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FIRST PERSON PLURAL
SHORT STORIES

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FIRST PERSON PLURAL

JUSTIN LAZOR

ABSTRACT

I decided to title this collection *First Person Plural* after observing that one of the most prominent motifs common among these stories concerns the instability and multiplicity of identity. Horror is one of the traditions that most influences my writing, particularly the claustrophobic psychological horror of writers like Edgar Allen Poe. I mainly deploy the tropes of horror in an effort to destabilize my characters' inner and outer realities. Another important influence on my writing has been that brand of fiction which exists within the liminal space between horror and realism, such as Dan Chaon's collection *Stay Awake*, *Bringing Out the Dead* by Joe Connelly and Joyce Carol Oates's "Where is Here?" That's the realm where some of my stories exist, where the metaphors of horror collapse on themselves and reveal what they're designed to represent and conceal. As a writer, one of my goals/challenges is to make clichés less cliché, to find new ways of telling familiar stories and invent conventions for telling unfamiliar ones. For each story in this collection, I attempted to identify and employ whichever conventions promised to best help me tell it in an unconventional and hopefully more effective way.

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INTRODUCTION

I decided to title this collection *First Person Plural* after observing that one of the most prominent motifs common among these stories concerns the instability and multiplicity of identity. That this should be a particular preoccupation of mine comes as little surprise to me, as my mother has long suffered from (among other diagnoses) Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). I will not dwell long on autobiography, as that is not the purpose of this introduction, but I believe a few words on that subject are necessary to properly contextualize the following work. When I was seven-years-old, my maternal grandfather died, and shortly thereafter my mom began to rapidly decompensate and require psychiatric care. A large and diverse cast of alters emerged from what had previously seemed to be her stable personality, as she now presented herself as a different person one day to the next, sometimes even one minute to the next.

This chaotic environment consequently affected a destabilization of my own sense of identity and reality. I often felt that what I was experiencing couldn't be real, that the chaos around me must be a manifestation of what I was feeling and not the other way around. And this sense of unreality was further exacerbated by the fact that her clinicians were reluctant to diagnose her with something as infinitesimally rare as DID. You see,

most psychologists believe in DID the same way most people believe in God. Most people believe that God exists, but are reluctant to believe any evidence that confirms that belief. If someone claims to have spoken directly with god, they tend to think he/she is either lying or crazy. Likewise, when my mom presented symptoms of DID, most doctors concluded that she was either faking it or suffering from some other, more common, mental illness, such as schizophrenia. They would assure me that what I was experiencing on a daily basis wasn't really happening, which did little to reassure me of my own sanity.

Two of my primary coping mechanisms at that time were reading and writing. I read a lot of Stephen King. His work resonated with my life, and I became more and more fascinated with the metaphorical nature of horror, the way that metaphor is deployed to render such stories both more and less frightening than the horrors of real life. Take the novel *It* for example: The story is more frightening because it contains a child-killing supernatural creature, but it's also less frightening because said creature operates within an identifiable system of rules. Pennywise can be defeated, whereas childhood trauma, for which he serves as a metaphorical representation, is much more insidious and enduring. By consolidating and personifying the ineffable horrors of growing up, King transformed them into something that was simultaneously more acutely horrifying but also more surmountable. Following his example, I began to write stories aimed at translating my own experience into a manageable system of metaphors.

Tragically, all of these fledgling efforts have been lost to posterity (irony intended).

Horror is still one of the traditions that most influences my writing, particularly the claustrophobic psychological horror of writers like Edgar Allen Poe. I mainly deploy

the tropes of horror in an effort to destabilize my characters' inner and outer realities. "Intersection" is the one story in this collection that conforms most to the conventional confines of the genre, as it depicts a character whose sense of identity is so disassociated from reality that he feels himself trapped within the delusional space of his internal reality. The narrative is so deeply imbedded within his disturbed psyche that the reader is forced to occupy this deranged fantasy world of his, in which his social isolation is a product of an oppressive, dystopian world rather than that of the dysfunctional psychology that leads him to create such a masochistic headspace. This story is mostly inspired by Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Zombie*, as I take her deep dive into the intellect of a psychopath one step further by completely divorcing the narrative from external reality.

The story "Interior. Hospital Room. Day." can be viewed as a semi-comic and inverted re-imagining of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." Whereas in Poe's story, the narrator's guilt causes him to imagine an external sign of it (i.e., the beating of his victim's heart under the floorboards), my character's lack of appropriate affect upon his mother's death renders him so guilt-stricken that he goes to great lengths to manifest an outward sign of the grief he needs to feel. I originally thought about titling the story "The Tell-Tale Tears," but I figured that would probably be too on-the-nose.

With "Symmetry," I draw upon Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to tell a story about a character who is, in a different way, dependent upon an external representation of herself. "Underground Parking Garage" is a story that deconstructs both the tropes of horror as well as the psychology of human fear, as it probes the boundary between rational fear and paranoia. And my story "First Person Plural" is partially indebted to Charlotte Perkin Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," as it gradually

grows more claustrophobic and surreal as my character struggles within the confines of (romantic) commitment.

Another important influence on my writing has been that brand of fiction which exists within the liminal space between horror and realism, such as Dan Chaon's collection *Stay Awake, Bringing Out the Dead* by Joe Connelly and Joyce Carol Oates's "Where is Here?" That's the realm where some of my stories exist, where the metaphors of horror collapse on themselves and reveal what they're designed to represent and conceal. I once asked Dan Chaon what he thought the effect was of his technique of blurring the line between the metaphorical content of horror and the real life phenomena it represents. He replied by making an analogy about movies and the difference between special effects and atmospherics, which I interpreted as meaning something along the lines of the idea that the monster is scarier before you see it. I think this is a partial answer. I think the rest of it has to do with our reliance on the safety of metaphorical interference, the way in which they are able to, as I mentioned before, turn the chaos of reality into something concrete over which we can exert agency. If Pennywise were to become self-consciously metaphorical, then the rules that allow for his defeat would become destabilized. The more the metaphorical converges with reality, the more uncanny and unsettling it becomes.

My writing also operates partially within the tradition of domestic realism. The works of such writers as Raymond Carver, Andre Dubus and Tobias Wolf (just to name a few) have been influential, as my writing is principally concerned with deeply flawed characters in dysfunctional relationships. What distinguishes me from most writers in this tradition, however, is my use of cross-genre experimentation. With "Interior.

Hospital Room. Day,” I not only infuse the story with elements of psychological horror, in the form of a close-third narration that forces the reader to occupy the claustrophobic space of my character’s obsessional thoughts, but I also cross over into screenwriting in order to reflect the mindset and coping strategy of my character (who is a screenwriter). And in the story “Witness,” I deploy the conventions of the children’s genre of “Choose Your Own Adventure” stories in an ironic way to offer commentary on the disjointed relationship between that genre and what is often the lived experience of childhood. That story also owes a debt to the self-consciously autobiographical creative nonfiction of such writers as Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace. While my story is a work of fiction (inspired to some extent by my life), its style seeks to imitate the more informative discourse of nonfiction and thereby blur the line between the two genres, just as the boundaries of reality are blurred for the characters in that story.

In terms of experimentation, I’ve been influenced by writers such as Italo Calvino, Charlie Kaufman and George Saunders. Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* and Kaufman’s “Adaptation” have inspired the metafictional technique of “Witness.” And George Saunders’s defiance of convention, such as his trademark passive protagonists, has emboldened me to take such storytelling risks as writing a “Choose Your Own Adventure Story” in which there are no meaningful choices.

As a writer, one of my goals/challenges is to make clichés less cliché, to find new ways of telling familiar stories and invent conventions for telling unfamiliar ones. One of the criticisms leveled against psychoanalysis is that, in the end, the patient never really overcomes her symptoms, her defense mechanisms, she just identifies with them. (This is particularly true of DID, in which identification *is* the primary defense mechanism.) I

think a similar process happens with writing. We create conventions to help us tell stories, conventions which are really just literary defense mechanisms against what Ken Liu calls the “irreducibly random and senseless” logic of real life. They allow us to translate that chaos into a coherent narrative. Eventually, however, we begin to identify more with the conventions than with the story they’re trying to tell. For example, we no longer think of Dissociative Identity Disorder as a rare psychological disorder, but rather as the once cool and now cliché twist at the end of so many movies and novels. One of the things I try to do is repurpose conventions to demystify them and lay bare their artificiality and usefulness.

For each story in this collection, I attempted to identify and employ whichever conventions promised to best help me tell it in an unconventional and hopefully more effective way. In “Witness,” I have the narrator address his younger self as a separate character in order to duplicate the process of dissociation that led to his mother’s Dissociative Identity Disorder. Through this parallel, I attempt to remove DID from the realm of the cliché and show that it is ultimately just an extreme example of the multiplicity of identity inherent in the human condition. In “First Person Plural,” I use horror, surrealism and absurdism to literalize the sensation of losing one’s identity and autonomy within a committed relationship. My story “Interior. Hospital Room. Day.” presents a character who tries to script his emotional response to reveal how people in general often operate by performing pre-conditioned emotional scripts. In “Symmetry,” my character seeks solace in a Photoshopped picture of herself, serving as an example of how people attempt to cultivate an ideal self and control how they are perceived by both themselves and others. The uncertain nature of the power that this image exerts over her

serves to both cast her into existential limbo and render the genre of her story as nebulous as her sense of identity. And “Inertia” is a story about a girl going through adolescence, that time when one’s sense of identity begins to emerge as something seemingly separate from the confines of childhood dependence. The narrative depicts both her struggle to master the titular scientific principle as well as how said law of physics manifests itself within her thought process concerning a momentary decision that might ultimately prove fateful in regards to the development of her sense of self. The story ultimately raises the question of how much control we have over our own identities versus the external forces that shape and control us in a manner similar to the ways that inanimate objects yield to the influence of immutable scientific law.

FIRST PERSON PLURAL

The nightmares begin shortly after she breaks off her engagement.

“Nightmares” are what she calls them, even though she knows that’s not really the right word. If she’s truly honest with herself—which is something she tries her best to avoid as much as possible lately—she has to admit they’re more like happy endings. “Happy” is of course a relative, subjective concept, and in this case, from her perspective, it applies only in the most widely accepted sense. Every night, when she falls asleep, she finds herself trapped in a version of her future that’s claustrophobically fulfilling, a hellish vision of everything she’s never known she’s always wanted. Every morning, when she wakes up, she slaps herself across the face and pulls out her hair in clumps and claws at her legs and takes a scalding hot shower and watches internet videos of natural disasters and starving orphans, with bloated bellies and protruding ribcages, anything to break the spell of contentment that’s threatening to suffocate her soul.

The reason she broke off her engagement was largely semantic. It was an act of desperation following a barely perceptible yet very real escalation in her use of first

person plural pronouns. It was a radical excision in response to the realization that all of her “I, me, my and mines” were rapidly metastasizing into “we, us, our and ours-es.”

The first inescapably noticeable symptom of her diseased diction presented itself while she and her fiancé were making a shopping list one Saturday afternoon. She was rummaging through the cramped kitchen of their apartment, taking stock of all they were lacking, while he sat at their tiny table, jotting down necessities in that hypnotically elegant handwriting of his, the same handwriting that had composed the poems and stories and finally the letters that had made her fall in love with him back in those fateful creative writing workshops during her long ago college days, now five years past.

Or had it? She sometimes wondered if this was just a lie she told herself. Or, if it wasn't an outright falsehood, then it was perhaps, at the very least, a romantically revisionist history of their relationship. For, there were moments, however fleeting and repressed, when she would become absolutely uncertain if it wasn't his handwriting itself with which she had fallen in love. It always seemed too crazy for her to put into words, but she was convinced, however vaguely, that the lines and loops and dots that came from his pen somehow transcended the mere representational power of words, that the alchemy of the ink soaking into the paper conjured up a purer, realer version of whatever he wrote. Although she would deny it if anyone ever asked (and why would one?), she had once caught herself just as she was about to lick a piece of paper on which he had written the words “ice cream,” after the most intense flavor of rocky road had filled her mouth upon reading them. The page was a mere inch from her outstretched tongue when she finally regained herself, balled it up and threw it directly down the garbage shoot in the hall of their building. His penmanship possessed a power over her that she couldn't

consistently deny or characterize. She loved it almost as much as she feared it would take away all her hopes and dreams and make them unbearably real.

And so, as she opened each cupboard and looked for the empty spaces left by the things that were no longer there, she was also preternaturally aware of each stroke of his pen on the piece of paper she would do her absolute best never to lay eyes upon. “Raisin bran...sugar...olive oil...tea—both green and black...honey...” She opened the fridge, the door of which cut the small room into two unequal halves. “We’re almost out of milk...eggs...O.J...we need cheese cubes if we want them for the pasta salad...”

“How are we on toilet paper?” he said.

“We’re okay, but we could use some soap.” She examined a half-empty bag of slimy lettuce and threw it in the trash. “We also need lettuce.”

“Bar or liquid?”

“Both, actually.” She closed the fridge and stood there for a moment, thinking. “Oh, and we’re almost out of tampons.”

Her fiancé didn’t say anything about her pronoun gaff. He simply wrote down “tampons,” inscribing it into the list with such an exactitude of pen strokes that, if she were to look at it (which she wouldn’t), she was almost entirely convinced that a box of Tampax—a very unique one, influenced by her pronoun choice—would’ve popped out of the page, tumbled off the table and landed at her feet.

Nonetheless, the word “we’re” hung in the air between them like an echo that kept getting softer but never completely fell silent.

The sound of it would continue to haunt the quieter moments of the rest of her life.

After that, she would always shudder whenever she caught herself falling into the first person plural. Then she would shudder again, thinking of all the times she had no doubt done so without even realizing it.

“Drop by *our* apartment.”

“*We’d* love to.”

“It’s from *us*.”

“*We* decided on Soft Asparagus for *our* bedroom walls. It just felt the most *us*.”

As a failed writer turned editor, she knew the power of words. And soon enough, her pronouns, like some black magic incantation, began to exert their dominion over her. Lying in bed at night, wide awake, her fiancé holding her, surrounded by their Soft Asparagus walls, she would feel the boundaries of herself grow blurry and ill-defined. The respective temperatures of their bodies, which always seemed to be diametrically opposed at the moment of getting into bed together, with hers being cold and shivery and his almost scalding hot at first touch, would gradually blend into a dull, anesthetizing warmth. She would feel his heat invading her chilly skin, replacing the exhilaration that came from losing body heat to the leaching air with the narcotic numbness of incubating warmth. Eventually, she would no longer feel like her body was her own. She would instead begin to conceive herself to be like some involuntarily parasitic growth upon him, like a tumor or a fetus. She would try to sense the exact point where he ended and she began, the place where their skin was touching. She would imagine all the bacteria and other microorganisms swimming in the sweat between their bodies, leaving him and entering her and vice versa, the two of them constituting one superorganism, one

interconnected microbiome, the boundary between them as permeable and symbolic as lines on a map. Inevitably, at some point during the lonely, overcrowded night, she would become absolutely convinced that their flesh had melded together, and she would spend endless, terrified hours lying completely still, breathing in shallow, cautious breaths, afraid that one false move might cause a fatal tear in their conjoined body.

During sex, she would often think of her previous boyfriends and other miscellaneous lovers in an effort to prevent herself from reaching orgasm. Too often, it would happen in a matter of seconds. He would barely push into her, and she would find herself grabbing hold of him for support and moaning like a woman in labor. It was completely against her will. It felt like a violation, a possession. It didn't even feel like sex, not like how she used to know it, that messy, haphazard, awkward jumble of bodies, that clumsy trial-and-error search for the right angle and rhythm. With her fiancé, it didn't even seem like a biological process. It was inhumanly efficient, like pushing a button. It was like he knew the password to her body and could operate it at will.

One night, she suggested that they try listening to a little mood music. He agreed, and so she got out her phone and found the theme song to "Schindler's List" on YouTube.

"A little counterproductive, no?" he said, as the melancholy notes filled their boudoir.

His erection wilted right on cue.

"Looks like our walls aren't the only ones with soft asparagus tonight," she said, not realizing how vicious it sounded until after she had said it.

He apologized profusely and kissed her. He then reached under the sheets and started touching her. And before she could even transfer the word “stop” from her brain to her mouth, she was climaxing harder than she could ever remember, all the while thinking about that scene when Liam Neeson sees the girl in the red coat on the wagon of corpses.

There were times, of course, when she was inclined to bring her thinking in line with how she felt, moments when she would close her eyes and try to conjure up the good times, back when the power of his penmanship seemed like a blessing more than a curse. She would think about how, back in college, he would write the word “love” in the margin of her notebooks, and she would feel her heart swell until it was big enough to accommodate not only every hurt she had ever personally felt, but the combined sorrow of the human race, how she would feel The Crusades, The Holocaust and all the world’s wars, not to mention every individual rape, murder and heartbreak, subsumed in the cursive of that single word.

She would try to remember how, when her father died, her fiancé wrote her a posthumous letter from him, apologizing for all the excesses and omissions he had committed against both her and her mother, and assuring her that he had always, in his heart of hearts, loved her in the proper measure. She would try to remember how that letter helped her grieve and find closure, how his words helped to workshop and revise all the moments in her past that had hung open like wounds that would never heal. She would occasionally retrieve his counterfeit confession from the left side of her bra, where she sometimes still kept it, next to her heart, and reread it, trying to rediscover the version of herself that had believed it to be authentic. But it inevitably turned to dust in her

hands, the words warped and moldered, instead recalling all the things they had attempted to reconcile. One day, she finally burnt the letter with an ashtray and lighter she had bought expressly for that purpose. When her fiancé asked her what she had done, she told him she was taking up smoking for the health hazards. He simply sighed in response, having known the truth even before asking the question.

There was a time when she believed she could save her fiancé. She offered to type up his manuscripts, translate his supernatural scrawl into a form that publishers might find acceptable. He was initially resistant to the idea, but then she reminded him of how their workshop teachers in college had always refused his handwritten submissions, even though he had spent weeks painstakingly copying and recopying them by hand for the entire class.

“No one wants the human touch,” she would tell him. “They want mechanical precision. They want impersonal conformity. They want to be able to skim your words and not have to pay attention to every detail, every line, loop and dot.”

Finally, he relented, and she went to work. She tried her best to preserve the power of his words. She experimented with every font, from Arial to Yu Mincho Light. She spent most of their savings on reams of all the best paper stocks. At one point, she even had her fiancé write directly on the screen of her laptop with a stylus, hoping that the analytical genius of its circuitry would be able to translate his handwriting into just the right typographical representation. But it was all for naught. She began to feel more and more like an abortionist, as the end of every day found her surrounded by the crumpled-up carcasses of all her fruitless efforts to bring the life of her fiancé’s words into the world. She would put the two versions side-by-side, his original manuscript next

to her typed and printed version of the same. They were identical in every way. The words, sentences and paragraphs all faithfully transcribed. But somehow her version lacked the fecundity of his. It was just a bunch of words joined together by grammar, devoid of meaning or feeling. She would get to the end of it and have no idea what she had just read. Reading his manuscript, on the other hand, was like emerging from Plato's allegorical cave and seeing the world for the first time.

Eventually, she forsook her vain and barren pursuit. She burned all the hardcopy evidence of her labors and erased all the related computer files. And then, for good measure, she smashed her laptop to bits with a hammer, unable to sleep with the idea of data remanence weighing on her mind. And with that she gave up on the idea of her fiancé as a writer and, with it, the idea of her as his wife.

Shortly thereafter, she began to notice the disease plaguing her pronouns. She tried her best to cure it with exacting specificity.

"I'm gonna go lie down on my half of...the bed."

"Do you know how much money is in...the checking account that you and I share?"

"Are you still planning on inviting your least favorite cousin to the wedding scheduled to take place between you and I?"

Her fiancé didn't so much as blink at any of these sudden idiosyncrasies. It was as if he knew exactly what she was struggling with, which of course only made her resent him all the more.

Every time she came home, the apartment seemed smaller than before. It seemed like she couldn't escape him. She would leave him in the living room, only to find him waiting for her in the bedroom. She would turn on the light in the bathroom, only to find him sitting on the toilet, reading the newspaper. She would get in the shower, only to find him cleaning the grout between the tiles. Every day she would walk each room from one end to the other, and every day it took her fewer steps to do so. Every day she would reach for the ceiling, and every day it seemed like her fingertips were closer to touching it.

Their apartment wasn't the only thing that was shrinking. She knew it was crazy to think this, but she swore her fiancé was a little bit shorter each day. She searched her memories. When they first met in college, he had stood a full head and shoulders taller than her, right? He was at least six-two to her five-six. Now, when she wore heels, they seemed to be on equal standing. And there were times when she swore she could look down at the thinning patch of hair on the crown of his head.

She constantly felt like she was stuck somewhere between being awake and dreaming. She would fall asleep in her bed and wake up at the office, sitting at her desk, her hands at work on her keyboard, typing, midsentence.

A spider ran across her hands, causing her to involuntarily recoil and fling her arms out away from her body, a motion that sent the arachnid flying into the mess of books and papers that surrounded her desk like a literary mote. She tried to determine exactly where the little bastard had landed, so she could root him out and exterminate him, but to no avail. She'd always hated spiders, ever since one of her classmates in third grade, a disagreeable little shit of a little boy named Oscar, had told her that, when spider

eggs hatch, the little baby spiders devour their mother's dead body before leaving their nest. She wasn't even sure if Oscar's morbid little fun fact was true. Considering the source, it very well might not have been. But she had never had the heart to google it and find out for certain, and therefore persisted in her prejudice against spiders as if it were.

Her thoughts were interrupted, as she became aware that her boss was knocking on her open door, one of those courtesy knocks that are used to simultaneously get one's attention and respect boundaries.

"Hey, Melissa. Got a minute?" he said.

She hesitated a moment, not entirely sure he was talking to her, even though she was the only person in the room, he was looking right at her and calling her by name. The most ridiculous question went through her mind: Had her name been Melissa before that moment?

She felt a delicate sweat break out across her back and under her breasts. She blinked her eyes hard and shook her head, trying to shake the feeling of unreality.

"No? I can come back," he said.

"No. I just... Now's fine."

"I wanted to talk to you about the McDaniel's book." He leaned against the doorframe, as men often do when they want to both seem casual and block your means of egress.

"I'm almost done with it."

"He said you sent it to him."

"Did I?"

"He said, and I quote, you turned it into a fucking haiku."

She looked down at the screen of her computer, at what she had just been typing before she had been interrupted, first by the spider incident and then her boss's knocking, and read it aloud:

“Well, you know how defensive writers can be. Never wanting to make the hard cuts. Overreacting. I'm sure...”

That was the end of what she'd written.

“You're sure of what?”

She just shook her head.

Her boss pulled out his phone and read something off of it.

“The bitch broke my heart. I wrote a book about it. This is my bitch book.”

“Bitch book? Did he mean: This is my book, bitch? Wait? Is he saying I broke his heart or...”

“No. He didn't say that. That was the haiku you sent him.”

“Oh. Wow,” she said, shaking her head. “That's embarrassing. It's not even a very good haiku. I mean, the syllables are right, I think.” She counted the syllables on her fingers. “But the essence of a good haiku is having, like, two images juxtaposed together with the cutting word in between. That was just like a summary. An accurate summary, but not much of a haiku.”

“Are you okay?” he said, tilting his head down the way people do when they're asking if you're okay.

She could feel that her armpits were now soaked and that sweat was welling up on her scalp, threatening to start dripping down her face. And so, she accordingly unbuttoned the top button of her blouse.

“Yeah. I’ve just been feeling...out of sorts lately.” She unbuttoned another button. “Have you ever felt like your life was infected with minimalism or something? Like every word you say is a rope, and you’re tying them to the walls around you and pulling them nearer to you every time you speak?”

He regarded her for a long moment, his eyes briefly straying down to her chest and then returning to her face. She looked down and saw that she had unbuttoned her blouse all the way down to her bra. She hastily redid a few of the buttons.

“You should come to the range with me sometime.”

“The what?”

He made a gun with his thumb and forefinger.

“Oh. I don’t like guns. You know. Chekhov and all.”

“Fuck Chekhov. It’s a great way to blow off steam.”

When she got home, she had to stoop down and turn sideways to fit through the door, which she could only open halfway before it smacked into the wall.

Her fiancé was sitting at the dining room table. He had a pile of at least a half dozen chair pads under him and his feet weren’t touching the floor. He turned to her, gave her a boyish grin and then returned his attention to her laptop, which was open in front of him.

She thought back to her boss knocking on her open door.

“What are *you* doing with *my* computer?”

“I just wanted to see what you’ve been writing lately.”

“I don’t write anymore. *You* know that.”

“Writers are always writing. I saw that you’ve been writing a lot of emails to your boss,” he said with an air of nonchalant suspicion, the tone of voice that people use when they’re accusing you of something but are afraid to do so.

“Those are private.”

“What’s that smell?”

“Gun powder. *I* was at the shooting range.”

“But you hate guns.” He turned to her with an expression of childlike dejection, his eyes big and watery, his bottom lip quivering slightly, as if she’d just told him there’s no Santa Clause. “You know. Chekhov and all.”

“Fuck Chekhov.”

“I think the two of you are having an affair.”

“There are no two of *me*. Be precise when *you’re* talking to *me*. *You’re* a writer after all. *I’m* not having an affair. *I* just fuck *him* from time to time. We—*I* mean *he* and *I* go to the range after work sometimes and then *he* and *I* go to this little motel and fuck. *His* penis in *my* vagina. That’s all.”

“How long?”

“*I* don’t know. It varies. However long it takes *him* to come.”

“I mean how long has this been going on?”

“Oh.” She tried to remember, but her memories didn’t seem to be sequential anymore. It was if they were all built on top of one another, like new cities on the ruins of older ones. She felt like an archeologist attempting to reconstruct some semblance of a timeline from artifacts. The contraction she had noticed in her apartment and fiancé was evidently affecting her mind as well. Or maybe it was the other way around.

She thought back to the motel room, to lying on the bed, her naked back on the worn and dirty comforter, letting her mind drift while her boss was on top of her, inside her, going about his business, which had very little to do with her. Her body was an unsolvable puzzle to him. Every touch was wrong. She savored the pure mechanics of the act. The pushing in and pulling back. She thought about engines, pneumatic cylinders, expanding gas and the transference of energy. She thought about electric sockets and USB ports. All the separate parts that could be interchanged. An electric plug doesn't care which socket you plug it into. An engine doesn't miss a broken part that gets replaced. It was such a liberating feeling to know that he didn't really care if she was enjoying herself as much as he was. He recognized and respected the physical form of her, her separateness, her otherness. He enjoyed her body and left her everything else. There was no them. There was just him and her.

“*His* semen is inside *me* right now.” She looked at her fiancé’s face as she said this, waiting to see how his devastation would manifest itself. His mouth got smaller. His eyes grew bigger. His cheeks were pink and chubby. He was almost a baby again. “And *I* stopped taking *my* birth control.”

“Why?”

“So that if *I* get pregnant, neither *you* nor *I* will know who the father is.”

“We’ll raise it as our own regardless. I love you. I’ll love anything you create.”

“Goddammit...” She wanted to call him by name, but couldn’t think of it.

“There is no *we*. There is no *our*. *You* need to leave. *I* fucked another man. *You’re* heartbroken. That’s how this goes. Pack up all *your* stuff and leave.”

“I don’t have anything.”

“What are *you* talking about?”

“I don’t have anything. Everything is ours.”

“What about *your* clothes?”

“I don’t have any clothes.”

“*You’re* wearing clothes right now. *You* have drawers of clothes in *your* portion of the dresser. *You* have clothes hanging in the closet.”

“No I don’t.”

Exasperated, she stormed off to the bedroom and began rummaging through all the drawers of their dresser. They were all filled with only her clothes. She couldn’t find anything of his, not even a pair of underwear or a stray sock. She threw open the closet, rifled through all the blouses and dresses hanging in there.

When she returned to the dining room, her fiancé was still sitting at the table, but now he was completely naked.

“Get out!” she roared loud enough to vibrate the china of their upstairs neighbor.

High atop his pile of pads, her fiancé looked, with terrified eyes, over the edge of the chair at the floor far below. He reached out for her with both arms.

“Help me!”

She sighed and then picked him up off the chair and placed him gently on the floor. He hugged her legs, hanging on tenaciously as she tried to wiggle him off.

“*You* need to leave.”

“But I wuv you.”

“*I* love *you* too. But *I’ll* love *you* even more once *you’re* gone. Let go.”

He finally released her legs and looked up at her, his expression an exaggerated pout obviously meant to pull at her heartstrings.

She opened the door and gestured for him to leave. After a moment of reluctance, he put his head down and toddled out. On the other side, he turned around and looked up at her expectantly, as if he thought she would relent and invite him back inside. Instead, she closed and locked the door.

She went over to the window and watched him leave the building and slowly walk down the street, a naked toddler in the big world.

And now is when the nightmares begin. Every night, she goes to sleep and lives through the future that she aborted with her engagement. At their wedding, her mother walks her down the aisle, the two of them having cried when they decided on the idea, which struck them as being as obvious as it was epiphanic, when it simultaneously occurred to the both of them as they were dress shopping. She and her ex-fiancé can't help laughing through their vows, as they both feel overwhelmed by the absurdity of it all, the archaic ceremony being staged just for them, the on-cue emotionality of their friends and families, the preposterous beauty of it all. And when she dances the first dance with her ex-fiancé-turned-husband, she feels a solidity to him that she finds deeply reassuring. It's as if his very physicality makes hers possible. She tries to imagine the scene without him, everyone watching her as she turns around and around by herself, like the little pop-up ballerina in the music box she never had as a little girl, but she just can't picture it. She feels herself need him. Then she gets pregnant on their wedding night. Well, she can't be entirely certain of the exact timing, but it makes for a good story,

anyhow. And when she holds her daughter for the very first time, the tiny baby that was only moments earlier a part of her, she cries tears of joy and realizes that clichés don't feel so cliché when you're living through them. Then her ex-fiancé-turned-husband gets a job teaching high school English, specifically requesting to teach remedial classes at the worst performing school in the area. He writes passages from Shakespeare across the blackboard and then watches as a look of unexpected and overwhelming comprehension spreads throughout the classroom. Finally, his handwriting serves a purpose, as most of his students, who were once deemed hopeless, graduate and go to college. They buy a modest house in a modest suburb. Then she gets pregnant again, and after a difficult pregnancy and many weeks of mandatory bedrest, she miscarries, waking one night to find the telltale pool of blood on the sheets, another cliché that doesn't feel like one. She's of course devastated at first, but eventually she comes to realize that this tragedy makes her appreciate both her daughter and the son to come later even more. She balances her career with motherhood, enjoying and exceling at each on its own terms, in her own way. When her children eventually go off to college, she has few regrets and embraces the next stage of her life with renewed vigor. She returns to writing and publishes a novel with a rival house. It's about a woman who, when she goes to sleep, dreams of an alternate version of her life where she keeps the child she aborted when she was young and scared. The book is a modest failure, being described in reviews as sentimental and unfeminist, but when she looks at it sitting on the bookshelf in her study, she feels a sense of peace and completeness. Eventually, after spending a few years as the head of the publishing house she's worked for all her career, she retires. She tries to persuade her ex-fiancé-turned-husband to follow suit, but he tells her he can't imagine

giving up the satisfaction he gets from teaching. And so, they spend the summers travelling together, and she spends the rest of the year writing books she will never publish and travelling alone. She spends one winter in the Caribbean, where she has a brief affair with a much younger man. She knows from the beginning it won't last long, and she never tells her ex-fiancé-turned-husband about it or regrets it. When she gets back home, she puts it in a corner of her mind and leaves it there, knowing where to find it should she ever choose to do so. Shortly before he turns eighty, her ex-fiancé-turned-husband suffers a stroke and loses the ability to use his right hand, his writing hand. He becomes distant after that, spending most days sitting at the dining room table, trying to write with his left hand. After a mercifully brief interlude, he dies. She doesn't remarry. She goes on a few dates that her friends set her up on, but nothing comes of them. She just doesn't feel the need for any of that anymore. She spends the rest of her days writing and watching her grandchildren grow up. Then one morning, she simply doesn't wake up.

And this is when she always wakes up, in her apartment, in the life that she chose, the life she's been away from for so long, as the dream always seems to take place in real time. When she wakes each morning, she feels as if she's been asleep for almost sixty years. The first thing she does every morning is go to the bathroom mirror, check her reflection, reassure herself that she didn't literally sleep her life away. The face that looks back at her, crusty-eyed and panic-stricken, is always the same one she had when she went to sleep the previous night, having aged only seven to eight hours. She's always shocked by how young she looks, as she had been nearing ninety only a minute earlier. She moves around tentatively, awkwardly, no longer used to having joints with their full

range of motion and no pain. She searches in vain for her dentures, only to remember that she still has all her teeth. She picks up the phone and starts dialing the number for the daughter she never had. She goes to the pharmacy down the street and tries to pick up a refill of the heart medicine she doesn't take. At work, she struggles to remember what she was working on yesterday, forgets the names of her coworkers. When her boss kisses her, she recoils in indignation, not remembering that they're actively having an affair.

Every night, she spends more than twice as long in the world of the dream as she's actually been alive. And the effect accumulates night after night. After only a week, she's been living her imaginary future for over 300 years, all of the same events reoccurring and reinforcing themselves until they feel far more real than her waking life. She tries to stay awake, washing down trucker speed with energy drinks and coffee. She's able to stay up for a couple days straight, but eventually she's overcome with exhaustion. She asks her boss if he knows where she can get some coke or meth. He laughs and then tells her he knows how to get her high, sticking out his tongue suggestively.

She quickly becomes convinced that her ex-fiancé is somehow the cause of her aberrant dreaming. He must have written that future for her. She must have read it. She tries to remember when and where, but she can't. She comes to the logically paranoid conclusion that he must've slipped it to her subconsciously. Maybe he wrote it down, took a picture of it and then programmed her laptop to flash it every so often as a subliminal message. Or maybe he used phosphorescent paint to write it on the walls of her bedroom, making it so faint that she can only see it out of the corners of her eyes.

The center of the visual field is the least sensitive to light. She remembers learning that in biology class. That's why, when you're looking up at the stars, the fainter ones seem to disappear when you try to look directly at them.

She calls off work and repaints her bedroom, but the dreams continue.

She begins to suspect that her ex-fiancé is coming into her apartment while she's sleeping at night, maybe whispering in her ear, messing with her clocks, altering the space-time continuum. She tries to remember if he took his keys with him when he left. He was naked and a toddler, but did he have keys in his little hand? Or maybe he put them in his mouth; babies are always doing that. She buys several spy cameras and sets them up around the apartment. She uses night vision mode to record while she's sleeping.

The next morning, after living through another sixty years of her other life, she looks at the footage. She scrolls through the night, feeling like she's in one of those found footage horror movies, half expecting a ghost or a demon to photobomb her sleep selfie.

What she does see is even more horrifying. She watches the green, infrared footage in disbelief, as she sees a baby enter her bedroom, crawling across the ceiling, down the wall and finally onto her bed. She covers her mouth in horror, as she watches the baby crawl on top of her chest, pull up her shirt and begin to suckle. A faint but contented smile forms on her sleeping face. She slams her laptop shut and screams until her throat gives out on her.

She goes to work and asks to borrow one of her boss's guns.

“What for?”

“Protection. My ex.”

“I could come over.”

“No. I just need a gun. For peace of mind.”

“Why is your voice so hoarse?”

“I had a phone fight. With the ex.”

He looks her up and down, scrutinizing her very closely. She suddenly realizes that she didn't shower or even change. The only thing between her bare butt and the world is the bottom of her sleepshirt.

“Please. I haven't been able to sleep at night.”

After she lets him fuck her on his desk, he finally agrees.

“Remember to aim center mass.”

Lying in bed, awake and in wait, she holds the gun under her pillow and listens carefully to every sound. Her heart is beating in her ears. Her stomach is churning nervously, causing her to let out little burps every so often. She's never been so terrified in her life, which she knows is preposterous. After all, she spent all those nights lying in bed, praying that she wouldn't miscarry, only to finally wake to the horror of all that blood—No, that didn't actually happen, she reminds herself. But she's lived through it so many times, each time feeling like the first. She can't go back there again. One way or another, this gun is going to—

She hears it coming now, the soft, eurythmic thudding of its hands and knees against the ceiling, as it crawls towards her. She squeezes her eyes shut and tightens her grip on the gun. She listens as it accelerates across the ceiling, pauses as it negotiates the

transition to the wall and finally plops down next to her on the bed. As the mattress bounces slightly under her, she uses all her will power to suppress a scream. She waits until it's just about to crawl on top of her and then, in one fluid motion, jumps up into a sitting position and aims the gun.

She expects it to either turn and run or attack her, but it instead just offers her a big, amused smile and makes a little cooing sound.

“Stay away from me or I’ll shoot!”

Her hands are shaking, causing the barrel of the gun to jump around.

It laughs and starts crawling towards her, reaching for the gun with an eager little hand. It touches the barrel, one of its fingers slipping inside for a moment.

She pulls the hammer back as she starts to cry.

It crawls closer still, takes the barrel in both its hands and guides it into its mouth, chewing on the cold metal with its toothless gums.

Without any premeditation, she yanks the gun away from it and throws it on the floor. She winces, half expecting it to fire from the impact, but it doesn't.

The baby starts to cry. She's not sure if she hurt him when she pulled the gun out of his mouth or if he's just upset that she took away his new toy.

“Come here,” she says.

She takes the baby into her arms. He immediately quiets down and begins pawing at her breasts. She pulls up her shirt and guides her nipple into his already sucking mouth. As she nurses him, he begins to regress even further, shrinking down to a newborn. His hair retracts into his scalp, his nails into his tiny fingers and toes. He continues to diminish, his skin gradually growing translucent. She can see his miniature

heart beating in his chest, the blood coursing through his veins. His features become indistinct, as he turns into a fetus and then an embryo. Now she can hold him in the palm of her hand, now on the tip of her finger. He's stopped nursing because he no longer has a mouth. She watches as he continues to shrink down until he completely disappears. She looks closely at her finger. Even though she can't see him, she knows he's still there. She can feel him, like a tiny tingle.

She licks her finger.

Tonight she doesn't have the dream. And in the morning, she wakes refreshed and free, confident for the first time in a long time that her life is real, that it's hers.

At work, she greets everyone by name and finishes editing the McDaniel book by lunch. Her boss asks her if she wants to go grab a bite, and as they're eating, she tells him that she wants to end their affair. She doesn't tell him the whole truth, that she's realized she was only having sex with him to hurt her ex-fiancé-turned-husband-turned-baby-turned-fetus-turned-embryo-turned-zygote-turned-midnight-snack and thereby ruin/save her life. She just tells him that she's afraid their personal relationship will eventually interfere with their working one. He takes it reasonably well, having already decided to start fucking his new intern.

Back at the office, while in the process of writing an email to McDaniel, apologizing for her unsolicited haiku, she suddenly finds herself doubled over, depositing the half-digested remnants of her chicken salad sandwich in the wastebasket next to her desk.

Looking down at the mess, she sighs and then laughs.

Still bent over the wastebasket, she stops laughing when something under her desk catches her attention out of the corner of her eye. It's a small, white glob, almost like a wad of gum but not quite. She squints her eyes and leans in closer, trying to identify it. It appears to be a little white sack made of some sort of fibrous material. There's a hole in it, as if it ruptured or something, and it looks to be hollow inside.

She puzzles over it a moment, wiping the vomit from her mouth with a tissue, and then she remembers the spider.

INTERSECTION

It's just after noon, but the sun is trapped behind a dense layer of clouds, leaving the city in a flat, grey gloom.

Walking towards the designated intersection, the groom can feel the winter wind tearing at his face and seeping inside the oversized, well-worn coat they made him put on over his ceremonial garments: an ostentatious ensemble of striking black and white contrast called a "tuxedo."

Despite the cold, his heart is pumping a nervous sweat from his armpits down to where the waistband of his pants holds his shirt against his skin, as he fails to silence the many doubts he's been busy inventing during the past weeks.

He's afraid she'll look like a corpse, a frozen, blue corpse on their wedding day.

Cursing himself, he regrets not waiting for a summer date.

A secret so shameful and damning he's never allowed himself to even think about it except late at night when no one could see it light up his eyes in the dark, he's always imagined his bride like those mythical creatures in the old pictures, a white "dress" floating around her legs, her face painted like a picture, her tan neck shining with perspiration.

He's always longed for the smell of "perfume" mixed with sweat, a salty bouquet of flowers and pheromones. (Or at least that's what he imagined it would smell like, based on his studies.)

Inhaling sharply, he feels the rattle of his head cold and tastes the mucus running down the back of his throat.

He looks up at the tall, neglected buildings surrounding him. They seem to arch over the street, their roofs meeting and their shadows adding to the gloom.

All the animals, the city's inheritors, are hibernating in these ruins, leaving him as the only living creature in a vacuum of desperate silence, broken only by the unbearably loud whistle of his breathing and the violence of his dress shoes crunching through the snow.

He lets out a sigh which turns into a cough.

He's always been so damned impatient.

He closes his eyes for a moment and tries in vain to calm himself, knowing that, if he can't get his emotions and impulses under control, his wedding will quickly become his funeral.

Now the ceremony begins.

From around a corner, she appears some twenty yards ahead of him.

His lungs begin to ache, as his pulse and his stride quicken.

Her figure is well-camouflaged by the thick, amorphous coat they put on her over her gown. Her hair is hidden underneath a woolen cap.

As they grow nearer to one another, he can see that her face is a raw shade of red from the cold. If she's wearing any "make-up," and he doubts she is, it's quite invisible against the inflamed canvas of her wind-burnt cheeks and chapped lips.

At least she's not blue.

He assesses that she's not an unattractive specimen, if one can make such a judgment after seeing so little from so far away. She is, of course, merely a faint shadow of those veritable goddesses he studied in history class, but then again he knows that embellishment is an essential component of mythology. Nothing can ever be trusted to be as good as it's remembered to be.

As far as personality is concerned, he's worked that part out long in advance. He simply projects onto her everything he wants and needs, a feeling of warmth and security that has forever lingered in the space before his earliest memories, a feeling he's always felt an irrepressible need to return to, a feeling he's determined to find within her.

After a moment straining his imagination, it's settled.

She's something.

She's enough.

She's perfect.

A few seconds later, he notices that she's wearing boots.

They're brown and waterlogged.

They're big and rugged and masculine.

He's glad for this.

At least he'll be spared the agony of having to watch her struggle along in "high-heels."

On some level, he knows this to be a lie.

On some level, he would much rather see her fall and break her face than miss the opportunity to see a woman in real women's shoes.

But he's determined to be content.

He'll make the most of this.

She's perfect.

As they reach their respective sides of the intersection and begin crossing, he catches sight of something on her upper lip.

He squints and strains his eyes, trying to identify it.

What is it?

A splotch of sloppily applied "lipstick" perhaps?

Do her lips look so chapped because they're painted red?

He tries his best to make himself believe this comforting explanation, even as the true answer grows more and more apparent, as the red spot in question grows larger and larger in his field of vision until it seems as oppressive as a scorching summer sun.

With only five feet left between them, denial suddenly gives way to a crippling seizure of panic.

It's a pimple!

A horrible, red pimple is standing out from her red face like a fleshy volcano.

He stares helplessly at its inflamed base and hard, white head.

He starts sweating profusely, his temples throbbing, as if worms or other such agents of corruption are attempting to burrow their way out of his skull.

They could've covered it with makeup!

They could've camouflaged it like they have almost every other inch of her flesh!

With all he's sacrificed, with all he's been denied, they could've granted him this one...

To look...

An unprecedented flush of rage makes his veins burn and his skin prickle.

He's been deceived!

She's *not* perfect!

She's corrupt!

She's defective!

She...

He suddenly realizes he's staring down an empty street.

They've passed each other already.

He walked past her without looking at her, without smelling her, without feeling her body move past his.

He missed his own marriage.

Crazy with desperation, he turns and runs after her as fast as he can.

He will touch her.

It's forbidden.

It's punishable by violence and death.

But, if he's to be denied everything else, then he'll at least have that much.

It'll be something.

It'll be enough.

It'll be per—

They're on him before he's taken more than three steps, their camouflaged forms emerging from the shadows and the snow as if the very landscape is coming to life to stop him.

He can feel the impact of their blows against his arms, legs, ribs and skull. He can feel the weight of their boots as they crush his bones and grind his flesh into the pavement.

The pain is unbearable.

He hopes it will last forever.

With his cheek half-buried in the reddening snow, he watches as she walks away.

She doesn't look back.

She doesn't hesitate.

Out the back of her cap, though, hangs a lock of loose, brown hair, swaying to the rhythm of her step.

He continues to stare at it until blood runs in his eyes and his brain stops.

UNDERGROUND PARKING GARAGE

An arm shoots through the narrow gap between the elevator doors just before they close. Startled, she looks up from her phone and watches as a man she doesn't know comes in. She makes eye contact with him for a split second before darting her eyes back to the screen of her phone.

The man notices her startled expression. He looks at the button panel and sees that GL is already lit up.

She waits for him to push a button for a different floor. When he doesn't, she thinks about pushing another one, getting off on the wrong floor, waiting a few minutes and then going back down. But she's being ridiculous, right? This isn't a horror movie, though the whole arm shooting between the doors trope made it feel that way for a second. The only thing that was missing was her frantically pounding on the door-close button and then taking a premature sigh of relief when they started to do so. But he was probably just trying to catch the elevator. That's the most rational assumption, right? Her stomach contracts as she watches the bars quickly disappear from her phone's signal status as they descend underground.

She feels like he's starting at her, but when she steals a glance over at him, she sees that he isn't. He has his eyes fixed on the floor-indicator panel above the doors, which has become so dingy it barely serves its purpose anymore. She sizes him up out of the corner of her eye. He's dressed business casual, has a well-groomed beard, no obviously suspicious characteristics. But does that really prove anything? What would be an obviously suspicious characteristic? A ski mask? Latex gloves? A t-shirt that says "serial killer" across the front? She spontaneously recalls something she read online a while ago, an article that claimed that nearly half of all women are the victims of some form of sexual assault during their lifetimes. She was shocked when she read that, felt amazed and grateful that she had thus far evaded such a pervasive threat. But what if her luck is about to run out? This guy seems normal, but unless there is a small subset of prolifically pervy men, then the statistics seem to indicate that even normal guys have close to a 50-50 chance of being dangerous.

She wishes he would take out his phone, check his messages or his Facebook, play Tetris or something. Granted, he probably doesn't have a signal either, but he could at least fake it, like she has the decency to do. There's something comforting about seeing strangers play with their phones. It's a sign of normalcy. It's as if they're not really there.

He can feel the tension coming off of her in waves, which in turn makes him feel uneasy. He reaches into his pocket for his phone but then remembers the battery's dead. He considers taking it out and pretending to do something with it. But if she notices it's not really on, the ruse will just make matters worse. He thinks about smiling at her, but what if it comes across creepy instead of reassuring. After all, there's nothing more

unnerving than the inscrutable smile of a stranger. Plus, if he were going to smile, he should've done it right as he was getting in the elevator. The time for smiling is past. He wishes he were the sort of person who could nonchalantly defuse these types of situations. Some people can do that so easily. He can imagine some other guy saying something like "just so you know, I'm not a serial killer" with so much natural charm that all the suffocating awkwardness would melt away into easy laughter. That guy might even end up getting a drink with her or something. But he knows if he were to try saying something like that, he would have pepper spray in his eyes before he could even finish his sentence.

The elevator comes to a stop and the doors open, revealing the dark and vacant environ of the underground parking garage, a setting that seems to have been specifically designed to mainline primal fear into the human brain. There's even a blinking light right outside the elevator to render the ambiance complete. Dark, light, dark, light, as if it's serving as a symbol for the tenuous line between safety and danger, the known and the unknown. Neither of them move at first, and then they both start at the same time. He holds out his arm, gesturing for her to go first, and then immediately regrets it. Now he has to follow her.

He walks slowly, allowing a somewhat comfortable gap to develop between them, hoping that she'll appreciate the effort he's making to appear nonthreatening. He tells himself that he's being such a gentleman—nay, a hero, a protector for this damsel who's in distress because of his presence.

She hears his footsteps echoing behind her, a sound which, along with the hum of the fluorescent lights, calls to mind the standardized soundtrack that she's heard in so

many similar scenes in so many movies, all of which now seem to have been foreshadowing this very moment. She pulls her car keys out of her pocket, her thumb gently caressing the panic button. She regrets never having bought a can of pepper spray, as one of her friends once suggested. She can hear her heart thumping in her ears. She can feel the nervous electricity of fight-or-flight energy humming through her nerves.

As they round a corner, first her and then him, they each see to their mutual chagrin that their cars, the only two left in the garage, are parked right next to one another.

They both start to panic. She starts walking faster, almost breaking into a trot. He slows down even more.

When she gets to her car, she looks back over her shoulder, as discretely as she can, to see how close behind her he is.

He notices her frightened glance in his direction and, without thinking, stops in his tracks.

The sight of him just standing there, staring in her general direction, is somehow even more unnerving than his approach. What's he doing? Why isn't he moving? What does he want?

He watches as she gets in her car, counting the seconds till this ordeal will come to an end.

Her hands are shaking so badly she has difficulty lining up her key with the ignition slot. As soon as the engine turns over, she throws the gear shift into reverse and backs out of her spot, all the while afraid that, in her nervous state, she might cut her wheels too soon and clip the fender of his car. That would be decidedly bad. Would she

then have to get back out of her car and exchange insurance info with this potential psycho? Could she plead fear as a sufficient defense on a hit-skip charge?

As she drives past him, he keeps his eyes fixed on the ground, a gesture she finds singularly creepy.

She resolves to stop at the first gas station she comes across and buy a can of pepper spray.

Once she's gone, he gets in his car and drives home, thinking that in the future he should probably just wait for the next elevator.

SYMMETRY

Back when she was a teenager, Lisa learned how to make herself disappear. She would lock herself in the bathroom and stare at her reflection in the mirror until it gradually faded away. The key, she discovered, was to keep her eyes very still, allow them the time to form a perfect, overlapping negative afterimage. First the details would fade away, her face giving way to a blank canvas, and then, if she was patient enough, she'd eventually find herself completely gone.

Tonight, Lisa finds herself sitting at the kitchen table with her family, staring at the dirty dishes, the sauce-splattered remnants of the spaghetti dinner she made, when her younger daughter, Emily, hands her a crayon portrait titled "my butifulest mommy."

"Do you like it?" Emily asks, before she even lets go of the paper.

Lisa looks at the drawing, at the jumble of black squiggles that represents her hair, at the mismatched blue circles of her eyes, which are standing right next to each other, near the top of the purple oval of her face. She looks at the crooked half-moon of her mouth, containing two square teeth. She feels her brow begin to furrow, and so she makes an effort to smile instead.

“I love it,” she says, with the forced sincerity that she fears doesn’t come as naturally to her as it does to her children’s classmates’ mothers.

“Hold it up,” Emily says, her little face bright and eager. “Hold it next to your face, so we can guess which one is the real you.”

Lisa follows her daughter’s instructions.

“Why did you make her face purple?” Lisa’s older daughter, Katie, says, her voice sharp with her ten-year-old sense of superiority.

“Because purple is the most beautifulest color.”

“Beautifulest isn’t a word,” Katie says, rolling her eyes, a gesture she recently picked up somewhere and is beginning to use towards her sister with increasing regularity. “You’re supposed to say most beautiful. And mommy’s face isn’t purple.”

“It is to me.”

“It is not. You can’t just make things how you want them.”

“Yes, I can.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Come on girls,” their father, Matt, finally says. “Let’s try to at least pretend like we’re civilized young ladies while we’re at the dinner table.”

“You first!” Emily says, pointing at him across the table.

“Well, I don’t mind if I do,” he says, picking up his glass of water and taking a dainty, little sip, his pinky finger sticking out and pointing at the ceiling.

Both girls laugh hysterically. After a moment, though, Katie regains her composure and rolls her eyes instead. Lisa realizes she’s still holding the drawing next to her face, and so she lowers it to the table, face down.

“No!” Emily protests. “Hold it up! Everyone has to guess which one is you.”

Lisa suppresses a sigh and then holds the picture back up.

“Smile,” Emily says. “Like in the picture.”

Lisa forces an awkward smile, feeling as if her mouth is a crooked half-moon filled with two square teeth.

“And don’t forget to turn your face purple,” Katie says, rolling her eyes again.

“You better watch out,” Matt says to Katie. “If you keep rolling your eyes so hard, they’re gonna get stuck up there, and all you’ll be able to see for the rest of your life is your brain.”

“And there’s not much to see,” Emily says.

Matt laughs.

“Dad!” Katie protests.

“That’s not a very nice thing to say, Emily,” Matt says, still chuckling. “But good one.”

“Dad!” Katie says again.

“What?” Matt says. “Lighten up and learn to take a joke, sweet heart. You’re only ten years old. Stop taking yourself so seriously and enjoy your childhood while it lasts.”

Still holding the drawing and her smile, Lisa feels separate from the drama playing out before her, as if she’s become just another homemade decoration to be hung on the fridge. If she tries to move, she might instead tear like paper.

“Now, come on,” Emily says with giddy seriousness, bouncing up and down on her padded booster seat. “You first, daddy. Which one is the real mommy?”

Matt looks at his wife with mock scrutiny, narrowing his eyes and tapping his chin with his finger. After a moment, he gives the same regard to the portrait.

“Hold on a second,” he says. “I need to put on my glasses.”

As Matt goes over to the coat closet, Lisa imagines crumpling the picture into a ball and shooting it across the room into the trash. She sees Emily’s eyes, wide with shock and disbelief, following the paper ball as it makes a perfect arc across the kitchen, over Katie’s head, past the stove and into the bag. She imagines Emily’s head turning back, in slow motion, her cute little face dropping and her eyes beginning to fill with tears that then, one by one, follow the curves of her cheeks down to the cleft chin she inherited from Lisa.

This imaginative indulgence fills Lisa with first satisfaction and then guilt. She knows her responses are all wrong. She knows she should stop taking herself so seriously and enjoy motherhood while it lasts. She wishes she could be like Matt, so natural and joyful with the kids, nothing like the moody poet he was when they met in college. She looks at her daughters and sees the lines of symmetry running across the table, one mirroring Matt onto Emily and the other mirroring herself onto Katie. But Katie is just going through a phase, right? She’s just entering the awkward part of growing up, of finding herself. Or maybe she’s been corrupted by Lisa’s influence. Maybe it’s only a matter of time until she ruins Emily as well.

Lisa’s always thought that she, herself, would eventually change, that something would happen that would allow her to become someone else, the final, complete version of herself. She thought college would do that. She thought marrying Matt would do that to her. She thought motherhood would remake her in its own image. From each of these

cocoons, however, she's always emerged unchanged. And long after everyone around her has flown off, she's continued to inch along the ground, just waiting for the shadow of a footstep.

Matt looms over her for a second before sitting back down in his chair. His glasses perched on the very tip of his nose, he leans in uncomfortably close to her face, like a museum patron who thinks the ropes around the paintings are just for everyone else. His breath is hot and pungent. As her eyes begin to water, she realizes she put too much garlic in the spaghetti sauce.

"Man, this is a tough one," he says, with a flourish of spittle that lands on her cheek and lips. "The resemblance is uncanny. If I have to hazard a guess...I guess I'll have to go with the one on the right." He gestures to the crayon drawing. "I think that's the real mommy."

He leans back, and Lisa takes a deep breath.

"How about you, Katie?" he says, turning his gaze from mother to daughter. "What do you think?"

"Can I just be excused?"

"Nope. We're having some family time right now. Take a guess." He leans towards Katie and looks at her over the top of his glasses. "Choose wisely or ixnay on the ettypray ittlelay iarslay."

"You talk like an alien, daddy," Emily says, giggling obliviously.

"Maybe I am one," he says with a playfully devious grin, a grin that immediately falls flat as he turns back to Katie. "So, my dear, what's your final answer?"

“The one on the right is obviously mommy,” Katie says in a pronounced monotone.

“Good enough,” Matt says. “So, my little Rembrandt, how did we do?”

Emily smiles so wide Lisa half expects her cheeks to tear open.

“You’re both wrong,” Emily says, bouncing up and down with almost violent enthusiasm. “That’s my drawing. And that...that’s mommy.”

“What?!” Matt says, throwing his hands up and looking around the table in disbelief. “You sure had me fooled. This is a real masterpiece you made there. You know, sweet heart, your mom used to be an artist too. You must get your talent from her.”

“What do you mean used to be?” Lisa says.

Everyone turns to her with surprise, as if they’d all forgotten she was there.

A weird, fleeting thought flies into Lisa’s mind, like a moth towards a bug light. Maybe she did disappear for a moment there. Maybe she blended in with the wallpaper. Maybe Emily’s drawing cancelled her out, rendered her redundant in the scheme of the universe. Maybe if she holds perfectly still and stays perfectly quiet for long enough, she’ll fade away forever.

Lisa realizes once again that she’s still holding the picture next to her face. She slowly and gently places it on the table, face down.

“Uh...” Matt says. “It’s just that I haven’t seen you draw or paint anything in years. I mean...I don’t think I could write a poem to save my life anymore. All the memos at work have killed the artistic side of my brain. I can only think in bullet points now.”

Lisa thinks of the boxes of their old school stuff up in the attic, his poems and her drawings rotting side by side, the corpses of their former selves.

“What I do or don’t do doesn’t change who I am,” Lisa says, her voice sounding more upset and desperate than she intended or even thought she felt.

“Ok,” he says with a gentle, placating tone. “I never meant to imply otherwise. All my girls are amazing.”

She tries to smile, but her mouth feels strange and she can’t quite control it. She ends up just baring her teeth instead.

“Are you okay, mommy?” Katie asks.

“I’m just...” she starts to say. She wants to reassure her daughter, but instead she just gathers up the dishes and washes them until there’s no evidence left that anything happened.

Sitting in bed, staring at the screen of her laptop, Lisa doesn’t hear Matt come in the room.

“The girls are in bed asleep, if you know what I mean,” he says, his voice suggestively dropping an octave at the end.

Startled, Lisa slams shut her computer.

“Whoa,” Matt says, smiling. “What was that? Were you looking at something naughty?”

Lisa feels her face getting warmer, betraying her.

“You were, weren’t you? You naughty little girl. Come on now, share with daddy,” he says, walking towards the bed.

“You just startled me,” Lisa says, resting her hands on top of the computer.

“Nope. Not buying it. You forget, I was a teenage boy once. My mom walked in on me rushing to put things away more times than I care to recall.”

“I wasn’t looking at porn.”

He jumps up on the bed, crawls over to her side and straddles her hips with his knees. “Come on, spill the beans,” he says, putting his hands on her shoulders and then gently running his fingertips down the lengths of her arms. “We have ways of making you talk.”

“Are you having fun?” she says, dryly, making it clear she’s not playing along.

“You’re seriously not gonna tell me?” he says, smirking incredulously.

“I’d rather not.”

“Ok, Bartleby. But what about our no secrets rule?”

“I never agreed to any such rule.”

“B.S. We always tell the girls that there are no secrets in this house.”

She notices that his hands are ever-so-gradually sliding towards the edges of the computer, so she casually grips it with both of hers.

“First, you’re the only one who ever says that. And second, I thought that was just to encourage the girls to be honest with us.”

“Honesty is a two-way street—“

She bursts out laughing, but then remembers the girls and quiets it down to a chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

“I remember when clichés like that used to make you throw up in your mouth.”

“What can I say? Clichés are clichés for a reason,” he says, wrapping his fingers around the edges of her laptop.

“You always tell the truth?”

“I try. Especially with you and the girls.”

“So, tonight at dinner, when you put on that show about how great Emily’s picture was and how you couldn’t tell me apart from it, you were being one hundred percent honest with her?”

“What the fuck?” he says, laughing but at the same time tightening his grip on the computer until the plastic creaks from the pressure. “She’s a child. She deserves a little positive reinforcement from time to time, so she can grow up feeling loved and worthwhile. I mean, I know your parents weren’t exactly the warmest people on the planet...”

“This has nothing to do with my parents.”

“...but I would like to hope that we can do at least a little bit better.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” she says, tightening her grip as well.

“It means what the fuck was wrong with you tonight? Your sweet, little daughter hands you a picture she lovingly made of you, and you sit there holding it like it’s a fucking time bomb about to explode in your face. Thank god Emily’s too young to notice. But seriously, Lisa...”

She watches as his emotions begin to shift, the anger sagging out of his face, his grip on the computer relaxing.

“Are you really that unhappy?” he says.

She doesn’t know how to answer, so she lets go of the computer instead.

He looks down at the laptop and then back to her face. “Are you giving this to me?”

She nods.

He takes the computer and sits down on his side of the bed. He looks at her again, and she gives him another encouraging nod. He opens the laptop and the screen flickers on. She doesn't look at it. She just watches its reflection in his eyes. Two tiny pictures of her, one floating in the black well of each of his pupils. It's sort of like looking in a mirror. Not an objective mirror, of course. Or maybe it's a more objective reflection of her. After all, she still feels like the girl she was in that picture. When she closes her eyes and imagines her own face, that's the picture she sees.

“I don't understand,” he says. “It's just a selfie. How old were you?”

“Sometime in my teens. Fourteen, fifteen, maybe.”

“You look so much like Katie,” he says, turning to her with a big grin.

“There's more pictures in the folder. You can flip through them.”

She continues watching his eyes. Next is a pencil drawing, then a watercolor, then pastels and finally oil on canvas, each one a rendition of the same photo. He looks at them all with such pride and affection, as if they were Emily's artwork.

Lisa wonders what would happen if the pictures suddenly disappeared, if she found herself staring into the empty mirrors of her husband's eyes.

When he's flipped through them all and gets back to the photo, he turns to her, beaming.

“They're all amazing.”

“I'm partial to the pencil one. That's always been my strongest medium, I think.”

“You’re so talented. Why did you stop?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just fell into a new routine and, as time went by, I wasn’t sure if I could do it anymore. I’m still not, to be honest.”

As she speaks, the words come so easily she assumes they must be the truth.

Matt looks at the picture again and then down at his hands.

“I’m an idiot,” he says. “This is all because of what I said at dinner, isn’t it?” He looks up at her, shaking his head. “That stupid line about how you *used to be* an artist. Emily’s drawing must’ve already had you thinking along similar lines, and then I say that and...”

His logic seems plausible enough. And she supposes he’s not entirely wrong. And she doesn’t really want to explain the rest to him. And she’s not entirely sure she can put the rest into words. And she’s a little afraid that, if she tries, it’ll just keep changing shape until she can’t even recognize it anymore, like faces in a dream.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” he says. “It was just a semantic fuck-up. I think you were, are and always will be a brilliant artist. Forgive me?”

She nods.

He leans over and kisses her on the cheek. He pulls back part way, looking her in the eyes for a moment, and then kisses her mouth. She reciprocates. He puts his arm around her and pulls their bodies closer together. The computer slides off his lap and becomes wedged, uncomfortably, between them. He stops, pulls back and picks up the computer. He’s about to set it aside, but then looks at the photo again.

“I can’t get over how much you look like Katie,” he says, smiling and shaking his head. “The two of you could be...”

He leans in closer to the screen and squints his eyes, obviously scrutinizing something.

Very casually, she reaches over and takes the computer, allowing her hands to linger on his as she does so. She takes it over to her desk, where she plugs it in. Then she walks over to the other side of the room and shuts the door.

“Didn’t you say something about the girls being asleep?”

She’s standing in the bathroom of her parents’ house, looking at herself in the mirror. She feels like she can’t trust the mirror. This suspicion has been growing in her mind for a while now. There’s a camera sitting on the sink. She picks it up and holds it in front of her face at arm’s length. She looks directly into the lens. She doesn’t smile. After all, how much of your life do you spend smiling? A very small fraction, by her estimation. She keeps her face completely relaxed. She takes the picture, the camera making that little artificial shutter noise. She takes a deep breath. She turns the camera around. Who is this? The person in the picture doesn’t look anything like her. Her features are all distorted, like she’s looking in a funhouse mirror. She looks from the camera to the mirror and back again. Which is the truth? What do other people see when they see her? She feels a wave of vertigo come over her. Can anyone ever know what they really look like?

She hears water running in the tub behind her, and her reflection suddenly shifts from what she looked like at fifteen to what she looks like now. She looks at the camera. The picture now looks like a Picasso, with one of her eyes on the side of her head by her ear, the other on her forehead above her nose, her face turned purple and somehow

simultaneously straight-on and in profile. Aghast, she throws the camera across the room, where it falls into the toilet. She doesn't dare look in the mirror again, afraid of what she might see and even more afraid of what she might not see.

“What’s wrong, mommy?”

She turns and finds Katie and Emily sitting in the bathtub together.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she says, kneeling down next to the tub.

She feels that she has something clutched tightly in her hand. She’s almost afraid to look. But when she does, she sees that it’s just a hairbrush. She starts brushing Katie’s hair, but the brush gets tangled and Katie begins to whine and fidget.

“Just hold still,” Lisa says. “Let mommy get it out.”

She holds onto the hair above the tangle with one hand and pulls on the brush with the other. Katie starts shrieking in pain. Finally, the brush comes loose.

“See, that wasn’t so—“

Katie’s hair starts disintegrating in Lisa’s hands, breaking up into smaller and smaller pieces, until it’s nothing but little flecks of light, floating down through the air. This starts a chain reaction, as both of her daughters begin rapidly dissolving into the bath water. She tries to grab hold of them, pull them out, but their skin breaks apart and slips between her fingers like rivulets of red, green and blue glitter. Lisa stares helplessly as it swirls down the drain and out into the world, where she knows she’ll never be able to find it all and put them back together again.

What brings Lisa back to consciousness are the dual sensations of light and cold. Her back is covered by a mixture of her and Matt’s sweat, which, now exposed to the air,

has cooled her skin down uncomfortably. It's a feeling of loss, of incompleteness. A faint amount of light is seeping through her eyelids. She opens them and sees a figure silhouetted by a cold, blue light. Her eyes and her mind are both still a little foggy. At first, she thinks it's her father, standing in the doorway of her bedroom, the hall light behind him turning him into a shadow. Then, remembering he's dead, she thinks, for one strange moment, that it's his ghost, coming back to...what? She blinks her eyes until they focus.

She sees Matt, sitting at her desk, her laptop open in front of him.

"Come back to bed," she says, pulling the sheet up over her shoulders. "I'm cold."

He doesn't respond. He just continues sitting there, motionless, staring at the screen.

"What are you doing?" she says, dragging herself into a halfway sitting position against the headboard. "Matt?"

He's as still and silent as a corpse.

She looks on the floor for her shirt, finds it and puts it on. She crawls out of bed and slowly walks up behind him. The photo of her teenage self is on the screen.

She puts her hand on his shoulder, feeling the warmth of his skin revive her cadaverously cold fingers.

"I knew there was something wrong about this picture," he says, not turning around. "I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something about it made me uneasy in the back of my mind."

He points at the screen. The movement is so sudden it almost startles her.

“Then I noticed this,” he says. “This pimple just above your eyebrow, almost entirely obscured by the hair. It has a twin on the other side.”

“I’m going back to bed,” she says, taking her hand off his shoulder.

“You mirrored the one half of your face across to the other side. Why?”

She starts to turn away, but he reaches back and gently grabs her arm. She stops.

“When did you make this?” he says. “Tonight?”

“No. Back when I took the picture.”

“Why? Were you insecure or something?” he says, finally turning to her.

“I was a teenager. Of course I was insecure. But that’s not why I made the picture?”

“Then why? Was it because of your parents?” he says, grimacing as he says the word.

“Oh, my god,” she says, raising her voice. “Will you stop trying to blame my parents for everything?” She looks down at her arm. His grip, though gentle, now feels unpleasantly hot to her, like a branding iron. “And will you please let go of my arm?”

He looks down at his hand and then opens it.

“Keep your voice down,” he says. “The girls are sleeping.”

“My parents weren’t perfect,” she says in a harsh whisper. “But they didn’t *do* anything to me, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She sighs. “They were who they were. I am who I am.”

“Why did you make the picture? Why can’t you tell me that?”

“I was a fucked-up and confused teenager. And not because of my parents. Just because all teenagers are fucked-up and confused. I guess I was just trying to impose order on things.”

“On your face?”

“It was a start.”

“Okay,” he says, nodding and looking down at the floor. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Can we please just go back to bed now?” she says, rubbing her shoulders for warmth with her icy hands.

He stops nodding and looks up at her.

“But what I still don’t understand is why you were looking at it tonight,” he says.

“Was it because of Emily’s picture?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says.

“Then help me out.”

“Sometimes I just feel like looking at those pictures. That’s all.”

He reaches up and gently strokes her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

“Don’t you know how beautiful you are?” he says.

She slaps his hand away, harder than she intended, her cold fingers stinging from the impact.

He looks at her for a long moment, his expression changing from shock to something inscrutable, then he turns back to the computer. He clicks on the picture. The options menu pops up.

“What are you doing?”

“This isn’t healthy,” he says, hovering the cursor over “delete.”

She wants to tell him to stop. She wants to grab the computer away from him. She wants to protect the picture she made, all those years ago, with the ferocity of a mother protecting her young. But she feels frozen. If she tries to move or speak, she might crack and shatter. All she can do is stare at her picture. All she can do is stay very still and silent and wait for it to be over.

He clicks “delete” and it disappears.

“I’m sorry,” he says, turning his gaze from the now blank computer screen back to her. “But this is for your own—“

She’s gone.

Interior. Hospital Room. Day.

Standing over his mother's still-warm body, David doesn't understand why he can't cry. He should be crying. And not just a little. The flood gates should open up and drown everyone in this room. Somebody cue the waterworks already, before we lose the light! After all, this is a major turning point in the narrative of his life, one of those moments that fundamentally alters one's position in the world and perspective about life and death. Come on! Seriously! The place from whence he came is no more, defunct, closed for business. The path leading him to the grave is now a straight shot, devoid of detours or obstacles.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Black and white CU of David's face.

Music: A mournful accordion track

FRENCH NARRATOR (VO)
Mortalité. Futilité. Oubli complet. C'est la vie.

A single tear runs down David's cheek.

FADE TO BLACK

But that's not really the point, is it? He shouldn't be crying for his own sake, for this suddenly acute sense of his own mortality. He should be crying for her. Obviously. Only a moment ago, she was lying there in that hospital bed, alive and...well, not so well. Her heart was beating slower and slower, as indicated by the blips on the monitor. Her lungs were taking increasingly shallow and ragged breaths. He knew what was coming. He knew it the moment he arrived here this morning. In fact, he'd known it ever since the stroke, about a month ago. That's why he flew back home from LA. It was inevitable. It was, like his brother told him over the phone, "just a matter of time." Time enough to come home and watch his mother die.

But the point is, no matter how inevitable her death may have seemed, she was still alive. She was still in there somewhere, behind those bewildered and accusing eyes that occasionally opened and looked at him or his siblings or the wall or the ceiling. Her stroke-ravaged brain was still thinking and dreaming things she'll never have the chance to share with anyone. And now, she's still lying there, but she's still, departed, passed away, at peace, not with us anymore, beyond the veil, gone to a better place, a member of the great majority, meeting her maker, taking the last train to glory, riding the pale horse, inert, pushing up daisies, dead, dead as a doornail, dead as a dodo, dead as dead gets, an object that was recently a person, a mass of rotting meat, worm food. He cycles through all the expressions he can think of, but none of them make it feel the way he knows it should.

He knows the part he's supposed to be playing, the type of scene he's in. He's seen it in countless movies and TV shows. Hell, he's even written scenes like this:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

David watches his mother's breathing gradually come to a stop. Her chest rises and falls, but then doesn't rise again.

CU of David breaking down into tears.

The entire family comes together for a group hug of commiseration.

FADE TO BLACK

He knows, if he were watching this scene in a movie, he'd be bawling his eyes out. He knows, if he were writing this scene, he'd stop typing, read it back and feel a little choked up by the sheer power of his own words. That's always been the litmus test by which he's judged his writing. If he can make himself cry, then it should have the same effect on the audience. And this process has served him well, as he's worked on three shows that have survived to syndication—primetime network dramas no less—carving out a stable career for himself. His colleagues have nicknames for him, Drippy Dave and David Downer being the most common, inspired by his habit of breaking down into tears in the writers' room and on set. And this is exactly what makes his current condition so disturbing. If he were the sort of manly man who never shed a tear, he'd simply chalk his reaction up to his generally stoic disposition. But he's a regular crybaby. He's even been known to cry during children's cartoons. He can recall, one Saturday morning years ago, watching a particularly moving episode of SpongeBob with his son. As the tears began streaming down his face, his five-year-old turned to him with an expression that seemed to say: What the hell is wrong with you, old man? And that same question now echoes across the gulf of time, becoming amplified into a booming and undeniably damning accusation. What the hell is wrong with him?

Looking around the room, he can see the appropriate response modeled by his entire family. His sister Lisa is sitting in a chair on the other side of the bed, still holding their mother's shriveled, veiny hand in both of hers, as if letting go will somehow make her death more real, or some such shit. Her head is hanging down towards her chest, obstructing David's view of her face, but her irregular breathing and heaving shoulders make it clear that she's silently sobbing. His brother Patrick and his sister-in-law Marie are standing at the foot of the bed, holding one another as they both cry, she on his shoulder and he in her hair.

Noticing that Patrick's nose is dripping into Marie's frizzy blonde perm, David feels a smile begin to curl his lips.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Everyone is crying so hard that the tiled floor becomes slick with tears and mucus.

Patrick slips and falls onto the hospital bed, his head becoming wedged between his mother's legs, as if he's attempting to return from whence he came.

DAVID

Talk about a Freudian slip!

SFX: Canned laughter.

Mortified, he slips his hand into his pocket and gives his scrotum a good, hard pinch. What the hell is wrong with him? This isn't a comedy. It's a tragedy, a drama, a very special episode designed to make everyone appreciate how fleeting and fragile life really is.

For Christ's sake, even his own wife Sarah, who had an openly contentious relationship with his mother (and that was on a good day), has tears running down her face and dripping off her chin. This won't do. He can't be the only one...

A rumble of thunder causes him to look out the window. The heavy, grey clouds, which have been hanging over the scene since they drove here in the morning, have chosen this very moment to finally let loose their downpour.

"Fucking cliché," David mutters under his breath. Even the weather has to show him up.

If he were writing this scene, there's no way he would go for something so obvious and trite. The sun should be shining, ironic and defiant, demonstrating how little the world cares about their mundane, little tragedy.

He tries to force himself to cry, attempting to summon tears by scrunching up his face and breathing in fake, mechanical sobs. His efforts are in vain, but they do attract the attention of his wife, who, mistaking his farce of a display for genuine, comes over and embraces him.

"It's okay," she whispers in his ear. "Just let it all out."

David continues to fake sob, hiding his dry eyes against her shoulder.

It suddenly occurs to him that this very same scene has played out before, when his father died ten years ago. Back then, however, he attributed his lack of tears to the fact that he had never really felt that close to his father, an aloof shadow of a man who rarely showed any emotion, except for when he was watching his favorite teams on TV. David still remembers the transformation that would inevitably occur when his dad switched off the set after a game. All the excitement, camaraderie and commiseration he

had exuded for four quarters or nine innings would end so abruptly it would give David the emotional equivalent of whiplash. Eventually, he stopped watching games with his father, preferring no relationship at all to one that seemingly had less to do with him than it did with the score.

The only times he can remember seeing his father cry were when his team won or lost the big game. At funerals, graduations and weddings, his eyes were always as dry as kindling. And so, standing beside his father's deathbed, his dry eyes felt like an appropriate tribute. When he looked around at his weeping siblings back then, their response was the one that seemed wrong and out of place. He remembers silently accusing them of faking it. They were just going through the motions. The tears they were shedding must've been inspired by obligation rather than any genuine feeling of loss. He pitied them, a couple of trained dogs, performing a conditioned response, one that had nothing at all to do with the man in question.

He now tries to find a similar explanation for his current situation. He considers his sister. She's nearing fifty, divorced, childless. Couldn't her tears be more for herself than their mother? Couldn't they be falling to fill the emptiness of her own life? He has a wife and a son. She has none of that. Their mother was no doubt the center of her social circle, the main support propping up the wreck of her life.

That seems a bit harsh.

But maybe that's how life works. Maybe everyone is like a monkey swinging through the jungle. Only instead of swinging from branch to branch, you swing from person to person, first your parents, then your spouse and finally your children and grandchildren. As long as you keep moving forward, you might hardly notice if one of

the branches behind you should snap. But if you should find yourself, like poor Lisa, holding on to just one branch for dear life, then the death of a parent must seem like the ground rushing up to meet you. For his sister, their mother's death must be like a glimpse into her own rapidly approaching future, one filled with only decay and regret, as she won't even have children to mourn or remember her.

But what about his brother? He has a wife and kids. And what about Sarah and Marie? They should be swinging through entirely different jungles. His logic begins to fall apart. He chokes on his own metaphor. His mother was a warm and generous and lovely person. She was the polar opposite of his father. Everyone loved her, and now everyone is mourning her...with one glaring exception, of course

He searches his emotions for even the slightest hint of sadness or grief. Hell, he'd even settle for regret or self-pity. He tries to force it, tries to make all of this feel real by thinking of all the things he'll never experience again. He'll never hear his mother's voice or laugh again. He'll never see her smile again. He'll never feel the soft warmth of her embrace or the wetness of her lipstick coming off on his cheek when she kisses him. He thinks of how he experienced all of these things for the last time without even realizing it, without having the prescience to really savor them for one final moment...

Nothing. His heart feels like Styrofoam. If the nurse were to take his pulse, she would probably think him as dead as his mother and wheel them both down to the morgue.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

David stands over his dead mother.

DAVID

Good-bye, mom. I'll miss you.

He leans down to kiss her forehead.

Suddenly, her eyes pop open, red and demonic-looking. She reaches up and grabs hold of him.

MOTHER

You're coming with me, you heartless ingrate!

David screams and tries to pull away, but to no avail.

The ground opens up and slowly pulls the entire bed down into the cold embrace of death and decay.

David continues to scream, until the earth finally closes back over them.

A desperate, last-ditch idea pops into his head. One of his actor friends once told him about method acting, the technique they use to summon emotions at will, cry on command. They conjure up some experience, either from memory or imagination, which allows them to emotionally identify with their role. But therein lies the problem. This is exactly the kind of moment an actor would recall to stimulate the response of mourning. He feels caught in a paradox. How do you method act your own life?

His wife and son. What if they...

What if his wife were driving...his son in the seat next to her...down some two-lane road...the kind you always see in the movies...located dangerously close to the edge of a cliff. Say there's a semi coming in the opposite direction. It's snowing...blizzard conditions, visibility damn near zero. They're approaching a curve, his wife and the semi at the exact same time. The semi, in the inner lane, takes the turn a little too wide, drifting into his wife's lane. She doesn't see the truck until she's almost on top of it. She...

He can't go any further. He tries to tell himself it's because he can't bear to even think about such a thing. But he knows better. What if you open the smallest, innermost box at the center of your soul, and you find that it's empty?

His wife's embrace suddenly feels oppressive, accusatory. He pulls away, a little too abruptly. She looks at him. Confused? Hurt? Angry? He can't read her expression. He suddenly feels like an emotional illiterate.

"I have to go to the bathroom," he says, this being the first excuse to pop into his head. He quickly turns away from her, his face reddening with shame for his dry, unreddened eyes, and goes out the door.

He wanders aimlessly down the halls of the hospital, unable to find a bathroom, not looking for a bathroom. He just needs to get far away from that room, far away from all the expectations that haunt it like his mother's angry ghost. So what if he can't cry? Does that somehow automatically mean he never loved her? Does it somehow automatically mean he's a bad son? So what if he never cries again? Should he spend the rest of his life hating himself?

He wonders what his family is doing, now that he's gone. He imagines them talking about him, commenting on his strange reaction, his lack of tears, his hurried departure. They were probably all just waiting for him to leave, so they could tear into him, so they could take all their sadness and grief and turn it into a sacrificial knife to slit his throat. Screw them! Who are they to judge him? Who are they?

He turns a corner and finds himself at the threshold of some sort of lounge area. A half dozen or so people are sitting in there, watching TV. The theme of this room is obviously comfort. The cushy couches and plush chairs are in stark contrast to the

functional seating options he's seen in other areas of the hospital. This is clearly a room for the bereaved.

He looks at each of the people in the lounge. They all have two things in common. First, they all exhibit the telltale signs of having recently cried: red eyes, smeared makeup, little crusts of mucus under their noses. And second, they're all staring mindlessly, emotionlessly at the TV screen. This is a roomful of people who needed a break from grieving, a roomful of people who were in so much pain they had to call a timeout. And so they came here, where the TV offers them a few moments of distraction. David turns his attention to what's playing on the TV. The cheap production values and proscenium aesthetic immediately clue him into the fact that it's some species of daytime soap detritus.

Jesus, it's still just early afternoon. This day has been so long already.

In the show, a generically handsome man is standing in a generically well-appointed living room, looking at a photograph of a generically beautiful young woman. (They both look like they just walked off the pages of a department store catalogue.) The actor struggles to express something poignant with his eyes, something in keeping with the heavy-handed, cloyingly emotional soundtrack. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. He reluctantly puts the photo back on the bookshelf and walks over to the door. He opens it, revealing none other than the woman in the photo. They look at each other for a long moment, the camera cutting back and forth between his shocked expression and her expectant one. Then they embrace.

David has never seen this show before. He has no emotional investment in either of these characters. He has no idea who they are or what their backstory is, and he

doesn't care. As a general rule, he hates soap operas. He finds them painfully dumb, and he avoids them so as not to let their insipid sentimentality infect his own writing.

As the music swells, however, he feels that old familiar pressure rise up in his chest and choke his breathing, that unmistakable swampy feeling as tears well up around his eyes. With relief so immense it borders on a religious or orgasmic experience, he begins to sob convulsively. He savors the warmth of the tears running down his face, their saline flavor as they flow into his open mouth. Overjoyed, he begins to laugh in an awkward syncopated rhythm with his sobs, almost choking in the process. Through his blurred, watercolor vision, he becomes aware of the fact that everyone in the lounge has turned to look at him. Let them look, he thinks. He has nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

David runs frantically down the halls of the hospital, blinded by tears.

He throws open the door to his mother's room.

Each and every one of his family members looks up and sees him standing there, crying openly and proudly. They go to him, embracing him, giving him a big group hug.

His sister is the last to join in, as she reluctantly lets go of her mother's hand and merges into the orgy of love and healing he has inspired.

David looks over at his mother.

CU of his tear-streaked face.

DAVID (VO)

All these tears, they're for you, mom.

FADE TO BLACK

INERTIA

As the bus slows down, Mary looks up from her science book to check which stop she's at. 110th. Still a ways to go. An old lady gets off and two girls wearing private school uniforms get on. Crap. She knows one of them. Arabella. They used to be friends before they ended up going to different high schools. The girls don't look at her or say anything as they walk by, but Mary can feel what they're thinking about her. But at least she can wear jeans to school. Take that.

She returns to her book, determined to master this whole inertia thing. "The tendency of a body at rest to remain at rest..." Sounds like laziness, like her father sitting on the couch watching football all weekend, calling for her to bring him pretzels or beer or whatever. "...a body in motion to stay in motion in a straight line." Why a straight line? "...unless acted on by an outside force." Like what? If her father's sitting on the couch, he could stay there or he could get up and start walking. And once he's moving, he could turn into the kitchen, he could stop when he gets to the fridge. Where's the outside force? He gets up because he's hungry or thirsty, but both of those are internal. The reason he's hungry, though, is because his bowl of pretzels is empty. That's the outside force, isn't it? And maybe she isn't around to get it for him. That might be—

The bus comes to a sudden stop, causing her book to slide off her lap and fall on the floor. As she's reaching down to retrieve it, the bus lurches forward a few more yards and then comes to a stop again. Her head smacks against the seat in front of her. She recognizes Arabella's laugh and feels her cheeks getting warm. She's probably laughing at something else, though.

Sitting back up and rubbing the sore spot on the top of her head, it suddenly occurs to her: Inertia! Her book was at rest on her lap, and the bus stopping was the outside force that made it slide off. But why does one thing stopping cause something else to move? If she stops getting her father pretzels...then he'll have to go and get them himself. That makes sense. She thinks back to the old lady that she saw get off the bus. Being old, she probably would've rather stayed at rest, but arriving at her stop made her go into motion and get off the bus. But what's with this straight line business?

The bus starts moving again. As it follows a curve in the street, she notices that her body is leaning in the opposite direction, towards the window. Before she can fully consider this, however, a man walking up the aisle loses his balance and falls on top of her. His left hand is holding several plastic shopping bags, which knock her book off her lap again. His right hand grabs her by the shoulder, hard, to catch his fall. She lets out a gasp and tries to pull away from him, but he holds on tight as he struggles to get back to his feet. She looks at the hand gripping her shoulder. His finger nails are long and jagged and black with embedded dirt. She looks at his face. His hair is greasy. The whites of his eyes are yellow and his pupils cloudy. He has an unkempt grey beard that keeps scratching against her cheek as he labors to regain his footing. He smells like beer, stale body odor and unwashed clothes, a worse version of how her father sometimes

smells by the end of the weekend. He mutters an apology, his breath sour enough to make her eyes water, as he finally manages to right himself.

“Hey Mary,” she hears Arabella’s voice calling to her and turns in that direction before she can think better of it.

The two girls are rocking in their seats with laughter.

“You make a new friend there?” Arabella says.

“You give him your number?” says the other girl.

Mary quickly turns back around and stares intently out the window, her whole body burning with embarrassment.

The man who fell on her gets off the bus. Mary stares at him angrily. It’s all his fault. Why couldn’t he just stay on his stupid feet and walk like a normal person? In a straight line, like a body in motion is supposed to?

As he continues to walk away, something falls out of one of the bags he’s carrying. Mary squints her eyes, trying to identify it. She thinks it might be one of those white paper bags that they put prescriptions in at pharmacies, like the ones that her father’s blood pressure medication comes in. But maybe not. It might also be one of those white paper bags that they put donuts in at bakeries. She can’t be sure.

She thinks about pounding on the window, trying to get his attention. But he probably wouldn’t hear it.

She thinks about running to the door of the bus, which is still open, and calling after him. But the doors would probably close and the bus would probably drive away before she had a chance to tell him he dropped something.

She could get off the bus, pick up the bag and run after him. But she probably doesn't have enough time to retrieve her book from the floor, put it back in her backpack and then get off the bus before it pulls away.

She could yell for the bus driver to wait, but...

The bus continues idling at the stop for longer than usual. The doors remain open as Mary watches the man walk farther and farther from his dropped bag. If she had reacted right away, she could've done something. But she had no way of knowing the bus would stay stopped for so long. Now it's definitely too late.

Finally, the doors close and the bus drives away, much to her relief.

The next stop is hers, and Mary hurries off the bus, fearing that Arabella and her new friend might offer her one last parting jeer.

As the bus pulls away, she looks in the opposite direction, the direction of the dropped bag and the man who fell on her. She could walk back and retrieve the bag, but then what? She doesn't know where the man lives. He'll probably realize it's gone when he gets home and then retrace his steps and find it right where he dropped it.

She could go back just to verify that it was in fact just a bag full of donuts. But she already knows that's what it was. She thinks back and pictures the bag, imagining it as clearly as she can, as the kind of white bag you get from a bakery, not a pharmacy. That's what it was.

The matter settled in her mind, she decides to forget about the whole thing and walks straight home.

WITNESS

(A CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE STORY)

This is not going to help.

That's the most important lesson our mother taught us. All of her attempts to hide from her past, all of her dissociation and repression, her supporting cast of alters, none of it really helped. It only delayed the inevitable return of the memories that haunted her. "Haunted" is an apt metaphor for her condition. After all, ghosts are just metaphors for the impossibility of truly leaving the past behind. But she couldn't help it. She had to try. And now so do we. You see, we're doing it already. There is no "we." And yet, I divide us into two, creating you, my younger self, as a separate character, just like how she created other personalities to divide up her past. What she accomplished psychologically, I now imitate narratively. Like mother, like son. Or rather, like mothers, like sons. That's another one of our inherited defense mechanisms: inappropriate humor. Like how she used to joke about suicide between attempts, saying things like "if Clooney doesn't come back to ER, I'll just have to kill myself." And when we would get mad at her irreverence, she would tell us that "everyone has the right to laugh at their own suffering."

I know you know where we're going. That night. I've been going back there, from time to time, ever since I was you. Even more so now that she's gone. Yeah, that's right. She finally succeeded at making her escape. It happened a couple months ago. She didn't leave a note. She didn't need to. She knew we would know everything she didn't write. The last time I saw her, when I came home for winter break, she seemed fine, which was, of course, her best trick. She was always a little bit too normal right before an attempt. I should've known better. It wouldn't have mattered. How does this revelation make you feel? Sad? Angry? Scared? Maybe even a little relieved? Me too.

I've often wondered why that night in the motel room is the one memory that haunts us the most. It's not like it was an isolated incident. It was just one night amid years of similar episodes. She didn't even try to kill herself that night. If we stick to objective facts, lay out the basic situation for our story, we have to describe it as follows: She remembered something painful, reliving it in her mind and acting it out with her body, and then fell asleep. Objectively speaking, nothing really happened. It was all in her head. Our dead grandfather wasn't really there. He was just a memory. The best I can come up with, in terms of justifying its prominence, is the fact that that night was the first time we were all alone, the first time we didn't have someone around to help, the first time it was entirely up to us to protect her. And we failed so miserably. That night made us realize we couldn't save her. No one could. You can draw a straight line from that night to her suicide eleven years later.

And so, let's go back there again, like I have so many times before. Only this time, I'll take you with me. My younger self. My fictional character. My sacrificial

lamb. My hope is that, in doing so, I can give the burden of that night to you. But don't worry. It won't work.

This is not going to help.

(1)

On second thought, I think maybe we'll ease into it, delay the inevitable a little longer, start at the shrink's office a few days later and then flashback to that night. As a bonus, it'll give our story a nice framing device.

And so, you find yourself sitting in what appears to be a waiting room. You have no idea how you got here. From the books on the bookshelf (mostly kiddie and YA fare) and the pamphlets on the wall (with titles like "Eating Disorders" and "Building Self-Esteem"), you surmise this must be the office of a child psychologist. The only other person in the room is a woman, small and unassuming, sitting across from you and reading a magazine. She looks up and smiles at you, but you suspect she's not entirely what she seems.

Although the preceding paragraph might seem like the opening of a mystery story, it's not true and, no matter how hard you might try or how much you might want to, you can't make yourself believe it. You know all too well why you're here. Denial won't help you. It's just another failed defense mechanism.

As young as you are, you've already learned how memory is funny that way. When you're trying to memorize something—like, say, state capitals for an upcoming geography test—it often feels like you're trying to eat soup with a fork. The things you'd rather forget, though, they always seem to have a way of getting permanently tattooed on

the insides of your eyelids. We've often wondered if maybe the education system should take a lesson from this. Every class could begin with a video of a puppy getting hit by a car. Or the desks could be wired to administer electric shocks for incorrect answers. After all, trauma is the best teacher.

You really don't want to be here. Despite your protests, however, our mom (that's who the mystery woman is, by the way, as much as you might like to deny it, and she definitely isn't what she seems) insisted on the importance of talking it out, "debriefing" as the shrinks like to call it. But you've been here before. You've talked things out before. It only ever made you feel worse. And this time in particular, you'd rather just go home, play video games and pretend like nothing happened. What are you supposed to say, anyway? "Last weekend I watched my mom get raped by my grandfather in a motel room in southern Ohio. Oh, and by the way, he's been dead for five years." Rape by memory. No one writes children stories about things like that. There are no conventions for telling such a tale. What would we even title our little story? "Night of the Incestuous Dead?" There's that inappropriate humor again. No one else is laughing, but our mom would be proud.

Craving distraction, you get up and go over to the bookshelf. You select a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book. You used to enjoy them when you were younger, and a little regression might be comforting at a time like this. You don't analyze your choice in these terms, of course. You're only eleven. Since our grandfather is allowed to intrude from the past, however, it seems only fair that I, your future self, should be allowed to come back and help tell our story.

You read the first page:

WATCH OUT!

THIS BOOK IS DIFFERENT than every other book you've ever read! Have you ever wanted to read a book about YOU? A book where you choose what happens? A book where you decide your own fate? Then this book is for YOU!

You and I both stifle a wry, little chuckle. We'd be happy if *life* were like that.

You turn the page and start reading the story. It's called "Your Grandparents are Zombies." I'm curious to learn if it's intended as a metaphor for the real-life horrors of Alzheimer's, but your attention keeps wandering back to that night in the motel room, to your very own undead grandfather.

Oops. I guess this book won't be so comforting after all.

If you want to remember what happened, **go to (3)**.

If you want to continue reading the book, **go to (2)**.

(2)

You summon all your powers of concentration, but the story on the page is drowned out by the one inside your head. You blink your eyes in disbelief, as the words swim around, rearranging themselves into a familiar and inescapable pattern. You look on in horror as the illustration of the zombie begins to look more and more like your own dead/undead grandfather. You can't fight it. You have to face what happened.

Go to (3).

(3)

And now we're back in that cheap, musty little motel room in Tiltonsville, and you're breaking your promise to her. She asked you, made you swear, that you wouldn't fall asleep until she does. But it's been a long day. And though you're fighting to keep your eyes open, and though you keep sitting up straighter against the headboard of the bed, catching your chin before it droops against your chest, willing your mind to stay alert and focused on "Night of the Living Dead," which the two of you are watching on some late night horror movie show (which you specifically picked because you thought it would be too scary for you to fall asleep), it's so hard to keep fighting it. The headboard's so hard, and the pillow's so soft. It would be so easy to just give in. Besides, she seems fine. She's not crying anymore, like she was earlier at Pastor David's house, regressing to younger versions of herself and confessing all the things her father made her do. She got all of that out of her system. Now she's fine. She's our mom again. Ready to watch a little TV and go to bed. She doesn't...

Your head has somehow wound up nestled in the softness of the pillow. Your eyes are still open...most of the time. You're still watching TV. Is this still "Night of the Living Dead?" What time is it?

(You might be thinking that all these zombie references seem a little convenient. Did we really read that undead-themed book at the shrink's office? Did we really watch "Night of the Living Dead" on the very night that the memory of our dead grandfather came back to life to torment our mother? Of course not. These references, however, serve to underscore the system of metaphors we're working with here. And the "Choose

Your Own Adventure” book helped me introduce the formal conceit of our little story. Fictionalizing certain details allows me the luxury of these literary defense mechanisms.)

“Are you awake?” She asks.

You open your eyes.

“Yeah.”

Of course, you’re awake. You’re sitting...lying here, watching...something with her. You’re awake. Really.

...what brings you back to the dim, yellow light of the motel room is the sound of her crying.

If you want to go back to sleep, **go to (4)**.

If you want to wake up and see what’s wrong, **go to (5)**.

(4)

Your first thought is to just go back to sleep. Let grandma deal with this. Surely, she can...You’re alone! In Tiltonsville! Grandma is over a hundred miles away!

And you’re awake!

Go to (5).

(5)

She's sitting on the far edge of the bed, her back to you, crying into the phone. I'm not sure anyone but the two of us can fully appreciate how beautiful a sight this is to behold: a phone! Surely, Pastor David is on the other end. Listening to her. Reassuring her. Saying to her all those things that he'll surely know to say to make everything okay. He's a good man. Caring. Capable. He was her pastor and counselor when he was stationed at your local church. That's why the two of you made this pilgrimage to see him after all. Surely, he can fashion some sort of Jesus patch to get you through the night.

You're not sure what she's saying to him. Partly because it's hard to understand her through her crying. Partly because you'd rather not understand. Her voice sounds younger, like a child's. Your best guess is that she's probably Angel, her five-year-old self. Which is good. Angel's never tried to kill herself.

You grab onto your buddy—Poochie, the stuffed dog you've had since you were in kindergarten, the stuffed dog whose nose fell off the second day you had him, the stuffed dog you instantly fell in love with and refused to let our mom send back for a replacement, the stuffed dog our dad frowns at when you go over to his house on the weekends, saying you're too old for stuffed animals, the stuffed dog who remains the most reliable figure in your life—and hold him tight. You reassure him you'll get through this. After all, you've seen it all before. There's nothing present—not in this room, nor in our mom's head—that's new to you.

The TV is off now, so our little scene is reflected/playing on it, like this is some new, low-budget, poorly lit reality show where they lock a child and a mental patient in a

room together and watch what happens. There's our mom, giving her all, playing for ratings. And there's you, staring straight into the camera/screen like an amateur.

We flip through the channels of our memories together. Here's a rerun of an old sitcom. In this episode, our mom is hiding under the table in our dining room, using it as a shield against something only she can see. As she cowers there, her face regresses until she's looking up with the terrified eyes of a child. The studio audience erupts in laughter, as the camera tilts up to reveal you and grandma eating dinner and exchanging glances that read "not this again." Cue the sound FX: Whomp whomp!

A few channels up, we find a game show titled "Who's Your Mother Today?" The object of the game is for the contestant (you) to observe our mom and then guess which of her alters is in control. In the first round, she's sitting cross-legged on the floor and making her stuffed animal Lamby Pie talk, and so you correctly guess that our mother is Angel, her five-year-old self. In the next round, she's flirting with strange men at the mall, which clues you in to the fact that she's currently Tina, her sixteen-year-old self. And in the final round, she's being resuscitated by paramedics, which can only mean that she's Debi, her current self, who can't stand all the repressed memories that have been flooding her mind since our grandfather died. You easily win the game and the grand prize: A LIFETIME SUPPLY OF THERAPY! (Deductibles and copays still apply.)

On the sci-fi channel, there's a B-rated flick, in which you suspect that your mother, who was once so stable and normal, has been replaced by a mentally-ill pod person. (We'll eventually learn that this phenomenon is called Capgras syndrome.) And on the next station, they're having a late night marathon of all of her guest appearances

on “ER.” Tina bats her eyelashes at George Clooney, as he informs her that he’s placing her on a 72-hour psych hold.

No, this little show in which you’re currently co-starring is nothing new. Routine. Formulaic. A direct-to-video release at best. After more than a dozen suicide attempts over the past five years, the genre has become decidedly passé.

Additionally, I think we can agree on one more thing: Everything will be all right...so long as she stays on the phone. As long as she’s on the phone, reaching out for help, the world will retain at least a precarious sense of order. As long as she’s on the phone, you can just sit there, in the front row, and cheer and hope with the rest of the spectators. As long as she’s on the phone, you won’t have to go in there, on the other side of the screen.

You look at the phone cord. Then you look over by the TV, where her purse is sitting with the rest of your luggage. You do a rough calculation and conclude that it’s not long enough. You can add another to the list of reasons why it’s crucial she stays on the phone: As long as she’s on the phone, she can’t reach her purse and the pills inside.

You hug Poochie even tighter against your chest, and you silently pray: “Oh, god, please help her stay on the phone. Please help Pastor David help her. Please help everything be okay. Please help her stay on the phone.”

Well, now that we’ve established the importance of her staying on the phone...CLICK

Your eyes reject the sight of the receiver returned to its cradle. “Cradle.” How fitting. An infant so peacefully at rest. Lucky bastard. You will it not to be so. It can’t be... How can she do this to you?!

You watch and listen, waiting for it to ring. It doesn't. Why isn't he calling back? Doesn't he realize that you need him to deal with this?! Hello?! You're just a kid! A little help, please!

No one answers. Of course they don't. The drama must escalate. You know you're alone now. Our mom has left you for her past.

You look at her.

She's just sitting there.

Her back still to you.

Hunched over a little.

Not crying.

Not making a sound.

Is she breathing? You hold yours and listen. You know it's up to you. Her protection now rests in your hands of insufficient size. You want to help her. You want to claw your eyes out and put them in her head, allow her to see the world as you do, a place of realism, not the hauntings of memory. Far more than that, however, you want to become the phone, to channel the energy of someone equal to the task before you, to serve as the conduit and not the caregiver...to not have to care anymore.

If you want to call Pastor David, **go to (6).**

If you want to try to comfort her yourself, **go to (7).**

If you want to do nothing, **go to (8).**

(6)

You reach past her and take the phone off the end table, cautiously glancing at her as you do so. She doesn't object. She doesn't look at you. She doesn't seem to even realize you're there. She's just staring down at the floor, her lips moving slightly, silently.

You dial Pastor David's number, which you had the foresight to memorize for emergencies such as this. You're such a smart kid, if you will say so myself.

It rings. It rings again. And again. Now the answering machine picks up: "Hello, you've reached..." You hang up. Maybe he's in the bathroom or something. You try again. This time you get a busy signal. You quickly hang up, figuring he must be trying to call you back, that you must be calling each other simultaneously. You wait, watching the phone, poised to answer it as soon as it rings. Nothing. You try calling him again. Again a busy signal.

Slowly, it dawns on you: He took his phone off the hook.

You can't believe it. What kind of a man of god chooses sleep, chooses his own comfort over the needs of a mentally ill woman and a young boy?

It is perhaps possible to trace my atheism back to this very moment.

You might be wondering why you don't try calling grandma. I honestly don't remember. Perhaps you figure she'll already be asleep. Perhaps you're afraid of the long distance charges. Probably you just realize that the sound of her voice, telling her daughter there's nothing to be afraid of, that it's all just in her head, will only make matters worse, will only make the past seem more present.

If you want to try to comfort her, **go to (7)**.

If you want to do nothing, **go to (8)**.

(7)

You know it's up to you. You ask her if she's all right. She doesn't respond, but instead starts crying again.

Crap.

You dust off your script from past performances. You reach over and gently place your hand on her back. You begin regurgitating hollow phrases of comfort like the bad actor you are:

"You're okay"

"You're safe."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm here."

"Tell me what's wrong."

"You're safe."

You continue in such a sincerely pathetic manner until she finally pulls away from you. She begins crying harder...and talking to someone.

Who?

You?

No.

You know who. (Gulp!)

Continue to (8).

(8)

(By now, you're probably wondering what kind of a "Choose Your Own Adventure" story this is. No matter what you choose, you always end up going down the same path. You see, that's what we learned that night. Sometimes life is a straight line of choices.)

You know she's gone. She can't hear you now any more than you can see what she's seeing. You want to help her (You do, right? Of course you do), but the fact that you can't comes as a relief. And so, knowing there's nothing you can do, you hold tight to Poochie and assume your most familiar role: Witness.

Reflexively, you begin to estimate the probability that she'll try to commit suicide. You can't be certain who she is now. You think about the bottles of assorted pills in her purse, the traveling pharmacy that is, at least in theory, supposed to keep her away from ideas of using it to end her life. Next, you picture the toilet, a rainbow of tablets and capsules swirling down to a watery grave. You're not sure which ones are good for suicide, so you'd have to flush them all. You wonder how she'd react to such a drastic course of action, whether or not she'd even notice in her present state. You picture her smacking you. You picture her flushing you down the toilet to retrieve her precious pills. At least then you'd get a reaction out of her, break the spell of—

Your thoughts are interrupted.

Lying on her back, her arms and legs pinned against the bed by a force invisible to you yet obviously tangible to her, she begins to alternately whimper and scream for

him to stop. (You wonder if anyone will hear her and come knocking on the door. Of course they won't.) Her white cotton nightgown becomes a taut, flat surface as her thighs are forced apart. Her hands, twisted into claws, roll in circles across the sheets, trying to fight back but held down. Sweat and tears running down her contorted face, she thrusts her body back and forth, trying to break free. But she can't. Because she couldn't. She throws her head vehemently from side to side, maybe trying to convince herself that what she's experiencing isn't really real.

All of this is happening on the other side of the king-size bed, only inches away from you. You think to yourself that you should get up and...do something. Even if it's just to go over and sit in the chair on the other side of the room. But you can't move. You can only watch.

You understand what you're witnessing, even though you don't know what the hell you're looking at. The shrinks call it a body memory. Her entire body is collaborating with her mind to render a reenactment indistinguishable from the original. What you're seeing is perfectly real, both from your perspective on the outside and even more so to her, even though it occurred decades before we were born. I can also tell you that her resistance is new and improvised. When she went through this the first time, she was no doubt a statue of submission, an empty body. Only now is it safe to fight back. She knows he's dead, but somehow that doesn't seem to help her much.

I can't explain any of this to you, of course. But even if I could, it wouldn't make any difference. A label won't make it any less terrifying. Although she's possessed, this isn't a demon you can exorcize. Saying its name won't make it go away.

Similarly, telling you that recovered memories have become a highly controversial issue within the psychiatric community wouldn't help you any either. Regardless of their accuracy, her memories are the law of the land tonight. (This controversy will, however, cause you quite the existential crisis in a few years. When you become a psych major in college, your professors will tell you that Multiple Personality Disorder (now relabeled Dissociative Identity Disorder) is generally considered something of an urban legend in the psych community, thereby effectively reclassifying the experiences of your childhood from realism to mythology. So there's something to look forward to.)

You want to do something. You want to play the hero and save her. And even if that's a lie, you would if you could. But what can you do? If he were a zombie, you could fight him, try to bash his brains out or something. You could grab our mom, barricade the two of you in the bathroom and wait for the trigger-happy rednecks to arrive. If he were a ghost or a demon, you could make a cross with your index fingers and drive him back to hell. The trusty hotel bible might help too. But how does one fight somebody else's memories? How can a hero slay a monster that only exists in the victim's head? Ironically, people have invented all these supernatural metaphors as less frightening representations of real life horrors. We use them to comfort ourselves with the illusion of control. But they can't help you now.

You hold Poochie a few inches in front of your face, contrasting the serenity of his ever-staring, ever-blank inanimate eyes with the chaos beyond him. He holds within him a peace that you have to envy. You tear open both your chests and begin packing your heart with the stuffing that makes him so pliable and still. You wait as the soft

webbing circulates throughout your body, arresting your pulse, forcing your eyes to grow just as still as his. You begin to feel better. You can endure.

Her psychologists and psychiatrists like to praise you for your performance in scenes like this one. They like to talk about how “strong” you are to remain “calm” and “help” her when she has an “episode.” But what they so happily mistake for extraordinary is, in truth, as simple as it appears on the surface. Silence and stillness are all you have to offer. The truth is you’re a coward, and you would run away, like our father, if there were only someplace for you to run.

Her terror persists well into the elastic hours of the night.

And then it’s finally overcome by exhaustion, and she’s still. Even after it’s over, you continue to sit there (Sleep? Yeah, you think you might’ve heard of such a thing once), waiting for the sun to rise. It doesn’t show any special hurry.

Continue to (9).

(9)

Back at the psychologist’s office, our mom is now telling her version of what happened that night. Her memories are vague. They’re a jumbled mess of reality and fantasy, past and present.

“I remember you,” she says at the end, turning to look at you. “I remember remembering you. That’s really what kept me here.”

While it feels nice to hear her say this, the impact has gradually become diminished through repetition. As we observed at the outset, you've been here before. This is simply the denouement to the current episode of an ongoing series. You know she's not lying, but she has her lines, just like you have yours. And moments like these, even when you're in them, never feel as real as your memories of the events that necessitated them, events like that night in the motel room (or the one our mom relived therein), where the past perpetually intrudes upon the present.

"Is there anything you'd like to add?" the psychologist asks, fixing his unnervingly sympathetic gaze on you.

To tell the truth, **go back to (3) and read the whole thing over again.**

To say what you need to say, **go to (10).**

(10)

"No," you say.

"How do you feel about what happened?" he asks.

"I'm just glad she's okay now," you say, turning to look at our mom, who's looking at you with proud and teary eyes.

"Yes, of course," he says. "But that must have been a very scary experience for you. Are you sure you don't have any feelings you'd like to express?"

He has the best intentions, but you can cut through the crap and see what he's really asking: Are you sure you don't want to upset your mom all over again and make her feel guilty?

To tell the truth, **go back to (3) and read the whole thing over again.**

To say what you need to say, **go to (11).**

(11)

Finally, a choice that matters.

Finally, a scene where you know how to play the hero.

You know your line by heart and deliver it like a pro.

“I’m okay.”

Now, all you have to do is keep saying it over and over again until it’s true.

And when you get tired, I’ll take over.