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Marlena sunk the tip of her pointer finger into the skin of a Navel orange. She despised eating on the subway; a more unappetizing sensory dynamic couldn’t exist. Sweat and grime, the smell of other people’s leftovers, mingled with sweet cologne or perfume. But Marlena needed sustenance for the impending conversation with her mother…her mother, her mother, her mother. Good god, if she knew Marlena had been drunk the night before she would make sure Marlena was aware of her disapproval. You haven’t grown out of that yet? She would say. Marlena needed a lecture right now like she needed a hole in the head. She was actually never positive what that phrase meant, as there are actually quite a few holes in one’s head. She took out her worn copy of *The Metamorphosis* from the NYU lending library and opened it to where she had left off the day before. Marlena tried not to think about what she had to tell her mother, nor the mistake she had made last night, and checked the time on her watch. The lights flickered as the F train momentarily lost electrical connectivity.

There were actually three things Marlena was trying not to think about that morning.

1. The look of the man’s hand when he had grabbed her mother’s backside.
2. The fact that her mother had a backside, and it was in fact, grabbable.
3. That she had a secret. And it wasn’t what her mother expected.

Last night she had slept with a woman for the first time. The party had been packed, the air was thick with the smell of weed and sweaty bodies, humid like before a summer rainstorm. It wasn’t like she didn’t know the girl, like it was some stranger. And
it wasn’t like she was some butch girl who looked like a man or anything. Katy, was her name, with a “y.” She was on exchange from Australia, and sat next to her in class for months, and Marlena didn’t know what drew her to Katy. She was smart, she said insightful things, and painlessly brushed off the pawing hands of the men who sat in a circle around her, pesterling her with moronic questions. *Have you ever seen a deadly snake? Do you eat Vegemite? Are there kangaroos like, in your backyard?* Marlena shook her head just thinking about it. Last night that’s how she had started her conversation with Katy, “liquid courage” they called it.

“Hey” Marlena asked sarcastically, “Do you have kangaroos in your backyard?”

Not missing a bit, she replied, “In fact, we prefer to keep them as pets. Only until slaughter time, that is. We’re the only country that eats our national animal.”

On the subway now, she smiled to think about it, and to think about what had come next. Maybe her mother didn’t need to know, but she would tell her anyway. She would leverage her secret with what she now knew about her mother, that way she couldn’t get mad.

“Jay St. Jay St.” The subway stopped. The doors opened to a whirlwind of black and white on the platform. Marlena squeezed her thin body tighter towards the edge of the seat, as The Bronx Bombers Little League stormed the subway train with swinging mitts, bat bags, and grass stains on their tiny gray pants. The train jerked forward, causing Number 8 to stumble in his cleats and trip, no her cleats, as the ponytail through the back of her hat indicated, and she landed in Marlena’s lap. Marlena hesitated just a moment too long, and for a second she and Number 8 sat there, the young girl splayed out on her
bony lap, legs akimbo. Quickly, Number 8 pulled herself up, mumbling an awkward apology. Marlena shook her head, it’s okay, she assured her. She didn’t remove her sunglasses. Across the car an old lady with wrinkles that cut deep into her skin, smiled slightly, raising one corner of her mouth.

Marlena often wondered about this special breed of child, the city kid. Were they oblivious to the constant, looming threats of the city? Did their parents imbed tracking devices in them to follow their every move? She remembered being lost in the supermarket once as a child. She was old enough to walk on her own, and old enough that she didn’t need her mom anymore. She had gone to get toothpaste and when she returned to frozen foods she was gone. Marlena walked up and down the front of the store, gazing down each aisle. Nothing. She gradually lost the cool she was trying so hard to keep, other moms would page their kids over the intercom if they were lost, she had heard it before. Jimmy please come to customer service, your mom is waiting for you! Gum smacking teenage lips would repeat. Why couldn’t her own mother do that? How hard is it to just ask them to call her? She had run up and down the aisles, and finally, she saw her mother in the deli section, casually ordering cold cuts like nothing was happening, like Marlena’s world wasn’t crumbling.

“Oh hi honey, I thought I lost you,” she said with a smile.

And suddenly, she had felt the need to fiercely guard her emotions. “No,” she had said coolly, “I was just looking for toothpaste.”

“Then where is it honey?” Her mom asked, her eyebrows arched.

Marlena looked down at her empty hands.
Eggs Benedict, well done and wheat toast. Her mother had ordered as they sat in a sunny café in the West Village a few weeks after Marlena moved to New York. Her mother got the same damn thing every time they ate breakfast. Why didn’t she ever want to try anything different? She studied her mother’s face in the sunlight. She was pretty. She knew that, she recognized it. Her features were soft and understated; she had almond shaped eyes and a nose that sloped down in an angle familiar to Marlena. A sensation probably called into memory from studying her own face in the mirror. Her body was small and tight, all her strength compacted into a tiny frame. Marlena’s own body was longer, slimmer, like an elongated image of her mother in a fun house mirror. Sometimes Marlena examined her own torso at length, she noticed happily, that it was so slim if she pretended her breasts weren’t there, her stomach could actually pass for a man’s. A sharp V diving below her waistline.

“You don’t want to try pancakes for a change?” Marlena asked, pointing to the menu with the specials. The café was coming to life around them, bustling waiters knocking plates on tables and NYU students filtering in with their laptops to do homework. “They’re supposed to be delicious here.”

“If it’s not broke, don’t fix it, Marlena.” She smiled slightly, and patted Marlena’s hand. “I’m going to use the rest room. Order me a coffee, black, if he comes back.”

Her mother’s phone lay on the café table in its bright pink case. It buzzed once. Marlena paid no attention and went back to checking her Facebook notifications. It buzzed again. She couldn’t help glancing at the text message across the table.
“Room 3B”

Her seat faced the bathroom. She grabbed the phone and slid it open. Her thumb scrolled quickly through the previous messages.

“Hey beautiful. Can’t wait to see you tonight. Call when you’re done w/Marlena. Waiting.” From 917-223-8955.

“917-223-8955” Marlena repeated out loud, annunciating each number. That was not her father. That was not Dad. She felt her bowels rolling around, arguing about which wanted to exit first. Her thumb hesitated over the next text message.

“I need to go back to the hotel to shower and change.” Her mother had responded. Normal answer, normal response, Marlena repeated. Could be anyone, maybe just a friend calling her beautiful, girl friends did that right?

“Will join you.” 917-223-8955. Not normal, Marlena thought. She scrolled to the first text and placed the phone on the table, where her mother had left it. Just in time for the bathroom door to open.

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“Court St. This is the Court St. Station.” Marlena sank into her seat. Three more stops and she would be outside the Green Tree Hotel and Spa where her mother would be waiting, saturated in flowery perfume with expertly rendered makeup. She was not sure how she was going to tell her what she knew, nor about the sudden addition of her newfound sexuality.
She rolled over the words in her head. Mom, I know. Mom, I’m gay. Mom, I know. It all got so jumbled up, what was the more important fact? Marlena wasn’t even sure she was gay, just that she was in love with Katy, she thought. There had been other girls, other crushes, other glances from across the room. But this was the first time she had acted on it. In a sense, her other’s infidelity had given her a sort of power over her. A kind of grand *fuck you*, that made her blood boil, and made her feel shockingly free at the same time.

She would say, *Mom, I know why you’re in New York.* No, maybe she could feign fear, Mom, please don’t tell Dad yet, just try to work things out first. Promise? Oh, and last night I slept with a woman. Maybe she would joke, I had weird dream you were cheating on Dad with some 917 number a few weeks ago, what do you think that means? Now we both have a secret.

Marlena knew several things about confrontations with her mother:

1. She needed to be in the position of power.
2. Marlena had never won one, never.
3. She could not be confronted head on about emotional issues.

She hadn’t even come to terms with it herself. “Cheating” seemed like a word reserved for desperate women in Lifetime movies. “Cheating” was too young for her mother. It was something her friends did; hell even she had done it- but not her mother. Women in pantsuits weren’t supposed to cheat on their husbands. Similarly, “lesbian” wasn’t a word she associated with herself either. Lesbians had mullets and clapped each other on the back at softball games. Lesbians didn’t meet at a college party, and admit
their longtime love for each other over brimming cups of some else’s booze. They didn’t talk about books, and meet in the bathroom to undress each other…

Lesbians were a category on a porn website. Not that Marlena had ever looked, she wasn’t that kind of person. Lesbian, lesbian, lesbian. It sounded like a breed of dog to her. She would stick with the term gay, when she dropped the bomb on her mother. In fact, when she thought about it like that, she wished suddenly to increase the dramatic impact, she would use the term lesbian.

A bellowing voice from the other side of the train car shocked her back into reality.

“Attention ladies and gentleman! For your listening pleasure a tiny slice of the bayou right here in Brooklyn, please be kind and rewind, ha ha, just kidding! If y’all are old enough to remember that, DO be kind enough to grace these fine gentleman with a monetary contribution for their hard work and talent!”

Marlena turned to see a squat man in a white suit with black pinstripes hold his arms wide open like he was parting the Red Sea, while behind him a trombone, bass drum and tuba marched up the car. “Oh when those saints! They come a-marchin in! Do ya hear them? Lord do you hear us?” The white suit was belting and the old woman across the aisle was tapping her foot in time, her face changed from a scowl to a smile. Marlena suddenly found that too, was moved by the music. She felt a sob rising in her throat that she couldn’t quite explain. She had once read somewhere that in New Orleans they played music like this at funerals before they “cut the body loose.” Marlena thought of a casket being carried down the concrete steps of a church, the pallbearers sullen
against the backdrop of a rainy afternoon. Behind them, a whole pack of White Suits stomping and swaying in time with the music, pounding a marching band bass drum “daa-da-da.”

White Suit hit a high C that pitched Marlena back to the train. The occupants of the subway car did not look up from their designated reading. “Oh when those saints come a-marchin in” Marlena searched her purse for spare change. There was a dollar stuck inside The Metamorphosis. The quartet fast approaching, White Suit sunk into a deep bow, removing his hat and stretching it out for Marlena. “How I know they’d love, if this pretty girl would be in their number.” He smiled at Marlena. She wondered if maybe the man her mother had been seeing was a musician. Maybe his was the mystery hand she had seen grab…No…she couldn’t say it. She couldn’t even think it.

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The day she found out, her mother walked her back to the subway so she could catch the train to her apartment. The blacktop on 6th Avenue shimmered in the morning light like a river. She remembered hearing somewhere that they paved the roadway originally with tiny shards of glass, mixed in with tar and concrete. More cost efficient, she had heard. Seemed peculiar to think of a road made of half glass. They walked along the sidewalk until they reached the subway Marlena took to get home.

“You’re heading back home now? You sure you don’t want to hang around for a bit?” Marlena had asked her mother, giving her an attempt to tell the truth. All she had to do was agree, say yes, maybe I’ll see an old friend while I’m here, great idea honey. Or actually yes, Marlena, here’s been something I’ve been meaning to tell you. That was it.
“Yes honey, I said that. I’m going home.”

“Okay Mom, love you, see you in a few weeks when I come up.” They kissed once on each cheek. Her mother squeezed her tightly as they hugged.

Marlena turned away and walked towards the subway sign. Hanging back for a few seconds, she waited until her mother was out of sight. She dodged behind a bus stop partition. She saw her mother’s teal blazer crossing the street. Maybe she was going home, maybe Marlena had made this whole thing up. Had she even seen the text messages? She jogged up the stairs at a safe distance. Once she was on the street she saw the back of her mother’s head bobbing along with the crowd. It looked as though she was going back to the parking deck to get the car. She crossed 6th Avenue and Marlena stayed at the station. False alarm. She’s just going home.

Just then, a tall graying man in a black suit walked up to her mother in the crowd, she turned her face towards him, beaming in the sunlight, he looked around quickly then kissed her. Marlena saw his hand slide from around her waist to her butt, and grab it forcefully. Her mother giggled and put her hand around his hips. Marlena stood on the corner stunned, the weight of the filthy air of the city sitting heavily on her skin, and a damp chill, as if it were about to rain.

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“1st Ave and 2nd Street.” The quartet got out and into the next car down, she heard White Suit begin his speech again, “Attention Ladies and Gentleman of the jury! Just kidding…” The rumbling across the tracks muffled the sound, and silence regained control of the car. The old woman across the aisle clutched her Macy’s bag tighter and
Marlena opened her tattered NYU copy of The Metamorphosis and tried to read. She admittedly had no idea what was going on. The premise of the book was clear, giant bug, etc. However, if a regular man all of a sudden turned into a giant bug, wouldn’t they send him to the doctor before they locked him away in a room? She knew she was missing the point, but didn’t care enough to go looking for it. This was already considered a “Great Book of the 20th Century” it did not need her approval. It had been Katy’s recommendation, that why she was slaloming through each word. The idea that Katy’s eyes had skimmed this same text, and found something in it, it felt like a treasure hunt to Marlena. Like she was reading it to find the missing pieces of this girl whose body she had been allowed to explore, and solve some mysterious puzzle of why. Why Marlena.

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Marlena wasn’t sure what she had to gain from telling her mother that she knew about the affair. That is, until she had met Katy. After the day of the ass-grab, she had gone back to her dorm room and opened up her Facebook account. She went through every one of her mother’s friends, older people with profile pictures of grandchildren or tropical sunsets. She searched for a New York location and a male friend. She turned up three men, all her mother’s age; two of them had no profile pictures or information other than sharing an Elementary School. Which left only one, and he was single. Robert F. Barry. He sounded like the name of a professional building, not a person. The Robert F. Barry Federal Office Complex. The Robert F. Barry School for Autism. The Robert F. Barry International Airport. His profile picture was taken on the top of a cliff, overlooking undulating blue ocean and staring at the camera with a stupid grin. Was her
mother just outside of the frame, wearing her Macy’s one piece bathing suit with the skirt and her giant straw hat?

***

Marlena kept going over her goodbye with Katy the night before. She held Marlena’s hand in the hallway outside the party. The music had been muffled, and the only sound was the tele’-novella in Spanish coming from the neighbors apartment. Katy had slid her hand into Marlena’s front pocket, and grabbed her phone. Outside, she eagerly checked it to see if Katy had stored her number, but when she scrolled to the K section, she found nothing.

Across town, her mother was probably just finishing the paper and retreating to her room to do her makeup. How about brunch, do you think you could wake up in time for that? She had asked. Yes, mom. Just pick the place and I’ll meet you at the hotel. The car was now empty except for a young mom and little girl who had settled into the seat across from her. Marlena watched the child, pleasantly ignorant of all things germ related, as she picked at a piece of stale gum under her shoe, bouncing up and down with excitement in the hard plastic seats. She soon grew tired of this, and Marlena watched as she rose, using the metal handrail to steady herself.

Her mother was clearly engaged in playing a game on her phone, and was barely watching the girl as she stumbled up and down the aisle of the train, occasionally losing her balance, and then using her tiny hands to push into the sludge on the floor to right herself. She was wandering towards Marlena, who quickly looked back down at her
Kafka tome, feigning enough interest that she hoped the child would instinctively understand not to approach her. She had enough on her mind.

The things that happened next confused Marlena:

1. Marlena thought there was a legitimate mistake. She was sure they had just stopped at 14th St.
2. The car was empty, the game-playing mother was gone, she did exist, didn’t she?
3. The little girl was still squatting on the floor tearing up a day old Daily News into tiny little strips, unaware that she was now alone.

Marlena looked out the sliding shutters of the door to where the mother stood on the platform. It had only taken a moment. She met Marlena’s gaze and held it, unflinching, until the wheels on the train unstuck from the tracks and lurched forward, tossing Marlena off balance and thrusting her back to reality. She ran to the doors and banged on the glass with both fists balled up.

“Hey! Get back here your kid is still here! Jesus Christ lady, don’t you know how illegal this is! You’re going to wind up in jail! They’ll find you!” Marlena screamed into the tinted plexiglass that was already moving out of the station and back into the tunnel. Why had she hesitated? Why had she just stood there staring at her? A young teenage couple had sat at the end of the car, the only seats in a pair, they noticed nothing amiss as they spliced one set of headphones for two heads, moving back and forth to the beat of the same song.

“Sucks, man,” the boy mumbled to the girl next to him.
Marlena walked over and crouched down next to the girl, placing a tentative hand on her small back. “Hi,” She said gently, “What’s your name?” She lifted the girl and placed her on the hard plastic seat next to her. The girl looked at her but didn’t answer. Her mother, and the Mr. Robert F. Barry discussion would have to wait.

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Marlena climbed the grimy subway stairs and lifted herself, and the child, into the bright Sunday morning. For a moment she hesitated. The sounds of the city were incomparable, the rush, the steam, the smells (for better or worse), she felt a wholeness here, like she existed in her entirety only in this moment, in this instant, surrounded by chaos and cacophony.

“What’s your name, honey, the sooner you tell me the sooner we can find your mommy.” Marlena had said as she scooped up the girl and left the train. She could do this! She knew it! The girls dimpled cheeks were caked with tears and she had shoved her thumb deeply into her mouth. Marlena was surprised by how calm the little girl still seemed. Maybe she was used to this? Do kids this little remember things like that? Marlena thought. She had remembered the grocery store, that’s for sure, but she was older then, wasn’t she?

“My name is Lucy,” The little girl said. What a pretty name, Marlena thought, like Lucille Ball, or Lucy the first hominid, maybe Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds. Someone must care about you Lucy. “Nice to meet you, my name is Marlena, we’re going to find your mother as soon as we can, okay Lucy?”
Marlena looked around for a transit cop, an MTA, an NYPD even a Port Authority. Where the fuck were they all? When you didn’t need them, they were everywhere, checking your bag on the subway, scowling at you from cop cars, patrolling Times Square with sullen looks. Now, the one time she actually did need one, they were nowhere to be found. She was one stop from their usual brunch restaurant, but only two blocks from the Green Tree Hotel where her mother was staying.

No. She would solve this herself; she wouldn’t go to her mother. She could do this. She put Lucy down but kept holding her hand. Who could she call? She would call the police, no doubt, but first? Could she call Katy? It might not be appropriate, but they were friends, weren’t they? It would be a bonding experience, she thought, looking at the stringy-haired child. They would figure it out together, and maybe, become closer because of it. She took her phone from her pocket. She remembered that Katy’s number wasn’t under K. Maybe it had saved wrong, she looked under her last name, then in her messages, and notes, and pictures, and every other piece of fucking shit application on this phone she now resisted throwing it in the garbage. She settled on a facebook message to Katy. Hey, she wrote, I’m having a bit of an emergency, think you can meet me on the LES like asap? Hope you’re hangover’s not too bad ;-) Was the winky face too much? She wondered.

“Help!” She wanted to scream. She was beginning to lose it a bit, now she wasn’t a hero anymore, she felt like a kidnapper. Lucy was starting to get fidgety in her arms, writhing against her skin. Marlena placed her gently on the sidewalk, and watched her teeter along precariously balanced. An older lady looked at them and smiled a bit,
Marlena wanted to grab the lady by the shoulders and shout “I don’t know what to do with this kid! She’s not mine! She’s not even my little sister!”

Still no message from Katy. What was she thinking, messaging her, she must seem like a psychopath now. Forget it, she told herself. She raced the two blocks to the hotel holding Lucy in her arms. She had managed to calm her down a bit, they entered the marble tiled lobby and the receptionist scowled at Marlena.

“Can I help you?” She asked.

“I’m here to see Mrs. Eileen Fisher, I’m her daughter, Marlena.”

The woman typed noisily on the computer.

“We’re not registering a Mrs. Eileen Fisher. Are you sure she’s not staying under a different name?” she said condescendingly. “Maybe you have the wrong hotel.”

Marlena felt disgusted. “Try Robert F. Barry please,” She said to the clerk.

“Oh, yup!” The clerk smiled, blissfully unaware of the complications at hand, “there it is. Room number…”

“3B.” Marlena said, before the receptionist could answer.

Marlena and Lucy padded down the carpeted floors of the third floor, and Marlena knocked on the door. Her mother, clad in silk pajamas Marlena had never seen, opened the door with a look of shock.

“Marlena! Honey!” Her mom opened the door, “we’re not supposed to meet for another half hour! I was just getting ready…I was meeting…this is…”
“Save it mom. I’m not dumb.” Marlena said.

“Are you…volunteering or babysitting something?” Her mother said, looking down at the child with curiosity.

“Mom I think I need your help…” Marlena said, suddenly overcome with emotion and fatigue.
Professional Connections

Southern State Prison was visible from every major highway within a five-mile radius, but ironically, accessible by none. The barbed wire and guard towers seemed fitting against the dark post-industrial landscape of abandoned factories and multi-colored shipping containers that painted northern New Jersey. To get to the prison, I had to take Frontage Road off the 1 and 9, make a series of u-turns, bearing right, left, right again, until my inner compass was positive I would wind up in exactly the same place where I’d begun. Just when I were sure I would be damned to eternally circle Newark Airport, the parking lot appeared.

I’d worked at the prison now for over a year, and still the drive seemed impractical. I pulled my car into the parking lot and noticed that Jackie’s car wasn’t there. Disappointed at the prospect of another lifeless day ticking by, I ignored the clock and watched a freight train rumble in through Port Elizabeth. The train seemed to race the cars on the highway until it pulled ahead and out of sight.

I could lie in some grandiose cliché’, ring my hands say that everyday at the prison was the same, but it wasn’t. Some days the guys would be on their best behavior, and an air of palpable optimism infused our shabby substance abuse counseling sessions. Those were the days I got the sense I could really change something. Honest-to-god help someone out of their broken life. Into a new, shinier, cleaner existence. Other days the balance between man and animal seemed tenuous. No sudden movements, I told myself,
don’t force conversation, just keep talking Liz. A lull in conversation was the enemy in a room full of angry men.

When Jackie arrived, it all changed. We’d both pulled into the prison late that day, and I was skeptical at first. She was wearing crocs. Who the hell wears crocs to a prison? A bit of morning coffee had spilled onto her creased Gap button-down. The back of her long brown hair was still wet from her morning, I’m late-gotta go, shower. Thank God, I thought. I really hated people who had it all together, or at least people who tried to appear so. With their organized briefcases, perfectly tweezed eyebrows and ironed creased pants. I didn’t think Jackie seemed like that kind of person. Not that I was in any way slovenly. I try (at least once or twice a year) to ceremoniously reorganize my life—I clean the car, the house, throw out some old cards or pictures of ex-girlfriends. Then I sit in my tiny living room in North Newark and feel relieved that I’ve really gotten somewhere. This usually lasts a month.

After a few years of working at Southern State Prison, I knew when people are new to correctional employment. They treated it like a foreign country, *Um, I’m just here to see, um, so-and so…He works upstairs! I mean, in administration, I mean, he’s not a prisoner!* Or they walk around the lobby in a daze, asking the guard for permission to use the bathroom. It makes one want to take them by the shoulders and yell, “*These are bathrooms! These are lockers! These are people! For the love of god, don’t be so attached to your comfort zone.*” I remembered Ms. Smith-James telling me we had a new, young intern about my age coming to help us out. I saw Jackie in the lobby, I thought it must be her. Jackie strode in like she owned the place. I thought she must have transferred from another lock-down facility. I hung back and let her go through the metal
detector first, setting it off one, two, three times in a row. Officer Wormley at the front desk was about to lose it. She tapped her knuckles on the machine impatiently. Every time the shrill auditory assault of a detector went off, Wormley shook her head with disgust, her wig inching a tiny bit further past her right ear.

“Young lady, you got to do it again. I don’t know what you have on you, but this is a prison,” She raises her eyebrows. “I can’t be letting you go through beeping to high heaven, I don’t know you from a nobody on the street, baby.” Wormley looked up and met my eye, sighing loudly.

“She’ll get it, don’t worry.” I said.

Jackie narrowed her eyes a bit and her face grew taut with concentration. She brushed through the detector again.

“Yo! Wormley!” A tall officer at the back of the line said, “what’s the hold up girl? We got to get through! Shift change!”

His irate voice conjured a chorus of agreement from the growing line of officers stomping their heavy black state issued boots, waiting to punch in.

“You know they were going at it before.” He shouted so everyone could hear. “Put the whole place on lockdown! Now let’s move this line!”

Metal detector try number five. Officer Wormley had frisked Jackie roughly a dozen times; the situation was escalating quickly. I stepped forward, hoping my method would prove I was the kind of person who had the nuances of prison culture down.
“Okay, maybe it just tripped a glitch in the system or something.” I’d made that up completely, but it sounded like something that could happen. “Let me go through and see if it doesn’t go off, and then we can try again and maybe that will reset it.” Wormley liked me enough to listen. I’d looked at over twenty different pictures of her grandkids during the course of one day.

I had no idea if my plan would work. I’d made up the concept of a “tripping a glitch” on the spot, but it seemed a clever way of saying, *let me handle this.* I put my briefcase on the scanner, did an expert walk, holding my arms close to my body and moved quickly, simultaneously covering any zippers, piercing, underwires, etc.

The detector was silent. Jackie tried next, casually imitating my walk. The detector was silent again, and I quietly congratulated myself for navigating that situation. We were about to get buzzed into through the first set of doors when Ms. Smith-James careened into the lobby. She was a short, stocky woman in her mid 40’s, she was roughly as wide as she was tall. Ms. Smith-James always looked mildly uncomfortable as though a nagging itch existed in a place she could never scratch. Today she was dressed for work in jeans, and a college sweatshirt that ballooned out over her massive bosom like a poncho. Usually Ms. Smith-James was the very embodiment of a state employee just anticipating retirement. She came to work in her best sweat suit. Her favorite was a brown number of a velour imitation fabric. It was all well and good except in the summer, when she sweated like a water buffalo. The smell sank into the cheap fibers and morphed into a truly offensive olfactory assault.
“Jackie, this is Liz,” Ms. Smith James says. “She’s been working with me starting up the program.”

I shake her hand and try to make assertive eye contact.

“Liz, Jackie is coming in to help us out with choosing candidates for the new drug treatment program. Her area of expertise is psychology.”

I sized her up. Pretty, looked sharp, we’ll see, could be trouble. I always tried to be on the lookout for someone who made things weird. Straight women got the hint that I was not heterosexual. They either made it weird, and insisted on establishing the same odd air of gender difference that exists between men and women, or they came onto me in subtle ways their signals crossed between my masculine vibe and my feminine features. Sometimes, if I was skilled enough, I could manipulate the situation into a third, often marginalized category, the best friend alternative. This is possible through the discussion of topics which humanize a person, the best being the art of discussing Boyfriend Problems.

Boyfriend Problems solved all things tense. Problems included but weren’t limited to: cheating, lack of cleanliness, emotional unavailability, imaginary relationships with men who don’t actually know the woman exists, family baggage and irreparable emotional hindrances, and of course, bedroom drama.

Oh no, what did he do? Are you okay? Or maybe, I can’t believe he cancelled on your family dinner. I don’t know, I don’t want to say it but that’s pretty rude. Wow, that’s crazy that he hasn’t said ‘I love you.’ Maybe you need to talk to him about it. As soon as
I started hearing about Boyfriend Problems, you are tucked safely into the friend category.

We were buzzed through the first door and our footfalls thudded heavily down the hallway. We greeted each officer that passed us with a nodding of the head. Every corridor is sealed with a locked steel door. Only an invisible officer behind one-way glass can buzz anyone through each breezeway. The polite thing to do, I learned, is to always give the officer an appreciative nod. I soon found that the doors opened quicker and I could move freely throughout the compound. Those who fail to extend this courtesy, however, you could be standing there waiting for a door to open for five minutes, which feels like an eternity in prison time.

Ms. Smith-James waddled through the final doorway onto the stretch of concrete that served as the prison’s main passageway. Block A, which housed our drug rehabilitation program, lay on the other side of the compound lay our building.

“So is this like, the whole…campus?” Jackie asked awkwardly.

“I’m not sure if you would necessarily chose to call it a campus. Maybe it’s more of a compound. But yeah, this is it.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets. “I guess it doesn’t really matter what you call it,” I muttered.

I tried to remember how I felt the first time I’d been there but couldn’t recall the details. We had entered the yard by then. Freezing air slapped me across the face, shooting through my thin jacket. Jackie’s arrival and subsequent ill-timed technological issues had inadvertently sentenced us to walk past D-Block during yard time. D-Block was reserved for maximum security offenders. This was a gang prison, so the Bloods,
Crips, Latin Kings, and M13 were all thrown together into the same “specialty block.” Some administrator’s great idea, no doubt. Partitions of shiny metal fences arranged in 12 by 12 foot corridors where the guys were allowed “yard time” and stalked up and down the stretch of ground, fight dogs in a cage about to compete. Today was no different.

*Never look at them,* I was told time and time again, I had day-dreamed through in countless trainings before starting the drug counseling job.

“Hey snow flake, I bet your shit is mad white. You ever been with a brother?” A catcall from behind D-Block.

Not so original, I thought. I turned to Jackie, “We usually try to avoid this time of day. It can be a little rough. Just ignore them."

She nodded but didn’t meet my eyes.

“Hey baby you like them ladies, huh? I like them too. You just need it from a real man. Real man like me will lay it down on you.” Another, different voice this time.

“So where did you go to school?” I asked, trying to divert her attention.

“Rutgers New Brunswick. What about you?” Her voice was raspy and surprisingly relaxed.

“Villanova, but I spent most of my free time at Rutgers. Everyone I know goes there. I’m still not sure why I wound up at Villanova. The cheaper tuition, probably.” I smiled and laughed, genuinely.

“So how long have you been working here?” Jackie asked.
“Last year I interned with another program, HIV/AIDS Prevention, and this year I’m working here to set up this drug education program.”

“Where in New Brunswick do you live?” I asked.

“Louis Street, do you know it? It’s right off Easton Ave.”

I knew Louis Street well. One of my best high school friends had lost her virginity in a broken down Ford Focus on Louis St. to a man whose name she claimed she couldn’t remember. Her story joined the legendary New Brunswick stories, or as we sometimes called it, No-Funswick.

“Of course I know Louis Street, the Ale N’Wich, Tata’s Pizza, Hole in the Wall Donuts. Yeah, totally.” I was keenly aware of the fact that I sounded like I knew what I was talking about, and for a moment delighted in my confidence.

Jackie and I worked in the off-white cinder blocked office for the rest of the afternoon, exchanging personal information while trying to organize a coherent filing system out of the overflowing bins of paper Ms. Smith-James had haphazardly strewn around the cramped room.

“How are you girls doing in here?” She would poke her head into the office and ask, spit wildly flying from her mouth in every direction.

***

Weeks passed in this same pattern, and we developed an understanding of each other’s needs typical of workplace relationships. A kind of silent conversation simmered
under the superficial comments of “pass me the general population master list,” and “I’m ordering pizza, half pepperoni, right?”

“What made you get into this field?” I asked Jackie one day.

“I don’t know. I guess I never thought there was any other option. I’m interested in the science of addiction. Why does it happen to some people and not others? Drug addiction that is…What makes some people special and others wind up, well…in here. I guess I just want to help more people.”

I nodded in agreement.

“What about you?” she asked, her eyes glancing up from a stack of wrinkled papers.

“Honestly, I don’t know anymore. At first I wanted to help people. What an annoying word, ‘help.’ Really though, I did. Then, I figured at least I wanted to work somewhere that isn’t a 9-5 slow death, crunching numbers and writing e-mails that no one cares about. Now I’m just kind of biding my time.”

“Well I think you’re really good at this” Jackie pushed her chair back to look at me. “I see how you talk to the guys, like you’re just naturally not judgmental.”

“Thanks. Somehow I feel like that’s a lie, but thanks.” I said.

“No, you’re easy to confide in. I feel like I can tell you anything.” Her eyes waited impatiently for a reaction. I turned away from her, towards the cabinet, started to stack manila folders.
Jackie really did want to help people. To rehabilitate them, to isolate their triggers and reprogram them, like Pavlov’s dog. She spoke easily and freely. The men, in their khaki uniforms, each one smelled of the same sterile state soap. They kept their hair finely combed and beards neatly trimmed as if those were the only methods to express themselves.

“Good afternoon, M’am.” Each one greeted us as they filed into the tiny office with no ceiling, just four cubicle walls and endless warehouse sky.

“Hey guys, how is everybody doing?” A chorus of mumbles, “If any of you guys are repeat offenders, maybe you can take this time to talk a little bit about what happened once you got out the first time. What didn’t work for you. What made you turn back to old habits?” Jackie asked. Her top shirt button had popped and exposed an inch of her bare chest underneath. I stole a glance. Looking up, I met the gaze of Alex, who had also noticed. Embarrassed, I averted my eyes but saw a tiny smile starting on the edges of his mouth.

“I know for me, it was going back to the old neighborhood, seeing my block, my house. I tried to stay away from it for awhile, but soon I was right back there. Because I wanted to be.”

“Yeah man, I feel that. Sometimes it makes you angry like, why you offering me shit? You know I just come up out of here, what the fuck?” Alex chimed in agreement.

After Jackie started running the drug rehab counseling session they began behaving. They came in polite, focused and ready to examine their demons under the fluorescent glow of the prison lights. It made me feel kind of like shit. I could never
really care as much as Jackie did. I was nervous, observant, too self-aware, and keenly conscious of the fact that she was much better than I at the business of human emotions.

Ms. Smith-James ate it all up. I even had more tolerance for her now that Jackie was there. We three were inseparable in a way, eating lunch together every day at the Holiday Inn buffet special down the road. We took our full hour break while crisp young men in white shirts brought us more water, always more water. Our soups and salads would arrive and immediately Ms. Smith-James would announce either a stirring support or eternal condemnation of the exact portion of soup.

“That’s a good size soup! That is a good size soup. I knew we came here for a reason. See that? $3.50 and that’s the size? What, is that a good 10, 12 ounces? That’s a good size soup.”

The waiter would shake his head not quite understanding the impact his delivery had made as contiguous to the delivered item itself. Jackie and I would make eye contact and laugh a little, understanding the absurdity and hilarity of the situation. I had begun to look forward to work.

***

“So are you like, dating anyone?” Jackie asked one afternoon. We were walking back out to our cars.

“I just broke up with my girlfriend. It’s okay though, I mean last year had been all swan song and Ani Difranco mix CD’s anyway.” I half-heartedly joked, not quite convincing. It wasn’t okay, of course.
“Oh, that’s sad. Whatever though you’re cute. You’ll find someone new.”

I could feel her looking at me, then back at the ground.

“Thanks, I mean I hope so. They better have a small fucking fortune too so I can quit this goddamn job and be a kept woman.” I joked to lighten what I felt might turn into an awkward conversation. “What about you?”

“I’ve been seeing this guy.” Jackie said. “He plays bass in a band but doesn’t do much else. I think it’s over. I can’t handle how lazy he is.”

Here it was, the platonic invitation to talk about her boyfriend issues. “Yeah,” I said, “it’s time to be done with that phase, grow up a little bit, especially if he wants to keep you.”

“You’re lucky you’re gay. Men are assholes.” Jackie looked me in the eye. “I wish I dated women.”

“No, you don’t.” I said, with an audible edge of bitterness in my voice, “Women can be just as big pains in the ass.”

“I doubt that. Maybe you should give my boyfriend lessons in how to get his shit together. Seems like you have it down pretty well.”

“It’s only a clever façade, but thank you.” I unlocked the door to my car, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

***
The next morning I had only one inmate to interview. We sat on the steel benches in the area affectionately referred to as “the cage” situated directly in the center of the unit. Antonio told me about his drug history, his abuse as a child. That he had never known his mother. His father was a monster of a man who disappeared days at a time. The inmate remembered the waiting. Sitting in his footed pajamas on an old brown sofa eating cereal because it was the only thing he could reach in the cabinet. He’d told this story before, I could tell. He said he’d gotten into drugs as soon as he possibly could. This kind of honesty was not uncommon in prison. There wasn’t time for bullshit; there was only time for bullshit. He told me first it was the usual, smoking L’s on the block with Kasey and El-Z. El-Z was the one who got him into the other, harder stuff.

El was short for Muhammad El-Zahir, his cousin. He’d showed Antonio how to push, how to corner the market in his hood, make ends meet, bring home enough for his needs and his girl’s too. He liked the fast pace. He liked the critical thinking; he liked the danger and excitement and the respect he got from his little cousins. They puffed out their chests when Antonio walked into a room. I thought he would have made a great Wall Street broker. I could imagine see this guy on the trading floor, rubbing elbows with Brooks Brothers suits and clean cuts, beating them at their own game. El-Z died. It was a shooting on South Munn St. the corner of East Orange and Vailsburg. He bled out in the street, one of the worst neighborhoods in Essex County. The city had tried everything; ripping up the sidewalk, making new street signs, building polished public schools. Nothing helped. After El-Z died Antonio was depressed. El-Z was his boy, after all.

He showed me his angel wings tattoo with the initials “M.E.Z’’ on his upper arm, rippling with muscles. He started getting into the heavy stuff then. Black tar, A-bombs,
whatever he could find. I looked at his sheet. Assault and Intent to Distribute, a common
sentence. What happened, I asked. Some guy had asked Antonio if he had any, walked
with him a couple blocks, talked shit, bought a bag, then flashed a badge and cuffed him,
smiling triumphantly to his brethren as the backup cars screeched up. Red and blue lights
flashed.

I wondered if Antonio remembered when we’d both looked at Jackie’s undone top
button. I found my thoughts drifting to that button a lot. Thinking about her filled up
most of my time, and I wondered what she would say to Antonio now if she were doing
this interview.

Antonio had broke free, punched the cop in the face and head-butted him.
Antonio just kept talking as I nodded in silence. He’d broken the cop’s nose and jaw in
two places. Antonio found out later that the cop had intentionally walked him into a
nearby school zone, just so he could slam Antonio with a tougher charge and longer
sentence. I’d never sell to kids, Antonio said, never.

I wanted to shake his hand when I got up to leave. But they told me never to touch
the guys, so I nodded at him and told him I would see him for group tomorrow. I didn’t
even realized it had started to rain. Lightning was striking nearby. Planes in Newark
airport were grounded momentarily. It was eerily quiet in the airspace just above our
heads. Usually it teemed with jet engine roars. I went into the office where Jackie and I
were supposed to meet and head over for a staff meeting. I found her in the hallway. Gray
pants and a loose sweater flattered her slim figure. I nodded at Officer Brown and he
smiled back in recognition. He was a tall man, with a kind face who always seemed
willing to help anyone who asked. I wondered how he cut it in the prison without being walked on.

“How was your day?” Jackie asked.

“I interviewed Antonio Rivera. Same story.” I leaned against the wall on the opposite side of the hallway, “We can take him into the program officially. He seems like he’s open to help. How was yours?”

“Better,” she paused, “now that you’re back.”

She smiled smugly and I had no idea how to respond. I didn’t have to. The lights flickered, and then browned out again. Just as I reached for the doorknob, they went out. We were at the end of the hallway. I knew Officer Brown was behind us. He pushed us both gently from behind and said in a guttural tone that scared me a bit, “Walk. Faster.”

He buzzed us into a small corner office just in time.

“Stay put in her ladies. I think we’re going into lockdown.” He grabbed the radio on his blue uniform collar and spoke into his shirt “Code 3. Code 3. All Officers, Code 3.”

That meant a lockdown. A lockdown happens when any crisis whatsoever occurs within the prison walls. Blackout counted. Employees could not leave an area when the code was called, we were officially sealed in until the prison SWAT team resolved the issue. This could last minutes, it could last hours.

Jackie looked flustered, her usual bravado challenged.
“Don’t worry,” I said, trying to sound sure of myself. “This has happened to me before, it’s not that big a deal. The only reason they do it is so idiot civilian employees like us don’t get hurt.” It probably wasn’t the best thing to say. Her face grew darker and more disturbed.

“No,” She looked confused, “It’s okay, I’m sure it’ll be fine, right?”

“Seriously, it’s okay,” I put my hand on her shoulder as platonically as possible.

In a few moments, the generator lights flickered trying to come back to life. The lockdown was still in effect. A forced hush settled over the building. No sounds of life but the blinking exit sign at the end of the hallway. Then, the rhythmic pounding of footsteps in unison, like a march, getting louder and closer. The SWAT team, I thought. There had to have been a fight.

Jackie moved away from the door.

“Just sit own and try to relax,” I tried to be reassuring. “I’m telling you, this will be over soon and you’ll wonder why you stressed out in the first place.”

“Okay, you’re right,” she said. “I’m not scared I’m just kind of freaked. I didn’t even know this could happen. No one ever told me about lockdown procedures. What do you think would have happened to us if we had been in the hallway, and Officer Brown hadn’t been there?”

“Someone would have come because I would have blown the living shit out of my whistle.” I fingered the rudimentary alert systems provided to me during orientation so long ago.
Just as Jackie started to calm down, I heard the vibration of a gate buzz from the far side of the building. Shit, I thought. No doors open or closed during lockdown. Not a single one. The fight must be in here. I didn’t tell Jackie that, best not to freak her out any more. The pounding crested, and then died out. I figured they were headed to the other side.

A door opened and waves of shouting floated out from another room. Jackie looked tense. “It’s okay,” I said, my own stomach dropping. “We’re locked in here there’s no way we could get in or out without someone buzzing us. Okay? Don’t worry.” I was starting to get impatient with her. Her vulnerability was endearing, but it wasn’t the time to play damsel.

A body slammed up against our door. We both jumped. A few seconds later I saw a flash of body armor, the SWAT team clad in black with gold lettering on their riot gear.

“Here, I’ll stand in front of you in case anything happens.” I said, as if that would do any good. The slamming again. This time it was a head. Again and again it slammed against our door. I could see traces of blood, mucus, and hairs, on the thick institutional windowpane. I heard the body outside slide down the door and slump onto the floor. As the SWAT Officer briskly walked away.

“Try to stay calm. You’ve seen fights before, right?” I said. A mild attempt at comforting, there a fight at a party or a bar, there’s still a door. There’s always a door. She collapsed in a chair across the room. I walked over and touched her shoulder, feeling the tension in her muscles. “It’s okay, trust me, I’ve been on lock a million times it’s no big deal.” Voices from outside seemed to reach a fever pitch. The Emergency Exit sign
blinking red, exposing dozens of khaki prison uniforms pacing back and forth all stuffed into the hallway.

“Liz, do you know what my New Year’s Resolution was this year?” Jackie said.

“Um…nope…what was it?” I couldn’t see how this could possibly be relevant.

“To get over you.” Jackie said.

A boot kicked the door from outside. Once, quickly a second time, louder. Shouts of “Officer Ty, get us the 11 and get here stat. This was pre-planned.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” I mumbled. Of course I knew what she meant.

“Yes, you do.” She turned to face me and kissed me on the cheek, lingering for a moment too long. I twisted around, grabbed her hips and jerked her towards me. Another body collided with the door, this time not as hard, a flash of flesh pressed up against the glass; “M.E.Z.” Antonio Rivera’s wrist tattoo. I hoped he hadn’t seen us. I put my hand on her lower back to ease the shock when I leaned her back against the concrete wall, out of the vision line of the tiny window in the door. She kissed me deeply and her hands interlaced at the back of my neck. The shouts of the fight still raged outside.

“We shouldn’t do this now.” I said.

“Liz,” Jackie whispered, “we probably shouldn’t do this ever.”

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“It’s fine, okay?” I said later in the parking lot.
There was just enough mist to sit on her brown hair as she shifted her eyes away in apology.

“No, it’s not. I’ve never done anything like that before. I promise, I swear. I feel really awkward now.”

“There’s nothing to be weird about. I’ll see you on Monday, okay? If you need anything, call me.”

“I’m not gay.” She looked at the ground.

“Congratulations.”

“At least I don’t think I am.”

Jackie never came back. Reminders of her were everywhere. Her loopy handwriting on post-its and files, Antonio Rivera’s sulking eyes that bore into me during counseling. What had he seen? Ms. Smith-Jackson muttered about Jackie calling her to tell her she had found a new job, not an internship, and good for her; she’ll do just fine there, she was a tough one you know.

Everyday I expected her to come back, stroll through the door like nothing had happened. But she didn’t. My text messages to her entered a void. Hey you sick? and then later, angrily, you don’t have to talk to me, but at least call our boss. Finally with shame, I don’t care about what happened. It’s no big deal. Just talk to me.

Ms. Smith-James and I now ate silent lunches of quiet understanding. Fridays were the worst. Those were the days we used to go to the Holiday Inn buffet. Now we just ate bagged sandwiches in the break room and talked about Jackie.
“I hope she’s doing well.” Ms. Smith-James said.

“I do too, she’s smart, I’m sure she can hack it wherever she is.”

“You two really hit it off. I’m surprised she hasn’t gotten in touch with you.” Ms. Smith-James muttered innocently into her instant pasta dish.

“Yeah, it’s a surprise to you and me both.” I let the honesty of the statement overtake me.

“These professional connections are the best to keep, you know” I zoned out and stared through the dirty break room window. The freight train was bearing down on the 1&9. In the distance the giant cranes of Port Elizabeth heaved a colorful rainbow of containers through the air, lowering them to the final leg of their journey.

I walked to my car at the end of the day. A light rain clung to the March air, hanging there, balanced between existence and absorption back into the pavement. Any anticipation of winter was gone, and the brilliance of spring was too far away. The light, cold drizzle was just enough to stain the parking lot a deeper shade of black, and turn the hard earth to mud.
You are going blind. Not figuratively, not metaphorically. You are actually going blind. You are driving to work down the NJ Turnpike as on every other morning. The giant praying mantis oil rigs flank either side of the road, plunging into the silt of the river bed. The Kill Van Kull smells like expired yogurt today. Sometimes, on a good day, it smells like buttered popcorn. The Turnpike is seven blaring lanes of a terrifying driving hell, on a calm morning. This morning, the one in which you are going blind, traffic is nothing short of a panic attack. On your way to the Goethals Bridge exit you can tell just how bad it’s getting. Exit 13A. You squint a bit, not quite able to make out the words. But you know them as well as you know the sign from the opening credits of the Sopranos.

At first, you think, oh, it’s probably just my contact lenses. Surely, those terrible pieces of plastic stuck to your retinas cause endless trouble. You rub your eyes and your legs begin to feel itchy. You scratch your left ankle so hard that it starts to bleed a bit. You’re still driving. It’s your last day before a well deserved three day weekend, during which you worked 25 hours of overtime. You have a court date at 9 a.m. in Staten Island for an incident that happened yesterday. At 2 p.m. you have a family team conference for Lajada. You can't be late. You're the only one who has the court report and you double check your briefcase to make sure it's still there. You think of the day before, your first removal of a child.
Funny, it’s what everyone thinks you do as a social worker. “Oh you’re a baby stealer right? You steal babies.” One year in and you hadn’t even stolen one baby. Turns out, it was worse than you thought. You think of Rahmel’s hands covered in Cheetos dust, grasping his mother’s braids as she leaned over the crib in the ACS office to say goodbye. The office walls are dotted with 80’s era pictures of multi-ethnic, happy children in stonewashed jeans and flat top haircuts, playing basketball together. Rahmel’s mother, Lajada, violated probation. After you and Lajada leave Rahmel there, Lajada sits beside the empty car seat on the way back. The car seat rattles back and forth over every bump, loose without his weight.

You think about the car seat now like it’s part of the same time, the same fluid forward motion that is your day today. You cross the Goethals into Staten Island. It's a hot, wet morning, Pollen outside sticks to everything. It's the middle of May. Down the SIE, slowly, in the right lane blinking your hazards lights you pull onto Vanderbilt Avenue. The half-abandoned Bayley psychiatric hospital has been repurposed to house the social service agency where you work. You remember the first time you came here for the job interview, and thought it was some kind of joke. The building stood on a bluff a few feet from New York Harbor. Roof tiles were scattered on the front driveway; weeks grew wildly between every broken concrete crack. You half expected to see corpse like mental patients stumbling around in white dressing gowns, clutching their IV poles and staring at you with haunted eyes. They interview was upstairs in an old surgical room. The rusty prep sink still dripped water in the corner. You pull in now and see the vast yellowing lawn dotted with swing sets, and weird little cottages that your supervisor told
you once housed “recovering families”-whatever that means. How can a whole family need to recover from the same thing? You park the car and slowly make your way into the office. Maybe if you rinse your eyes out, you’ll feel better.

You unlock the door to your office and it hits you. Sounds are muted. Your throat is hot, itchy. You know something’s wrong, You know by the innate way your body is signaling distress.

"Listen" you say to your boss, "I can't see."

Jen says, "o downstairs to medical and get some eye drops." She doesn’t look up from her computer. Social workers are an odd group of people. All of you are almost completely devoid of any natural ability to become alarmed.

"I think my throat is starting to close. We have to go to the hospital. I think I have to go to the hospital."

"Okay” she says, “but can we stop at Starbucks?"

Jen, your boss, pulls into Richmond Medical Center and you hastily give her your reports for the day. You think about what you had on tap. The home visits, the phone calls, the assurances you gave Lajada. You told her you would be there to supervise her first visit with Rahmel, now that he is in care. The term “in care” is an ironic one, at best, used as a signifier, a kind of blanket term that designates the period of your client’s lives that no longer belong to them. “In care” means your decisions are managed, micromanaged, then finally torn apart. “In care” means a child is officially state business, a name on a case file, a docket number, a wait-all-day-at-family court, disenfranchised, in state custody.

"I'll cover the Rodriguez date. and Lajada FTC. She's been doing okay right? Text
me with a few talking points...oh, and feel better please."

“Jen,” you say, “just make sure she gets to visit Rahmel today please.”

In the ER, you wait in a line of people to talk to the nurse. Something smells horrible. Your legs feel like they’re giving out and you have to squat on the floor for a bit. Or sit, yeah, you should just sit down. You just have to rest really quickly. You remember something your mom, an ER nurse and your first call, once said, *If you ever need to be seen immediately, just tell them you're having chest pains, that will get you seen asap.* Your mother. You didn’t call her. How would she know where you are, how would she find you, shit, shit, shit. You look up at the panels of fluorescent light on the ceiling, and the nurse is standing over you, asking you if you’re alright. She’s calling to another woman, and the lights seem to be dimming. Thank god someone finally thought to turn those goddamn things down. They keep getting darker, and darker and then finally everything goes black.

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You wake, an IV stuck in your arm, oxygen lines run into your nose, and a nurse is sticking little plastic EKG pasties all over your body and you like you have numerous, oddly placed nipples, like a pregnant dog, or cat. It’s a weird thought, you have a fever you think, and then you fall back into darkness.

You open your eyes to commotion in the ER. Your temperature reads 103 on the blood pressure machine. You look down at your chest. The nipples are gone, thank god. The man next to you expired while you were unconscious. “Coded” the nurses say indifferently as they pass by the bed. “Oh, patient in Bed 12 Coded.” His family is gathered over him. Holding hands and bowing their heads, they begin praying.
chants sound like the humming of a thousand cicadas getting louder and louder and louder. It’s the Kaddish you think, the prayer for the Jewish dead. You remember reading a Ginsberg poem about the Kaddish. You wonder if these people have ever read that poem. Somehow, you doubt it. The sound of their voices suddenly deafening, muting out everything else, and you slip again into unconsciousness.

This time, your mother’s voice wakes you from your fever. Hers is not a nice, gentle, maternal tone that you would customarily imagine waking you from a near death anaphylactic reaction. She sounds hysterical, frenzied. Her voice goes up an octave and she says every syllable of your name in a careful, deliberate, clearly annunciated way. She is pulling back literally every single curtain of every single bed in the ER, looking for you. You know this because you hear the metal curtain rings clanging against each other in quick succession, getting closer and closer to your bed. You recognize her quick staccato footsteps, the same ones you’ve heard a thousand times down the upstairs hallway of your house. Quick, purposeful, a little bit angry. You think you hear her yelling at someone, but I’m not sure.

“How many hospitals are on this goddamn island?” You heard my mother say.

“And they all look like zombie apocalypse video games.” My brother appears behind the curtain.

“Mom brought you pastina.” Your brother says, tossing a warm Tupperware down on the bed. “I ate most of it while we were driving around in circle. I think there are a few bites left. Glad you didn’t die but Jesus you look like shit.”

“How the hell did you find me…” You desperately want to know, “How did Mom have time to make pastina?”
“Some sort of instinctual Mom GPS,” your brother answers, “and superior pasta making ability, clearly.”

“I’m going to kill you, if this filthy hospital doesn’t first. Did you know that man over there has been dead for nearly three hours and is still in that bed? What kind of hospital is this?”

You lay back into bed and take a deep breath. You feel your mother’s cool hand on your forehead and your eyes closed instinctually.
Symmetry

The trunk of the oak tree remained upright, though the roots had long since disintegrated, rotting into the hard packed New England soil. Terrence was in his second year of college when the trunk fell, admitting defeat. Terrence took this as a kind of sign, a divine intervention. It was quite possible a change was coming. He had lived home now for all of his life. When he was born, his parents brought directly from the hospital to the house on River Drive, upstairs to the second bedroom on the left. The oak tree was alive then, the leaves an arrogant green. When Terrence looked at old pictures, the tree almost looked fluorescent. It seemed liken imitation tree, framing the sun burnt faces of his mother and father, alive and well, with their arms around each other for the photograph.

Terrence's mother, Abigail, was a strong woman with broad shoulders. She swung an axe like she believed the cold climate of Maine would kill them if she didn't dice up enough firewood to keep them in heat for an entire, unrelenting winter. Terrence didn't much appreciate her haste in chopping up the old oak tree after it died. He would have much preferred waiting a bit. The oak tree had been the first thing he had ever really sketched. The drawing was hasty and youthful with jagged lines. Still all the same, he had drawn the oak outside his bedroom window. It was his tree. It wasn't easy, he was used to the shade of a thing, the shape and size of it. He was used to its form in the moonlight, outside his bedroom window at night. It shows him how to see light, how to know what six o'clock on a summer afternoon looked like. The snow that gathered on its branches in
the winter, made him feel warm and safe. Terrene is older now, he understood that things leave. They go away, they die. The green veined leaves didn't come last year, or this year either. Still, it was sad, even if the wood, split and stacked, would be put to work warming the house.

Abigail was absolute in her belief that everything needed to be of use. Everyone, too, had to be of use, for that matter. Terrence thought sometimes that she was some leftover relic from settler days; a brave pioneer, making frugal adjustments in their already sparse house to ensure that nothing would be wasted. Terrence rarely found her maternally comforting. The touch of her hands was cold, dry and sanitized from perpetual washing after her nursing shifts at the hospital were over. Abigail collected rainwater from the runoff. One day she came home with four garbage cans, posted them under each gutter, and rigged a watering pail up from the other side.

"To water the plants with," she said, "or, in case we run out in a storm."

She had once taught Terrence to mend his socks. Terrence wondered when was the last time someone had last used the word "mend." But he sat patiently with her, plunging the needle in and out of the wool. When they were done, his sock was a tangled mess of thread, a heap. Abigail took it from his hands, and with a pop-pop ripped out each stitch; she gave him the mess of yarn to him to sort out and start over.

Terrence too, needed to be of use to Abigail. She shuffled him off to college a few miles down the road when he graduated high school. Terrence didn’t have many friends, nor did he have the desire to make them. Friends were a liability. Abigail decided to send Terrence to college, on condition that he enroll as a business major.

"Business," she said, "is a useful trade in society these days. You can start a
company, a store maybe.

"Sketching is a useful trade too."

"Maybe for street vendors."

Terrence knew he would never utter another word about drawing. Art was his secret passion, his indulgence in the world of senses. He had no desire other than to delight in the ripples and curves of bodies as they fell onto his page, limb by limb. He loved painting layered musculature and action, motion and strength. All the things he could not access in his life. Terrence felt sometimes, in the secret of his mind, that he belonged to another world, an older world, not that of his mother. He looked nothing like her. She was squat and powerful. His lankly limbs dangled loosely about his sides.

In secret, he imagined himself a living Boticelli, a reincarnation of the great Greek fresco artist of the past, painting beauty into the living cement as it hardened, writhing beneath his brush. He wanted to paint the rouge on a woman's cheek, the lean bicep of a young man holding a water jug, etch his obliques into living size with each muscle tense, on the brink of hesitation.

Symmetry, in high school art class he had learned that symmetry was a thing of beauty; the congruence of each side of the human face, form, and body. His mother's face lacked fundamental symmetry. One side of her mouth dipped down a bit more than the other. His own face lacked symmetry as well. He had a long nose and freckles dotted his face, freckles were the enemy of congruence.

A few days after the oak tree was felled, and Abigail had started to chop up the wood for the fireplace, Terrence realized that money must be tight. Usually they only used the old woodstove as an emergency backup when the power went out, or when the
cold got unbearable.

“Mom” Terrence sat with her over a lunch of cold sandwiches and coffee. “How’s the money situation lately. It seems we’ve been cutting some big corners?”

"Well. I’ve been meaning to tell you about that.” She wiped at her mouth with a napkin, not maintaining eye contact with him, but looking down at the floor. “We’re going to take a boarder, you know." Abigail dipped her toast into a cup of black coffee. "They're not giving me enough overtime at the hospital to even cover the taxes on the place this year. Every year they get higher and higher."

"I'll get a job in town. I don't want a stranger living here." Terrence pulled out a worn wooden chair and sat facing her. "If Dad were alive, he would never allow it."

"Well, he's ten miles down the road, sunk in the ground." Abigail brushed her graying hair from her face. "Maybe we should get his opinion." She placed her cup on the table and pushed her chair out. Abigail paused. She took a deep sigh and placed a hand on the back of Terrence's neck. "When you finish college, the sooner the better, than you help out around her. But until then, we do what we can to get by. Always have, always will. That's the end of it."

"I'll put the ad in the mail today." Terrence said, looking away.

"Dad would want us to get by, Terrence. Dad wouldn't want us to struggle like we have been. Dad…” Her voice trailed off.

His mother's heart still so desperately bled for his father. Terrence knew this, because she kept his father’s toothbrush still in its position, lying in wait for its rightful owner. His father had placed it into the ceramic dish, driven to work, and had a heart
ttack on the floor of the lumber mill. His boss, and coworkers looking on as he died. A few years later, Terrence went to the bathroom and saw his father's toothbrush wet with water. He looked around, as thought to see his father's hulking form standing right behind the shower curtain. He realized later that his mother had used his father's toothbrush. She’d probably longed to feel close to him again, Terrence thought. For a moment maybe she had.

The afternoon the boarder arrived, the sun was slung low in the sky. Terrence was tasked with stacking the wood neatly in a grid on the porch. His stomach growled for lunch, a turkey sandwich and salad leftover from yesterday that sat in the fridge. The stranger took his hat off and ran a hand through his light brown hair. He wore a patched jacket and carried a duffel in one hand, a heavy case in the other. He slumped towards one side. He’d answered the ad in the newspaper a week after Abigail posted it. He’d just arrived in town to start a part-time job teaching music at the local community college.

"You must be Terrence, Abigail's son." The stranger smiled.

"That’s me.” Terrence dusted his hands on the front of his khaki pants. "And your name is…" Terrence waited for an answer.

"Bill James. But call me Billy, please." He stuck out his hand. It was warm and moist. Terrence saw it was the hand that held the case, he’d just momentarily set it on the front lawn.

"What's in there?" Terrence asked.

"Saxophone. Alto Sax."

“I've never heard a saxophone before." Terrence ran a hand through his sandy hair and looked at Billy's worn boots, and how his jeans fit better than Terrence’s.
"In fact, I don't know if I've ever heard a live instrument at all- besides the piano at church." Billy looked like a better, fuller version of Terrence, he thought.

"Then man, I have to play for you sometime!" Bill said excitedly, like he’d just discovered something new, not the otherway around. “Jazz, bebop, all the old classics and maybe I'll play you one of my original tunes as well. What do you do Terrence?" Billy took out a tobacco pouch and licked the ends of the thin paper.

"I major in business at County College."

"Yes, yes to all that." Billy stuck the limp cigarette in his mouth and lit it, "but Terrence, what do you DO?"

"Well, I draw. Sketch really. Mostly landscapes." Terrence lied. "Actually, I'm teaching myself human form right now. I want to paint frescoes, like the ancient Etruscans and Greeks. I want to paint on walls and ceilings and floors; I want to paint into concrete as it dries, so my brush strokes are preserved forever."

Terrence was not sure why he told this stranger everything. As soon as the words left his lips he felt stupid and shy. He dug his hands down deep into his pockets hating himself and his stupid mouth, his stupid dreams, his stupid drawings. They weren’t even that good when it came down to it, he was sure.

"Sounds fucking fantastic, sounds like you really have a dream, a vision, like you're headed somewhere only you know about. I love it. I'd love to see sometime." Billy clapped Terrence on the back and picked up his case, walking towards the house.

"Now," he called after Terrence, "where am I going here, buddy, upstairs or down?"

The clapboard floor creaked beneath Billy’s foosteps. It had been years since
Terrence had heard anything from that room. It used to be his father's office, more like a junk room even. Abigail didn't much like that, as she had no need for junk, and no use for rubbish. She would always try to clean it out while he was at work. She took big contractor bags full of old paperwork, magazines, unread issues of the paper. That where she’d been when she got the call that her husband had died. Sitting squat in that little room, with her knees on the floor, sorting through old issues of "Time" magazine that he’d left in a big stack. Terrence thought she’d never touch the room after that, but Abigail went in the very next day and did a thorough clean. She took the magazines to the recycling center, and arranged the desk as if he might come home at any minute and need to work. She placed a fresh light bulb in the desk lamp, and positioned a pen on the ink blotter poised and ready for use.

Lately, Terrence didn't think much about his father. After he died, of course, he imagined seeing him again, feeling his presence in the rooms where he loved to spend time. He would sit in his recliner and imagine his father was there, a friendly ghost sitting inside of him, laughing at the sensation of a human body within his own ghostly one. But lately Terrence had little time for ghosts, he was too consumed with his own mind, his own earthly flesh and navigating the sea of its desires.

He felt a part of him was missing. It may, however, have been a part that never actually existed. It was an odd sensation, like the itch of a phantom limb that he’d never discovered. At first he was consumed by it, tangled up in the emotions of his confusion. It had started with the oak tree outside his window dying. Once it was gone he felt an odd ache. As though the landscape of his life had been inextricably altered without his permission. Terrence thought maybe it was his classes; he was never truly fulfilled by
them. The only purpose they served was sheer, unadulterated time to draw. The back of heads mostly, the hips of the girl who sat in front of him. Wide, like Ginny's. She had been his girlfriend once. Ginny. When they kissed she touched his face like she was impersonating a silly old movie, clutching his Rudolph Valentino cheeks. He felt like a baby being squeezed to death. The way her hands rubbed his face made it feel like there was a terrible itch he longed to stop. Like they were burning a hole into his face. Ginny must have felt the same way, because she told him he bored her and he stopped calling her.

In the spare room, Terrence could hear the stranger arranging his possessions. He was slowly unpacking his duffel, and his saxophone case, placing each item deliberately in the oak chest Abigail had carted up the stairs herself while Terrence was in class. Terrence walked past his room on his way to their shared bathroom. The door was open a crack and he looked in. Billy held his saxophone on his lap, polishing it. His shirt off, was exposing his bare chest. Downstairs, Abigail called to him for dinner.

The three of them sat awkwardly at the table, waiting for each other to speak. Finally Abigail broke the silence.

"Don't expect to get dinner every night" Abigail said sharply, "This isn't that kind of arrangement." The three of them sat at the barren wooden table

"Didn't think it was, m'am." Bill placed his hands on his fork and knife. "So, does anyone else live here?"

Abigail looked up at him with a scowl. "No" she said. "Just us. You too. My husband died years ago. That's his old office you'll be staying in, so treat it with respect. No pictures on the walls or silly things like that. It's your room, don't get me wrong, but
I'd like it if you didn't foul it up."

"How did he die? If you don't mind me asking that is."

"Heart attack." Terrence chimed in, through a mouthful of potatoes. "I was pretty young still."

"That's very sad, I'm sorry for your loss." Bill said, cutting into his meatloaf. "I lost my Dad when I was just a kid. Car accident. So I understand."

"We're all okay here, thanks for the thought." Abigail said, still suspicious of the stranger. "So. How did you get to be a musician?"

"Well I guess like anyone does...practice!"

"Very funny" she said. "But you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do, m'am. I started playing the saxophone after my Dad died. Everyday I practiced. It's the only thing that made me feel whole again. Then I discovered jazz. It was like my whole world was a black and white silent film- and then poof, it lit up like a Christmas tree." Bill had pushed his chair out a bit and was gesturing wildly with his hands. Terrence could see his mother was becoming uncomfortable.

"I bet Terrence feels the same way about drawing." Bill said.

Abigail placed her utensils on the edge of the table. "Terrence studies business, not drawing."

"Yes. But that's not his passion is it? Business is fine enough, I'm sure. We all have to get a day job right? But he loves art and I understand that. If it’s anything like my love of music, it doesn’t go away."

After dinner, Terrence went up to his room to study. His books were piled high on his desk and would probably stay unopened until finals. He thought about the conversation at dinner, his mother’s angry eyes and her hands gripping her silverware. He
didn't know why she desperately hated his drawing and art. It had long been a source of
shame for her; something feminine maybe that she denied was within him. Terrence was
content to do as she pleased, as long as he could have the secret escape of his art. He felt
exposed when Bill had brought it up, like the most intimate and personal part of him was
open wide tp his mother’s criticism. Down the hall, he could hear Bill moving around the
room that used to be his father’s office. He wondered about the saxophone. Would Bill
really play for him?

Terrence longed to hear the instrument. The idea of it seemed so out of place in
the old two story clapboard house which was otherwise so frugal, so silent. How could he
ask Bill to play? Maybe he would offer up some of his art first, his paintings, then it
would be an even exchange. He imagined a conversation in his head, Terrence wanted to
play it cool. He wanted Bill to respect him as a peer, a fellow artist, not as a child. He
wouldn’t go into Bill’s room intentionally, that was too obvious. Instead he would just
happen to be walking by, he would make a quick, easy comment that would start the
conversation. He would-

"I'm going in to work to cover a few hours off someone's shift." Abigail yelled
upstairs, interrupting his thought. "Won't be home until late. We can use the overtime."
Her voice trailed off.

"Okay" Terrence said, trying to conceal his eagerness, "Be safe driving." He
rarely said kind things to his mother. Sometimes they had a rather icy relationship, like a
business dealing at best. He was her only son, her only child. She was his only family,
and they needed one another. He wanted to feel connected to someone, something. She
wanted to feel connected to his father.
Terrence looked out the window to where the oak tree had once stood. The view seemed so naked now. Like something was missing from the landscape. He had a clear, unadulterated view of the forest beyond their house now.

Terrence walked down the hallway, towards the bathroom, even though he didn't need to use it. He convinced himself he was going to get a glass of water. From inside Bill’s room Terrence heard the clinking of metal and knocked quietly on the door. Slowly, the door creaked opened, Terrence stood in the doorway exposed. Bill was facing the window, with his back to the door, the saxophone draped around his neck with a thin cloth strap. He was pressing the keys and holding the mouthpiece up to his lips, swaying in time to the beat. Bending his knees, he knelt to the floor and finished the silent song with a flourish. Terrence wanted to clap but felt silly, standing there in the doorway, clapping for nothing but a spirited performance.

"You can play if you want," he heard himself say. "She's gone out for the night, working extra hours at the hospital."

"I didn't see you." Bill said, "You sure you don't mind? What do you want to hear-I'll let you pick…Coltrane? Gillespie? Parker?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know the difference." Terrence hesitated and crossed the threshold into his father's old office.

"Then Gillespie. He's everybody's first- was mine too, I was a teenager, couldn't have been more than fourteen."

"Sounds good." Terrence sat at the desk.

"Do you want some whiskey?"

The sweet scent of whiskey infused the air in the room. Terrence leaned forward
in his chair and folded his hands over his skinny legs.

"Sure." He concentrated hard on preserving the nonchalant nuance in his voice. "I'll have a drink." He took the flask and slugged it back, letting the whiskey sting his throat. Outside, heavy rain smacked against the windows. His mother wouldn't be home for some time. Terrence felt free when she wasn't around, the whole house breathed a collective sigh when she was gone. His mother was committed to her job. It was hard to see her as the caring type. Nurses had soft hands, even tempers and healing powers beyond their understanding. Terrence did not see these things in his mother, but he knew she was capable. She was strong and matter-of-fact, and maybe helpless people trusted her.

Bill had closed his eyes and slowly started to blow air through the belly of the saxophone. Out came a loud rush, a sudden swarming of sounds so vast that Terrence pushed back in his seat a bit. The notes flew up in the air and then fell back down again, vanishing as more and more sound surrounded them. Terrence watched the muscles of Bill's forearm tense and relax with every key he pressed. He seemed to occupy a point between light and dark "chiaroscuro" was the word, Terrence though. It was the moment before action; the slightest pause in which great Roman generals stopped, about to march into battle. It was the tension of taut tendons, rippling muscled, poised on the brink between glory and darkness.

"I can't play like this. You're not getting it. You're zoning out. This isn't a solo piece." Bill said, the saxophone dangling around his neck. "You know what I'm going to do…I'm going to play along with a record." He walked to the other side of the room to a box of records.
Terrence watched Bill looking through the music in the corner of the room. Bill selected one and put it on the record player always kept in the office. Static like rustling paper blasted through the speakers. Terrence noticed the curve of Bill’s hips and length of his torso, how his pants legs fell neatly around his shoes. Terrence, had always been so tall that his pants never looked quite right at the ankles. The cuff always hovered a few inches above his tennis shoes.

"You're very symmetrical." Terrence said over the static.

"What?" Bill turned.

"Your body." Terrence stood up and walked towards him. "It all fits together perfectly. I mean, you are what the human form is supposed to look like. I hope you don't mind me saying that. When the Greeks painted humans, men mostly, they chose their subjects not by their beauty, but by their symmetry."

"See. That's exactly the opposite of jazz."

Bill grabbed Terrence around the back of the neck like a puppy. The music skipped a few times, then started to blare through the speakers, a saxophone and a horn section.

"Jazz music is asymmetry," Bill said. “It's the chaos of the rhythm and the beat. It's like someone unchained all of the notes from where they were shackled onto the staff and let them wild and free. Loose and do whatever the fuck they felt like doing. Listen to the beat, listen to the 16-16 time, you hear that? Ba-baba-ba-baba-ba, that's Gillespie baby!" He let out a woop and grabbed Terrence by the shoulders, shaking him like a rag doll with their faces inches apart. Then he grabbed his pant leg and lifted Terrence's foot off the floor- forcing him to keep time. "You hear it Terri? You must hear it now baby!"
Terrence was warm from the whiskey and he did hear it, he did. It filled up his soul with a kind of fullness he had never known before, a kind of heat almost. He was a part of the rhythm, and just the same parts of him filled up the whitespace in between the notes. He found the beat and stomped his foot on the floor like it was on fire, keeping time deliberately. Outside the rain had stopped and the air was clear and the song suddenly ended.

"Incredible. I never knew music could be like that. So chaotic, so crazy," Terrence said, flopping back down on the chair.

"That was jazz, baby." Bill said. "Now show me what you got in that notebook."

Terrence looked down to where he had been sketching before the music.

"My notebook is nothing."

"How can you say that? It's everything, Terrence, everything." Bill touched Terrence’s shoulder, "never let anyone tell you it's nothing."

Terrence opened the journal and felt Bill's breath over his shoulder, on his cheek.

The first page of the journal was blank. Terrence always liked to start off a blank page, an open book. He felt himself drawn towards Bill, as though Bill’s body somehow Pulled Terrence towards him. Terrence felt lightheaded with whiskey and the honesty of telling the truth about his ambitions. He had so often slipped into his daydreams of art, that he’d forgotten what it was like to share it with someone else. Terrence felt his face move towards Bill’s, like gravity was having its way with him. Why did he want this? He couldn't think. What was wrong with him?

The feeling of bebop took over and the beat deafened him. Terrence felt a deep ringing in his ears. Everything else was drowned out, all sound, all silence. This loud,
deafening white noise blocked out all his thoughts. Outside, the rain had broken the humid warm front and the window was open. Cold air came through it, breaking the spell in the room. Terrence drew nearer to Bill, until he felt Bill’s breath against his skin, his lips, he felt Bill grab his shoulders.

"Get. Out." The door creaked. Abigail's narrow eyes stared at them. Suddenly, Terrence was naked, exposed, his bare white skin filthy. He looked down at his body and saw that he was fully clothed. He saw Abigail’s eyes sift from Terrence to Bill. How much had she seen?

"All of it. I saw all of it." Abigail answered the question that Terrence had not asked. "You're filthy, both of you. Leave. Get out." She pointed to Bill.

"But we didn't do anything." Bill said.

The slam of the door behind her was more definitive than anything she could have said to Terrence. That night Terrence slept a fitful sleep. He tossed and turned on the lumpy mattress until finally he slipped into a dream. He was basking in the sunlight of a Mediterranean beach in the middle of July. Tiny pebbles making creases in his back and he reclined under the sun, drunk with the sleepiness and the warmth of its glow. Tiny blue waves crested and broke with rhythmic certainty. Out at sea, a cargo ship boomed a warning horn. Above him, seagulls flapped their wings and screeched to each other in high-pitched call sand responses, in time to the beat of Dizzy Gillespie. The gulls beat their wings. Terrence sunk into the sand, inches and inches, until the cold wet sand slowly enveloped him. He tried to get out, thrashed his arms and legs, but the sand pulled him further into the mucky wet beach. He stared up at the beautiful blue sky. White puffs floated across with mesmerizing certainty as he screamed, over and over again. No one
could hear him.

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Terrence woke up to the glow of the sun, despite the gray morning outside. He lay in bed for an hour, thinking about something he’d once heard. It was impossible to create something new in one's dreams. You never die in your dreams, because it is a sensation you have yet to experience. He’d heard that all dreams are versions we have gone through in our everyday lives. This, he decided, made perfect sense. He knew he’d already lived the life of a dreamer, an artist, a great master painter.

When he got out of bed the house was silent. The walls breathed in and out like a great bellows pushed by some unseen lung circulating the air of last night. He padded down the hallway in his socks, towards the bathroom. When he reached Billy's bedroom he opened the door and looked in through the crack. Abigail was sitting on her knees, arranging his father's old magazines from where they had been packed up in the closet. He watched her as she twisted the light bulb in the desk lamp. All signs of Billy were gone. Terrence wondered if he had dreamed the entire incident. Had there been a Billy? Had he really grabbed Terrence’s shoulders like that, and pulled Terrence towards him? Abigail crumpled up a few pieces of sheet music that were left scattered on the bed and tossed them in the waste bin. She took his father's pen out of the desk drawer and placed it on the ink blotter, poised and ready for use.
Crime in the City

Crescent Valley was constructed in 1948 using government funds sometime after the war. The idea was that people should no longer cram themselves into little boxes stacked one on top of the other. Few knew how to farm the land anymore. But appreciated physical connection to nature; they felt this was a constitutional right. The town was laid out on a grid, each street equidistant from the next. Block-by-block neighborhoods formed, shifting the sparse landscape of the valley into a vast panorama of congruent green rectangles.

Dinner was late getting on the table at modest house in Crescent Valley. Bruce and Jeanine Tucker furiously relayed dishes in and out of the oven, amidst glances of desperation. The heat from the range was burning Jeanine’s eyes when she bent down to grab a plate, and as a result, she dropped her mother’s hand me down Corning Ware full of boiled potatoes on the kitchen floor. She stared at the goopy mess of starch mingling with shards of flowered pottery on the floor until Bruce jumped in with a towel, mopping up the mess on his hands and knees. In the dining room, neighbors Jim and Cindy were waiting, impatiently clinking the ice in their glasses. Jeanine looked at Bruce and mouthed a faint I’m sorry. Bruce smiled up at her; his brown eyes creased at the ends. He’d never believed his luck in marrying her.

They’d lived at the house on Mission Ave for a month, and were eager to please
their neighbors and make new friends. Bruce had invited Jim and Cindy over earlier in
the week; he’d seen them walking their Pekingese one night while he was walking
Arthur, his massive golden retriever. Arthur preferred a late night walk. Even though they
had a perfectly good fenced in yard for the dog, Bruce liked a little night air too. He
didn’t have the same fears everyone else expressed. In fact, he quite liked how after dusk
everyone feared Crescent City crime so much they more or less barricaded themselves in
their homes and Arthur had the run of the sidewalks. Jim and Cindy saw him they yelled
hello and waved to him. Bruce quickly stomped out the one cigarette a day he allowed
himself, and jogged across the street to make introductions. He invited them to dinner
later that week.

The suburbs in the Valley had become a reprieve from neighboring Crescent City,
where decay and neglect spread like a viruses through the streets. Hollowed out houses
and darkened windows stared blankly out into the night. Mission Avenue ran from the
city, all the way into Crescent Valley, converged with the freeway and lost itself to seven
lanes of humming traffic. At around seven p.m. in the summer months, Crescent Valley
mothers called the children back in for supper. Lawnmowers stopped and grills were
extinguished. The front doors of each house in the suburb closed and locked. The street
lamps in Crescent Valley buzzed on and spread pools of yellow light across the
pavement.

Late June humidity hung in the night air, as if the suburb sat in the crook of a
perspiring arm. The mild wind blew hot air through the streets, gently rustling the leaves
on the forsythia bushes that lined their driveway with tiny yellow blooms. Jeanine was
starting to sweat and turned the oven off, opening the slats over the screen door to let in
the tepid breeze.

"Dinner is served!" Bruce pushed through the door to the dining room carrying a hot plate. He moved between Cindy and Jim, his long legs and slim frame gangly like a teenage boy’s.

"Oh!" Cindy exclaimed, her teeth blotched with red lipstick, "This all looks so delicious."

Jim, a rotund man whose belly hung between his legs, was halfway through the bottle of Cabernet they’d brought to the party. His bloodshot left eye blinked furiously as he spoke. "What do you call this? Is this some kind of Portuguese dish?" His eye blinked rapidly. “Hear they’re moving in from all sides of the neighborhood!"

"No,” Jeanine said, trying to hide her irritation, “it’s filet mignon steak, with a dipping sauce on the side. The brussel sprouts should be done warming in a second."

Jim grunted in approval, pushing the food around on his plate. "Bruce, did you hear they're closing the park?"

"I don't even think we've seen the park yet!" Jeanine forced a laugh and looked at Bruce.

"I doubt that will make a difference in the crime rate.” Cindy had slid out a compact and was dabbing at her lips. “I don't think criminals are afraid of the dark."

"Yes" Jim looked at his wife, “but it will make it more apparent who is actually breaking the law." He placed both hands on the table.

It was clear to Bruce that this was a conversation taking place between Jim and Cindy to which the Tuckers just happened to be privy. Bruce looked at Jim’s face, the flesh on either side of Jim’s wedding ring popped out. Bruce wondered if the constant
burden of negativity was too much for Jim to carry, a health risk even.

“Whoever is in the park, after night fall, is a criminal. Simple as that.” Jim felt the need to clarify.

"And then what happens?" Cindy waved her empty wine glass in the air in rhythm with her speech. “We chase them down and do a citizens arrest? They probably have guns and knives.”

"There's been a rash of robberies in the east side recently,” Jeanine said, resolute to enter the conversation. “I read the Hendersons lost all their jewelry, and they shot the dog on the way out. Can you imagine that? The dog!"

"Might as well shoot the Hendersons!" Jim said.

"Jim!" Cindy narrowed her eyes, “why would you say that?"

"What? I'm just telling the truth, that doesn't make any sense, that's all. Why shoot the dog?"

"Maybe to shut him up,” Jeanine said from the other end of the table. “So they didn't get caught."

They all stopped eating.

"I guess that makes sense." Jim said reluctantly, chewing an oversized hunk of steak.

"Do you have your intercom system setup yet? It warns you of any ongoing criminal activity depending on the crimes that evening, a car jacking, a robbery. Last night someone got arrested over on Park."

"He sits there all night with an old police manual looking up the codes and writing them down in his own personal notebook!" Cindy refilled her glass of wine.
"I do not! Just the ones I don't know."

"You're an accountant, Jim," Cindy laughed. "You don't know any police codes."

"I'm just trying to keep my family safe, Cindy, "You of all people should understand that."

“What family, Jim, me and the dog?”

Across the table, Bruce chewed silently. In spite of the melancholy turn in conversation he felt a sudden wave of appreciation for his wife’s beauty. Her hair was slightly mussed, and fine sheen of perspiration had gathered on her upper lip. Such moments of imperfection inspired him. The dreaminess of her damp clothing, when the edge of her dress stuck to the seam of her stocking, her hair out of place, even a piece of spinach stuck between her teeth could make him love her more. These things assured him of what he already knew; that she was his, wonderfully, remarkably, his. She smiled at him, a comically forced smile that said I know you don’t want to be doing this either, but we can’t be the hermit couple with the big dog. Now, in their dining room, Jeanine was the only one who existed for him. He didn’t much care about engaging in forced conversation with the neighbors. But he knew Jeanine was acutely aware of their performance with the new neighbors, and their presence Crescent Valley.

Jim stopped eating and looked into the distance. "There are just so many bullets, in the chamber of a gun. So many lives at the end of those bullets, or bullets at the end of those lives. They are all floating around, somewhere in the world. For every bullet used, there is another factory pressing one out. There will always be violence."

"Stop waxing philosophical, Jim," Cindy said, “no one wants to hear it."

"Maybe not.” Jim buttered his bread. “But we all have to do our part."
"And what do you suppose that is? Vigilantism? Walking around in a U.N. Peacekeeper uniform and disarming vandals and criminals?" Cindy threw Jeanine an annoyed look.

Bruce could see all politics inside their relationship spread out on the table in front of Jim and Cindy. He wondered how long they’d been together. He hoped he would not arrive at a similar point with Jeanine. But their relationship was different; they were good together. They balanced each other. They had saved each other, in a sense. He knew she grew impatient with him, and she didn’t quite understand his need to protect her, but she loved him all the same. The two of them were similar; they felt the world in the same way. They loved the energy it had to offer, all the beauty, instead of walking around scared every time a situation wasn’t exactly how they had pictured it. Their way of living led to some disappointments, but also a wonderful sense of freedom that Bruce could never quite give up.

"Cindy, you know I never leave home without my gun. What about you, Bruce?"

“That thing you carry is barely even a pistol.” Cindy turned to Bruce and Jeanine, “Don’t let him scare you, it’s practically a toy gun.”

“But it’s accurate.” Jim took another swig of wine.

"I don't have a weapon. Mrs. Tucker prefers we not invite that kind of energy into our home."

People thought Jeanine could be rather unpredictable. Bruce often felt this had to do more with her personality, and less with her gender. If Jeanine were a man, her personality would seem fun and powerful. And anyway, Bruce knew the truth about her. She was so sensitive, and always concerned with the energy of things, their nature. Bruce
had met her seven years ago at a crowded college dive where his friend was bartending. He wouldn’t say for sure what it was, maybe mutual appreciation. Maybe Bruce could provide the kind of normality she secretly craved. The prospect that someone like Jeanine would want him enlivened him. He thought of her, on that first night, her long slender fingers wrapped around her perspiring beer mug.

They had both come from a similar background. Coming of age in a time of general opulence in Crescent City made the abject poverty of Bruce’s childhood stand out. Year after year he wore his brother’s recycled clothes. His mother made pancakes for dinner at least twice a week when they were out of meat or vegetables. For a while, after high school, Bruce got into some smalltime theft, lifting checks from the convenience store where he worked and cashing them. He even robbed a few houses with his friends. Only the families they knew were on vacation, of course.

Jeanine had it a little rougher, from what he understood, and she wore it like a weight. It was Jeanine who was the most concerned about moving to Crescent Valley. Bruce felt it was almost as if she feared that any day the crime from the city would swarm in like a plague and overtake them all. She imagined herself cross-contaminated by the sins of others and forced into the same category as before. She felt herself to be an outsider, an ‘other’, a person who lived much further from the wrong side of the tracks than was comfortable to talk about in conversation.

Jim was fiddling with the knobs on the intercom system that came stock inside every home in Crescent Valley. Bruce hadn’t touched the thing since he moved in- he didn’t care to know every event around him. He was comfortable with taking a chance on letting the fates decide.
After the crime in the city began to spill into the neighboring suburbs, a Crescent Valley ordinance required residents to install the intercom alert system in their homes in order to encourage citizens to be vigilant. The intercom was an unassuming square box that resembled a radio, wedged into a space in the wall. There were two buttons on the intercom, on and off. A dispatcher’s throaty voice belted out detailed alerts and police codes that would beam incessantly through the airwaves. Walking Arthur down Mission Ave at night Bruce could hear the intercom buzzing out of the open windows of Crescent Valley homes. The frequency of it annoyed him. He wished he could hear only his footsteps, Arthur’s heavy breath.

Across the room, Jim had managed to turn the intercom on just in time.


“I know what a 320 is!” Jim said excitedly. “That’s vandalizing private property!”

“Well, aren’t you special” Cindy refilled another glass of wine.

"Turn on the television.” Jim patted Bruce on the back, “Let's see if the news has picked it up yet.”

"Why don't we finish dinner first?” Bruce said, "Jeanine spent so long preparing it.”

But Jim, Cindy and even Jeanine had already gathered around the giant oak encased Magnavox that sat on the floor. Bruce got up and opened the window. He needed to feel the night air. He walked over to the television and rested his hand gently on Jeanie’s lower back, letting his fingers feel the line of her underwear. He felt Jeanine swat his fingers away as it crept lower. He wanted to be playful, and fun and secretive, but the mood in the room was turning sour. Red and blue lights flashed on the television
screen. The news channel was interviewing an old lady with a walker. She eeked out a few words about the vandals taking her lawn statue of St. Francis of Assisi and throwing it through her living room window. The reporter leaned in close and asked her how this had made her feel. Bruce knew the reporter wanted to hear something alarming, or pathetic, more emotional pornography to entrance the masses of people who tuned in to watch the news. The lady said she didn't understand. All her life she’d lived in Crescent Valley, and nothing like this had ever happened to her before. Bruce got up and turned the television off.

If there was something Bruce hated more than the intercom, it was surely the television. It was like a big breathing beast that sat in the room, daring him to a dual of control every time he even considered turning it on. Crescent Valley was always glued to the news channel. These pumped out 24 hours a day, seven days a week, relentlessly. They started broadcasting 24-hour news during the war. People would watch every night trying to pick the grainy faces of their loved ones out of the endless montage of grisly unshaven faces covered in filth. The images were captured via helmet cameras and the footage was poor quality at best. But people became addicted, and here in the Valley, many years after the war had ended, the news channels stayed beaming images into every living room. It was like they loved the rush of moment a breaking story, a tiny pin prick of adrenaline administered to an otherwise sedentary life. The viscosity of the rush of emotions flowed powerfully through their veins and became addicting.

Across the room, another Crime in the City alert rang from the intercom. Jim pulled a worn notebook from his back pocket and scanned each page. Bruce looked over at Mrs. Tucker. The brown curls at the nape of her neck gently stirred in the warm Santa
Ana winds drifting in from the open window. Bruce didn't care about the Crime in the City alerts. He just wanted the neighbors to leave so he could sit back and have a drink and smoke with his wife. He knew the neighborhood might soon become "infested" with crime as the reporter had called it, but the price was too good on the house, Arthur needed a backyard. Their two story Cape Cod was perfect, with thick hedges on a corner lot. Bruce felt confident in his ability to keep his wife safe. She was what he’d always wanted, anyway. In fact, he was a bit obsessed about her well-being. Once when she was drove South to see her parents, he realized he hadn’t checked the tire pressure on the car before she left. He’d called her, then raced in his car down the thruway to where she’d pulled over in a rest stop waiting for him. All the while, he imagined a paralyzing phone call and pictured her beautiful face disfigured from his negligence, her long swan arms mangled with shards of glass. He’d filled the tires up, put a quart of oil in to be safe, and even washed her windshield so she could see clearly.

Outside Bruce heard a sharp crack like a tree limb snapping. He looked at the open window, but saw only streetlights and moths swarming around the light. The air was still, the warm wind had wound down and the leaves stood silently. Inside, the buzz of the intercom chirped again.

“Crime in the City” it hissed over static, “Code 139. Code 139.”

“Armed robbery” Jim muttered, tracing the code in his grubby notebook.

“Oh my, this is starting to sound serious, maybe we better get going.” Cindy said.

Bruce quite liked this idea, and agreed completely. He longed to stretch out on the couch with his feet up and watch some mindless television with his wife. “No, not yet,” he felt obligated to protest. “We haven’t even gotten to dessert yet!”
“Oh, he’s right, Jimmy,” Cindy said. “We’re only across the street, anyway.”

Jim didn’t notice. He had been standing over the television watching the news when it broke for commercial.

“Jim? Hellooo!” Cindy waved her arms at him. “What did the news say?”

“They took everyone hostage.” He said, his eyes averted, “then the vandals threw the woman down the basement stairs, and…”

“And what, Jim!” Cindy held his shoulder, “And what?”

“She was pregnant.”

“Oh, that’s awful.” Cindy put her pudgy hand over her mouth and repeated herself. “My god, that’s just awful.”

“Would anyone like some wine?” Jeanine had been standing over them; Bruce thought she was beginning to look tired.

“Jeanine, come on and relax.” Bruce patted her arm gently. “I think everyone’s okay. Hey, I wonder why Arthur hasn’t come in yet.”

Bruce had adopted Arthur from the animal shelter when he and Jeannie first met in college. He’d wanted a companion who never judged him for crying sometimes during movies, or leaving his toothbrush in the shower, or failing to get raise at work. Arthur had become a part of his reality, and half the reason he pushed for the move to Crescent Valley in the first place was to have more room for Arthur. He looked over at the doggie door, freshly installed, which acted as Arthur’s own private entrance. He could see Jim and Cindy looking restlessly around the room. Should they stay or go? Was it was even safe enough outside for them to venture across the freshly paved street and down the sidewalk? Bruce didn’t offer up any suggestions. He often hung back during important
moments of crisis to see how a situation would unfold, and whether a natural leader would emerge. If no one spoke, he could install himself as the manager of a situation almost immediately, but it was never his ideal. The psychology of it fascinated him; everyone fell in some ascribed pecking order deemed by nature, and felt an innate urgency to assume a certain position. Jeanine was lighting tiny tea light candles one by one. She locked eyes with him and nodded towards Jim and Cindy. She was waiting for him to take the lead.

“So” Bruce said, getting up from the sofa. “I suppose we should get on with dinner, despite whatever is happening outside. Besides,” he patted Jim on the back, “we have our resident intercom police code expert.”

“Yes,” Cindy agreed, “Let’s have dessert, and stay where there’s plenty of wine, and company!”

Static came in across the intercom, “Crime in the City” the dispatcher said.

“This is why I never put that goddamn thing on,” Bruce muttered.

“Ignorance is bliss then, Bruce?” Jim had heard him.

“No,” Bruce said, “I just prefer not to live in constant fear.”

“Then you, my friend, are living in a dream world.” Jim leaned back in his chair.

“Crescent Valley is going to crumble just like the city. Mark my words, crime is rampant. If you heard the shit I hear every night Bruce…” His voice trailed off… “It’s relentless. And you know what? It’s not the violence, that’s not it, no, its cruelty Bruce. It’s disgusting what these people do. Rob old ladies, throw women down the stairs just for the hell of it. It’s like the bottom has fallen out of the whole thing. The whole lousy, shitty world is coming apart Bruce. You can ignore it all you want, but it doesn’t change what’s
going on outside these walls.”

“Don’t say that.” Jeanine was standing near the kitchen wearing two oven mitts. Her hands were folded across her chest. “You don’t know what the hell…I…”


“Jim, look that up. Come on hurry up.” Cindy said. “What were you saying Jeanine, dear?” She looked up, her eyes glassy, and her lips darkened with wine.

“Nothing. Just, nothing. I’m Portuguese, that’s all. You said before Jim, about Portuguese people moving in from all sides. Well that’s me. I thought you should know.”

“Is everything okay, Jeanine?” Bruce went to his wife’s side.

The intercom buzzed again. This time, an officer’s voice came through from another frequency, “We’ve got armed men, traveling westward down Mission Avenue towards the suburbs of Crescent Valley, three of them. Ccall another 390 dispatcher.”

“That’s us dear, that’s us.” Jeanine said, getting alarmed.

The trapped air inside the house had a fetid smell. For a moment, Bruce thought someone had relieved themselves, but the situation was far from that dramatic. He realized the smell was the brussel sprouts Jeanine had left in the oven. They were emitting a stale scent, stewing in their own juices.

“Honey,” Jim asked Cindy, “what’s that smell?”

“Dammit Bruce,” Jeanine got up from the table, “I left the food in the oven.”

“Who cares,” he said, holding her wrist and guiding her back down. “We’ll do the dishes later when all this is over.”

“Okay you’re right.” Jeanine said, “Let me just go turn the oven off.”
Outside a tiny tapping started on the roof. The room held its breath. The tapping increased to a steady stream and they all laughed politely. Rain, it was the sound of rain. It had been a few weeks. The drought was drying up the lawns one by one turning them to dusty yellow patches of dirt.

“Thank god,” Cindy said. “We’re finally getting some rain.”

The rattling of the rain sounded like someone was hitting the house itself, rhythmically over and over again. The intercom chimed in the background. “Crime in the City alert. 300’s block of Mission Ave. is now under surveillance.”

The rattling sound seemed to be getting more persistent, and louder. Jim turned towards the door as if to hear more clearly. Bruce got up absentmindedly to take the brussel sprouts out of the oven, he walked into the kitchen. Suddenly a large crack sounded, shaking windowpanes. Jim jumped out of his seat and pulled his pistol from his pocket.

“Jim put that away!” Jeanine stood just opposite. “Don’t you think you’re being a little extreme!”

“They’re here, don’t you see, they could be right outside! What, do you want to wait until they get in here and push you down the stairs? Is that what you want?”

“Put the gun away Jim. No one is impressed. We don’t care and it doesn’t make any of us feel safe, does it?” Cindy seemed slightly hysterical.

Outside a sharp crack sounded again, like a tree limb or a hammer, and Jim opened the front window, letting the rain splatter in across the lace doilies, wetting the coffee table, and the new green carpet. He leaned out the window with his whole torso and fired his gun into the underbrush twice.
“Jim! Stop being ridiculous!” Cindy pulled him by the waistband of his pants back into the room.

He was soggy and out of breath. “I, I think I hit something…” he stuttered. “I think I got them!”

A whimpering came up through the rain, into the open window.

Bruce had rushed back into the room. “What the hell is going on!” He shouted. “I told you, we don’t believe in guns in this house!”

“I’m sorry Bruce. No harm done, I hope. Why don’t we go outside and have a look around.”

Bruce opened the door and jumped the three steps down to the walkway. A cracked tree limb sat splintered on the sidewalk, grown heavy from the rain and fallen from the oak tree against the house a loose shutter slapped carelessly in the wind. Bruce separated the hedge that protected the house pulling the brittle green branches with both hands and saw a panting mass of yellow fur.

“Arthur!” Bruce yelled, “Jeanine! Get the car!”

“Crime in the City” the intercom buzzed inside. “Perpetrators left Mission Avenue, apprehended on freeway south of the city.”
A Mile North of Cold Storage Beach

Cold Storage beach was desolate that time of year. Most families had already sufficiently vacated by late August. Packed their turtle toppers up and made their way down 6A back to Boston. The fall was imminent by then. Subtly breathing into the late afternoon, and at night coming out of hiding and forcing you to pull the covers up a little higher, close the window and put on an extra shirt. The end of August brought out a peculiar sadness in people, admitting the fact that it hadn’t been all barbeques and baseball games. It had been a fleeting glimpse if we all lived a different, better kind of life. People needed to cling to the last of summer because they deeply feared who they had to become in their real lives once the grills were tethered to their decks and the beach chairs stacked in the basement.

Cape Cod was our yearly tradition. No matter where each sibling was, what they were doing, who they were dating, where they were working. We would all pack ourselves into our separate cars and find our way up north from New Jersey to meet our mother for a few weeks next to Cape Cod Bay. I was worse for the wear this year. Barely dragging myself up I-95, and away from the home I had shared with Mariella for six years now. I had moved out a few days before, so when I pulled into the rental house driveway I had six years worth of clothes and books packed into my car, with no place to put them I figured I would just drive them around until I made a plan.
The first time I had been to the Cape without her, was accentuated by the fact that everyone else was thoroughly entombed in long-term relationships. The twins Katie and Peter had somehow managed to find themselves in diametrically opposing situations, Katie with a perfect man, Chris, loved by the family, who provided her stability and love. Peter with a detestable guy named Joey, who had a shaved head and a piercing through his septum, like a bull. Joey spent an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom, to the point where any act whether lewd or not, couldn’t possibly take that long. When we were in a group, Joey spoke only to our brother Peter, never to any of us and this made for a rather awkward group dynamic. We could all be sitting around, eating pizza or watching a movie, and Joey would whisper something to Peter, and Peter would turn to us and say something like, “Guys, Joey just made a really funny joke about the movie.” We all hoped this relationship would expire soon.

Of the sibling set, Katie was the most grounded. She was a practical, scientific person who would tell you what you needed to hear. This was reflected in her short, powerful physique well sculpted from years of instructing yoga. Her boyfriend Chris was also short, together they made an aesthetically pleasing, compact pair. Chris was an ice-climber, and spent all winter scaling glacial sheets in far-flung places, a fact he never advertised, and rarely discussed except for during Christmas when he was inundated with ice-climbing books as gifts because no one knew what else to get him.

Chris was the first to see the whale the day it washed up. We were swimming in the bay, feeling the sudden saltiness of the water that hinted the tide was going out. I floated on my back thinking of Mariella. How she would wade so carefully into the cold New England water, so much rougher than the white sands and warm waters of her native
Puerto Rico, but never deterred, her brown skin pimpled with goosebumps from the temperature, her arms slung around my neck. What was she doing now, who was she with.

“Guys,” Chris shouted, “What the hell is that!” He pointed to a sleek dorsal fin cutting out of the water moving parallel to the beach. Suddenly, the fin turned straight to the beach, and headed directly in, jamming itself onto the sandbar.

Chris and I swam to shore, walking at first, and then ran over to where it was thrusting its enormous body against the beach. Nature is nearly perfect in this way, delivering its consequences immediately with no delay.

“Holy shit” Chris muttered, staring as the whale thrashed its powerful tail wildly back and forth.

“I’ll call wildlife services.” I said.

I thought of Mariella then. How it would break her heart to see him like this, a beautiful creature of the sea ran aground, violently domesticated. She was like that creature when we met, all untamed and wild. She was so young, not yet distilled by the ravages time wrought on the open-wounded soul, exposed to all manner of worldly elements. Slowly a crowd started to gather on the beach. Pasty white people with wide brimmed sunhats and small children all pointing and gasping.

“Should we try and help it?” A woman with a small child asked me.
“No,” I turned towards her, “I think it’s best if we back away. It’s more dangerous to get in the water with an agitated creature. I called the authorities already. Just leave it alone.”

“OH MY GOD!” When I turned back a woman with long hair, had hiked up her jeans and waded into the water “We have to save it!” With a child’s pink sand bucket in the shape of a castle, she began pouring water over the whale.

A guy with designer sunglasses yelled, “you’re going to fucking drown it lady!” from the beach, “you’re pouring water right into its blowhole! That’s where it breathes!”

One of the children said, “Mommy!” and yanked the young woman’s hand, “but I don’t want the whale to drown!”

“This is nature honey,” The woman with the pink bucket replied, her stringy hair waving wildly in the wind, “what you want doesn’t matter!”

“Don’t speak to my child like that!” the mother said, “honey,” she said, turned to her son, “what’s important now is that we don’t hurt the whale, okay?”

“This is un-fucking-believable,” Chris looked at me. “What should we do?”

“We already called wildlife services. I guess we should probably get everyone out of the water.”

“Chris! Jane!” Katie ran up to us. “What’s going on?”

“Katie what the hell does it look like! We found a beached whale.”
“Don’t be a smartass.” Katie took her phone out from her beach bag. “I’m calling Peter, he needs to see this.”

“Don’t forget to call Joey too.”

“He was in the bathroom when I left the house.”

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As far as undoings go, the sex had been the first thing out for us. This was something we know from other couples, that it was the first death null in a long line of indicators. We always said if that ever went south, we would know our expiration date was coming up quickly. But it was different, it was slower and more insidious. The iciness crept into our everyday routine, putting a cool chill between us that somehow made us both further apart, and closer together. We joked about it at first, in that awkward forced way, like somehow if they made light of it, it would make the problem into something malleable something we could deal with like a flat tire or a broken wrist. But that seemed to make it worse. I often found myself trying to trace the exact trajectory of the breakdown, as we often do when something ends or goes terribly wrong.

"Problems in the bedroom?" The infomercial seemed to boom almost comically and suddenly I would have this feeling of being kind of underwater a deafening, hard swallow kind of feeling.

I made a weak joke, something like, "ha, good thing we don't have to deal with erectile dysfunction," and hope she picked up my cue. Maybe if we made light of it, it would somehow disappear, go away, become history.
"Well at least they have pills for that," Mariella said. “Sometimes I think gay relationships are worse. Straight people have it easy or something, you just lie there and take it. Really technically only one person has to be turned on. The other person just has to be like…breathing”

“Yeah, just like, human.” I said, laughing. “Men just constantly exist in a state of being three fourths of the way to having sex with any available outlet.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Yeah,” she looked away.

I felt myself exploding under the pressure of the unsaid, "we don't need pills okay. I just need to get a decent nights sleep sometimes, it's like you don't understand my life, you don't understand I have to be a human in the morning I teach it's not like I sit at a desk all goddamn day and answer a phone.”

This was a long suffering argument between us that I knew was my fault, my own martyrdom sinking another nail in our coffin but I was unwilling to give this inch. Like I wanted her to know, to understand that the language of my body was more than horizontal. That I carried the dirt of the day around long after I came home and showered, and that she would have to break that down if I were to come out for her.

“That’s not my problem” she said.

“Then whose problem is it? It’s ours isn’t it? What do you want? Do you want me to fuck you like a man?”

“Jane, don’t be disgusting.”
“I’m not the one being disgusting, that’s what you’re saying isn’t it? Why don’t you go on your little phone, download one of those apps, and find a nice Spanish guy with a shape-up, I’m sure it wouldn’t be hard.”

“Well, maybe it would be.”

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This area was generally teeming with wildlife; seals, crabs, tiny minnows that would dart around your feet in the water. Mostly we took this as an opportunity to mourn the loss of the wildness on the rest of the eastern seaboard of the United States. Cape Cod had been so miraculously preserved by several government initiatives dating back to the Kennedy days. This was what had kept it pristine, and alive, an original initiative by John F. Kennedy, a Hyannis native, to declare the Cape Cod National Seashore an area protected by federal mandates. This meant that the stretches of beach on either side of the arm of Cape Cod were almost eerily preserved.

Scrub pine lined the sides of the single highway going down the long arm of the peninsula stuck into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Sandy shoulders where the asphalt ended, and tiny clapboard houses one by one appearing with less frequency the more easterly you went. It was as much a time capsule of the past as it was a reminder of man’s present ability to decimate the land. As New Jersey natives, we held a special love and contempt for the sandy shores of Cold Storage Beach. Aside from the shifting sands, it was an exact replica of the rugged beauty that had enticed Christopher Columbus, and later the Pilgrims to settle on the abundant shores of North America. Natural dunes spread so far north and south on the seashore that if walked a few yards in any direction,
you would have no indicator of where you had entered the beach. Unlike New Jersey, whose shores served as a testament to greed, capitalism and the steamroller of real estate moguls consuming any iota of nature in their wake.

We looked at Cape Cod with a sadness, a nostalgia and a love all our own. What would New Jersey look like if they had not built million dollar mansions lining up to the ocean’s door? Casinos and boardwalks and cottages built onto the beach. A blight on the landscape and severed the dunes that functioned as natures fortresses against the fury of the Atlantic. Instead, the peninsula of the Jersey Shore lay unprotected to any means of natural disasters forthcoming. What would the Jersey shore look like? Without the beer cans, the infamous syringes of Sandy Hook and the mansions of the elite climbing over each other on their way into the ocean?

“I bet a whale couldn’t even survive off the Jersey Shore.” Peter had joined us, and Joey was silently standing behind him, snapping pictures on his phone.

“Not unless it was a hybrid whale that could process petroleum waste into fuel.” Chris said to Peter. They had become good friends over the last several years. It didn’t seem to bother him that Katie’s twin was gay, and this was another thing working to his credit. He cared only about making Katie happy, and Chris naturally got along with Peter because of their shared sense of humor, and general fear of making Katie angry. The only thing which could disturb this was the frequent public displays of affection which Peter and Joey had recently begun to engage in. Despite Chris’s liberalism, even he was visibly uncomfortable with the piggy-back rides, long kisses and lingering back rubs of the couple when they were around other people.
“I wish Mariella were here to see this.” Katie looked at me sadly, “she would think this is so cool.”

“Yeah thanks Katie,” I said. “That is really what I needed to hear right now.”

“Well have you talked to her?” Katie was never afraid to ask the toughest questions first.

“No Katie. I haven’t.”

“It’s not cool.” Joey said, from in back of Peter.

“What’s not cool, babe?” Peter rubbed the small of Joey’s back, overtly sexual, tapping his butt with reassurance.

“They said it was cool, that Mariella would think it was cool.” Joey said to Peter, his septum ring flashing in the sunlight. “It’s not cool, it’s a dying animal, we’re watching it fucking die. How can they think that is cool?”

Katie looked exasperated, “you know we can hear you guys right?” she raised one eyebrow and rolled her eyes, the bun on top of her head wagging accusingly at them.

Peter put up his hand to Katie as if to say, I know he’s intolerable, but please just let it go? This was a unique skill set which twins often came pre-programmed with. The ability to anticipate each other’s moves without context, and to most importantly, know when the other would become angry or agitated. This skill often became an object of scrutiny and doubt in board games, and tense situations, when Katie and Peter would find themselves literally capable of communicating wholly without the use of words. In the game of Pictionary one would draw a line, and the other would shot “Snake!” As
children, I also remembered them as having a special kind of language, one reserved for each other and not at all capable of being transposed into ordinary dialogue. It wasn’t that they were not speaking English, it was that the cadence of their words, and the tone of their voices communicated an interiority which the rest of the world was simply not privy to.

Katie blinked a few times and clenched her jaw at Peter, letting him know that while she would let it go, she wasn’t happy with it, nor with Joey, who had now draped himself over Peter and was running his fingers through Peter’s sandy blonde hair.

“Guys, I think it almost got itself free!” Chris gestured wildly at the whale, full of excitement. The feeling in the crowd rose, and there was a palpable air of hope, the mother with the little child was pointing at the whale, and everyone seemed to pause briefly, waiting for the moment where it was swim back out to sea, and everyone could return to the last days of their vacation, forgetting about the ugly scene at the beach and telling it only to friends as a story of triumph.

The whale had managed to somehow free the lower half of its body from the sandbank, and was wildly flapping its tail, thrusting it into and out of the water until it looked like it was almost free. The woman who had been pouring water into its blowhole had waded into the tide again and was calling to the others on the beach to come and help push it. The whale blew water out with a giant huff, and thrashed one more time, scaring the lady and other bystanders back onto the beach. The whale opened its glassy eye and looked at us, blood clouded the water around it and the whale blinked and turned its giant head. Then the movements stopped. And the beach was silent except for the tiny waves
that lapped onto the shoreline.

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“If you love me so much, why won’t you touch me?” Mariella said, a few months after the space between us had frozen like a lake, so thick and shiny you could walk across it while still seeing deep into everything that had once existed below. When she said this I couldn’t help thinking how beautiful she was. How gorgeous and angry like she had inherited her mother’s propensity for violence and when it rose to the surface it was not my Mariella, domesticated by suburban New Jersey, but a Taino Indian calling out from the lush rainforests of the Caribbean.

“Because I just don’t feel like it.” I didn’t look up from my computer. “I just can’t. I’m busy.”

“You’re always fucking busy.” She said, pushing the table away and standing over me, “What is it exactly you’re always too busy with?”

“I have to make lesson plans for tomorrow. Do you understand that if I don’t do this, it’s not like someone’s going to be mad, oh maybe I’ll get an angry e-mail from some administrator? No, I’ll have thirty fucking underprivileged kids sitting in front of me, not learning a goddamn thing because I decided to be selfish.”
“You are fucking selfish.” Mariella reached out and grabbed my hand, placing it on her breast. “Why don’t you like this? Everybody else likes this, today the maintenance guy asked me what time I got off work, ay Papi, I said, I’m not for you.”

“Is that supposed to make me mad? I looked up at her. Wishing we could just keep doing work, and watching television. Roseanne was on in the background, the sepia-toned screen with its afghan-laden couch and boisterous family reminiscent of my childhood, made me feel sick to my stomach to look at.

“It’s supposed to make you want to fuck me,” she said. “It’s supposed to make you want to keep me.”

“Why do you have to talk like that? So vulgar? Just relax. Let’s eat dinner and then go to bed early.

“I’m sorry,” Mariella said, hanging her head in defeat like she was all of a sudden sapped of energy.

“It’s okay.” I gestured to her with open arms, “I’m sorry too, just come here and sit next to me. We’ll talk about this after dinner and figure it out, okay? Please I don’t want you to be upset.” She curled into the crook of my arm, and took the remote to the television.

“Did you really have to talk about the janitor?” I said laughing, trying to break the tension by making light of the fight, “that was kind of a low blow.”

“Well I knew it would make you angry. When I talk about guys it always makes you angry. I just want attention sometimes, okay?” She said, kissing me on the cheek.
“Yeah okay,” I laughed,” ay Papi, let’s order Thai?”

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“It’s not sick, it’s dying.” Mom said, having just arrived at the beach. She lowered her glasses down her nose to look at the spectacle unfolding before us. The police had had caution taped off the whale, which looked utterly ridiculous, as the entire beach had gathered only a few feet from the creature.

“How can you tell?” I asked. “That might not be true Mom, the wildlife people are coming, I think they will just drag it out to sea or something.”

“Jane, it’s dying,” she said. Believe me, I worked with animals for decades. I know when they’re dying. Just look at its eyes.”

They had glazed over with a kind of yellowish-silk, and although the whale was obviously still breathing, it was labored now, and he seemed to have lost the original inertia causing him to thrust his tail.

The most striking part about the whale was its blubber. It looked so out of place in the mid afternoon Cape Cod sun. A shiny, silk skin bobbing in and out of the cloudy waves, two men in khaki shorts had arrived at the beach.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’re from the National Wildlife Fisheries Service and we would just like to say good afternoon to everyone and talk to you a little bit about this situation.”

Peter muttered from a few feet away, “Great, now some asshole is going to tell everyone what we already know.”
“Shutup Peter! We want to know what’s going on!” Katie said and smacked him.

“Ow!” Peter said.

“Don’t hit him!” Joey turned to Katie.

“I’ll hit him anytime I want, he’s my brother.”

“This is an adult Minke whale. They are often seen off the shores of Cape Cod, and have their home in colder water. She seems to have been separated from the pod and found her way to shore. Now, it’s important to understand that most whales actually have no idea what a shore even is. You and I do.” The man said, gesturing to a young boy.

“We know that this is land” he poured some sand into the little boy’s hand, and this” he pointed to the vast ocean, “is sea.”

“Wow they really hired a genius on this one.” Katie said to Chris, who was standing a few feet closer, paying special attention.

Mom had retreated to her beach chair, and was reading Anna Karenina under the umbrella, ignoring the spectacle unfolding just a few feet away.

“But a Minke whale like this one, free to roam the ocean for her entire life, doing nothing but swimming in and out of channels and through the open waters of the Atlantic, she has never known that there is land. So when she first felt the sand, she had no idea that water could end.”

“That’s pretty fucking profound, isn’t it?” Katie said to me.
“Now whenever we see a beached whale, we have to ask ourselves, why here? Why now? Now, this particular whale, she seems to be about entering the last phases of her life. So what happened is whales have this sixth sense almost, they are very intuitive creatures. So she probably felt herself not doing so well, and even though she has never been on shore before, she found where the ocean ends, and swam here so she could rest.”

“Poor whale,” Joey said to Peter, who gently stroked his arm.

“What’s going to happen to it?” Chris asked Katie.

“It’s time for the glue factory for that one” Mom called out from her beach chair.

‘Mom!’ Katie yelled. “That’s a terrible thing to say!”

“I don’t mean to sound insensitive! But it’s just suffering at this point. That’s what we used to say about the horses on the farm. It’s terrible to watch an animal suffer.”

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The grocery store was out of birthday cakes so I bought a Spiderman one instead. I figured Mariella would like it. She had an odd and displaced affinity for superheroes. I called it part of her “teenage boy aesthetic.” This same part of her personality lent itself to playing video games, screaming at the television during sporting events, and listening to grunge alternative music.

“Don’t come home until 6 p.m. okay?” I told her on the phone. “Just make sure you don’t.”
I had cleaned the house, invited over our friends and family, and set up a party in the backyard, stringing Christmas lights from tree branch to tree branch even though it was the middle of May, lighting tikki torches in the backyard. The night was perfect for a surprise party, it was the balmy beginning of summer, but still brisk enough for a fire in the outdoor chimney. The sound of salsa music, and the smell of neighbors grilling hamburgers and hotdogs floated up and down our suburban block.

“I brought the food Mom sent up.” Katie said, as she and Chris unlocked the front door with their own copy of our key.

“I think it’s a meat lasagna.” Chris said.

“Mari loves that doesn’t she?” Katie asked. “Mom says to tell her happy birthday, and sent up this gift.” Katie handed me a small gift bag and card.

“She said to apologize to you, it’s not that much money in the card, we have to be a bit thrifty and save for Cape Cod in a few weeks.”

“Are Peter and Fucking Joey coming?”

“I know Peter is, but I think Fucking Joey is busy tonight, Peter wouldn’t miss it though, he loves Mari,” Katie said.

Slowly, our friends and family came into the house, dropping gifts on the table and pouring themselves drinks. At a few minutes to six o’clock I gathered everyone in the backyard to wait. I heard the door unlatching from inside and called in.

“Hey, I’m in the backyard fixing something! Come outside!”
Mariella opened the door slowly, clearly suspecting something was going on and when she saw everyone a deeply sad smile spread across her face.

“Surprise! Happy Birthday!” Everyone shouted.

As I met Mariella’s gaze, tears gathered in her eyes, and in my own as well, falling silently. We hesitated in that moment, preserving it for the acute sadness that only we could know. An instant later she would make the rounds and kiss everyone on their respective cheeks and thank our family for coming.

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It was a necropsy. This was what you called a whale-autopsy. It had a special name, and that name is meant to imply that it holds a sort of scientific validity. That the purpose of the whale is not human, and has no intention of being so, even in death- the whale is almost spiritual, that it goes on living long after it is deceased because it can be of use. From a mile north of Cold Storage Beach, it was transported to a local laboratory, teased apart like a great mystery of the deep, to solve the problems of the sea. What killed it, how long did it live, what pod did it belong to? What was the exact pathology of its death? In this way, the whale’s suffering somehow seemed justified to all of us, that it had died for a reason accessible to us laymen, that it had died for the greater glory of science and the mysterious exploration of the deepest Atlantic trenches below.