

THE STICKING PLACE

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There's no proof that if I received Porter's email three years ago, or even three months ago, I would have deleted it. That may just be wishful thinking on my part, wanting to see myself as so stalwart and hard. But no question it arrived at a time when I was not quite my usual self.

I'm early to get to the cafe, though I don't understand how; I timed everything so carefully. I sat on a bench in Washington Square until exactly 11:45, figuring it would take twenty-five minutes to cross the Village, yet when I checked my watch on the last block, it was not quite noon. So, I slow down and walk like I'm eighty-five years old. I nearly hunch my shoulders. I think to myself, is this what it will be like to be an old, old woman?

Samz is the name of the cafe, with a Z. I wonder if it's cutesy spelling or someone's last name. I poke my head in the door to check if Porter is inside.

One man who looks about forty sits in the back, and I stare at him, but even twelve years couldn't change Porter that much.

Then I spring back, like there's a force field around the cafe. I refuse to be the first one here. Two storefronts down, a street vendor has set up his folding table.

The table is covered with a cloth. Dark green velvet, opulent. It makes me think of church. It's out of place in SoHo in May, where it's already so hot that looking at velvet makes me sweat.

Did I remember to put on deodorant? Yes.

All morning, no surprise, my head has buzzed. I barely read three pages of my novel in the hour I sat in Washington Square. That was partly the novel's fault. I picked it up on my way out because it fit into my green purse, while the book I was actually reading didn't. At the park I cursed myself for switching books instead of purses, because there was no way a story about some Armenian fisherman was going to hold me, not today. Though to be fair, it's hard to imagine the book that could.

Instead, Porter's email keeps unrolling in my brain. Short, I know it by heart.

Julie (if this is really you),

Forgive the out of the blue message. I've been wanting to contact you for a while— quite some time, actually— and I've at long last “screwed my courage to the sticking place” to do so. Are you ever in New York these days? I will be there for work the last week of May and would very much like to see you. Alternatively, I could meet you— well, just about anywhere. But I'd rather not do this over email. There are things I need to tell you, and it's a conversation best conducted face-to-face.

Love, Porter (and if this isn't Julie, I really am not a lunatic)

Two weeks ago I saw his name in my Inbox and caught my breath. My ears hurt, which is about the strangest physiological effect I can think of: not inside my ears, but the rims.

There was a time, I like to think, that I would have deleted the email without opening it. I have it in me to be very surgical. But now is not that time. And who knows, maybe I'm kidding myself about that prior resolve. Maybe there was never a moment when curiosity, at least, wouldn't have compelled me to hear what he had to say. I had barricades up, granted, but

they weren't very obstructive ones, and the truth is Porter never did try too hard to get through.

The vendor has earrings spread all over the green cloth. I can't remember the last time I wore earrings—it's been at least a year—but they focus my attention in a way the Armenian fisherman failed to do. He's organized them by color. It's all earrings, only earrings. They make rainbow stripes on the cloth. For some reason, the yellow ones grab my eyes. I never wear yellow, but I can't look away from them to the colors I do wear, blue, green, black, and sometimes, when I feel like breaking rules, jarring the eye, red and pink. ("Redheads shouldn't wear shades of red," my mother drilled into me when I first started choosing my clothes, and though I remember red being my favorite color, I listened to her, as I often still do).

"Try some on?" the vendor says. I can't place his accent—West African, maybe. He holds out a hand mirror.

Even as I shake my head, my fingers close on a pair. They are clear butterscotch and square. They remind me of cough drops.

Here are the things I thought when I opened Porter's email:

He has AIDS and wants to warn me in person. That thought almost stopped my heart, before I remembered all the blood tests they do when

you're pregnant. I don't have HIV. So my mind flitted: Okay, he hasn't infected me, but he still has AIDS. He doesn't know whether I've been tested—informing me is the responsible thing to do.

Or, forget AIDS, he has whatever: cancer, a brain tumor—something terminal. And he wants to say good-bye. That seemed less plausible.

Or, he's in some kind of recovery program, and he's ninth-stepping me. I'm on his list of people to make amends to.

But isn't the rule that you only make contact if it will do people more good than harm to hear from you? While I could not characterize it as pleasant (pricking ears, near heart attack), I don't know if my reaction to his email qualifies as harm-inducing. But wouldn't Porter nevertheless assume I was intractably, for life, situated in the "harm" category? I've certainly given him no reason to believe otherwise.

Then I thought: Since when did Porter give a rat's ass about how his actions make me feel?

Or, he wants to get back together. His latest relationship has exploded (big surprise), and in the consequent self-scrutiny (not a guy given to reflection, this one) he thinks about me—The One Who Got Away. I put that epithet in caps because the only way even to consider this possibility is to make

fun of it immediately, by using my most withering and ironic mental voice. My Dorothy Parker internal narrator.

Still, the possibility is unsettling enough that I feel a kind of current again around the rim of my ears, and I must forestall further consideration. So I hold up to the light and pick apart the actual text of his email.

The first earring goes in, though I have to push the wire hard, but the second sticks. Has the hole actually closed? I used to love earrings—I used to wear them every day. I picture a pair of turquoise tear-drops. “They make your eyes so blue.” Who said that? In my head it’s Heather’s voice. I press again, tentatively. I’m less afraid of pain than of bleeding all over this guy’s jewelry.

The text of that email made my internal Dorothy Parker lick her lips: lots to satirize. To begin with: What the fuck is up with the *Macbeth* quote? Does that even make sense contextually? If I remembered right, that’s Lady Macbeth talking, and she’s exhorting Macbeth to kill Duncan. I looked it up to confirm, I have a bunch of the Penguin editions left over from some college Shakespeare class, and I was right. I smirked a bit over this, Porter’s inappropriate allusions. Well, I was always the better student.

I push the earring, hard. It hurts, more sharply than before, but the earring finally pops in. It doesn't slide so much as force through the flesh in a sticky way that makes me think of cutting meat. I touch my ear lobe, trying to be subtle about it, then look at my fingertip. No blood.

There are other, less bitchy, notations I made about that email. It's short but carefully written. He has his commas in the right place—and Porter didn't always pay attention to commas. I remember proofreading briefs for him that were full of comma splices. He's picked his verbs carefully but oddly. "Conducted." There's something formal about that word. It's the kind of diction you'd use in a job application.

"There are things I need to tell you face-to-face" was the first bit to snag my attention, the line that set off that reptile brain chain reaction: AIDS/ Cancer/ Ninth Step/ Regrets Letting Me Go. The phrase that I found myself chewing over that night, lying in my brother's bed, is a different one: The offer to meet me "just about anywhere." Seriously? What if I said Hong Kong or Nairobi? He's full of shit.

But "just about anywhere" ravel in my mind when I email him back twenty-four hours after opening his message. I keep it short. I'm too self-conscious, after my snotty critical scrutiny, to give him much to work with.

I will be in New York Saturday, May 28. I can meet then. Say noon?

Name a place. J

Before sending it, I replaced J with Julie, because J sounds too intimate, and then I cut Julie altogether. He knows who it's from.

What I left out: It so happens I will also be in New York May 27, and 26, and 29, and 30, and, heck, pretty much all of May. Officially, I'm apartment-sitting for my brother Andrew, taking care of his dog while he and his wife, Francine, honeymoon in Portugal. Really, I'm hiding, wound-licking, and trying to figure out what the hell to do about Will. No one has used the word "separation" yet, except my lawyer Joe Lymon, whom I've known since I was eight, and who told me yesterday that I should file for divorce. That is, Joe used the word "separation" only to trump it. ("By no means do I want to interfere, Julie, and I promise not to say anything about this situation to your father, but I must advise you to formalize your separation and file for divorce. It's foolish to subject yourself to further risk.").

I look at myself in the mirror the vendor handed me. The earrings are swinging pieces of candy. For a second I'm pleased. Noticing, he says, "Just

forty-five dollars, ma'am." But the movement of my smile catches my eye, and I'm immediately sorry. It's like seeing your reflection when you're tripping on acid: horrible, but impossible to tear away from.

I process my face, how pale, how drawn; the wrinkles around my eyes, and suddenly, also my mouth. How old I look. Well, at least not fat; after three weeks of fretting and eating the strange dry goods in Andrew's and Francine's pantry—crackers that look like bark, bags of seeds—I must have lost eight pounds. Still, my face is too disturbing, and I hand back the mirror.

"Anything wrong, ma'am?" His accent rounds the ma'am to mom. I pull the earrings out.

The one that was hard to stick in clings, and I think of meat again, of a hook in a fish. Fishing with my father and watching some giant silver thing—a flounder?—thrashing, desperate to breathe; my father ripping the hook from its lip as I cowered behind an ice chest. How old was I? Eleven? The smear of blood on the floor of Uncle Henry's boat.

A hand on my shoulder.

I think, irrationally, that I would recognize the feel of that hand, its precise weight, if I were in a stadium and a thousand people came up quietly behind me and touched me there.

I turn to see Porter. There's an awkward second of looking at each other, and then I quickly look down at his chin, and we hug.

I have a vague sense that the hug wasn't what I scripted. I would have had some other game plan, surely. But none of the possibilities—a handshake? a step backward while crossing my arms in a way that radiates chilly distance?—none of them seem right, and besides, it's over, it's done. "God grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change."

Before I can think, he's leading me to the cafe, his hand still on my shoulder. We stand in line, taking sidelong glances at each other, and I suspect we haven't yet said a word. How strange. He must be thinking the same thing, because he laughs suddenly and says, "Well, hi."

"Hi," I repeat.

It's hard to look at him but hard to look away, like my face in the hand mirror. I could have predicted that Porter would age well. The trick is the bones. His hair is receding on either side of the center point, giving him a sharp widow's peak. In a few years he'll have Jack Nicholson's capital M hairline, but it suits him somehow. He looks—and the thought makes me want to laugh—a bit like Count Dracula.

“You look gorgeous,” he says, and I turn away, because it’s a lie. The mirror image is too present. The last twelve years haven’t treated me as kindly as they’ve treated Porter, which is no fucking fair.

“What am I supposed to order?” I study the baffling menu. It’s written up in chalk on a giant black board, and the decorations are chalked too, tall cups of coffee emitting, like smoke stacks, blue ripples of steam.

“They make the coffee to order, one cup at a time. It’s good. The thing I’ve had before is Canopy of Heaven.” He laughs. “Weird name. Sounds like an erotic massage parlor, doesn’t it?” His face changes. He regrets saying that, I can tell. Why? Because it will remind me of what a dissolute pervert he is? Unlikely that I’m going to forget that fact. For some reason, seeing Porter uneasy makes me feel more composed, undoes the problem of him looking sexy.

I say, “Okay, I’ll have that too,” and when we get to the counter, Porter orders “Two Canopies, large, cream, not too sweet.”

I remember all the times he ordered for me. Menus conflicted him; he wanted to sample everything. Rabbit or lamb? It would send him into a tail-spin. I didn’t much care what I ate, except I drew the line at organs. So we got in the habit of Porter ordering for us both, and we’d trade plates. Think-

ing about that now makes me smile: how symptomatic of Porter, to be incapable of committing to an appetizer. And I thought I was being so flexible, so accommodating. Ha.

“What are you smiling about?”

“Nothing.”

We sit, and I look around. The cafe is shabby-precious. There are wooden tables of all sizes, some as big as dining room tables, some like desks. Ours is the kind of round side table you’d see draped with a doily in a grandma’s living room. There are lamps so pretty I’d want them in my house, those fake Tiffany stained-glass lamps that Will never lets me buy. But there are also lamps with torn shades. The chairs we are sitting on are mustard velvet.

Velvet: fuck.

I look down at my right hand, closed in a fist, and feel the earrings in them, the cold stone warming in my balled hand, the filament of wire. Well, they will have to wait. Under the table, I open my purse.

It’s the loudest zipper in the world. I hate this green purse that holds boring books and contraband and unzips so loudly that Porter is staring at me. It goes straight into the garbage when I get back to Andrew’s. I feel myself blush. I say, “So.”

“So,” he repeats. And then something I’m not expecting: “Hey, did you hear about Geri Rosenblatt?”

“Sure.” Geri was my friend Kevin’s older sister. Dead at forty-one, she had a horrible, fast decline with ALS. The last time I saw her, she was so small and contorted in her wheelchair that she reminded me of a chicken wing.

“I still can’t believe it,” Porter says. “I remember her flying across the monkey bars like Tarzan.”

“I didn’t know you knew her.”

“We went to grade school together.”

Which of course makes sense; Porter is Geri’s age. Was her age.

“Did you go to her funeral?” he says.

“Yes. It was awful.”

“I hear poor Mrs. Rosenblatt was completely destroyed.” He is looking at his hands, turning a salt shaker around and around.

“Well, can you imagine, losing a child?”

Porter’s eyes narrow. “No, I can’t, actually.” And the way he says it, measured, pointed, I’m not sure what he’s saying: if it’s just another convention, more of the how awful! how dreadful! opining; or if he’s saying he him-

self doesn't have children, so he can't imagine the loss; or if he's in fact saying the opposite—that he does have children, therefore the loss is inconceivable in a different way. The way that starts the minute you have a child, when right away your mind plays horrible tricks: I love you so dearly, you small thing, how will I ever protect you from dying? Immediately producing fantasies you repress just as quickly, stomping on awful mental fires.

I look at him, wanting to ask, but resisting because I don't want to answer. We regard each other for a few seconds—it feels longer—and I realize it's the longest I've looked right into his eyes. Dark brown eyes, the feature it's been hardest to extinguish. Sometimes I dream about them, and that's all that happens in the dream: his eyes stare at me. Nothing scary, but I wake up miserable.

"I almost went myself," he says, at last. "And then I thought you might be there and it felt... complicated. Like I would be going partly to see you. Or alternatively, I wouldn't go because I was afraid of seeing you. Anyway, it was confusing, so I didn't go. And the more I've thought about it, the more I've realized it's time to stop being so chickenshit."

I consider his email again. I wonder when Porter started throwing around the word *alternatively*. I'm thinking "complex feelings about a mutu-

al friend's death" wasn't on my speculative list of reasons why Porter, after twelve years, would contact me.

"So I decided it was time." He rotates the salt shaker again. Then he says, "Do you know what the ninth step is?"

I have to laugh. He looks surprised, then smiles.

"I'll take that as a 'yes.' What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing. Just, that one was on my list. For why you wanted to get in touch."

"Really? What else was on the list?"

But I shake my head. "You were saying?"

His smile has deepened. It's a smile I recognize, the flirtatious, putting-on-the-charm one. Now he sobers. "So you know about the ninth step. It's when the person in recovery makes amends to people he harmed through his addiction. Has anyone ever ninth-stepped you?"

"My cousin Serena. You remember Serena?"

"Sure."

"Well, it was pretty silly. She quit drinking three years ago. Even though we've always been close, her drinking never had a negative impact on me. Frankly, I'm not sure I'd call her an alcoholic. It seemed more like she was

going through a stage where she needed to evaluate every last thing and purify herself. Anyway, when she made amends to me it was for all these things that happened when we were kids, way before either of us started drinking. Like I had this pillow I called 'Softy.' One time when I was maybe five and Serena was six, she was mad at me about something. I caught her with Softy in her lap, stroking him. I asked her what she was doing, and she looked at me with really mean, *Bad Seed* eyes, and said, 'I'm smoothing out Softy and making him hard.' That's the kind of thing she brought up: hardening Softy."

Porter is laughing, as I knew he would, and I feel a rush of pleasure that immediately makes me ashamed and suspicious of myself. It reminds me of being on an early date, when you trot out all those scripted stories guaranteed to charm.

"'Making Softy hard'! That also sounds like a naughty massage parlor." His eyes find mine again; I feel pinned. "Well, you know the drill. I make amends to you, for hurting you in ways influenced by my addiction."

I shake my head. "First of all, I don't see how you accomplish that, Porter. I mean, we're not talking pillows. You cheated on me with my best friend. What's supposed to happen here? You say you're sorry, and I say, Oh, no worries? I have to say, the thing that pisses me off about the whole ninth

step ritual is that it functions like a Catholic confessional. Just by copping to something you receive absolution. That strikes me as way too fucking easy.”

Porter studies me. “You’ve gotten tougher, haven’t you?” he says at last.

“It just seems conceptually ridiculous,” I say. “Heather understood. She once said to me explicitly, ‘This is not an apology.’ She knew making one was absurd.”

I stop, because Porter’s face has changed from looking contrite to almost angry. “Heather,” he repeats, and his mouth twists. “Now that you bring her up—”

I’m already shaking my head. “I won’t talk about Heather.”

“That sounds familiar,” he says. I look at him, baffled. He’s turning the salt shaker again. “Okay,” he says, finally. “You said, ‘First of all.’ What’s the ‘Second of all?’”

It takes me a beat to re-orient. “Second of all, isn’t there a rule about the ninth step? You are only supposed to make contact if it will do more good than harm, something like that?”

“Right.” Porter actually looks ashamed. “Well, that’s true. Like I said in my email, I’ve been mulling this for a while, whether I should contact you. Phillip, he’s my sponsor, we’ve had conversation after conversation about it.

On the one hand, you're pretty high up there, frankly you pretty much top the list, of people I owe amends and explanation to. You were the primary victim of my addiction. On the other hand..."

I'm bristling, again, this time about his word choice. "Victim?" I repeat. And then, considering, "Addiction?" It strikes me suddenly that Porter keeps using that word. I haven't heard him say "sober" once. "Wait a minute. What are you supposed to be addicted to?"

He frowns. I guess "supposed to" wasn't particularly diplomatic.

"Oh, don't tell me you're a sex addict!"

I see in his face that I'm pissing him off, but he controls himself, and after a minute even laughs. "Why is that so hard to believe? I expected it to make perfect sense to you."

"Oh my God." Again, anger is a transfusion jolting through me. I know it's a bit unfair to Porter, because this rage over phony addictions is not exclusively about him. "Talk about bullshit concepts! Sex addiction is so indicative of our society, the way we exonerate all kinds of bad behavior and turn deviants into, what was your word, 'victims.' Don't get me started. In fifty years people will laugh about our generation. Really, this Oprah woe-is-me culture will seem ludicrous, and baffling, to our descendants."

Porter's eyebrows raise. "Listen to you, Nancy Reagan," he says. "Just say no,' huh? When did you turn into such a fireball?"

"Okay, let me ask you this," I say. "Do you want to fuck Queen Elizabeth?"

"Queen Elizabeth the First or Queen Elizabeth the Second?"

"The Second. Eighty-whatever-year-old Queen Elizabeth. Because if you want to fuck her, then I'm open to accepting the designation 'sex addict.' Otherwise, I think you're kidding yourself, trying to excuse bad behavior."

Porter smiles, his twisty smile, and shakes his head. "Well. I don't want to fuck Queen Elizabeth in the puffy suit. Now the First, especially if she looked like Cate Blanchett in that movie, different story."

For some reason, we're smiling at each other.

"Look, it's not like I wasn't expecting skepticism, nor the first time I've heard it," Porter says. "But it's simply true, Julie, that sex addiction shares many of the same attributes as other chemical addictions, like narcotics or alcohol, or behavioral addictions, like gambling."

Gambling: my face clenches. If Porter notices, he ignores it. He's ticking things off. "You feel out of control. You behave self-destructively and irra-

tionally, acting against your better judgment. You do anything for a ‘fix.’ You hit bottom. Want me to tell you about hitting bottom?”

Part of me does. Part wants the whole seamy story. I want to know why my perfect boyfriend chopped up my heart in so many bits that, twelve years later, I still feel like some Frankenstein creature, hanging together with sutures and glue. But part of me doesn’t want Porter humanized. I don’t want to feel sorry for him.

There are different roads that could lead to, and one, I feel, looking into his magnet eyes, is a hotel room. I am entirely aware that when I got dressed this morning, I put on my most flattering dress, morning glory blue, the one that people say makes my eyes so bright. I have never before or since had the kind of chemistry with anyone that I had with Porter.

“Not really,” I say.

Porter looks disappointed, but concedes. “Well, you’ll have to take my word for it, Julie. I hear the skepticism...”

He reminds me of our couples therapist, Dr. Sheffold, and the drill he makes Will and me do: “What I hear Julie saying is that my gambling makes her feel anxious and insecure.” My response: “No, Will, your handing our life savings to bookies in Vegas and getting us into debt for who knows how

many years makes me want to kill you!” Sheffold, cutting in: “Julie, please articulate your frustration in a less hostile way.” When did Porter start talking the therapy talk? It’s as strange on him as the commas and the adverbs and the nonsense *Macbeth* quoting. It’s as if he’s in drag.

“I hear the skepticism, I truly do. But don’t any of those behaviors sound familiar to you? Don’t you know any addicts? I mean, aside from the pillow smoother?”

“Of course,” I say. “There’s my father, remember?”

Porter nods. “Right, the Dewar’s. Did he ever get sober?”

“No, he refuses to think that he has a problem.”

And the truth is I’ve never suggested he does, though it becomes clearer over the years that Dad’s drinking is not just contextual, being part of the highball generation. Andrew tried to talk to him about it once, and Dad blew up. To James Howe, alcoholics sprawl on sidewalks holding brown paper bags. He bristles at the concept of “highly functioning alcoholic” at least as intensely as I bristle at “sex addict.” “I happen to like the taste of wine!” he snapped at Andrew, who, telling me the story later, said, “Less coherent a line when applied to vodka shots, no?”

“And there’s Will,” I add, then stop.

Porter looks at me. I'd forgotten how intense his gaze is. Or, rather, remembered but muted it. It's like being caught in a laser beam.

"Hold that thought, Julie. I'm going to the bathroom."

When he leaves, I try to compose myself. Porter has no clue, of course, how steeped I've been recently in twelve-step jargon. While staying at Andrew's, I've gone to half a dozen Al-Anon meetings. There's one in Park Slope that centers on gambling, but that's far away and a pretty esoteric specialty. For all the shit I've been giving Porter, I recognize the universality of the recovery rubric. Yet it rubs me the wrong way. Or rather, my response is conflicted. Sitting in my metal folding chair in a church basement that smells like a basketball court, I feel the serenity prayer course through me like wine: "God grant me the courage..." Yet removed from it, my empathy falls away. I'm walking rage again.

Yesterday that rage walked me right over to Joe Lymon's office. And I admire Joe's straight shooting. "Look, Julie," he said to me, "those marriage vows mean what they say. Have you ever really listened to them? 'For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer.' Your condition is inextricably tied to Will's."

I remember when Will and I first opened a joint account, the banker, a round-faced Latin guy who thought he was hilarious, encapsulated the pros and cons of the joint account. “On the plus side, if Will suddenly has a heart attack you have money, Julie. On the minus side, you can clean him out and run off to Atlantic City.” At the time, we laughed about the prospect of a heart attack representing a “plus side.”

Joe Lymon, again: “Of course, divorce is an efficient solution to that inextricable tie...”

It pisses me off how clueless I was about Will’s gambling. Oh, I knew about his weekly poker game because we’d host sometimes. I want to smack myself when I think about buying triple-cream cheeses for it. But I had no idea about the horses, or basketball, or the \$34,000 he lost over the weekend of Spencer Carbondale’s bachelor party (and fuck Spence for having a bachelor party in Vegas. I bet I’m not the only wife cursing him).

I was brain-dead clueless until I tried to figure out if we could afford in vitro (\$14,000 a shot, 25% chance that the embryo will take: a form of gambling in itself), and started looking through our financial statements three months ago.

Sometimes I think all the pressure to get pregnant over the past two years is responsible, in a way I intuit more than forgive, for Will's compulsion. All that unsexy timed sex and the ovulation kits and sperm counting and peeing on sticks and, since I turned thirty-six a year ago, the up-the-ante talk about fertility treatments.

And there's the confusing way it makes us play double roles. In the doctor's office, my being a mother is an optimistic finding: I've gotten pregnant "successfully" in the past, so I should be able to do so again. Of course, I was twenty-six then, and it strikes me that I first started feeling old when made to regard my ovaries that way. "As an older woman," Dr. Preminger characterized me, and I was startled. *What? Me?*

Socially, however, I'm childless. Not really; all my good friends know about the twins. But I learned a long time ago not to out myself at cocktail parties as a mother, because the follow-up questions stung too much. "Oh, you have daughters? Oh, they don't live with you?" Judgmental face. "Do they live with their father?" And, after I said, "No, they are with my ex-girlfriend," the inevitable, "I see...", the raised eyebrows, the awkward, "Excuse me, I need to get another drink." I made Will understand, finally, that

there was no point having such conversations until people had already made up their minds about the kind of person I was.

I didn't tell Will himself, after all, until our fourth date, which he talks about ruefully: "By then, you'd hooked me." But I remember the way even his face changed, and the way I had to explain—oh, it sometimes feels like I had to explain my whole life. And how he was relieved, how his face re-composed, when I said I would like another child. Maybe because he wanted children himself someday, but maybe also because he could regard me as not, after all, unnatural: this woman who left her children, who sees them only a couple of times a year. If I were a less shitty mother, would I have gotten pregnant by now? I wonder if Will asks himself my question.

Porter returns. "So," he says, sitting back in his chair. "Who's Will?"

"My husband."

"I figured." He's rotating the salt shaker again. I look at his hands. I could swear he was wearing a wedding ring before, but now he's not. I look more carefully and see a paler stripe of skin around that finger. Could he have removed his ring, just now in the bathroom? And why would he? I picture again some hotel room, Porter behind me, unzipping my blue dress.

"Are you married?"

His mouth twists. “What’s the Facebook characterization? ‘It’s complicated?’”

“I don’t know. I’m not on Facebook.”

“Actually, I knew you weren’t. I looked for you a while ago.” The flirtatious smile again. “You should succumb. Then you can see pictures of my kids.”

That jolts me. “You have kids?”

“Two. Callum is five, Maggie is three.”

“Maggie? For Margaret?”

“Short for Magnolia, actually.” He laughs at my expression. “It was her mother’s choice, I was iffy. Yeah, I remember how opinionated you always were about names.”

“I like Callum,” I say, and he laughs again.

“Thanks for the thumb’s up, baby name police.”

This conversation seems so strange: I never imagined being this civil. Back when Heather and I were living in Hanover, after the babies were born, I occasionally used to see this guy we called the Porter Clone who looked like Porter, especially from the back. Something about the set of his shoulders. I saw him at the butcher, on the Dartmouth campus, once at a park

where we were picnicking with our moms' group. And my reptile reflex was always flight. Of course it made no sense for Porter to be in Hanover. But I liked to rehearse what I'd do if I ever ran into Porter, and these fantasies constellated around my eyes. I'd give him some freezing look. Or I'd just look through him, like he was smoke. I never imagined speaking to him—just silently delivering the message that he was invisible.

“The reason I asked is because I have a Margaret,” I say, finally.

His face changes. It becomes chillier. “But you don't call her Maggie, do you?” he says.

How strange: my ears are pricking again. “What?”

“She's Mamie, right?”

I stare. Porter fans his fingers on the table top, regards them, then looks back up at me. “And she has a twin, correct? Her sister is Viva?”

“Correct.” He sounds like he's deposing me.

“How—?”

“I met them once.”

I'm racing, trying to understand. When the girls were with my parents in Newport? That would make sense. But surely they would tell me if they

ran into Porter. Unless, for some misguided reason, they were trying to protect me?

“How?” I repeat.

“When they were babies,” he says. “I bumped into Heather once, just before Thanksgiving. Didn’t she tell you?” I stare, bewildered. His mouth is a sharp line. “Interesting. How old are they? Ten now?”

I can’t make my mouth work. I nod.

“I gather they live with Heather.”

It’s a statement, not a question. How does he know? Well, of course there are any number of ways he could know, once he started asking questions.

I feel flooded again, not with anger this time but shame. I’m horrified, for reasons that don’t fully make sense to me. I’m scattered pieces that need reassembly. Porter’s the one who Done Me Wrong. He’s the one with the hat extended. So why do I feel like the deviant, the one being judged? A word shapes in my mind, like a bubble, and pops: *unnatural*.

“Julie,” he says, and his voice is softer. I feel like a penitent. What I want, and the irony of it strikes hard—it’s shattering—is some kind of absolution.

Hail Mary Mother of God. Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change.

He says, “There’s one thing I need to know,” and I look up, but his face doesn’t match his voice. It’s grim. “So when we were together, when we were a couple,” he begins, and even though I know what he’s going to ask just before he says it, I still can’t quite absorb the question. “Were you sleeping with Heather?”

I have felt angry over this last half hour, but it’s the first time my anger is purely focused on Porter, rather than a spillover of other things, like my resentment of Will. Which is strange, because for all these years I’ve thought of myself as so firmly set against Porter, so furious with him, but also so baffled by him. Suddenly he feels as recognizable—and as ugly—as my face in the hand mirror.

My voice, when I respond, is acid. “No, Porter. Remember? That was you.”

It’s like I’ve stuck a pin in a balloon. He recoils, he deflates, and I see on his face the horror and shame I must have been projecting seconds ago. It’s like someone hit a rewind button, except now it’s a film of Porter, not me.

“Julie, I’m sorry,” he says, but I’m already disentangling my purse from the chair back and standing up.

“Forget it, Porter.” It sounds, when I say it, much less like forgiveness than a final judgment. Before he can stand, I’m out the door.

I move fast, fast, because I don’t want him following me. I half-run back to Andrew’s apartment. My sandals click, click, click on the sidewalk. I can feel the blister popping up on my left heel. Stupid shoes, stupid purse, but I won’t slow down. The whole conversation replays in my head as I move, and it’s only on this mental review that I process well, he did after all, and at the eleventh hour, sneak in an apology.

Strange to know that I am not, after all, angry at Porter, any more than I was angry at him when he was telling me that sex addict bullshit. Strange, though hardly surprising, to know who the real target is, at this moment, of my loathing.

It’s only when I’m at the door and scrabbling in my purse that my fingers close, in place of keys, on the butterscotch earrings. I stare at them like they are tea leaves, like they might tell me something I could use.

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