe collapses and begins again, but we never get to meet. I know that's a depressing final note, but it's how I'm feeling."

[2:25 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "Forget that dreadful theory. Dream about this: I am your farm girl, and I play music while you till the fields, and at night you stroke my hair and hold me until I fall asleep like a child in your lap. Agh, that sounds agonizingly sentimental and non-feminist after typing it out. Goodnight, B."

* * *

Clark Googled flower shops in Portland and arranged for a bouquet of tulips to be delivered to Tilda at Scrub on the first day of her work week, except he didn't attach his name to the flowers, only a small note that read, *You're special to someone*. It was just too strange—for

Clark to send her flowers out of the blue. The gesture was what mattered, that Tilda would enjoy them. When he tuned into her apartment on the evening of the delivery, he spotted them on Tilda's side table, and this made him happy: some part of him had made it into her life.

It was Tuesday night, and Glazed was running a maple bacon bar as a special donut. Clark couldn't resist. As Nat checked him out, Clark said, "It's *Powerball* tonight."

"Fascinating," Nat said.

"It's almost three billion dollars," Clark said. "The largest jackpot in history. Twice as much as the previous top prize."

"I don't make enough money working in a donut shop to throw it away," Nat said.

"That sounds like something my daughter might say," Clark says. "She works two jobs, but I do think she throws some of her money away on, uh, things she shouldn't."

"Do you need your receipt?" Nat asked.

Clark might have mistaken her expression for boredom if it weren't for the way she looked at him, like her eyes asked him a serious question that her mouth couldn't. She looked worried.

"Are you sad?" Clark asked. He didn't know what made him blurt the question out. "My daughter thinks everyone is sad but pretends to not be."

Nat looked down at her apron strings, tightened them, and glanced up at Clark. "Enjoy your maple bacon bar," she said and disappeared into the kitchen.

Had he upset her? Maybe he asked the question wrong, or maybe he asked it the wrong way. Or maybe Tilda was right; it was too hard to say it out loud: *I am sad*. He didn't know what he would have said if she would've answered yes. What if she would've asked him back?

At his usual table, Clark pulled a lottery ticket from the breast pocket of his button-up shirt. He had purchased the ticket from a corner store after work, using the same numbers as Bernard. Clark considered changing one number but didn't know which number to choose. Now, if their numbers were pulled, he and Bernard would be forced to split the money.

Clark would feel guilty about that, Bernard having invested long-term in winning the lottery, only to be made to share his winnings with Clark, who had never even gambled and who had practically stolen Bernard's numbers. But if both of them won the largest jackpot in history, their names would be on the news and in headlines. They might even meet and become friends, and the topic of Tilda would be brought up, and finally he would have someone to talk to about her.

The time for the *Powerball* drawing neared. Clark booted up his laptop and tuned into Bernard's living room. He couldn't see Bernard, but after a minute, he appeared on screen, still wearing his Perma uniform. He didn't plop down on the couch as usual. He stood close to the television with his legs spread shoulder-width apart, his arms crossed, his lottery ticket clenched in one hand. The frame cropped Bernard's head away.

The drawing started, and the first number did not match. Neither did the second, or the third, and by the fourth, Bernard had turned away from the television. When none of the numbers matched, Clark was a little disappointed, but he shrugged it off. They could try again next Tuesday if nobody had won.

But Bernard began pacing the room. He crumpled his lottery ticket and tossed it at the wastebasket but missed. He stomped over to the basket and hurled it across the room. Discarded lottery tickets from past nights exploded when the basket hit the wall. Bernard disappeared from the room. Clark watched for thirty more minutes, but Bernard didn't return. Clark tuned into Bernard's smartwatch, car, and phone, but he wasn't on any of them.

As Clark ate his maple bacon bar, he wondered where Bernard had gone. He finished his donut. He could buy another one, but his stomach was full.

He tabbed back to Tilda's apartment. There was a man with her. Clark had seen him in her apartment before. Tilda was asking him how he knew her favorite flowers were tulips, and the man said it was a hunch, and Clark shut his laptop so loudly that many people in Glazed looked up from their work. Clark didn't care. Let them look. He was here, and he had feelings, and this, this, this *jabroni* had taken credit for his flowers, which, by the way, Clark did not choose tulips *on a hunch* but because he had scoured through Tilda's profiles to find a hint as to what her favorite flowers might be, which he did find, on a questionnaire from a long inactive profile.

But when it came down to it, Clark knew it was his own fault. He could've sent the flowers to Tilda, from Dad, and at least she would have known, could have thrown them in the garbage with the knowledge that Clark had sent them, which would have hurt, but then at least he would have tried. At least he would have tried.

* * *

Clark was at the office when he read Bernard's message to Tilda, asking when he would be able to visit her or vice-versa. The question had never been explicitly posed.

[9:34 p.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "I've been saving money for a plane ticket. If you let me stay with you, it wouldn't be too pricey of a trip. I would even buy you pho lol. We could pretend we don't know all that we do about each other. Roleplay strangers."

[1:06 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "I don't know. It's not a good time. I'm working a lot right now. I can barely afford my drug habits much less my rent. I can't just take time off to accommodate you."

[8:01 a.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "*Woah*. I'm not asking you to take off of work. I can wander the city while you're busy. I don't understand how 'it's not a good time.' How am I supposed to take that considering you've been saying for months that you wished we could be together? I'm trying to be serious, and you're making jokes about drugs. I just want to be with you, in whatever capacity. I have to head to work. We'll talk later."

[11:58 a.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "I mean, I do wish we could be together, but what if you get here, and I'm depressed or you hate me or I hate you or we get into a fight, and then we're stuck in my apartment together for however long. Isn't it nice what we have now? I thought you liked low-stakes situations."

[6:45 p.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "So basically, you only envision us in the ephemeral. You do realize we could never live on a farm together if you're worried about me seeing you depressed? And you're right; I'm a low-stakes kind of guy, but I don't want to live that way forever. I want to bet big here. I'm offering to fly cross-country to risk it, for fuck's sake. One night with you would be worth it. I'm going crazy over here. I want to count your

freckles, know what you smell like after work, read Tolstoy to you while you bathe. I just thought you would be excited when I said I have the money to meet you, and this doesn't feel good. Don't clam up on me now. What's going on?"

[6:48 p.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "What do you want me to do? We already chat all of the time, and that's the best I can do for now. I'm just not ready. I have this image of you, and I don't want it to go away. And as much as you think you want to know me, I'm telling you that you don't. I'm not a good person, Bernard. I'm self-aware enough to know that I destroy things that are good for me and nurture things that destroy me."

[6:49 p.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "Why are you telling me you're not a good person? I've talked to you enough to know that's not true. You are a good person. You just have some emotional baggage, but so does everyone."

[6:49 p.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "I've been fucking other people and not telling you."

[6:55 p.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "I don't know what to say. Wow. I imagined a future together, even if it took some time. I thought you were committed. Guess I judged you wrong. The worst part is how pathetic I am that I still love you, despite this."

[6:55 p.m.] *let_me_call_you_daddy*: "I don't think we should speak anymore."

[6:57 p.m.] *AreWeGoingInCircles*: "That's it?"

The question *That's it?* echoed in Clark's head. He wanted to know the same thing. He had already known their correspondence ended here. He had read these final messages first when he found their message thread weeks ago, but now he didn't believe this could actually

be the end. He panicked. Surely Tilda had said *something*, but she had not, and neither had Bernard.

Clark stared at his computer screen for fifteen minutes before deciding he should try to get back to work, but he couldn't focus. He read the final messages again. Why would Tilda do that to Bernard? Did Tilda not really ever love him? Why didn't Bernard say something else? Why had he just given up? Each question made room for another, and Clark left work early. He wasn't getting anything done anyway.

He sped to Glazed. Maybe he could do something. He had been a part of this, after all. He had the ability to tamper with their online identities, so why shouldn't he use it to maybe make his daughter and Bernard happy?

Once at Glazed, Clark ordered three buttermilk drops and a large whole milk and took his usual table. He knew what he would do. He would log into Bernard's account and send Tilda a message that would revive their conversation. He moved the conversation thread between them from Tilda's *Deleted Messages* to her *Inbox*, so she could see it again.

But the more he contemplated the plan and the messages—the *That's it?*—and Tilda's blatant disregard for Bernard, the angrier Clark became. *I'm offering to fly cross-country to risk it*, Bernard had written, which was so brave because Clark himself couldn't even do this. Didn't Tilda understand the magnitude of fear involved in this kind of potential sure-please-stab-me-in-the-heart scenario? And Bernard was willing to bare his overabundantly hairy chest, to let Tilda impale him because at least he would have done it, would have gone to see her, but here she was, skewering him from long distance.

. . . And, but, Bernard, he hadn't even said anything in response to Tilda. He deserved just as much blame for this whole thing falling apart. If he loved her so much, he should have fought for her. He just let her go, which was the *stupidest* mistake he could've made, which, yeah, uh, ha, Clark knew firsthand.

Clark's head began to ache. His face and neck were warm, and sweat beaded on his forehead. It was too crowded in Glazed. A steady flow of people entered and exited; their voices were muffled. Clark didn't know where to look. He couldn't meet the eyes of anyone else, and the tubular neons seemed brighter than usual. He could almost hear them singeing the air. He focussed on his laptop screen, drummed his fingers across the keyboard.

Clark typed, from Bernard's account: "Why did you ruin my life and leave me all alone. It's okay if you want to screw up your life, but do you have to destroy everyone else's too? How can you say all those things about wanting people to be honest and feel less alone and do a thing like you did?"

Clark was trembling when he finished writing. He didn't even proofread the message before pressing send.

"There," he said.

Clark read the message over and over in his head while he waited for Tilda to return home from work, when he knew she would check her profile. He watched her empty apartment to make sure he wouldn't miss her. He ate his buttermilk drops and ordered another round to occupy himself.

He was right. Tilda sat at her computer as soon as she walked into her room.

On Clark's screen, the message he sent her from Bernard's account changed from *Delivered* to *Read*. Clark stared into Tilda's eyes.

She tilted her head slightly and looked hard at the screen. Her eyes turned wild; her brows stood at attention. She began to cry. Just a tear at first, and another. She started to weep.

Oh no oh no oh no, Clark thought. The anger he felt before became a memory that belonged to someone else. He wanted to reach out, to touch her, to say he was sorry, that it was never her fault, ever. That he was always doing the wrong things or nothing at all, because he was always scared, which was why he watched life from afar, but he didn't know what he was afraid of exactly, lacked the insight to understand *why* he kept everyone and everything at a screen's-length away.

Tilda stood from her desk chair and walked to the bathroom. She reached into the place Clark couldn't see and returned to her bedroom, where she sat in her chair in front of her mirror. She held the razor blade.

For some reason, Clark imagined her holding a butterfly by its wings.

Tilda made long cuts down her left arm and screamed when she did this. She never cut her arms, and Clark had never heard her yell out when she cut herself. He wanted to project out of her computer. He wanted to materialize, but he couldn't. He was not real in Tilda's life. Tilda shrieked again, and he gripped the table so hard his plate fell to the floor and shattered. A remaining buttermilk drop rolled across the tiles.

The other patrons stopped what they were doing. Nat glared at Clark, dead pan.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll clean it. Just one minute."

He picked a few pieces of ceramic off the floor and turned back to Tilda on the screen. He had never seen her bleed this much. After a while, she slumped in her chair, and her eyes were not open anymore. What do I do, he thought. What do I do what do I do what do I do. Her cut arm hung limp at her side, and Clark could see blood pooling on her shag carpet, staining it a larger, misshapen circle of crimson each second.

He dialed 911 on his company phone, provided the operator with Tilda's address and explained what happened. When the operator asked for his name, he said, "I would prefer to remain anonymous, but I swear this is a serious call." And hung up.

He found a backdoor into the music playing software on Tilda's computer. He set *Help!* by the Beatles to play on repeat at the highest volume to help notify the medics. The stain on the carpet darkened. His daughter was dying in front of his eyes, because of him. He couldn't do anything. He had brought her into this world, abandoned her, and now he might have killed her.

"Dude, you're bleeding," Nat said.

He was. He had squeezed a shard of broken ceramic so hard the palm of his hand had cut open, and he hadn't felt it. "I'm fine," he said. "Fine. I'm fine." Everyone in the cafe stared at him.

When the medics arrived at Tilda's, they went to work on her, applying a tourniquet and moving her to the floor, handling her body like something that was never alive, then onto a stretcher and the room was empty. Clark shut the laptop. He picked the remaining ceramic pieces off the ground, piled them on the table. He clenched a bunch of napkins to stop his palm from bleeding, ran into the bathroom, and vomited in a toilet. In the mirror, sweat glistened on

his face. He stared at himself until the person he saw was not him but a person who looked just like him.

He returned to his seat and stared at his closed laptop. What would he say when Helen called him? How would he act surprised? She would think he didn't care. She would say something like, "Your daughter is dead, and you don't even care."

When she did call, later that night, she actually said, "My poor, poor baby," and sobbed.

"What is it?" Clark asked, though he already knew.

"Tilda's in the hospital," she said. "She tried to kill herself."

She's alive, Clark thought. My daughter is alive.

* * *

Employee, CLARK A. JOHNSON, has agreed to terms of resignation from position as system administrator at Booz Allen Hamilton Inc. after breaching terms of contract by extending surveillance and data collection beyond specified clearance for purpose of assigned tasks in strategic planning, human capital and learning, communication interception, operational improvement, cryptanalysis, and assurance and resilience. JOHNSON's incident was self-reported in official statement provided by JOHNSON. JOHNSON has chosen to resign in order to preempt administrative action and prosecution by the Department of Justice.

* * *

“Hey?” Nat asked. “Do you want something or not?”

“Oh,” Clark said. He had been spacing out all day, his mind wandering to Tilda. He apologized. “No chance you might have lemon jellies in the back, huh?”

“What you see is what we got,” Nat said.

Clark ordered two glazed donuts and a large glass of strawberry milk. He discovered this was his favorite combination at Glazed. “It’s my daughter’s birthday today,” he said.

“Twenty-one years old. You’re about the same age probably?”

“That’ll be four dollars and twenty three cents,” Nat said.

Clark handed her ten dollars, told her to keep the change, and settled into his usual table near the big storefront window where he could study the passersby.

It was good to be there. He hadn't visited Glazed in a week, since he had his freak out and scared Nat and the other patrons. He swore he wouldn't show his face here again but decided this morning he needed to come back one last time before leaving the city for good.

While Clark removed his laptop from his briefcase, he imagined, had he been a more present father, he might have taken Tilda to a place like Glazed every year for her birthday. Make it something like a tradition. How nice a notion: Tilda wanting to spend her birthday evening with him, even as she grew older. The image developed like a Polaroid in his mind. The two of them drenched in neon, crumbles of fried sweetness between them on the table, and nothing but time.

He didn't even know if Tilda liked donuts, which was funny to him, considering everything he had learned about her.

His laptop chimed. The boot-up sequence was complete. A glance at his wristwatch. It was almost lottery time.

He bit into his donut: warmth folding in on itself in his mouth. He chewed slowly, letting the rich flavor stir his tastebuds to life. He hadn't been able to taste anything the entire week since Tilda's suicide attempt.

Clark watched Bernard from his living room teleCAM. He was dressed in what seemed like a new pair of nice, gray chinos and a black button-up that slimmed Bernard out. The lottery announcement had just begun. It was *Lucky for Life*. The show started with its usual preliminaries, and the host started announcing numbers in his slow, methodical way.

But Bernard wasn't paying attention to the drawing. Clark couldn't even see a lottery ticket. Instead, Bernard polished his shoes. He only glanced at the television after the final number was called.

Another night, another loss.

Clark stood to use the bathroom, and Bernard was gone when Clark returned. The television began playing the evening news.

Bernard reappeared in the living room. He slipped on a coat and inspected himself in a mirror hanging on the wall. "You can do this," he said. "It's just a date with a nice woman your age. She's a person. You're a person. She's looking for someone. You're looking for someone. Be honest."

Bernard switched the overhead light off, reached for the remote, and Clark lost a visual.

“Bye, Bernard,” Clark said to himself.

“Who’s Bernard?” Nat asked. She cleared dirty dishes from the table next to his.

“Oh,” Clark said. “My daughter’s ex-boyfriend, I guess.”

“You’re a strange man,” Nat said.

“I’m trying not to be,” Clark said.

“I guess your daughter is lucky you’re so involved,” Nat said. “My father is a piece of shit.”

“He probably doesn’t want to be,” Clark said.

“Right,” Nat said and rolled her eyes. “Do you need anything right now? I have to go around back.”

He shook his head and smiled, and Nat was gone.

Clark finished his donuts, gulped down the last half of his glass of milk. A young couple and their child strolled past on the sidewalk just on the other side of his window. The child walked between his parents, holding their hands. They picked him up and swung him a few feet.

The young family disappeared into the night. When was the last time I held someone’s hand, Clark asked himself. How long has it been since I touched somebody else? He wiped his mouth with a napkin, crumpled it, and placed it on his empty donut dish. He brought the plate and the glass to the counter and turned to leave.

In a couple of hours he will be on an airplane. During the flight, he will practice in his head the words he plans to say. He will try to muster the courage to say them, to do the right

thing this time—the difficult thing. He will land in Portland, step outside the airport, and breathe the air his daughter breathes. He will spend the night at a cheap motel near the airport, wake up early, and request a car. He will give the cabbie the address to Cedar Hills Rehabilitation and then a healthy tip once they arrive, because he needs to feel he is doing good for someone. He will greet his ex-wife in person for the first time in years and fumble with his gestures, and she will guide him down a hall to a door.

He will be shaking because of what will happen next, but he will push the door open and stare at his daughter for a minute, lying in bed with bandages on her arm. He will take a step toward her. He will open his mouth, stop, start, and stop again. He will take a deep breath, and he will say, “I’m sad, too. Would you mind if I sit here, next to you?”

VITA

Ferris Wayne McDaniel is a fiction writer from Mamou, Louisiana. His work has appeared on *Hobart*, is forthcoming in *The Madison Review*, and has been shortlisted for *Glimmer Train's* New Writers fiction contest and *The Greensboro Review's* Robert Watson Literary Prize in fiction. He lives in New Orleans, where he works at a wine bar and spends his leisure time researching Internet micro-cultures, keeping his barista guessing what he'll drink today, and sharpening his hillbilly philosopher persona.