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The urges we have define us—the fleeting and the persistent, the unspoken and the shouted, the ones we run towards and the ones we run from. This collection explores how family, labor, and addiction affect characters' search for connection, in our world and in an increasingly technological one. In each story, characters' must reckon with if and how to enact their urges in a world where it is both easier and harder to do; it all depends on the urge.

THE URGE:

STORIES

by

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For Lakin and Curtis.

APPROVAL PAGE

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PREFACE

And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you.

—Denis Johnson

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BETTING

Jerry took the bet while sitting on a barstool at Donnie's. Next to him was his older brother, Rick, though most people thought that Jerry was older. He looked it. Where Rick had a head full of black curls that always seemed wet and a tan that could sometimes pass as natural, Jerry's hair was greyer, his eyes sunken, and his face weathered from years working the same fourslide press at the same manufacturing plant. Rick was too nice for Donnie's these days—he wore crisp, dry-cleaned button downs, a new watch every other week. He parked his little black Mazda convertible in the handicapped spot. On paper, Rick was a stockbroker, but he really made his money as a sports bookie for the financial elite.

Jerry had once thought to invest and asked him for advice, and Rick had replied: “Fuck if I know, Jerry baby. I'm just there for the clients. Haven't traded a stock in months.”

Rick liked bets—a five for furthest cigarette flick, a ten for sinking a pool shot, twenty for furthest drive on the Golden Tee machine in the back—but only “small bets” as he called them, which meant anything not sports-related. The amount didn't matter; anything that wasn't part of his business was a small bet. Rick never betted with business. Jerry shied away from bets, normally, but he wanted to ask Miranda out to Emerald Isle on the Outer Banks with him soon. That would really cement them together. He was up fifty from pool earlier, a rarity, and Rick was trying to win some of his money back.

“I’ll bet you a ten-er you can’t get that girl’s number,” said Rick at the bar.

Jerry looked at him. “I’m with Miranda?”

“You’ve been with her, what, two months? That doesn’t mean anything.”

Jerry didn’t say anything. Two months had felt longer. They’d seen a lot of each other in those two months. It felt like the other times that Jerry thought he’d found someone but different, too. They’d been spending more and more time together, slipping into each other’s lives like they were meant to be there. She was forty-two, never married, and smoked his brand.

“You go talk to her, then,” said Jerry, tossing back a shot Rick had bought.

“Rachel would kill me,” said Rick automatically, right hand going to the gold ring on his finger. Jerry had expected to hear that, and he knew Rick would still be eyeing the girl all night. The ring would probably end up in his pocket, and the girl’s number would probably end up in his phone.

“All right,” said Rick, turning back to Jerry. “A hundred on the next pool game.”

“A hundred?” asked Jerry. “Getting a little steep here.”

Rick waved the comment away. “Fuck it, it’s Friday. You in?”

“You always win at pool.”

“Darts then,” countered Rick. Jerry was the better darts player.

“Two hundred.”

“Fuck no, bro. That’s a bad bet.”

Jerry sipped his beer. Making money off these bets was generally easier than the work Rick paid him for—roofing work on his slum apartments, yard treatments on his

rich apartments, running Rick's errands—and whenever he got into the hole with his brother, he had to do that work until he was out. “Give me a challenge and a fat purse, and I'll think about it.”

“A challenge?” asked Rick with emphasis. “You haven't challenged yourself in years, bro. I love you, I do, but I mean, all you do is come here and drink.” Rick stopped and sat up. “You know what—I bet you couldn't stop coming here for a week. Actually, a month.”

“How much?” There were other bars in town.

Rick stopped and considered, and Jerry knew he was in for something worse.

“Actually, no. Not just this bar. No booze. No beer, none of it. A month.”

“How much?”

Rick thought about it some more. “One thousand.”

They both knew Jerry didn't have that kind of money. Rick didn't care—it was a game to him. Jerry wouldn't've taken the bet from anyone else, but he figured the worst that would happen is working the same old shit for Rick like he would anyways. But if he won it—a thousand bucks would go a long way with Miranda. A thousand bucks could get them a nice room in the Outer Banks and a fancy dinner and even a gift for her. He'd always wanted to do that—take someone he cared about somewhere special. They shook on it, and then Rick bought a shot for both of them to celebrate.

“Connie, baby, play some Billy Joel, will ya? Something on the piano,” said Rick, nudging Jerry. “We're celebrating.”

“Fuck off, Rick,” said Jerry. Behind the bar, Connie was so tired of the joke that

she didn't even look up from washing pint glasses.

#

The next morning Miranda wanted to see him. He'd told her that he was hungover, but she insisted, said she didn't have the time to come over but wanted to chat quickly. He wanted her to know that he'd make time for her, even if he wasn't feeling great, so he dragged himself out bed and went to meet her in the smoking area of their apartment complex.

They had met there, both of them bringing out their drinks one night and complaining about how their balconies were useless since they couldn't smoke on them. Fire alarms on balconies, they'd complained. First, they'd just met there—by chance—and shared a drink or two and a smoke together. Then they started planning to meet there, each bringing out a few beers or a bottle of wine. Then, she'd started coming directly to his apartment, but it was another two weeks before he even knew which unit she lived in.

He was there first, smoking a cigarette to kill his hangover. It helped his head but made his stomach feel worse. Miranda arrived looking sad but firm and sat down next to him on the bench.

“Hey, everything alright?” he asked as she sat down.

“I'm good. It's busy at the clinic right now, but I'm good. How was last night at Donnie's?”

“It was a good time,” said Jerry. “Won some money off Rick.”

She nodded, facing forward. “That's good then.”

Jerry thought about telling her that he was sober, but he suddenly wondered how

she'd react to it. She'd be happy for him, of course, but their relationship had been all about drinking together. Maybe, he thought, this was their chance to move forward.

“He wants to meet you.” Jerry figured that was a safe lie. “What’s up?”

She turned just enough to meet his gaze. “You should know, I do care about you. This isn’t about that,” she started. Jerry felt his stomach turn. He didn’t even really need to hear the rest of it. He’d been here so many times before, and he suspected he wouldn’t be in this situation too many more times.

“I just can’t give you what you’re looking for,” she kept going. Jerry wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but she was it.

“I’m not looking for anything,” he said. She looked up from her hands, straight ahead. He stared at her profile. “We’re good together, that’s all.”

“We decided this wouldn’t be too serious. We said we’d talk about it.”

“We are talking about it. We’re still casual,” said Jerry, wishing that they weren’t. He’d considered having a polar opposite conversation with her.

“I’m just more comfortable being friends,” she said. That was that.

“Yeah, yeah. I understand. Friends sounds good,” said Jerry. He smiled at her and nodded once, hoping it looked reassuring.

She stood to leave. Jerry guessed she was done.

Standing over him, she asked hesitantly, “Yeah, so, we’re good, right?”

Jerry looked up and nodded once more. “Of course. Why wouldn’t we be?”

#

Jerry spent the rest of the morning trying to kill his hangover, pacing around his

apartment, and thinking of things he could've said to Miranda. He wanted to tell her that he was sober, thinking it may impress her, though he knew that it wouldn't matter. He wanted to offer her a trip to Emerald Isle, a grand gesture, but he didn't have the money yet and didn't want to offer it anymore anyway. The money would be all his, Jerry realized. A thousand. He could do a lot with a thousand. At noon, he put on his work boots and walked the two miles to Rick's house. Saturdays he usually worked for Rick in whatever way Rick needed.

The walk wasn't pleasant. Jerry's chest felt like it had been peppered with buckshot and filled in with concrete—hollow and heavy all at once. He felt like a fucking idiot for feeling it, too—two months, what had he been thinking? Two months was nothing, Rick was right.

He passed The Tavern on his way, one of his old haunts. Then he passed BeerWorld, a place he'd never walked into before. Then he passed a liquor store. Then McCallahan's with their back porch, bright in the sunlight. On Saturdays, he liked to stop off at one or more of these places for a quick drink before working for Rick. Jerry sometimes needed that little bit of happiness to get through the afternoon's worth of work. He kept walking.

When he got to Rick's house, Rachel was the only one home. Jerry let himself into the backyard and found her sunbathing. Rachel was a few years younger than Rick, and Jerry hadn't spent too much time alone around her. Still, he sensed that she had a distaste for him and his life, and he felt the same about her. Rick was their only connection, and they both hated each other for how dependent they were on his money.

“Rick isn’t here,” she said, dropping her shades back over her eyes and resettling herself in her lounge chair.

“When’s he gonna be back?” Jerry stood over her, now feeling like they were both employees to the same boss. He tried to remember if he ever told her about Miranda.

She shrugged. “Probably soon.” They stood in silence together.

“Broke up with my girlfriend earlier.”

“You had a girlfriend?”

“Jerry baby!” called out Rick from inside. He had his head out of the upper deck door and waved Jerry in. “Hey, Ray!” he called to Rachel.

“Fuckin’ hate it when he calls me that,” said Rachel without turning. Jerry knew the feeling. “Sorry,” said Rachel to Jerry as he left. He wasn’t sure if she meant the girlfriend or working for Rick.

When Jerry got to the upper deck door, Rick asked him to head towards the Giller’s Park house and clean the gutters. “I’ll give you fifty for it. It’s a small house, you’ll be done no problem. Come back here and help me load up some wiring later, I’ll give you another fifty for that. Then we can hit Donnie’s, eh?”

“Fuck no, man. I’m winning that bet.”

Rick looked at him, confused for a minute. “Oh shit, last night? You were serious about that shit, bro?” Rick laughed at the notion of it. “C’mon, man. I was just messing with you.”

Jerry didn’t laugh with him. “Hell no, man. One month, a thousand bucks. We’re doing it.” Jerry would make Rick regret betting against him.

Rick put up his hands and began walking away. “Whatever, bro. If you can do it, I’ll pay up. Don’t think I won’t ask around about it though. I got friends all over this town.” Rick was now on the other side of their open floor plan. “Let me know when you’re done with the Giller’s Park place. Take the Ford.”

Rick owned a Ford that no one ever drove but Jerry, and Jerry wasn’t allowed to use it except when working for Rick. The truck was loaded with gear and tools that Rick had either bought or taken from neighbors and never given back. Jerry kept a pint of cheap whiskey in the center dash, and he kept his arm draped over it the entire ten-minute drive to Giller’s Park. He thought he could hear it sloshing around in there. He turned the radio to the classic rock station until he heard the opening lines of Hey Jude, then switched it randomly away. It landed on the symphony channel, which was playing a piano concerto. He turned the radio off, preferring silence to the piano. His fingers ached on the steering wheel, and he wondered if it was from his hangover or finishing the melody he’d just heard. The money. Jerry wanted to prove to Rick that he could stay sober for a month, but he also wanted the money for himself. Screw Miranda, right? He could get into a CDL training program with that kind of money, and then Rick would know that Jerry could do it and have to find some other sucker to do his work for him. Jerry imagined hoisting himself into a big semi and driving away from the town, Rick, Miranda, all of it.

The Giller’s Park place wasn’t a wide house, but it was tall. This meant that there were multiple tiers of gutters. Jerry didn’t like heights, and Rick knew this, or at least he did at some point. The first level of gutters was overflowing with brown and yellow

leaves, all half-decomposed and rotting. He'd forgotten gloves in the truck, so his hands were soon stinking and soaked in leafy rainwater. He wondered what Miranda was doing. Usually, on Saturdays, she stayed in bed with him then went off to the farmers market then cooked a big dinner. Jerry had never been invited, but she ate with her friend Sam a lot. Jerry suspected Sam was a man—more than a friend—but had never brought it up for fear it would scare her away. He imagined her at his place now, which looked something like Rick's in his head.

The second tier of gutters had less shit in them, but they were higher up and Jerry had to stand on the roof rather than the ladder. He climbed onto the first tier, making sure not to kick over the ladder. The black tiles radiated the afternoon sun, and Jerry could feel himself sweating out booze. He stank and his bones grew heavy, lifting the black mush up and out. He didn't look down but wanted to. Miranda lived on a higher floor than he did, and, emboldened by each other, they had often smoked on her balcony despite the regulations against it. Jerry had stood on her balcony with her, watching her flick her cigarette butt and lean over the railing to follow its descent. He'd never joined her but now wished he had.

Working his way around the house to clean the whole second tier, Jerry thought about his time with Miranda. They'd been good together. He'd thought they were good together. He remembered sitting up with her late at night, the first time she'd let him come over. They'd shared secrets and held each other, and he told her about Rick—about their parents thinking Jerry's talent with the piano wasn't worth as much as Rick's throwing arm, how Rick had begun betting on himself in high school and gotten into a

hole, how Jerry had come home to find their piano gone and Rick's bet squared. No one ever mentioned it.

The third tier was hard to get to. If Jerry had lived there, he would've gotten to it from the inside, but Rick had forbidden him from speaking to his rich residents unless he was spoken to first. Rick had never mentioned the poor ones. Jerry had to walk up a steep, narrow incline, then sit, then rotate, then shimmy his old ass up and up, all the while looking down onto the second tier, the first tier, the lawn, the concrete. It seemed to stretch, and he kept wiping sweat from his eyes. He was thirsty and aching and his head had begun to pound.

There was a blockage in the third tier, right by one of the drainpipes. A mass of leaves and helicopter seeds had formed a dense wall. Jerry tried to pick at it, but he couldn't find a good purchase on the slippery shit. His hands kept shaking. He slipped a little, not even three inches, but he had to close his eyes for a moment to steady himself.

He thought of Miranda, their good times together. *Casual* she'd said. He had thought he considered them casual—how casual was casual? The first night they'd slept together, they had stayed up late swapping favorites and firsts and lasts and nevers. She said she'd never learned to play an instrument but always wanted to. Jerry had told her about Rick, about how ever since they'd lost that piano, everything seemed to work out for him. She seemed to understand. He said he'd never been out of the state, and she said she'd never been to the Outer Banks. They dreamed up the trip then and there.

He began picking at the mass again with no more luck than before. Jerry finally grew tired of trying to pick it apart and stuck two fingers into the center of it, feeling

them come out the other side. He thought of Miranda and Rick, curled his fingers, and yanked.

#

When Jerry got back to Rick's, Rachel was inside making herself a smoothie. Jerry came in the back and walked towards her in the kitchen, shifting his arm to avoid touching the polished black baby grand piano. When Rick bought it, he told Jerry to come play whenever he wanted. Jerry usually didn't look at it.

"He home?" Jerry asked. He felt like his and Rachel's brief exchange earlier had bonded them somehow, if only a little.

"He's downstairs working out," she said, just as they both heard a faint, strenuous yell from below. Rachel poured two smoothies and offered one to Jerry. "Sorry. About the girlfriend." Jerry took the smoothie, waiting for something else he felt coming. "Why'd she do it? Leave you, I mean."

Jerry shrugged, trying to remember her exact wording. "She wasn't really my girlfriend."

"That's worse then." Jerry looked up. Rachel was looking down into her smoothie. "If they don't even make it real, you can't feel decent about feeling bad about it." She stopped. "Why'd she do it?"

Jerry could only remember that she couldn't give him what he wanted, but they had never talked about what he wanted. "She didn't feel it anymore."

"She's got a nice job?"

"Dental assistant. Hygienist, whatever." Rachel nodded then looked towards the

basement, where neither of them had heard a yell for a while.

“Must be nice for her,” Rachel said. “Rick jokes that he’ll leave me if I ever get a job.” Jerry wasn’t sure what to say to that. “He’s such a prick, you know?” said Rachel. Jerry looked at her—Rick was just Rick, always had been. “You know. Just like I do. But you could maybe do something about it.” Jerry wanted to ask what, how, when. Rick held all the cards. But then they heard heavy footsteps rising from the basement. She looked at the stairs, then back at Jerry. “Just, don’t let him push you around, okay?”

Rick wore a bright orange shirt that looked to be made of some special fabric. The sweat still clung to him. “Jerry baby! How’d the Giller’s Park place go? That third level give you any trouble?”

Rachel picked up her smoothie and said, “I’ll see ya. Sorry again about the girl.”

“What girl?” asked Rick.

“Where’s this shit you need help moving?”

Rick raised his eyebrows. “Woah, all right. Withdrawals already?” Before Jerry could say anything, he kept going: “Just grab the copper wiring from the shed back there and take it to that abandoned house on Hurlit Street and lock it inside, will ya? I stopped by your place earlier and left the cash there, along with something else.”

Jerry looked at his brother’s sly grin. Rick owned the apartment unit that Jerry stayed in—of course he had a key. “What?”

“Just something for you to look forward to when the month is up. Keep the truck tonight, no worries. Rachel and I are going out, and I don’t feel like leaving the place unlocked. Just don’t wreck it, all right?”

#

Jerry dropped off the wiring, wondering if it was legal. Rick sometimes took supplies off people to cover their bets, and he had the vague notion that copper wiring was expensive. Adding to his unease was the abandoned house, but nothing seemed wrong. He tried not to think of Rick sitting at some white tablecloth place with Rachel across from him. He'd be having a steak, fat and red and dripping, as Jerry took the rap for the wiring.

When Jerry got home, he found an envelope with one hundred fifty bones cash—more than they'd agreed on—resting atop a twenty-four pack of Heineken bottles. The case sat on the ground in the center of the apartment, carpet folding around the edges. The lights cast green shadows around it. Jerry took the money and went into the other room. He showered. He tried to think of something to eat for dinner but knew he wasn't hungry and wouldn't be hungry. He filled a glass of water and had a few sips. He walked past the case of beer. He wondered if it was cold.

What did he do before he drank? He looked around his apartment for something to do—did he have hobbies? He tried to think of something that would kill time. He walked around his apartment. He could clean his closet. Jerry stood in front of his closet, drumming his fingers against the open door. One month. Maybe he would go to Emerald Isle by himself, coming back all tan and white smile and island life. Rick would have to pay Jerry a thousand bucks. One month. The beer probably wasn't cold anyway.

Leaving the closet uncleaned, he passed the case of beer again. Should he get rid of it? That would be admitting to some weakness though, he thought. He would keep it.

Maybe he would give it to Rick at the end of the month when he collected his money.

Jerry passed the case again. Rick had put it in the middle of everything.

He could give it to Miranda. She drank. They were still neighbors. On impulse, he walked over to his balcony and looked down at the smoking area. Looking down was easier at night. She was there, along with someone else. *Sam*, he thought, though he couldn't even be sure the first shape was her. Jerry and she were the only ones who used the smoking area, but it could be someone else. *Casual*, he thought.

He was going back inside when he heard her laugh, and that concrete-filled buckshot in his chest dissolved into something rotting and wet. She was laughing. He kept walking, right to the case of beer. He was thinking of Rachel when he opened the cardboard, wondering what it was like to live with a man like Rick. He stopped wondering. He knew. The case was right in front of him. He knew. His keyring was in his right hand, a bottle in his left. He popped the tab before realizing the beer was, indeed, warm. He drank it, the sound of laughter in his ears. Jerry remembered when he would laugh with Miranda. He imagined Rick at some steak house. He kept drinking. A thousand bucks never tasted so good.

He moved the case outside onto the balcony and pulled up another by the neck. The weight was strange but familiar. He held the bottle upside down, like a throwing knife. He could see Rick's Ford in the lot to the right, windshield just asking for it. He could see Miranda and Sam in the smoking area to the left, cigarette cherries like landing lights. He figured he could hit either with a good toss.

“Bet me I won't.”

JOINT DECISIONS

Henry shaped the rest of his ground beef into patties as the woman approached his food truck and eyed the menu. The woman stood there for a long time—Henry’s menu wasn’t large, and so many people ordered the classic cheeseburger that he’d just about given up on his more gourmet burgers. Covertly he studied her—narrow as a nail with short cropped black hair. Her profile was outlined against the orange light of a nearby streetlamp, and Henry recognized her. She came to this brewery almost as regularly as he parked here, and she occasionally tried to flirt with him.

“Can I get you something?” he asked. Tonight, he didn’t have the patience to let someone just stand there, unwilling to buy something. This happened often; people thought of his truck as such a staple that they would forget he was inside, waiting for business, and would stand there chatting or looking at their phones.

She looked up at him. “No, no. I’m sorry.” She seemed about to turn back, then stopped herself. “Listen, I come here and see you a lot and I don’t usually do this type of thing but—” she stopped rambling and collected herself. “Do you want to grab a drink? Here or—” They met eyes and she trailed off. She smiled up at him, half apology and half hope.

Henry could go for a drink with a girl. None of their friends ever came to this bar; that was the reason he set up shop here. “Sure.” He smiled at her, feeling out of practice. Her smile changed to something devilish, and Henry realized this might be a bad idea.

Still, he closed early, determined not to feel guilty about losing the late-night drunk rush.

They had one drink together, and it seemed to drag. Henry could tell she was nervous at first, but it faded quickly. Her name was Madi. She was a real estate broker who had landed the job after trying and failing to get a teaching gig. She'd grown up and lived her whole life in Greensboro. She had a cat. Henry wished she was more interesting, but he could tell she was impressed by some of his answers—cooking school, New York City, small business owner.

“A New York City chef in Greensboro,” she said. “Why’d you leave?”

“It’s cheaper, for one,” said Henry. She waited for him to continue.

“So then why a burger truck?”

“The Burger Truck,” he corrected, smiling thinly and sipping his beer. He enjoyed how her eyes rested on his and how her leg almost casually brushed his under the table.

“Burgers are simple, and everyone can find one they like.”

“Like realty,” she said, sitting straighter in her chair. “There’s a house out there for everyone.”

“Yeah,” said Henry. “You’d know best. Most people just get a simple cheeseburger, though.”

She called him quickly just to give him her number, and as she was saying something about how she liked to text late into the night, he saved it under a fake name. Madi’s Tomatoes. A possible produce vendor, that’s all. Leaving, he told her that she should text him, and she’d pursed her mouth and smiled and said, “I’d love to.”

#

When Henry opened their front door, he felt the quiet of the house crash into him. Belle was upstairs, asleep as usual at this hour. Henry guessed she didn't want to talk about the consultation with him. He had blasted music on his way home, and the silence of their home pressed down around him. In New York, Belle waited to have her nightly bath till Henry got home. Sometimes it was so he could join her, but mostly it was just their routine together. She hadn't waited in a long while. Part of him wished he was back at the brewery, in his truck or at the bar with the girl—Tomatoes—but his mind kept returning to the conversation from earlier that day in brief flashes:

I missed my period.

Henry's eyebrows went up and he asked if she got a test.

She nodded her head without looking up from her oatmeal. *Yeah. Positive.*

Before Henry could ask what she wanted to do—what she wanted him to do—she said *I'm going to the doctor today. I need to get a consultation first.*

Henry asked if she wanted him to come. He could swing it with the truck, no problem.

She hadn't even looked up as she shook her head. *Don't worry about it. It's no big thing.*

No big thing. Henry could imagine Belle going through the motions—missing a period, buying the test, opening it, peeing on it, staring at it for the minute or thirty seconds or two minutes or whatever it took. All without telling him, all without letting him give his say. He figured it wasn't a big deal. Not to her, so it wasn't to him. Neither of them wanted kids—they'd had that conversation years ago, when they were still in

New York, when Henry was part owner of his shitty little restaurant, when Belle was still at the old firm. And, besides, what right did he have to that conversation? He knew it was her body, he'd be there for whatever she chose, but wasn't it their life together, too? Wasn't that what couples were supposed to do—talk?

He moved to the family room, thinking to turn on the TV. The silence around him grew suffocating, the cicadas and passing cars like stiches of sound, wrapping him up. As much as he wanted to, Henry couldn't just go and wake her.

It wasn't Belle he wanted, or at least not the Belle that slept upstairs, distant and silent. It was the Belle from before. Before what? Before Belle was working towards partner at the new firm and before Henry was just a food truck owner, before it felt like they were roommates, before their lives began to unweave from each other.

#

Henry woke up to Belle's weight joining his on the couch. She rested her arm on his chest. He cracked his eyes open, and she sat above him, offering him a mug of coffee. Henry felt a contentment seeing her, morning sun highlighting the different shades of brown in her hair. He took the coffee and sipped carefully so as not to spill on himself. She was dressed for work already, even had her coat on.

“Good morning, honey. You slept down here last night?”

“Morning. I wanted to watch some TV, but I was worried I'd wake you,” said Henry.

She glanced over at the TV, black screen reflecting them both on the couch in distortion. “Thanks,” she paused. “Today's going to be a long one, I think,” she said.

Then, “I’ve got a conference call with an LA firm tonight, on their hours. I’ll probably be home late.”

“Alright,” said Henry. He sipped the coffee again and sat up. “I’m planning on going to that bakery near your firm later. Want me to drop off some dinner?”

Henry was a little surprised to see that the smile she gave him wasn’t forced. “The firm will cater dinner for us.” She leaned down to kiss him softly. “I’ve got to run. I’ll see you later tonight, all right?” She tapped his chest once, got up, and left.

Moving into their kitchen, Henry reflected that she hadn’t brought up the consultation. He assumed that there wasn’t much to talk about with a meeting like that—he imagined they tried to make it difficult on her. She probably nodded along and reminded the doctor or nurse or whatever of the things they forgot to tell her.

Maybe she wasn’t pregnant, after all. The thought brought Henry up short. Maybe it was just an irregular period thing. A false positive on the stick. That could be good, thought Henry. Belle clearly didn’t want to discuss it, and Henry knew he did. But, if there was nothing to discuss, then it wouldn’t matter to either one of them.

#

As Henry took inventory and made a list of what he needed to buy, his phone sat on the table next to him. He needed fresh beef and bacon and, always, more cheese. Occasionally, he’d glance at his phone, thinking of sending Belle a text.

His phone vibrated just as he was finishing his list, and he was so consumed with thinking about Belle that he almost didn’t recognize that the message was from someone else. *Up for another drink soon? Somewhere quieter this time?* It was from Tomatoes,

Madi. He felt Tomatoes' attention rest on him from the distance; he imagined her thinking of him, staring at her phone, waiting for his message back.

As he drove around town, he remembered the conversation with Belle from years ago, the time they'd talked about kids. New York was in the middle of a huge storm, some hurricane or another that had lost most of its power but none of its rain. The streets were flooding, and the subways were closed.

They stayed in their shitty little apartment, the one with the disgusting bath, and listened to the rain together. He smiled thinking of it, remembering them holed up and alone. At some point, they'd given each other massages. Henry had been diligent about his, trying his best to give her a real, honest-to-god massage. He thought he did okay, but he remembered hers more. She had started kneading his back, legs cradling his thighs as she rested atop him. Her hands were soft and timid, giving too little pressure to actually feel good, and he'd started laughing. She'd leaned down over him, her hair falling to tickle his cheeks and neck and back. She'd kissed each freckle that spotted his back. She had held onto his shoulders, his arms.

Henry focused on the conversation they'd had. It was after the massage, after he'd cooked them dinner at 11 pm. The lights had been out, and the rain was heavy against the window-unit AC. They'd talked about ideal places to live—New York was on both their lists, she said never LA or some bumfuck midwestern corn town, he said never Arizona, but they both wanted somewhere warm. They'd talked about family, and he remembered that she was the one who asked the question. *Do you want kids?* He'd been worried it was a test. Belle had never seemed like the wanting-kids type, but Henry remembered being

filled with sudden uncertainty. *Not particularly*, he'd said. And she had leaned back and said, *Thank god*. He'd laughed at her relief. *Don't want them either?* She'd practically snorted. *There's no way I'm dealing with all that screaming, all that responsibility, for all those years. Sometimes I try to imagine it and just stall out...* She'd just shaken her head.

#

Henry asked Madi out for another drink. He'd made the decision not to. He'd made it multiple times, in fact, but he still found himself sitting in a shitty dive. She'd suggested it, which he found endearing in a way, and he'd accepted because he knew he wouldn't recognize anyone there. Knew he wouldn't be recognized.

He'd sort of forgotten what she looked like. She was pretty, in a way. Her hair was raven and cropped short, framing her high cheekbones. Her eyes were a bright blue that he hadn't noticed before. They said hi and ordered awkwardly, waiting for their drinks to start the conversation.

"I've been coming here since I was underage," she said looking around.

"No kidding? Never been here," said Henry.

"Well," she said sipping her drink. "I'm glad to be your first time, then."

Henry hated the joke, but he returned her smile in what he hoped was a flirty way. He hadn't really flirted in years, but she seemed a practiced veteran at it. He complimented her and liked how happy it seemed to make her. She complimented him on the shirt he was wearing. Belle had gotten it for him.

By the second drink, Henry had stopped thinking about Belle. He felt loose and

easy. He leaned back in his seat, and Madi leaned forward in hers. She seemed to be honest with him, which made him feel like he could be honest with her, if he'd wanted to. They took a round of shots. Halfway through the next drink, she began bringing up her past relationships.

“I was with him from high school till a year after undergraduate,” she said. “I thought he was the one for a long time, but he was a manipulative asshole in the end.” Henry nodded, unsurprised. “After that, I bounced around for a while. One or two more serious guys, ya know, but nothing major.”

She looked up at him, hoping for a similar run-down of his past. “And, what about now?” he asked.

She huffed out a quick laugh. “Most of the time, I just see where the night takes me.” They eyed each other for a brief moment, and Henry felt a stirring in his chest that was simple attraction. For the first time, he considered actually going through with it. “I would like to settle down sometime though.” Henry felt the stirring in his chest sputter. *Best of fucking luck*, thought Henry before realizing that she was probably thinking of him. “What about you?” she asked. He could see her eyes resting on his lips.

Henry leaned back a little more and twirled his glass lightly. “Lately I’ve just been going through the motions, I guess. Day-in, day-out, you know.”

“All work and no play,” she said.

“Yeah,” he laughed. “I guess you could say I’m in a bit of a rut.”

“Well,” she said. “we can’t have that, now can we?”

“No, no. We can’t,” said Henry with a smile.

“How do you think you’ll break the rut?” she asked. Her leg brushed his again, not even the pretense of an accident. The touch surprised him, though she’d done it a few times. It wasn’t the touch itself but the emotion behind it—he felt her want him. She wanted to touch him, be close to him. Even if it was just for a night, he thought. Especially because it was just for a night.

“Well, I—” Henry stopped. *I want to talk to my wife* went through his head, unbidden. He said, “Well, I guess I’m not quite sure.”

Her smile was almost a pout. “Well, you think on it—I’m going to the bathroom. Another shot when I’m back?” she asked as she stood up and gathered her purse.

“Whiskey it is,” he said. He hoped his smile didn’t look as forced as it felt.

With her gone, Henry found himself slipping into drunkenness. It was coming onto him. He checked his phone, realized it was later than he planned, and saw messages from Belle. *Home early, let’s have dinner together?* And then: *Your truck is here, I know you’re not working. Answer please?* And finally: *Henry, I’m worried. Where are you?*

He paid their tabs, and when Madi came back, he told her he’d had a good night but was headed home. He liked how disappointed she seemed, as if his presence was the highlight of her night. Belle was probably in a bath already, readying herself for bed.

#

The lights were off when Henry approached the house, but Belle’s car was in the driveway. He opened the door, turned on the light, and saw her on the couch. She uncurled herself. The light seemed harsh to her, harsh on her. He stood just inside the doorway.

The moment stretched silent between them, the hum of the refrigerator the only sound in the house. Then, Belle took a steadying breath, and the moment was over.

He moved to the armchair, so the length of the couch was between them. “How was work?” he asked.

Belle stared at him for a moment. “Why do you sleep down here so much?”

Henry was thrown off by that. “I’m worried that I’ll wake you.”

“You never worried about that before. I miss waking up to you.” Belle looked down at the table.

“What’d they say?”

“Pregnant.”

“And you’re going to?” Henry asked, the question coming out as a challenge, and she looked up, hesitating. “Abort it?”

She stiffened. “I told you years ago, Henry. We talked about this.”

“Yeah. Years ago.”

“I was planning to, yes.”

“Then why’d you sit here like this then?” Henry asked.

Her nose wrinkled slightly. “Are you drunk?” As she asked the question, her voice moved from curiosity to frustration. The flash of guilt that swept through Henry lit a quick burning anger.

He leaned in close, sure she could smell the whiskey, hoping she could smell Tomatoes’ perfume. “I was out drinking with a girl I met.” Her mouth dropped slightly then righted itself just as quickly. Her surprise was short-lived, and Henry could see the

confusion, the pain, set in. “She wanted to go somewhere quieter. I came here instead.”

“Oh, how good of you,” she spat at him. Rubbing her eyes, she said, “I can’t believe this. You were on a date? Tonight?”

“Believe it,” he said. “It was my decision to make.”

“God, fuck you, Henry,” she said. She stood and walked to stand in front of the TV. They were silent together for a moment.

“At least she was there,” said Henry. “Not always working late or going to the doctors with barely telling me.”

Belle shook her head slightly, and Henry knew she was putting aside the faulty logic of his point to get at his meaning. “You were with her just because—because she was there?”

“I was with her because she asked me. Because she talked to me. Because she wanted to share things with me.”

“And I’m here, Henry. At our home.” She gestured around the house. “Why didn’t you talk to me?”

“Talk to you?” he asked, bitterness creeping into his voice. “What, as you’re running out the door?” Henry felt himself growing more and more upset. She seemed too calm, and Henry felt he was missing something. “I don’t want kids, Belle. I want you. I want to know what’s going on with you. I want to be there for you when you go in. I want us to be like before. I want us to be there for each other.” Henry found himself yelling. As he spoke, Belle seemed to draw in on herself.

“And that’s why you were with her,” said Belle. “Because you want to be with

me.” She sat back down on the couch, a little closer to Henry. She looked up at him.

They sat with the house quiet around them. As the silence stretched, Henry’s anger faded, and he felt all the hours of pent-up fuming begin to leak out of him. He’d had drinks with another girl—twice. He’d thought about doing more, too, and for what?

Belle’s voice was soft and halting when she said, “Henry, I might want to keep it.” She was nearly finished talking by the time Henry realized she was fighting back tears. In a flash, Henry realized how much he substituted his idea of Belle for Belle herself, and as they looked at each other again, he felt something snap between them. Whether it was tension or trust, he couldn’t yet say, but he felt the force of its breaking in his chest. He put his head in his hands and took a deep breath, preparing himself for what he would say next, but before he could, Belle stood and headed upstairs. The pipes creaked, and he heard the bathtub filling.

AN URGENT CONNECTION

Richard waited in the ride share lot outside of O'Hare Airport, checking and rechecking when the flight from Vegas landed. He'd seen Ria and Shawn post on their Instagram story about waking up late after the Pornhub Awards Show, and then they tweeted about expensive airport food, so finding the exact flight wasn't hard. The flight landed, and he opened his rideshare apps. He immediately got an offer for a customer—Jeff—and opted out. Another popped up—Kerry. No good. He reloaded the app and saw Ria's name appear. Fate, thought Richard as he accepted the fare. We were meant to connect, thought Richard as he watched them exit O'Hare and look for his silver Accord.

Richard drove up near them and popped the trunk, too nervous to get their bags. He was glad they didn't look sad. Online, they'd said they were just happy to be nominated, but Richard still thought they should have won Best Live Couple. Then they were in his car. Ria's hair was red this month and Shawn wore a thin leather jacket. Richard decided he would get a leather jacket as soon as he could afford one.

Richard had foolishly thought they'd recognize him—of course they wouldn't. He only ever watched them. Still, they had to know who he was, by his site username, especially after he had organized their fanbase to get them nominated in the first place.

Not believing his good luck in getting their fare, Richard sat in silence for the first few minutes of the ride. But then, as he pulled out of O'Hare, Shawn asked, "How's your day been going?"

A lot of people asked Richard that, but of course Shawn would, too. He was always kind—to Richard and other people online. Richard couldn't imagine how nice he would be when they realized who Richard really was.

“Oh, it's been a great day,” said Richard, eyes on the road ahead. “Don't usually work O'Hare, though.”

Shawn looked out the window at the traffic and nodded. “It's a mess over here, but I hope the fares are good.” Shawn was a good guy. He hoped Richard was working, making money, providing.

Ria turned to Shawn and asked softly, “Is there any food at the house?”

Shawn shook his head. “Some fruit cups, maybe.”

“Well, that's something.” Ria repositioned herself. “I need my fruit fix.”

Ria with her fruit. She loved fruit; anyone who went to their stream at least once a day knew that. Richard knew he was lucky to get to see this; watching them online was his favorite thing to do, but it paled next to being in the car with them.

Shawn jostled Ria gently. “I call dibs on the peaches though.”

“Damn. Fine,” she said. Richard could tell she was just play-sulking. Their dynamic didn't change off-camera. Richard always knew they were genuine.

“We can make a stop somewhere if you want,” he said. “I can turn the app off, too, so you can take your time. I know cravings.”

“Damn,” said Ria, sounding impressed. “That's awesome of you, but I think we're good. Appreciate you, though.”

She appreciated him. Even though Richard knew that they thought he was just

another stranger, somehow that made it all the more real. Once they realized how much more he'd done than just drive them, how much more they meant to him, it would all come together for them.

He waited until the app told him they were five minutes from their house. Ria and Shawn leaned against each other, weary from travel, imagining home.

Richard's voice was thin and mumbling when he said, "Just wanted to say, you guys got robbed out there."

Silence from the back. When he glanced at the rearview, they were looking at each other. Richard was amazed at how close they were—talking without words.

"Thank you," said Shawn.

"I mean, you guys definitely should have won," said Richard. He felt more confident now, though he couldn't believe that he was actually talking to them, in person. "I don't watch those suckers that did win, but—damn—they've got nothing on you two."

Ria smiled—smiled! —at him through the rearview. "That's kind of you to say."

"Oh, no problem. No problem at all. I've been watching you two for years. I might've been one of the first subscribers."

"Oh," said Shawn. "Well, I'm glad you like the stream."

"It's a great community you've got there," said Richard, growing excited. "I'm 'RichModerator5.' I changed it so I could help monitor your chat."

"Oh, right. The moderator," said Ria. Richard missed the glance between them. "How did—you can drop us off here, it's alright."

"No, no. I couldn't leave you two out in the cold. GPS says it's right up here."

“Right,” said Shawn. He rubbed Ria’s shoulder and they moved closer together. Richard felt the familiar tang of envy at their intimacy. It was his favorite part of them, how wrapped up in each other they were, how inseparable.

“I was the one who helped get the votes to get you nominated,” said Richard.

Shawn nodded and said, “Right, yeah. We appreciate the support.”

They tipped him well, and they seemed agreeable to his offer to drive them again, though they hurried to get into their house. It was cold outside. They said to reach out to them online, next time they streamed. Richard wrote their address down on his hand, then wrote it in his phone just to be safe. Obviously, he’d send them something for getting nominated.

Cards were nice, but he really wanted to congratulate them. Plus, he didn’t want to send mail like every other fan must. Flowers were boring. He decided on a fruit basket, a big edible thing that would show how much he valued them and their new friendship. Ria loved fruit, and they were short on food at their place. It was perfect.

When Richard got back home, he found he’d been banned from their page—from the whole site. The automated email said he’d “made members of the community feel unsafe.” Unsafe? Richard couldn’t believe it—he’d driven them safely. He checked their Twitter page—he wasn’t blocked there, and they hadn’t mentioned him. He figured it must’ve been a mistake, but that just meant the fruit basket was more important than ever. Once they got the fruit basket, saw it was from him, then they’d realize that he was the safest guy around.

Except it was the first of the month in a few days. His mother needed medication,

the bank needed payments on the house, the dealership needed payments on the car, insurance always needed money. Electric bills. Richard would have to wait, so he did. All month, he found himself waiting for their shows to start. His ban wasn't ever lifted, though he tried to log on those first few days. Then, he turned off the alarms that alerted him to the start of their morning show, their afternoon show, their midnight show. It was too frustrating to know they were streaming, holding each other closely and fucking for everyone to see except Richard.

That month, he kept trying to jack off but couldn't finish. It was torture. He got hard a lot—woke up hard, went to bed hard, drove the city from Evanston to Hyde Park hard—but he just couldn't finish. Before his ban, he'd secretly recorded some of Ria and Shawn's live streams, so he tried to use those. He watched the violent fucks, where they tore at each other and left long, bloody marks on each other's backs, but those wouldn't do. He got closest to finishing on their quiet fucks when they seemed to forget they were streaming. No one else on the stream liked those, and Richard would have to appoint himself as moderator to keep the chat respectful. He loved Ria and Shawn for those videos—the ones where they just held each other tight and ran their hands down each other's naked bodies. Richard could imagine their hands tracing spiderwebs on his own skin, a touch so soft it could only mean care and love.

Now, Richard had \$150.00 for the fruit basket all set aside. After spending yet another hour pumping away in the morning, he gave up and went downstairs to where he heard his mom making coffee.

Most days, Richard didn't mind helping his mom. With early onset Alzheimer's,

she had strange gaps in her mind which enlarged or contracted seemingly at random. Some mornings were worse than others, but she always remembered coffee. That, for some reason, was ingrained in her deep and untouchable.

Still, there was nothing to be done about it except pay for medication and do the best he could. He wanted to do the best he could. He knew his parents had him late in their lives—the pregnancy was unlikely and unexpected. Richard had read online that the first signs of early on-set Alzheimer’s could begin in the mid-thirties—was his mom already losing her grip when she was pregnant with him? The thirty-three years since had only taken more and more of her. He wondered how long she had, then stopped wondering quickly.

Despite the exciting prospect of getting in touch with Ria and Shawn later tonight (he would pay for same day delivery, bringing the total to \$176.00), Richard found himself dreading another morning with his mom and her collapsing mind.

He entered the kitchen and saw her standing over the counter holding a pan. Eggs, butter, salt and pepper, hot sauce, and a spatula were all arrayed in front of her. She turned when Richard walked in.

“Morning, Mom. How are you?”

“Good morning, Dickie. I’m just fine. What—how do you want your eggs today?”

Richard had eaten eggs the same way for his entire life—scrambled with hot sauce. It was his mother’s tradition that made it so.

“How about scrambled today?” asked Richard lightly. “You always like that.”

She caught on before he even finished speaking. Laughing almost to herself, she said, “Scrambled. Of course.”

She turned to the countertop and began cooking while Richard went to the fruit basket site on his phone, ready to finally hit Order after seeing the basket in his cart for a month. \$182.00 with tax, but Richard knew how much they would appreciate it. The month had been a long one, not just because he couldn’t release but because he missed Ria and Shawn in his life.

“Oh, Richard. I didn’t realize you were down here,” said his mom after turning from the stove. She at least sounded happy.

Richard mustered his best smile through the mounting pain below his navel.

“Morning, Mom.”

#

The fruit basket was a thing of beauty. It had chocolate covered strawberries, pineapple cut into flowers, melon wedges as stalks of greenery. And peaches, enough for the both of them. Richard ordered it after breakfast then watched the tracker for twenty minutes before deciding that he’d have to go work after all.

He drove all day, thinking about the package. He drove I-90, the Eisenhower, Lake Shore Drive. When he drove, Richard sometimes tried to strike up conversation. It wasn’t for the tips—he usually got the best tips when he didn’t talk—but on the off chance that someone needed a friend to talk to. That’s what cabbies did, right? But, it never worked. The guys he drove always seemed to know something that he didn’t, some joke or fact about the world that Richard had missed. They tried to get him to become

their personal driver—asking for his number so they could call him on demand. None of the women ever tried that, though. Richard suspected that he made them uncomfortable whenever he tried to strike up conversation, which of course wasn't what he wanted.

Getting home that night, Richard checked the package tracker while sitting in his car in the driveway. It was delivered. He clicked out of that app and opened Twitter, which had been open in the background resting on Ria and Shawn's page. Richard felt his heart swell imagining their reaction. They didn't tag him—probably didn't know his username—but they shared it with their followers. Richard clicked on the tweet, and his heart shriveled in his chest.

Ria had tweeted, “hell no to creepy fans” with the picture, which showed a large fruit basket sitting next to an alleyway dumpster. Rats nibbled on the fruit. Creepy? Richard had to explain. He wasn't creepy—he was just like them. If he could just make them understand how much he appreciated them, then it could all work out. The same way Ria appreciated his driving. The same way Shawn was glad he was getting good fares. It was the same way he hoped they were fed and happy and liked the fruit. They cared about him, he knew, and he wanted to make sure they knew he cared about them, too.

The next morning, he drove to their neighborhood and cruised around for a while. The rideshare stickers on his car gave him carte blanche to go where he wanted, park where he wanted, linger in the middle of the street when he wanted. He couldn't bring himself to walk up to their door, but he wanted to. Leaving the neighborhood, he saw Ria walking home. She wore a tan plaid jacket and high boots. Richard almost missed seeing

her, so he had to drive around the block to loop around.

Slowing down, he rolled down his window. “Hey, Ria,” he said when he was just behind to her. She didn’t turn around.

“Ria, it’s me,” he said a bit louder. Now that he was next to her, he could see little white headphones in her ears.

He tapped on the horn, once and twice. She jumped and turned. Smiling, Richard held up a hand as a wave. Ria craned her neck to get a better view, and Richard saw her eyes go wide with recognition. She was excited to see him. “How about a ride? I can take you home if you want. No charge.” He grinned.

Ria repositioned her purse, hand resting inside the folds of it. “I’m meeting someone on the next block,” she said loudly. “Shawn is expecting me to meet him.”

Richard nodded and smiled, turning back to the wheel. “Enjoy the day,” he said. “I’ll see you around then.”

Friendships, he knew, can’t be rushed, but he wished he’d gotten a chance to explain.

#

When he walked into the house, his mom thought that he was his father, dead for ten years. Richard sighed, feeling his patience fray. “Hey, Mom,” he called. “It’s Richard.”

“Oh. Richard,” her voice sounded from the basement. “Send your father down when he gets home, will you?” Richard could hear the disguised fear in her voice, the trepidation when she had enough self-awareness to know that something was wrong.

Richard went straight up to his bedroom—his parent’s bedroom. He thought that maybe he could finish, but when he closed his eyes, all he saw were rats chewing the \$200.00 fruit he’d saved up for. Then, he opened his eyes to see a recording of Ria and Shawn that he’d watched too many times before, his parents’ old room, and his mother standing in the doorway.

“Oh, god. Dickie!” she yelled, closing the door behind her. Richard jumped in surprise, but he felt no embarrassment. With how today was going, she wouldn’t remember it. She had never seemed to remember all the times before.

Richard knew he should go check on his mother. He knew that mentioning Dad was not a good sign. Richard was all she had left, literally, since her mind was slipping away. Richard had to be her mind sometimes. But he was tired of being the only foothold she had on reality, tired of not having Ria and Shawn’s live stream chat to vent in. He wanted so badly to just release, like he had for as long as he could remember.

When he got down to the basement, his mom was making tea. The TV was tuned to some detective show, volume just loud enough to reach her small kitchenette. She turned when he hit the last stair and said, “Gosh, Dickie. You should talk to your father.”

Richard nearly laughed at the thought, and not just because the old man had bit the dust years ago. Richard’s father had loved two things: his job and his wife. His son always seemed to surprise him. Richard could remember watching movies with his father, silently enjoying a classic in each other’s company, then asking a question about it. His father would jump and ask how long Richard had been sitting there before telling him to be quiet for the rest of the movie. Richard wanted to tell his mom that she had

gotten all of his father's attention, but she knew it, once upon a time.

Richard said, "I will, Mom. When he comes home, I will."

She continued glancing between her cup of tea and the microwave clock, bobbing the tea bag. Finally, she took the teabag out and laid it in the sink. "He did alright, didn't he, Dickie?" Richard cocked his head, surprised. His mother didn't often sound like this.

"He left us with a lot, right?" she asked. Richard nodded slowly, reassuringly. His father had left them with a house twice mortgaged, nearly nothing in the savings account, and a host of shredded credit cards. A lot of debt, Richard thought. They'd done a decent job of crawling back in the years since, but they'd never been well settled. "I did the best I could after—after—" she stalled out, seeming to realize that her husband was dead.

Richard jumped in before she could spiral. "Of course, Mom. Of course. We're doing okay."

She patted his arm. "Thank you, Richard. We love you very much, you know that?"

Richard nodded in the way he knew she wanted him to. "Of course, Mom. Of course. I love you too."

"When's your father getting home again?"

She said it so simply and affectionately that Richard paused, realizing he didn't know how to answer the question. She'd asked it enough times throughout his life; just as his father loved his mother, so his mother loved his father. Theirs was a happy marriage, with a son they forgot about. Some of Richard's best memories were just watching them

together, happy. They'd dance around the living room, and Richard remembered their hands—slowly stroking each other's backs in soft, gentle swirls. In his memories, they never even knew he was there watching them.

She was still waiting for an answer.

“He'll be home late tonight, remember? He had a meeting.”

Richard could see everything in her face: that she knew he was lying, that she knew it didn't matter, that she knew she was missing something, that she'd never know what. “Of course, Dickie. Of course. I remember now.”

#

Before going to sleep that night, Richard found Ria's tweet from earlier, then DM'd their account to let them know that he was the one who sent it and wanted to connect again. He told them how much they meant to him—how he watched them every day, how he felt like they knew him in a way no one else did, how he loved them. He had to get them to understand that he wasn't just a normal guy; they have a genuine connection, and it'd be a shame to lose that. Richard kept reloading their DM chat, hoping to see those little dots that meant they were typing. Nothing. Fifteen minutes after he sent it, he decided that he should close his phone for the night. Thirty minutes after that, he realized his phone would die if he kept reloading the same page, so he got a charger. It was another twenty minutes before something changed—their read receipt came through. They'd seen it. He reloaded again, hoping for the connection he so badly wanted, and the page disappeared. It was replaced with a mostly blank screen, the word “Blocked” in large, easy-to-read letters.

#

In the morning, there was an email in Richard's inbox, the only email address he used for his Pornhub account, from a local lawyer saying that Ria and Shawn had gotten a temporary restraining order against him due to "harassment, sexual in nature, at home and at work." There was a hearing scheduled to make it a permanent restraining order. Richard couldn't believe it. After all those years of following them online, being one of their first subscribers. He'd given them cuts of his paycheck, moderated their chat, helped them raise money to fix their roof (which was probably bullshit, Richard thought now), and tipped them when they did nothing but kiss each other slowly, intimately. They told him they appreciated him when he drove them—they said they'd reach out if they needed a ride. Ria thought he was kind; Shawn wanted him to provide and get good fares. Did that mean anything to them?

Richard shook his head, lying in bed. He couldn't think too much about them, their live stream, not without getting hard. He twisted in his sheets. He hadn't cum in weeks—months?—and the pressure beneath his naval was mounting to something unbearable. He couldn't think about them. Not now, not after they'd betrayed him. And yet he ached. He wanted to see them, talk to them, get them to understand why he did the things he did. He wanted to cum whenever he wanted again, but mostly, he wanted back that connection they'd had.

And that was it. Richard jumped out of bed, threw on the first clothes he found, and headed out the door, car keys in hand. The pain between his legs radiated upward and filled him with a hot anger. He'd done nothing but care for them, he'd done everything he

could to care for them, and he had asked for nothing in return. Didn't he deserve something in return? Some small intimacy or love or—god damnit—respect?

He heard his mother calling after him, “Ray. Raymond, wait. Don't make—” and he shut the door behind himself. Calling after his father, not him. Of course. Still showering someone else with love when Richard was doing all the work to keep her safe and cared for.

He found their house quickly, easily, and was happy that parking was such a mess. It gave him time to drive around a little, calm down. He supposed he needed a plan. Passing their house for the third time, he saw they had an elm in their backyard, just like he did. They could bond over that. He saw a car pull out two doors down from their house. Fate, Richard thought.

He slipped out of the car and headed toward their front door. Richard felt himself hard, and he hoped that it wasn't noticeable. Now that he was here, the reality struck him—this was where they filmed and fucked. This was what he'd been watching all these years. The thought excited him. He would explain, tell them all the ways he loved them, remove any doubt about him they might have. Once he explained, got them to see and feel and appreciate their connection, they'd welcome him in, and then he'd be with them in their home.

There was no doorbell, and he always hated knocking. He knocked anyway, but he couldn't do it loudly enough. No one answered the door. Not knowing what else to do, he pulled his phone out and looked at it as if he could call them. He saw the time—he arrived right in the middle of their morning show. He'd been blocked for so long that

he'd forgotten.

Richard moved to the right of the door, peeking in the window. No one, but he felt his crotch jump at the thought. He kept moving rightwards, peeking into windows. He saw a large TV mounted on the wall above a stereo system. He imagined them falling asleep to some movie, holding each other and forgetting the world around them. He felt tingling.

At the next window, before he even looked in, he realized he was at the right one. The curtains, of course. They had purple curtains in their room, and there was always a crack open. On their live streams, they'd joked it was so people could watch them, but now Richard actually could. Without thinking, his hand went into his pocket. He could feel the strain of himself there.

He slowly looked into the window, hand resting next to his hard-on. He saw cords, microphones, studio lights, a tripod-mounted camera, then crumpled sheets, glistening limbs, and finally he saw Ria staring right at him, her face contorting from pleasure to terror. Richard wanted to jerk back, but as they met eyes and Ria's scream flew piercing from her open mouth, he felt himself bust, squirting eight weeks' worth of cum down his leg.

BOTTLES

We learned that Dad started drinking again when the city stopped recycling glass. I had just picked up Hank from his soccer practice and decided to take him to see his Grandpa. Dad still lived in the house they raised me—an old stone Queen Ann that my mother had always claimed should be on the Historic Registry. Hank loved his Grandpa, and his Grandpa seemed like a different man in the last few years. When I was growing up, he was an angry drunk, and when Mom died five years before Hank was born, he'd gotten worse. He'd contacted us a few years back, holding a three-year token and begging to connect with his grandson. I'd convinced Eileen to give him a shot, and everything appeared great. He was a changed man—happier than I'd ever seen him, kinder, gentler in the way I'd always hoped he would be.

When we pulled up in front of his house, he was outside on his porch, rocking in the shade. His garbage bin was on the curb, empty, next to a crate filled with twelve empty Highlife's, neatly arranged. Hank ran up to the porch, and Dad yelled, "Hank the Tank!" as he scooped up the soccer-clad kid, Hank disappearing into his massive frame. I made my way slowly up the concrete walkway to the porch steps, wondering what I should say, if anything.

I sat down next to Dad and Hank, listening to Hank retell every detail of his soccer practice once again.

As Hank said, "And then, we took turns shooting from in front of the net and to

the side, and I made all my kicks, so I didn't have to chase them behind the net. Then..." I checked my phone, scrolling through my email to see if Larry had contacted me about the big deal. After leaving the trading floor, I had started a consulting firm for insurance risk management and investment advising. It brought in a slow trickle of money, but somehow always promised more. Eileen had been patient, understanding, but the small savings we had was running out quickly. This deal I had in the works would help save us—cover some outstanding bills, Hank's tuition coming up, the mortgage, some new incoming bills.

"Going to put that thing down anytime soon?" asked my dad. I looked up and saw them both staring at me. I put my phone back in my pocket, smiling at them.

"Gotta keep bringing in the bacon. You have the guys over for poker, Dad?"

He looked up from Hank, who was sitting on his knee. "Poker? No, we stopped after Bernie hurt his leg on the ice. Why?"

I paused, feeling for a moment like a younger version of myself. I could ask about the bottles, but if he was happy, and gentle with Hank, and hadn't raised his voice since he was back in our lives, what was the harm in a few beers? He seemed so far from the man I'd grown up with. Back then, he was a liquor man, Jack and ice always threatening to spill with his jerky movements, and those were the times he got mean. Maybe he could do this—people did that, right? Got sober and were able to go back and dip their toes? Then, I realized he already was dipping his toes in again. The bottles were out there as proof.

"Just curious. Do you still have the poker set?" Dad started to tell me that it was

Jim's or Jack's or someone else's, but Hank wanted to go get a root beer—something he only ever got at Grandpa's—and we went inside.

When he first came back into our lives, I imagined a hundred times what it would be like if he started drinking again. But that was years ago now and felt so much longer that I could barely remember my imaginings. Had the old man earned the right to drink again? He and Hank were both oblivious of course, lost in their special relationship. I had always expected him to flaunt a relapse, shove it in my face somehow, but he was unconcerned.

When I watched him spend time with Hank, it occurred to me that Dad might wish for some time with his grandson because he missed so much of his time with me. He was putting in the effort, and in a way, he was spending time with me, too.

Driving home, I decided he could drink if he wanted. I thought of Mom, who had always wanted him to get sober. I thought of my sisters, how they'd been bitter that he didn't stop after she passed. Still, Hank was happy seeing him. I thought of my Dad's life—fewer and fewer friends making it to their next birthday, three daughters who rarely reached out, his and my strenuous-at-best relationship, and Hank. Eileen and I drank casually, why couldn't he? He was old, and he was all alone, and if I brought it up, I'd be taking away the one shot Hank would have to know him.

#

When summer school let out and Eileen was home from work, she told me her news before I could tell her mine.

“I got a call from Starview Prep today,” she said, smiling. “They're offering Hank

a spot on the team.”

I felt my face light up. “No kidding? Starting in the fall?” She nodded, clearly happy to see me excited. She knew what it meant to me that Hank showed so much promise at soccer, even more than I had at his age. Sometimes, I thought he showed more promise than I had in high school, before I’d missed two seasons because the accident. We’d made a point of not forcing it on him, but I always hoped. “We’ll ask him first if he wants to go, of course.”

“You know he’ll say yes,” she said as she laid out the table for dinner. “He loves it as much as you.” Hank was in the backyard playing, which was how he still thought of soccer drills, and I watched him through the window as I finished cooking dinner. He was good, and he was happy playing the game. I opened a bottle of wine for us and set out a glass of milk for Hank.

Washing her hands, she continued, “There is a tuition increase. I don’t think it’s anything we can’t handle.”

“I’ll make it work,” I said, thinking of the deal in progress. “He deserves it. I’ll make it work.”

Eileen came behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist, pressing her cheek into my back. “You’re a good dad, John,” she reassured me. “He’ll have a good shot if he wants it, the shot you couldn’t have.” I rubbed her arms. Eileen always knew what was on my mind. She pulled away and asked, “How is your dad doing anyway? You were planning on going over there, right?”

My phone vibrating stopped me from telling her about the bottles. Glancing at the

name on the screen, I saw it was one of the corporate lawyers responsible for reading through the big deal for the corporation. “Sorry, hon,” I said as I picked up my phone. She raised her eyebrows, asking, *Is this the big one?*

I answered the phone and said, “Larry, tell me some good news,” and moved towards the dining room table, half littered with my work and the other half littered with Eileen’s. I heard Eileen open the backdoor to wrangle Hank into coming back for dinner. In my ear, Larry said, “I’m working on the good news now. We’re moving along quickly on our end, and we’re ready to review the policy in its entirety as soon as possible. Think you’ll be able to send it over by the end of next week?”

“Yeah,” I said, stomach sinking. “That shouldn’t be a problem at all. Glad this is moving along now.” I didn’t think that I could get the entire policy out by next week, but I couldn’t let this deal slip by, not again. These deals fell through all the time—sometimes an interested party would back out, sometimes they went with another broker, sometimes I couldn’t move quick enough. Larry was telling me to have a good weekend, to call him next week, and I made my replies. I wanted to start working on the policy that minute, get this policy settled so that Eileen and Hank and I were secure, but I knew they were waiting for me to eat with them.

#

The next day I woke up when Eileen did—early. I had told her about the deadline last night after we put Hank to bed, and in the predawn gray we slipped through the house with practiced silence. By the time she was out the door, I was at the dining room table and working on the policy. The problem was that I had smaller jobs to do—friends’ home

insurance, acquaintances' life insurance, and a half dozen other, less profitable deals.

By the time Hank came bounding down the hallway towards the dining room, I had completed a bare one percent of the policy, already behind schedule. Hank needed my attention, and I wanted to explain to him how important the deal was, how much we needed it. I couldn't bring myself to make him think about money and the future and our security—by the time I was his age, I'd left the carefree world behind and had to focus on keeping my sisters and I safe. I didn't want him to lose an inch of his childhood, though, so I gave him the tablet for the morning and let him play games. If I couldn't spend time with him, at least I could make sure he was happy.

Later that day, I took Hank over to Dad's again. Ostensibly I was taking him over for a visit with his Grandpa, but really, I wanted to see if there was booze around the house. I pulled up in front of the house like I did the day before, and the bottles were still there. There seemed to be more, but I couldn't tell. Had there been extra room in the crate before or had it been full? Dad was surprised to see us, but he welcomed us in. He was watching the Cubs, beer in hand. I joined him on the couch, surprised as always by how much space my dad took up when I sat next to him. He was built like an ox, and when he sat down, he seemed to be a block of muscle. Hank sat on the carpet by our feet.

“Having a beer, Dad?” I asked after Hank and I settled down around him. I wasn't sure how this would go, and I wanted to keep my tone light so Hank wouldn't pick up that something was wrong.

He twirled the Highlife in his hand. “Just for the game.” He caught my look and raised his eyebrows, seeming to take in the empty and silent house around him.

“Are you drinking a lot then?” I asked.

He shrugged, eyes on the game. “Just for the games, like I said. And just this watery stuff,” he said, indicating the Highlife again. I felt reassured that he wasn’t drinking liquor.

“Just watch out, okay? Eileen and I worry about you.” The conversation was going much better than I anticipated. Before when I brought up his drinking, he got defensive, angry, and dismissive. Now, he was amiable, jovial. It helped that the Cubs were up two runs in the eighth, and what was so bad about letting him drink a little for a baseball game? “You feeling okay lately?”

“Fit as a bull, me. Always have been,” he said. “No need to worry about me.”

I smiled at him. “I remember saying the same thing to Mom years ago. She never listened.”

That produced a sharp bark of a laugh. “And now you hear it from this one, eh?” he asked, leaning forward to muss-up Hank’s hair. “Suppose it’s all part of the job.”

I leaned back into the couch, watching Báez hit a double. I looked from my dad to my son to the baseball game, and I felt a contentment that I always imagined was out there for fathers and sons. Here in my childhood home. Hank didn’t see the significance of it yet, really only liked baseball because of this, these moments with his grandpa, but I could see the start of a new relationship between the three of us.

“A guy could die of thirst around here,” I said.

He laughed but didn’t take his eyes off the game. “You grew up here—you need me to point you towards the fridge?”

I got up to find Hank some water or juice and get myself a beer. I hadn't planned on drinking, but I'd gotten good work done on the policy and figured one beer while watching the game couldn't hurt. I could already hear Eileen telling me I'd made a mistake by enabling him, but this was different in ways she probably wouldn't understand. He wasn't drinking liquor; he wasn't getting *drunk* like he used to—he wasn't getting drunk at all. He could do this casually, just like everyone else could, and it felt good to give my dad the benefit of the doubt after so long. She would only see it in terms of danger, not of possibility.

Opening the kitchen fridge, there weren't any beers. The garage fridge, however, was stacked full. I stood there for a moment, staring. There must have been three cases in the fridge, all out of their cardboard and stacked neatly, weight distributed so the shelves didn't warp.

I grabbed two and told myself that he bought in bulk. He hardly ever drove anymore, and he was known to buy so much frozen chicken that he filled up both his freezers and kept some in a camping cooler.

I made my way back to the family room. Hank was sprawled out on his stomach, arms propped up under his chin to watch the game. Dad was leaning back on the couch, beer empty, and the Cubs had let up one run with another two men on base.

#

Hank frustrated me as we drove home, asking me about the plans for the rest of the day, about the Cubs and Wrigley, about Grandpa and every other damn thing he could think to ask about. I knew that when we got home, I needed to work on the policy as

much as possible, but I also knew that this was the agreement that Eileen and I came to; she works over the summer and I keep an eye on Hank. My job, for the most part, allowed this, but lately I just didn't have the time I needed.

I sent Hank off to play in the backyard and went to the dining room table. The policy itself wasn't that difficult; it was the minutiae of detail and the size of the whole thing that made it such a long project. I'd lost too many deals to stretch this one out longer than I needed to.

The garage door opened, which meant Eileen was home. Standing up from the table, I heard her say, "Alrighty, honey, go up and wash your hands."

When I found Eileen in the kitchen plopping her oversized bag onto the counter, I asked, "How was work?"

"Hank was down the block, John. I found him on my way home."

"Down the block? I sent him into the backyard so I could get some work done."

Hank was, we both agreed, old enough to explore a little bit in the summer. In our own ways, we each had loose childhoods. She was carefully let free into the world; I was forgotten when I wasn't yelled out of the house. We'd agreed that we didn't want to suffocate Hank, but we hadn't made any plans yet.

"He gets caught up in games he plays with himself. He was out on a secret mission when I picked him up." I could tell she was worried, even a little upset. She wouldn't show it, because she knew that Hank was safe, but she was one small tragedy from pissed. More than that, though, was the fact that I'd let it happen. I thought of my dad.

“I’m sorry, Eileen. I’ll make sure he’s safe, I promise, okay?”

She began taking out some food for dinner. “We could hire a sitter until this project is finished.”

“We don’t need a sitter,” I said, in a tone that told her I hadn’t changed my mind. I’d grown up surrounded by people who weren’t my father, and Hank wouldn’t have that experience. He would know his parents made time for him, made time to make sure he was safe and happy. Eileen thought it was silly of me, but she’d only been left with a sitter when her parents went out on dates. I had spent entire weekends with neighbors.

“Well,” she said, drawing the word out. “What if your dad came and watched him?”

I moved around the kitchen preparing dinner. “I thought we decided that might not be a good idea.”

She nodded and kept angling to stay out of my way. “He’s been sober all this time, though. I was thinking about it the other day, and—I haven’t made up my mind but—I thought he might have earned some more trust. We’d have to talk about it with him, lay down some ground rules before we let it happen, but I thought maybe it was time.”

I looked at her as I filled a pot from the sink. “You think so? Really?” Eileen had always been adamant about Hank never being with his grandpa unsupervised. I’d told her stories, and she had done her own reading. The overall effect, it seemed to me, was fearing my dad and all he represented.

Eileen shrugged and said, “I mean, you’d have to be here in the house with them.

Maybe we should hide everything before he comes over.”

I couldn't help but smile. “More trust, huh?”

She grimaced. “Baby steps, John. Like I said, I'm just thinking about it for now. From what you've told me, he's never had a problem lying before, and—”

Hank came sprinting through the house. I grabbed him with one arm and told him to slow down, Speedracer. We began settling in for dinner then.

She was echoing some of my own thoughts exactly. My dad had recovered, could dip his toes in again. Eileen, by bringing this up, in some ways finalized the realization for me. Dad hadn't hit the bottle—only the watered-down beer, and he treated Hank with all the love in the world. As I sat down with my family for dinner, I felt like my family was finally starting to really come together before Larry emailed me asking for a status update on the project.

#

Monday came around, and when Larry called me up again, I told him that I was on track to send his team the policy. In reality, I was behind. I had gotten good work done over the weekend, much to Eileen's quiet chagrin. Still, there was a lot left to do, which I hoped she could see. This deal was necessary. We would survive another few months, maybe, but Hank's new tuition was right around the corner, as well as books and school supplies and the fee to join the team. What kind of father would I be if I let this chance slip by for him? Basically, the kind I had, and I wouldn't let that happen.

I was banking on getting a lot of it done from Tuesday to Thursday in the mornings, when Hank had soccer camp. On Tuesday, after soccer, I took Hank to

Grandpa's again.

The crate of bottles was overflowing, spilling onto the grass and off the curb into the street. I asked Dad, and he spun around quickly, his bulk swinging around to face me.

“That damn garbageman keeps forgetting.”

“No, the city stopped taking it, Dad. You have to go to the library and recycle it there.”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “The city has picked up my glass for years, how come they stopped now?”

“Years? How long have you been drinking again?” I suddenly felt—almost knew—that he had never stopped drinking.

“I wasn't talking about that,” he said. “They just pick up glass.” He saw my face. “Pasta sauce, John. For Christssake,” he trailed off, shaking his head.

Hank came back into the room and I let it go, though I realized belatedly that he never answered the question.

#

On the way home, it began to rain. Storm clouds had arrived in force while we were at Grandpa's. Now, there were fat drops obscuring my windshield. Big, fat drops that would soak into the soccer field over the next few hours, days, making Hank's soccer camp cancel, and as they fell, I felt the world narrow down to exclude my dad, my son, drinking, even the car I was driving. All I could think of was the policy and why we needed it—the bills arriving in two weeks, Hank's future, Eileen's security.

The next day, Wednesday, Hank was actually pretty good. He watched cartoons

and movies in the morning and played Legos in his room for most of the afternoon. I got a lot of work done—enough that I knew I’d need one more grueling day and it’d be ready to send out. I’d be cutting it short by giving Larry the policy by end-of-the-day Thursday, and Larry knew it too, letting me know in his own passive way that Friday was, definitely, a hard deadline.

On Thursday, I tried finding one of Hank’s friends for him to stay with for the day, and I tried offering him rewards if he let me work for the day. The gratification was too delayed, though, and I only got about fifteen minutes of work done before he came running back into the dining room with some new distraction.

I sat down and tried to become immediately busy, hoping he would show some self-reliance and go make up his own fun. I needed to get this done, for him. Hank trailed me in and then began busying himself somehow. I had just set my fingers on the keyboard when I realized how.

“Hank, stop that, will you?” I asked, more sharply than I intended. He had the printed pages of the new deal in front of him, making paper airplanes like I’d showed him how.

He threw one into the air, where it banked immediately to the left and went down near a potted plant.

“Hank, I asked you to stop,” I said. He threw another one.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s up, buddy? I just asked you to stop.” The cursor blinked on my screen next to a paragraph I’d been working on for the better part of an hour.

“You’ve got to say ‘please,’ Daddy,” Hank said with the all the authority of a

child.

“Hank, please, will you stop that?” I asked as nicely as I could, one hand still resting on my keyboard.

“Okay, Daddy,” said Hank. “Hey can we go—”

The doorbell rang, and Hank and I both turned. Maybe Eileen was expecting a package, though she usually told me when she ordered something. We weren’t expecting anyone. Hank bounded off with enthusiasm, and I followed with a sigh.

I rounded the corner and saw Hank pulling aside a window curtain to see who it was.

“Careful, buddy,” I said.

“It’s Grandpa!” he shouted. I heard my dad’s chuckle from through the door.

Before I even had the door fully opened, he yelled, “Hank the Tank!” and Hank jumped into his huge, outstretched arms.

“Dad, what’s going on? Everything alright?”

He was smiling at Hank when he answered. “What? You can stop by unannounced, but I can’t? I came for Hank here.”

“Of course, welcome,” I said, opening the door wider for him. He let Hank guide him inside by the hand. “I’d love it if you could watch him for a while. I’m swamped here.”

Hank was leading him further into the house, but he called out, “Sure, no worries. I’ll look after him.”

Eileen would probably be upset that we didn’t talk about it first, but I needed

something to occupy Hank's time and energy. Besides, she'd suggested it. Just for a few hours, and I would be in the house with them if anything happened. I could check in on them, too. If I was quick, she might not even find out.

The first game they played was hide and seek. Of course, Hank hid in the dining room, behind a potted plant. They played that for an hour, and I tried to ignore the insistent calling out and giggling from Hank whether he was hiding or seeking. At some point, they just began chasing each other around the house, and I stood up to find them.

"Dad, come on. I'm working here," I said when I found them in the family room recovering from a laughing bout.

"What, we're making too much noise?" he asked.

I raised my eyebrows to say *obviously*.

"Want us to go outside?" He looked at Hank when he said it, making sure it was something he wanted too.

I nodded as patiently as I could. "That would be great, thank you. There's tons to do in the backyard. Hank, why don't you show Grandpa your soccer skills?"

He was out the door before his grandpa even got off the couch.

"I appreciate this, Dad. Thanks again," I said, feeling close to him. Parents were meant to help out with stuff like this, and I was grateful he was able to give Hank time when I couldn't.

"No problem at all," he said back to me. "It's nice spending time with him. You know, that old house." He looked to the backyard. "It's big, that's all."

I thought how lonely he must be in the big house all by himself, but I could make

that a priority after the deal was finished. “Yeah, that makes sense. Keep him out of my hair for a few hours, will you?”

I sat back down and got lost in the work. It was mercifully silent, and compared to the last few hours, I felt like I was flying through my checklist. Hours passed. I was just starting on the final pages—the last stretch—when I heard the garage door open. I looked at the clock—Eileen was coming home.

I stood, stiff from hours hunched over my computer, and went to meet Eileen in the hallway.

“Hey,” she said when she saw me. “How’s the deal coming?”

“Almost finished,” I said with a smile. She smiled back and leaned in for a quick kiss.

“How was Hank?” she asked, heading towards the kitchen.

“Good. My dad stopped by, so they’ve been spending time in the backyard,” I said. As we both entered the kitchen, the backyard was in full view through the sliding glass door. It was empty.

She dropped her bags, where they landed with a dull thud that I felt from my feet to my chest. “John. Where’s Hank?”

“With my dad,” I said slowly, eyes still on the backyard, knowing it was the wrong answer.

She turned to me, head cocked and eyes dangerous. “John,” she said quietly. “Where the fuck is Hank?”

I turned back to the dining room, headed to find my phone and call. I felt a panic

rising in my chest—how long had they been gone for? I couldn't even think of where they would go. Ice cream came to mind. It felt like hope born solely from cliché. How'd this happen?

From behind me, Eileen was asking, "You just trusted him alone with your dad? After your childhood?" I felt her words stab into my stomach. She'd just brought up my dad babysitting the other day, but I hadn't told her beforehand and now Hank was gone. "When did you last see him? Did you know they were leaving?"

"No," I said, scrolling through my phone in a hurry before finally just holding the button down and telling it to call Dad.

The doorbell rang, and we both froze, looked to the door, looked at each other, and unfroze in unison. Moving to the front of the house, the phone was still ringing in my ear. I heard Hank before I saw him, chanting, "Twisty turns, twisty turns, twisty turns" over and over again. It was them. Something about the cadence of his voice, his delighted tone, brought me back to my childhood, about Hank's age.

I remembered sitting in the back of Dad's car at night, many different nights, chanting in the same tone, the same cadence, but different words. I remembered feeling sharp turns, hearing tires screech, smelling split liquor. I remembered learning what drunk driving was in school, and I remembered the accident.

One hand on the door, Eileen turned to look at me.

In a whisper, she said, "He's drinking again. Crazy loops, John." That was what I'd called it. It was one of the first stories I had told her about my dad. Hank and I both thought it was a game, decades apart from each other. Looking at me, her face changed

from surprise to something close to betrayal. “You knew, didn’t you?”

I opened my mouth, but she said, “You knew” and turned away.

Eileen opened the door and Hank ran in to hug her, safe and happy and clueless. He was decked out in the city’s minor league baseball team’s gear, replete with a foam finger and baseball cap too big for him.

“Grandpa took me to a baseball game and showed me how to keep score. Then he let me sit in the front seat and not wear a seatbelt, can I do that in your car?” I looked at Dad before answering Hank.

“Herb,” said Eileen too brightly as her only greeting to my dad. “Hank, let’s go upstairs and get you all ready for dinner.” Even though Hank was too big for it, she scooped him up heavily, clutching him close, and left without looking even remotely in my direction.

It was just the two of us. Keeping the door only partially open, I stared at him, and now that we were here, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen it before. His eyes were jaundiced.

“Were ya just gunna leave the kid with me or what?” asked Dad. I tried to convey how slurred his speech was with only a look.

“You’re welcome,” he spat.

“You’re drunk,” I said. This, I remembered well. “You’re a drunk.”

He threw his huge hands into the air. “I just watched after your kid for the whole damn day. You’re the one who couldn’t make time for him.”

“How much have you had to drink, Dad? How much did you drink before getting

behind the wheel with my son?" I felt a cold anger sharpening inside me. I realized how badly I had wanted him to be sober, stay sober; I had thought that it was mostly for Hank until that moment. More than that, though, was that he was right—I wasn't much better than my own father growing up, leaving me alone and unaccounted for. I hadn't driven drunk with Hank in the car, but I was the one who still let it happen. He drank; I worked.

"What? You still don't trust me? The kid is fine," he said. "You gonna invite me in?"

He went to take a step inside, and I held out my arm, hand splayed firmly in the center of his barrel of a chest. He swatted my arm away on impulse and tried to take another step. Letting go of the door, I pushed him back with both hands. "No," I said, putting all the weight I could behind that one word. He staggered back a step, more surprised than pushed. It was the first time I'd laid hands on him.

"The kid is fine, John," he said again, enunciating it like I was the one who was drunk. "I'm fine, the kid is fine, everything is fine." I wasn't fine, though. Not because he was drinking again—that was hardly surprising, though it hurt all the same. I wasn't fine because I'd fucked up letting Dad spend so much time with Hank.

I knew he was drunk, and I knew I wanted to send him out on the road anyway. I thought of my mom. Then I thought of Eileen and Hank. "Get out of here. Get out of here and go home, Herb."

He stared at me, and for a brief, ridiculous moment I thought he'd try and force his way in. I was decades younger than him, but he had a lifetime of drunken strength behind him. I set my feet to give me support if I needed it. Then he just shook his head,

huffed once, and shrugged. I'd seen that before, too, but not for a long time. He was just going to drink more. He walked away like he always walked away when he was drinking, shoulders swinging and chin up. I closed the door.

I could hear Eileen and Hank upstairs, talking about the game. I wanted to go up there and join them, hold Hank, whisper that I was sorry even if he didn't know for what. I wanted to tell Eileen I was sorry, that I shouldn't have trusted my dad, that a sitter was better than me forgetting about Hank, and I knew that it would come. Eileen wouldn't want them anywhere near each other, and even if she did, I didn't. Not anymore. Not even a little.

But the policy still needed to be finished, and bills would be arriving next week, and there would probably be funeral costs before too long.

WASTE

Ralph learned that Lorrie was pregnant on the same day it was announced that Greensboro would become the next SmartWaste City. Neither would happen for nine months or so, and both would have been great, in the abstract, separately. As it was, he was left with increasing prenatal medical bills, no job security, and the prospect of eighteen years' worth of expenses, not including a college fund. As the months went on and Lorrie began to show and the SmartWaste facility's construction ramped up, there was more and more talk around Liberty Waste about other SmartWaste cities around the country. Word around the plant was that those collectors and sorters were given the chance to transition to SmartWaste or take some severance deal.

At three months, it was clear that Lorrie wanted Ralph to move to SmartWaste:

“The benefits are good,” she said. “As good as Liberty. Maybe better in a few years.”

“I could find something in the arts. Schools are starting up their programs again. Maybe I could go back to theater.”

They sat at the kitchen table, a spread of color swatches laid out before them.

Lorrie said, “I miss it too, but maybe now isn't the best time. We don't even know what the severance is yet. And plenty of Liberty guys will be there, right?”

“The severance is going to be good money,” said Ralph. “Six months' pay, if the guys are right about the other cities. I could find a job in that time. I've got the degree.”

“A college degree doesn’t do what it used to,” she said back. Ralph could tell she was being gentle with him, and he knew she was right. Now was a bad time. “Look at me. The shop doesn’t give me insurance. Just think about it, okay?”

“I will,” said Ralph. He sighed and she looked at him. “It’s just— I mean, they’re just handing us jobs for the ones they’re taking. I like my job.” She waited for him to continue. “You remember what it was like at first, but I took to it quick enough. Liberty has been good to us, right? The union has helped.

“The union isn’t helping you now,” said Lorrie. She wasn’t the type for focusing on what was “supposed” to be. It was one of the reasons Ralph loved her. “Liberty will be gone soon, and we’ll need the insurance.” She idly moved the swatches around, her hand resting on a series of greens, which they thought might be a nice neutral color. “It’s another change, just like before.” He was looking down at his hands and she leaned over to catch his eye. “Think about it?”

“I will, I will,” said Ralph. He took her hand and kissed it, happy she’d been by his side since college.

The new plant was going up just across the street from the Liberty Waste plant. Most of the trash collectors, Ralph included, felt that it was an intentional slap in the face, though the city said it was a zoning requirement. The first things built were the solar charging stations: huge rows of the latest generation solar panels, all angled precisely southward to get the most sun. Below the farm of solar panels were as of yet empty parking spaces wide enough for the new self-driving autotrucks. They’d arrive closer to the unveiling day, with one or two trucks set to come sooner as a pilot program.

Ralph would stare at the skeletal construction site, each day fuller, more steel and glass. He would feel an odd stirring in his chest—the building was beautiful, in the way that denoted progress and a better world for his son, daughter, child. He thought of the baby in Lorrie sometimes, imagining the world she would grow up in and failing. He hoped she would be an artist. If all the jobs like his were going out the window, the world could change, become a haven for anyone to explore their art.

Then he would turn back to Liberty Waste, and his imaginings of the future gave way to a grizzled pride. Liberty Waste was a forty-year-old plant, and it had taken on the grime and dirt of such places. He'd been there for seven. Many of the windows were so dusty as to be useless, and the stench had seeped into the walls long ago. Whereas SmartWaste was silent for now, Liberty Waste thrummed and coughed its way through another day. No one had put money into this plant in years, and the guys—Ralph included—had constantly complained about management, the owners, all of it, until SmartWaste came along. Still, Ralph felt a deep and unmistakable satisfaction that came from doing hard, dirty work. No one else wanted to do it, and it needed to be done, and Ralph was there to do it.

#

When Lorrie was five months pregnant, a SmartWaste HR rep came to Liberty to talk to the guys about the specifics of their options. Ralph went to the meeting despite having a good prospect on the horizon. A local theater had called him to confirm his references and chat him up, which he thought was a good sign. A full-time gig, the theater would give the benefits he needed. An interview was dangled. Ralph tried to keep

from imagining himself behind the curtain again, but he was hopeful about getting hired. Still, sitting through the SmartWaste meeting couldn't hurt.

They all huddled in the cafeteria, sitting on folding chairs in loose formations around brown card tables. Valerie—the SmartWaste rep—was a sharp woman, her tight bun seeming to stretch her face back to sharpen the lines of her jaw, nose, and cheekbones. Her navy suit was impeccable. She held a clipboard and chatted amiably with the floor manager while everyone waited for the meeting to start. Looking around, Ralph could see that the other guys trusted her about as much as he did—something about how she smiled. *Efficient* came to mind.

After being briefly introduced by the floor manager, who seemed to try to impress upon them that they should be kind, and after briefly re-introducing herself, Valerie began telling them about the options on the table.

“We have enough positions for all Liberty Waste employees, of course, and we're so thrilled to have some of you—or all, who knows—joining us as we redesign the future of waste in this country,” she said. Ralph wondered if she'd studied theater—he noticed certain small movements, a shift of the shoulders, a tilt of the chin, that made him believe she knew how to work a stage.

“At SmartWaste, we recognize that many of you are drivers, collectors, and we know that you may not have training in much else. I'm here to assure you all that you'll be offered the chance to be trained in our SmartWaste technology, building new skills for yourself and gaining better opportunities with the more you learn,” she said.

Ralph raised his hand and she looked at him and smiled in a way that invited him

to speak. “What’s this training program like?”

“I’m so glad you asked,” she said. “I was about to explain. So, at SmartWaste we value jobs of all skill level, and if you choose not to receive job training or don’t get into the program, your job is still secure. The training program is four months of practical, hands-on experience in which you assist a current SmartWaste employee and learn their trade. We—”

Marcus, one of Ralph’s friends at work, interrupted her, “Did you say ‘get into the program’?”

“There are, unfortunately, a limited number of skilled positions available. As more cities enter the Smarter Trash Initiative, more positions will, of course, open up. But, for now, employees are encouraged to fill out a simple application to see if they’re well suited for such roles.” Valerie didn’t seem to realize she was peddling bullshit. Ralph would ask what the unskilled jobs were, but he figured the answer would be generalized. “Now, I know that you all value your union, so I’m here to assure you all that at SmartWaste we value unions very highly and would never dream of interfering. Of course, since none of you are drivers anymore, the union will need to take a different shape, be reformed and reestablished. But don’t worry about that! The union will be on its feet in no time.”

Another man spoke up, one that Ralph only knew vaguely from questions during union meetings, “What’s the pay difference between skilled and unskilled?”

Valerie looked to the general direction of the voice, but no one gave any indication that they had asked the question. “There is a slight pay difference, but not

large. At SmartWaste, all employees began at an entry-level salary and through their hard work, move up the pay scale.”

Ralph felt the room tense at the words. “Entry level?” he asked.

“Entry level, yes,” said Valerie. “I know that many of you have moved up Liberty’s pay scale.” She nodded at the floor manager, who returned the nod with a sickly smile. “However, since you won’t be Liberty employees any longer, you’ll be on an equal footing with all SmartWaste employees. We’re all about fair, equal treatment and expansive rewards.” She smiled again.

“Yeah, yeah. What’s the severance deal?” Ralph asked without raising his hand. He could feel the mood of the men and women around him—this wasn’t going well for Valerie.

If Valerie was an actress once, she should’ve stuck with it. Ralph could tell by the shift in her body weight, the movement of her hands on the clipboard. She was playing them, giving them the good news first. “SmartWaste comps the severance package that Liberty offers you all, as part of the Smarter Trash Initiative backed by the US government. Because of this, SmartWaste treats you all like our own employees, which means you’d get six months’ pay equal to your current SmartWaste pay scale.”

Ralph heard someone suck in on their teeth behind him. A few others shifted in their seats. He knew his coworkers well enough to know what each one of them was thinking: *Does she think we’re dumb? Six months’ pay at entry level?*

“So, it’s total bullshit?” asked someone.

“Hey,” said the floor manager, puffing his chest out like an umpire about to toss a pitcher.

Ralph read Valerie’s smile as saying *what a nice joke you just made*. She said, “I know that this might sound ideal, but SmartWaste really is committed to helping our employees. We like to imagine our company as a family, you see, and—”

Ralph stood up, unable to take any more. He felt himself fuming at Valerie, at the floor manager, at everyone responsible for taking his job. Deciding not to say anything unless she did first, he made his way out of the room as quietly as possible. He felt everyone’s eyes on him, could feel Valerie deciding whether or not to address his leaving. He heard a soft “uhm” escape her lips.

It wasn’t a word; she didn’t say anything to him. Still, he turned and snarled, “This *is* bullshit. Your company is taking our jobs, that we’ve worked hard for for years, and giving us bullshit in return.” Ralph stopped, wishing both that he could storm out and that he could stay and make her feel like shit. He couldn’t think of any more words, any other thing to say besides yelling *fuck your smart trash*. Instead, he repeated, “It’s just bullshit.”

#

Ralph and the others stood in the parking lot of Liberty after the day ended. The HR rep and her proposals had been the talk of the plant all day, and most of the collectors were going out for a drink to talk about it as a kind of unofficial union meeting. Ralph stood with his hands in the pockets of his thin jacket, feeling the wind rip through it. SmartWaste was a solid exterior these days, with the interior construction coming along

swiftly. There were cliff faces of glass, trees of steel supporting the whole thing. Ralph could see the autotrucks that were being used for the pilot program in their charging docks.

Ralph worried he'd have to start at SmartWaste. His search had, after months, left him with one other option—the local theater, and that wasn't even a real offer yet. He could find jobs to pay the bills, but without insurance none of it was worth anything. Time was running out, and the pregnancy was increasingly difficult on Lorrie. There was nothing to worry about, no major concerns, but it wore her down.

He took out his phone and asked Lorrie if she was okay with him going to the bar with the guys to talk about it. *I'll survive somehow*, she wrote, and he smiled reading it, *just come home soon and get more fish sticks*. Ralph had really hoped the fish stick craving was behind them, but he made a mental note to get another pack.

Walking to his car, Ralph saw his own collecting truck out back. It was a deep green faded to a lighter shade by the years, marked with dirt and grim and thin, white lines where the paint had been scratched or weathered away. Pausing, Ralph realized the truck would be gone soon, too. It didn't have another job waiting for it, unless they were shipping it off to Africa or Asia at a discounted price like all that knockoff sports gear. Staring at the truck, he felt a resentment flare within him—it wasn't just that he was being replaced but also his truck. He imagined the truck crumpling in a car compactor like all the trash getting crumpled inside and felt a preemptive pang of loss for it. It was a good truck.

#

“I think I’ll have to take the job,” said Ralph after they’d both gotten their beers.

Marcus turned to him, incredulous. “What? Why, man? You stormed out of there like you’d never be back. Fuckin’ inspiring.”

Ralph wished he hadn’t. He’d acted without thinking, and he hoped it wouldn’t ruin his references for the local theater job. “What else should I do? Lorrie’s pregnant. I can’t be out of work. We need the insurance.”

“Which means you can’t take the severance,” said Marcus slowly, just thinking through the problem for the first time. He sucked in his teeth.

“Not unless I get hired by the deadline,” said Ralph as he took a drink, remembering why this was so easy for Marcus. With the severance, Marcus would finally have enough for that cabin in the mountains. He spent most weekends and every vacation out there in the woods, putting in more work than he did collecting trash. Marcus had no wife, no kid, not a thing. He probably turned his nose up at insurance. In a way, he’d been preparing for this his entire life. Ralph didn’t have survival skills—he had a theater degree.

Ralph felt Marcus shift in his seat. “Hey,” he said. “You changed up jobs once before. You can do it again. Remember how much you hated Liberty when you started?”

Ralph couldn’t help but smile a little. “I didn’t hate it.”

“Yeah, you did,” said Marcus, catching Ralph in something close to a lie. “I had to show you up from down and you hated every minute of it. You did it, though.”

“So, what,” said Ralph. “I’ve got to just keep restarting every couple of years? Whatever job I get handed from SmartWaste, it’ll be gone soon too.”

Marcus shrugged. “You don’t know that.” Ralph laughed once. “Maybe you can get back into that acting stuff.”

“Set design,” said Ralph off-handedly. Marcus had shown a slight interest in Ralph’s previous career path, which was more than anyone else at Liberty ever had.

“Yeah, set design,” said Marcus. “You could start a play.”

Ralph smiled, trying not to let Marcus see. He meant well. Ralph did miss designing sets—the lighting, the color, the wooden boxes that became mountains or skyscrapers or whatever else he needed them to. When was the last time he painted? He couldn’t remember, but he could still feel the paint beneath his fingers from long hours behind stage working on sets in college.

“There’s not a big market for things like that, especially since I’m nearly a decade out of practice,” said Ralph, but he didn’t want to force Marcus to cheer him up all night. “Still, I’m looking, and I think this local theater will hire me on.”

Marcus seemed to understand that his work was over. “Hell, maybe SmartWaste has an acting department. You could do something for them.”

Images of the SmartWaste facility flashed through his mind—all the glass and steel and whiteness of the place. And then, he saw it as a set, all painted, covered in graffiti like some of the old Liberty trucks.

Ralph smiled and raised his glass for a toast. “Here’s to SmartWaste’s acting department.”

“Cheers, brother,” said Marcus.

The rest of the group were talking about all the things they’d like to do to the

union rep, the union president, Liberty Waste's CEO, Valerie, anyone and everyone who handed down this decision. The mayor's speech came on the TV above the bar. Behind the mayor stood a small array of autotrucks, the pilot program, specially produced for all SmartWaste American cities. Self-driving and solar powered, they'd pay for themselves within a decade, announced the mayor. Maybe less, if other cities were any indication. They'd clean the streets, too. And—here, the mayor was almost solemn—no one was losing a job. The crowd clapped.

Within the hour, the bar had begun to fill. Marcus left, so there was no one Ralph knew too well, but he recognized them all. He saw a lot of wedding rings, and he didn't doubt that most of them were facing the same conversation at home that he was.

Ralph turned to the one closest to him, someone he barely knew, and said, "I really do love this job." The man turned his head at the tone of Ralph's voice. "I worked for my route, and I got it. And they love me on that block. The kids run out and I take extra-long so they can stare at the truck. The families like me." The man was nodding, and the other guys were craning their necks down the bar to listen. "Now there's going to be a fucking truck doing it. A computer."

One of the guys at the other end of their group spoke up: "My route wasn't anything special—didn't know anyone. But I was out driving. If I'd wanted to stand around inside all day, I would've gotten a job at some fast-food shithole. Fuck," he said, just realizing something. "If I'd stayed at Goody's from high school till now, I could be manager." He shook his head. "Left for the union benefits."

Ralph rubbed his face and shook his head, trying to clear it of everything

SmartWaste. The TV occasionally showed reruns of the mayor's speech followed by B-roll of the fleet standing by, ready to self-mobilize come morning. The silver and black body, compact and rounded so everyone knew they were modern. The front had just enough room for a driver, in case something went wrong, but the windshields were blacked out. It had spidery arms with brushes and water jets peaking from the bottom.

Ralph heard some of the guys talking about the Liberty Plant, how long they'd been there, their routes, their routines. Some were multigeneration drivers. Others, like him, wound up there because they had no other options. He thought back on his early days there, when he was still transitioning. He'd seen Liberty as a set, the other guys as characters, and himself as a head set designer over it all. He didn't mean to—it was just how his brain was wired at the time. Ralph used to spend so much time thinking about the theater, and now that he wanted to get back into it, he could barely even remember one show from undergraduate.

The set was easy, mostly, for *Death of a Salesman*, and Ralph had been in charge of it. Ralph tried to remember the play and couldn't. A high school athlete, a pile of bricks, maybe? And the main character's big line—orange pips or a banana peel or some kind of fruit? It had been so long, Ralph realized, that he couldn't remember it. He just remembered the long hours spent painting the set, the short hours when the actors performed. There was nothing like the brief, fleeting moment when the audience saw a new set, or a set change, or some trick of lighting or props, that made them—for a moment—feel what he wanted them to feel.

And then it had ended. He and Lorrie were left with degrees and skillsets that no

one seemed to want, so they had figured it out. He'd gotten lucky with Liberty, and lucky in finding Marcus to help him fit in around the plant a bit easier. It was ending again. All that work tossed away.

Ten minutes later, he stood in the frozen section of the grocery store, looking for the bright neon green dinosaur that marked the only brand of fish sticks Lorrie would eat. Ralph had stopped wondering what the difference was and just accepted it. As his eyes scanned the frozen fish section, his mind rested on his old theater days. He missed the performance, even if no one really knew he was a part of it. He would be backstage, watching the world react to his handiwork. The image of SmartWaste covered in paint slipped through his mind again. There was some latent power there, reserved for him. Forget about changing the world or fixing their shit deal, vandalizing SmartWaste would be more about—something. Ralph wasn't sure he knew what, but he could feel it. Nothing would change. No one would even know it was him, but he could stand back and watch as the world reacted to someone making their voice be heard, even for a moment.

Ralph saw the green dinosaur, threw open the freezer door, and grabbed three boxes.

#

Lorrie was seven months pregnant, bigger each day, and Ralph hadn't found a job. The theater was taking its sweet time, no rush at all. An interview had been scheduled and rescheduled, until finally it seemed he'd have one at the end of the month. Ralph got home from work, took his customary long shower, and cooked a simple dinner of broccoli and pasta for them. They sat at the table, comfortably silent while they ate.

He'd been offered part-time gigs at churches and schools, teaching choir or running a production of *Godspell* for fifty screaming kids, but nothing with insurance. The only steady, definitive paycheck he had on the horizon was from SmartWaste.

"I saw an opening at a school over in Charlotte," Lorrie ventured.

"That Jefferson school?" asked Ralph. She nodded, and he began nodding too.

"Yeah. I sent in my stuff. They got back very fast, said the position was filled." She smiled with only her mouth, sadly, and Ralph tried to overlook the pity and see the kindness he knew was behind it.

"The SmartWaste job will be good," she said. "They seem like a good company, doing the world a favor, ya know, even if they have to play a little trashy to do it."

That pulled a wry smile from Ralph, but he rolled his eyes dramatically anyway. "Pregnancy and puns, Christ. I think I'll have to stay at a motel tonight if you keep that up." He reached over and squeezed her hand.

"Have they told you when you need to decide by?" she asked.

"About six weeks," said Ralph. "The training program application is due then, too. I was going to fill it out later tonight."

"The training program seems like it'll be good, and we can always keep looking after you start there," she said. "Once they train you, you can leave." She gave him a conspiratorial smile.

Ralph's heart swelled for her in that moment. She was pregnant and comforting him, and part of him felt like he shouldn't need her to do it. Another part was simply glad she did. He squeezed her hand softly before stacking their plates and silverware. "How're

you feeling? Want a cup of tea?” he asked as he stood to do the dishes.

“I would love one,” she said breathing out heavily. “I’ve been tired all day. I’m probably going to head up soon.”

“Want me to come with?” asked Ralph. “I can do the application another time.”

“I can manage going to sleep on my own just fine,” she said, a mix of annoyance and gratitude in her voice. “Thanks, though.”

Ralph smiled at the dishes he was doing. He knew she was tired of his offers to help, and they both knew he would keep offering it. “Just thought I’d ask.”

Later, Ralph downloaded the application off SmartWaste’s fancy website and began filling it out. He realized that the application was mostly just asking for any education or experience working with computer science, coding, electrical engineering, all the things that Ralph knew nothing about. He finished the application in fifteen minutes and looked down at the mostly blank piece of paper.

#

Lorrie was due in two weeks, and the SmartWaste plant was finished. Earlier in the day, he’d received an automated email from the theater—the position was filled. No call, not even a personal signature at the bottom. Ralph didn’t bother telling Lorrie. She had enough on her plate, and Ralph had gotten the sense that she could tell long ago that the theatre was just stringing him along.

He worried about her, and the baby, but couldn’t bring himself to ask her to slow down. In large part, this was simply to avoid a fight, but he also couldn’t imagine—didn’t really want to imagine, if he was honest with himself—what she was going through.

She went to bed earlier and woke up later, which he was glad for. He knew she was resting a good amount, and he got the place to himself at the start and end of each day. He usually spent the evenings watching sports—something he had picked up since starting at Liberty. He had never been too interested in them until the guys around the plant would spend their lunch breaks talking about it.

As Ralph watched third-rate sports newscasters run through the same programming as the last hour, his old days stayed fresh in his mind. He found himself returning again and again to his old shows—he built a set for *Our Town* once and had fallen for the lead, such puppy-dog love then and he couldn't even remember her face anymore. He'd acted in a few plays, directed one or two, but he had always been best at set design.

Ralph surprised himself by getting angry thinking like this. Generally, he wasn't the type to get angry or frustrated—Lorrie spit fire when she was pissed, and they usually felt the same way about things. He could always let her be angry for both of them, but now she was upstairs asleep, and he was downstairs thinking about all his wasted work at Liberty. How SmartWaste was throwing him to the bottom of the pile again. They weren't tossing him out, not yet, but he knew that somehow, he'd end up on their curb before too long.

His anger got him up off the couch, and then something frustrated and more powerful than he had realized clicked inside him. He saw SmartWaste gleaming and beside it, the array of autotrucks vandalized. If he had a ladder and all the time in the world, he would paint the facility itself, but he couldn't do the job he wanted. He saw

himself as a set designer again, and he felt like a Liberty man for what he imagined would be the last time.

He put the green paint left over from the child's room in his car, along with the widest paint roller he could find and a ski mask. He wore black, like behind the stage. Sitting in his driveway, he thought of Lorrie. He'd be back before she even knew. What if she woke up, went into labor? Guilt. Then determination. Ralph would have to be quick.

Driving to SmartWaste, Ralph knew that that company was helping the world out, helping his daughter out, even if he was on the shitty end of the deal this time around. He didn't care. A classic rock station that was always on at Liberty screamed from his car radio. For the first time in his life, he wanted petty revenge. He wanted to make a mark on the world that had fucked him, even if it was temporary, even if it didn't mean anything, even if the black eye he'd give it healed within a few days. He just wanted the world to see it on the news tomorrow.

He couldn't be arrested, could not let that happen, and as he drove further from his home, he worried more and more about Lorrie asleep in their bed. He wouldn't be arrested. He was powerful, someone whose work would be known even if he stayed anonymous.

Getting out of the car, Ralph felt a fear keep trying to rise in his chest, but each time it did, it was pushed down by his anger, his frustration, his rage at his impotence. Those were peripheral, though; this wasn't so much about what had happened in the past nine months as it was about what would happen in the future—he couldn't start at SmartWaste without doing this first.

He stood in front of an autotruck, his mask moist and hot against his face. He struggled to breath fully through the fabric, and he realized that he forgot a tray for the paint. Without the time to consider it, he tipped the can and dumped some paint onto the roller. It was messy, and now there was a pile of green paint. What did he care about their freshly paved lot? He raised his roller and in broad sweeping strokes wrote, "Death of a Garbage man." He figured that no one would understand it. He wasn't sure if he even remembered the play, if this message was the one he wanted to send, but as he finished the last letters, he stood as tall as he ever had. He was a giant, a force, a reminder to the world.

Then, as he stared at his work and his blackened reflection in the autotruck's glass, water came pouring off the top of the truck. It ran down the sides, smearing the paint, and thin spidery arms with brushes appeared to quietly, automatically, scrub the autotruck clean.

THE LAST REMNANT OF SORCELL

DPC: Sorcell.

Settler JourneyLog.

Entry One.

Date: 739/321.01/54

We're orbiting Sorcell, our new home, when the Administrators tell the Engineers to wake us all up and then launch the terraforming pods. They want us to watch. We spoke of it often before hibernating—chemical atmospheric change in a day, another day of hurricane-force storms wrapping the planet in a gray cocoon, then life. We may not be the first Dead Planet Colony, but we are the furthest from Earth, Mars, and the Oort Cloud Colonies. We're bringing life to a dead planet, and that dead planet is giving us life. Our home, which we can see being built beneath us.

Our habitation was sent ahead of us, shortly after ScoutDrone surveillance reported back a lack of water and a lack of nitrogen-rich atmosphere, the two indicators of a lifeless planet. Through a small series of autopiloted rockets, the necessary nanomaterial left months ago, programmed to build itself into homes for us. Because the nanomaterial was built for the desolation of space, these homes are effectively indestructible on-planet, even through landing and terraforming. Our town is already there, neatly arranged and spaced to give us each our own garden on top of any food we grow collectively.

We each received our JourneyLogs and copy of *Home at Last*, the same orientation manual that every member of every DPC receives. It's filled with tips on

navigating homesickness for our old planets, resolving disputes, learning to read weather patterns, and various forms of ceremony. We are, in theory, free to create our own culture, our own traditions, our own everything, but Administrators say that other Dead Planet Colonies use the book regularly to help maintain a level of civilization we were accustomed to before setting out.

The Administrators keep trying to show us news clips, viral videos, or sports games from Earth and Mars. But we find it harder and harder to focus on, to care about, our old home planets. *Home at Last* claims that this is an entirely normal feeling and nothing to be ashamed over but also it is important to never forget our origins. Most of us are disinterested in those old home planets, though, and we agree it is the distance, sure, but mostly it's the simple fact that none of us will return. What is there, for us? We volunteered for the Dead Planet Project knowing full well that it meant a new life utterly cut off from the Solar System Habitats; each of us had our reasons.

These reasons are as varied as we are. The Solar System Habitats have been pushing the Dead Planet Project for decades to depopulate Earth and Mars. We're the latest bunch of volunteers who offered themselves up to the possibilities of a new world.

We've begun to learn about each other, though the Administrators and Engineers prefer to stick to themselves. The Settlers gather each night, some of us sharing stories of how we got here; we all volunteered, but we share where we're from, what we did before, our hopes and dreams for this new planet. Mostly, we imagine the empty space, the openness of it all after each of us spent our lives surrounded by dense apartment complexes.

We divide up roles, though *Home at Last* claims that this is dangerous because we don't yet know what awaits us. Myjell had a great-grandfather who composted, so we agreed that they should lead that project. Yillian's father taught her the basics of irrigation when she was a child. We aren't even sure what skills we'll need, but we all feel ready, excited even, for our adventure.

#

DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Two.
Date: 739/321.06/54

Some of us are struggling to remember to use our JourneyLogs. The Administrators keep telling us that we're making history and need to record it, but most of us walk around in a kind of stupefied daze. We know that part of it is simply the newness, the unexpectedness of it all, but as the second sun rises over the fields of blue grass, high as your head, all of us stare in wonder. Or when we found a small lake of burnt orange liquid, nearly red. It was shadowy and metallic, like mercury. None of us stepped onto the fine-grain sand beach encompassing the lake. None of us would have said we were scared. Mostly we were amazed and excited that our planet held such new wonders.

We've been on Sorcell for five days, and our home is beautiful and bountiful. The landed ship marks one end of our town. It stands there solemn and immovable, a testament to our past and a commitment to our future. It will never fly again. From there, the town spreads to the west, following a main road with a dozen or so off-shoots. There is an Engineering Building to the north and an Administrative Building to the south. At

the far east end of town, there stands a community center. Dotted amongst these are dozens of homes, more than we can fill at the moment, each with a small plot of land. Surrounding all of it to the north, east, and south are the fields for tilling. To the west stands the fields of blue grass.

Home at Last tells us that the terraforming process was meant to hyperfertilize all the sand into soil, but there is still sand on plant petals, latched onto buildings, found in corners. It's like old Mars sand—reddish and yellow—and we soon grew tired of it in a quiet, resigned sort of way. This is our home, after all, and the Engineers tell us that it should dissipate quickly.

Tomorrow we say goodbye to the Western and Southern Colonies. They're setting off in cruisers, flying low over the ground, giving us a more accurate map of the planet than the ScoutDrone flyover. It is an exciting prospect—getting the lay of the land, as they used to say.

#

DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Three.
Date: 739/321.13/54

The Southern and Western Colonies left six days ago, and we haven't heard anything from either one of them. Because we don't know everything about this planet's interior geology, we expected communication black-outs, or the Engineers say they did. The Admin say that they aren't worried, but we are and we suspect they are.

There could be massive organic magnets beneath much of the crust, disabling all possible communication. They could have damaged their radios. They could have just

decided to ignore us. None of us say that there could be something out there, or the storms are rougher than anticipated, or the tech is failing. None of us say we might be alone now.

Once a week, we all take our collected sand out a few miles and bury it. It reminds most of us of taking out the recycling from our childhood homes, though a few of us are too young for that. We pass the lake of orange mercury on our way, and sometimes we see shadows dancing on the surface, sometimes even little ripples appear. We stop and stare, unspeaking, captivated. When we brought the Admin to see it, they assured us it is impossible that anything could be living down there. They quoted from *Home at Last*: our planets were definitively and scientifically deemed dead, which means there was nothing living to begin with, and the pods can't produce life on that scale artificially.

The lake captivated us, and we worried over it much more than the sand. The sand—so tiny, so ubiquitous, so invasive. We can't sweep it up or out fast enough. There's nothing about this in *Home at Last*; we checked. The Engineers think that it is, possibly, a problem with how the pods shattered part of the planet's crust upon landing.

We find sand plastered to the outsides of homes to which nothing should stick, forming strange designs of straight lines and violent angles. We find the sand in cupboards, in closets, under our rugs and even our pillows. We find sand in different places each time, and we've grown to talk about it— "Where's the sand today?" has become a greeting between us.

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DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Four.
Date: 739/321.14/54

Admin is clearly worried about The Southern and Western Colonies. We want answers, and we just learned that the Engineers have been working on different communications methods, none of them working. *Home at Last* tells us to trust the Engineers, trust the science, and to trust the Administrators, but we all agreed we should have been told. Admin assure us they'll have the answer soon but also that they don't really know anything yet. We ask how both of these can be true, and they talk about procedures outlined in the optional additional Orientation materials. Apparently, they have a different orientation manual than us.

And, they refuse to look into the ripples appearing on the burnt orange lake, which the Admin dubbed Sunset Lake. *Home at Last* claims that placenames are an effective community building device, but none of us like the name. Regardless, it seems to have stuck. We see the ripples often, and it's difficult to believe that it's simply our minds playing tricks or strange shadows from the two suns. They won't even really consider it. We know that their resources are spent on trying to communicate with the other colonies and attempting to locate and understand the microwinds.

Microwinds are the Engineer's latest theory about the sand. We thought it was our imagination, but it's increasing. After we come back from dumping the sand, it's there in our homes again, filling a different corner. It's gotten into our computers and e-readers. They don't know how it could get into motherboards, but it does. We've developed a method for cleaning the computers, but that isn't the worst of it.

A row of tomatoes on the furthest edge of the northern field had sand in them. We discovered it on accident—Ithawn tripped over a plant. They were still small, inedible little green things, but the trunk of the plant tore. Everything looked healthy, but we found sand ingrained in the vegetable itself, just dotted around the inside. It was in the stalks, too, and the vines and even the fiber of the leaves. It was just the one row, and we uprooted it and the next healthy row in hopes of stopping the spread.

Still, we took any healthy food we could find and stored it in the ship. We sanitized it twice, just to be sure.

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DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Five.
Date: 739/321.15/54

Fifteen days we've been here, and Admin finally got the Engineers to inspect the gnat-like things on Sunset Lake. We were loud in making a fuss about it, and then we were silent when the Engineers announced that the gnat-like things were just sand. Tiny grains of individual sand floating on microwinds—more confirmation of their theory.

It should have eased us but didn't. We no longer trust the sand, and we trust the Engineers less and less to tell us what is happening, to even know what is happening. We hadn't trusted our new home for days, and learning of the sand dancing on the metallic orange lake somehow confirmed it. *Home at Last* is useless, talking about building culture and easing homesickness instead of unknown natural phenomena.

Many of the northern vegetable rows have sand in them now. The worst ones are shaded a bright baby blue. On the eastern fields, we found a range of blue plants—from

that soft baby blue all the way to a deep twilight. Inside all of them were sand. Jheri and Marisol organized shifts for us—some moved in teams collecting any edible food we could find, some others inspected and disinfected it. The Admin quoted the procedures outlined in *Home at Last*, claiming they should have been consulted about new job assignments, and we happily offered them places in the shift rotations.

The Engineers have no idea why or how the sand is in the plants. They know it wasn't the pods—everything went precisely the same way as every other successful DPC terraform. So, they assure us that it's probably temporary and give us lines from *Home at Last*: “your new home needs to settle into itself the same way you do; be patient and understanding as the terraform process aligns with the natural rhythm of the planet. This may take some amount of time.” Admin tell us that this means: wait for rain to moisten the sand. Though, it's already stormed here twice, and each time the rain hasn't dampened the sand at all. The wind merely whips it through the air, stinging our eyes and lodging in our throats.

A few Admin caught a cold. We worry about alien diseases, remembering travesties of the past, but Engineering tells us that it's just a common cold, nothing to worry over.

One Admin, Ovheen, was caught hoarding food, which was both surprising and not. Some Admin began defending him, but they realized quickly that no one else would and so they stopped. As per *Home at Last* guidelines, Ovheen was forced to give it all back, relieved of any responsibility, and assigned supervisor to watch over him. Few of us took kindly to the theft, even though we're all doing the math, counting the mouths,

estimating how long food stores will last.

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DPC: Sorcell.

Settler JourneyLog.

Entry Six.

Date: 739/321.16/54

The Engineers have concluded that the continued presence of sand couldn't possibly have been a pod malfunction. The pods did exactly what they were supposed to—all systems ran through their programming correctly. Still, the sand comes. It comes into our food, our comfort. It comes into our homes.

The darkest shade of blue plants began to turn black. That blue grass, head-high, turned black overnight. Anchru called us all to see it first thing one morning; it seemed as dark as space, waving softly in the wind. Then, a section of black grass, perhaps twenty square feet, just fell. It crumbled, and then there was a pile of sand, fresh and dry as ever. It started miles away, but we can tell it is coming closer.

We finally got word from the Southern Colony—two words, in fact, delivered in Morse Code via short-wave radio:

MOVING SANDS

None of us are sure what it means, especially considering the sand in our food, but the Engineers think it confirms their microwind theory while Admin thinks it is some poetry declaring their independence, their isolation. Few of us Settlers buy into either theory, but no one has a better one.

After another storm two nights ago with no change, Admin told the Engineers to get to work on creating desert plants, resigning all of us to a life similar to our Earth

ancestors. “While it may seem difficult to be deprived of some more common luxuries, remember that your ancestors succeeded on Earth, and your descendants will look back on you with pride and amazement in much the same way you look back on your Earth ancestors,” says *Home at Last*. There is nothing else about reverting back to ancient times, though; that quote comes from the “Motivation Through Disillusionment” chapter.

Food stores are still good, but we worry and set guards. There hasn’t been any more theft, probably because everyone realizes—now—that it won’t help our home in the long run or the short. Still, we check the guards at the end of their shifts for food stuffed away.

A few Engineers have caught the cold running around our town. Some Settlers, too. It doesn’t seem too bad, not compared to everything else going on, but as more and more folks are catching it, there are less and less of us working to figure out solutions.

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DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Seven.
Date: 739/321.17/54

All the black grass is gone, replaced by a desert that’s larger every day. We don’t walk over there.

The sick Admin died last night. Their skin turned blue, then black within the hour. After seeing their spit was thick and grainy, we performed a crude autopsy. Inside, it was the same as the plants. Sand.

Home at Last has nothing about this. A few Admin had been scouring the pages

for answers, but even they've started to give up on it. Most of us put the book away in some back shelf days ago.

We all figure that the sick Engineers and Settlers are next. We've quarantined them in their homes, but many of us are still getting sick regardless. It presents as a cold, until the skin begins to turn, and no one has gotten better.

Morale is low, as no one can agree what to do. We've talked to the Engineers about leaving, but they say they'd need months, years maybe, to have a shot at getting the ship off the ground. And even if we do, there are issues of supply—hibernation fluid, mostly, and our solar sails were repurposed to power the town.

Our fields are all blue; they'll turn black soon though. The gardens around our homes are still green, but none of us have any doubt they'll change soon.

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DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Eight.
Date: 739/321.18/54

More sick, more dead. We bury their bodies in the desert as best we can, letting the shifting sand do much of the work. We do it because we should, and there's nothing else to do with them, but we hate it. We stand on the sand, feeling it give beneath us. Could it grab us? Could it pull us in? It seems cruel to give the bodies to the sand that just killed them, but—again—there's nothing else to do with them.

The fields are all black or fallen to sand already. Our town is bruised with blue and black plants. We wait for them to die.

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DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Nine.
Date: 739/321.19/54

An admin who was sick—Enrikay— wanted religious blessings, so we found the old rites in the “Cultural Ceremony” section of *Home at Last*. He died before we could give him the final blessing for the living, so we took a copy out to the fields to say some words as we buried him.

Another Admin began to recite the funeral rites for the faithfully departed, and as she read, the sand shifted and stirred, the winds moving it closer and closer to her, to the book. The sands moved like water, forming a small wave.

The wind—microwind, we guessed—was strangely hypnotizing. The sand twirled and reformed in patterns just barely unrecognizable.

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DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Ten.
Date: 739/321.20/54

The sand is moving. No wind. Not just trickles or tricks of the eye. The sands move in huge swaths across town. More waves, but bigger—ankle high—and right through the heart of town.

More have died. We read from *Home at Last* again, and again the sand swarmed, moving quicker than we’d seen before. It reared up into a knee-high crest and pushed us over. The book went to the ground, and the sands swallowed it. We watched as grains moved against the wind, tracing the patterns of the letters.

We watched and saw an intention to the movement, a purpose, for the first time. We—those few who remain—all agreed we felt like we were watching someone without sight read a book, the sands spreading, reaching, like fingers tracing letters. The small beads of sand acted as a unit as they curved around letters, moving left-to-right.

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DPC: Sorcell.
Settler JourneyLog.
Entry Eleven.
Date: 739/321.21/54

They're all gone now. Even their graves have been swallowed by the sands, and I've taken on a bluish tint, so I've to Sunset Lake to rest. Here, I see the same ripples again. I watch as the sand moves with a similar purpose, that same definite intention, as before. It took me until I saw their message to understand what we'd done to them. They rippled across the water, repeating a single word in their wake:

HOME

No other entries found.

No other JourneyLogs found.

End of recovered data for Dead Planet Colony: Sorcell.

End