

The Bassinet and Other Stories

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Wedding Makeup

Karen opened the door to Masterpieces Salon. She had booked an appointment for a makeup trial for her wedding day. She would surprise her fiancé John with the makeup at lunch today at Red Lobster, and he would think she was beautiful, she knew it.

In June in Florida, it was always boiling. The rush of cool dry air startled her. The boxy chairs were covered in white leather, and the cement tile floor had a dull sheen. New age music beat softly in the background. It smelled like glue and perfume.

You don't need makeup, John told her. He had always been upfront about his opinions. *You're wearing that? Green isn't your color*. But he held her hand and bought the meals, and most importantly, asked her to marry him. Karen was 39 years old. She knew she wasn't getting a second offer.

Maybe he was right about the makeup. She looked down at her shapeless paisley dress. It was a size too big for her. Everyone here was wearing a tight black outfit. A couple in front of her laughed quietly over Diet Cokes. She wished she hadn't made the appointment to begin with.

Before she could walk out the door, the receptionist looked at her through purple-framed glasses. She brushed a blue hair strand out of her face. "Who are you here to see?" she asked.

"I'm here to see, well, I'm not sure actually." Karen rubbed her left thumb in short tight circles with her right hand. John wanted her to stop her nervous habits, so she put her arms to her sides. She was so tall and her arms were so long that she never knew what to do with them. They dangled without touching her body.

"Karen?" After Karen nodded, she said, "You're here to see Minnie, I believe."

"Is that my 10:30?" A voice said from the back. The woman – Karen assumed she was Minnie – swayed to the music as she walked to the front. The translucent fabric on her dress flowed independent of her. She put her arm around Karen's back to guide her.

For a moment, Karen wasn't sure why the woman was reaching out and she opened her arms for a hug. She realized she was wrong too late.

The woman didn't see it. She smiled with her eyes. "We'll be preparing your wedding makeup, right? How exciting. I can't wait to get started." She turned to walk to her station. "I'm Minnie, by the way."

Karen followed her with clunky, heavy steps. She had put on a lot of weight recently – her doctor said it was because of stress.

She sat in the chair and looked at herself in the mirror. The white skin on her face glowed whitest around her eyes, which were a dull brown and set far apart. A red chain of acne ran along her chin and cheeks. Her nose sat flat against her face. Her hairline had receded as her thin yellowed hair had thinned even more.

She looked down so she didn't have to see. The only person who had the courage to be honest about her looks was John. And he liked her in spite of them.

"When's the big day?" Minnie asked. She ran her fingers through Karen's hair, pushing a few strands out of her face.

"Next month. I've already booked the other appointment with you," Karen said. She pretended to look at her fingernails. The skin on her hands was flaking.

"Great, great. So tell me, what kind of look are you going for? Natural, more of an evening style, a smoky eye?" Minnie pointed Karen's chin up so she had to look at herself in the mirror.

Karen didn't know there were different styles of makeup. She didn't have a lot of girlfriends. "I don't know."

"Is there any celebrity you like in particular? Someone whose look you like?" Minnie put her hand on Karen's shoulder.

"I don't know a lot about celebrities," Karen said. She only learned about them, if at all, through her daily crossword puzzles.

“Well, I’m thinking a more natural look will be just your style then. What are you planning on doing with your hair?” Minnie opened her makeup drawers, pulling out different creams and powders.

“I thought I’d just, well, put it in a bun. That’s what I normally do with it anyway.” She wore a bun every day at the dentist office, where she was a receptionist. The employee of the year for the past three years, actually. She looked over at Minnie’s hair, which was a smooth perfect bob.

“Then a natural look would be just your style. Would you mind if I turned you around? I like to have a big reveal at the end. We can tweak it from there, of course, but that way it’s a nice surprise,” Minnie said. She was already turning Karen around before she nodded.

Karen breathed out. She was glad the questions would end.

“So how did you meet your partner? What’s his name?” Minnie wiped Karen’s face with a cool cloth. No one had wiped Karen’s face since her mother, who died before she graduated high school.

“His name is John. He goes to the dentist office where I work as a receptionist.” When she handed him the clipboard for his patient information, he brushed his hand over hers and winked. He said he first noticed her by her handwriting. She had written on the “Office Only” section of the paperwork. *It was so careful and clean*, he had said.

He asked her to dinner at Red Lobster after his appointment.

“And what do you like about him? I loved the way my husband pushed his hair back, so clean and smooth.” Minnie was now rubbing a light-colored cream over her face and neck. Her hands were cold on Karen’s face, but she tried not to flinch.

Karen thought for a moment. Finally she said, "I like that he's decisive. What he likes about me is that I'm pretty indecisive. So I guess we make a good team." It was a relief to be with him, really, because she didn't have to worry about anything. She tapped her foot against the plastic foot rest.

Minnie brushed different powders onto her face. "My husband and I are like you. We can never decide where to eat," she said. She laughed, a high-pitched jingle.

"No problems there. John even tells me what to pick on the menu," Karen said. He always liked her best when she picked the cheapest option.

Minnie looked down at the floor. "Well, some decisions are good."

Karen picked at a hangnail. She wished she had worn a sweater. She didn't like the way her arms looked, all hairless and fleshy. *You might think about working out some. You know I like you either way, but you might think about it*, John told her. "How long have you and your husband been married?" she asked.

"For four years," Minnie said. She brushed liquid against the edge of Karen's eyelid.

Karen didn't like the feeling and kept closing her eyes. When she did, she could feel the liquid run against her cheeks.

"Please hold still," Minnie said. She pushed Karen's shoulders back so she was sitting straight up.

Karen waited until Minnie finished with her eyes. "Four years is a long time. John and I have known each other for three months," she said.

Minnie's eyes were so close to hers. They were bright gold with thin hazel lines. "Well that's exciting," she finally said. Her voice didn't rise and fall like a jingle anymore. It fell dull and flat.

“Oh sure, sure. We’re not getting any younger. And John says, ‘When you know, you know,’” Karen felt her chest tighten again. She wasn’t as sure that she knew. He had been only the second person to kiss her. The first was Carl Johnson, when they were thirteen years old. But she wanted to be a mother, a good mother like her own. And she had already scheduled a week-and-a-half off at the dentist’s office, which might ruin her chance to be employee of the year.

Karen could hear the murmurs of other conversations weaving through the music. Everyone else here was thin and young. They sat back and read magazines casually, with smooth unlined faces. Karen hadn’t read a magazine in years, even though she set out the new editions every week in the office. They didn’t have crosswords like the newspapers did.

“Please close your eyes,” Minnie said. She sprayed a thin mist on Karen’s face. “This is the holding spray. We’re almost done.” She put her hands in Minnie’s hair.

“Oh, I don’t need you to fix my hair. I didn’t pay for that,” Karen said. She rubbed her right thumb against her left palm and then stopped herself by placing them in her lap. She didn’t like the way they looked, all pink and fleshy, so she moved them further out on her leg.

“I won’t charge you. I’m just fixing your bun for you, for the full effect,” Minnie said.

Karen remembered the way her mother used to fix her hair. She knew Karen didn’t like brushes, so she’d brush her fingers through Karen’s hair. Her mother said she had a, “unique beauty.”

Minnie told Karen to close her eyes and spun her around to face the mirror.

Long after Karen had stopped spinning, she hadn’t opened her eyes.

“You can open them,” Minnie finally said.

Karen couldn’t find herself behind the woman in the mirror until she realized the woman was her. Her face shimmered with a tan glow and her eyes sparkled big and bold. The acne was

gone. Her bun was on the top of her head, in a big blond poof, and it made her hair look thick and full. She felt pressure in her chest and realized she had stopped breathing for a moment.

“You look pretty.” Minnie nodded her head and raised her eyebrows.

“Thank you,” Karen said. It was her own dull voice but she could see in the mirror that it came from thick, full red lips. Normally, her lips were so thin she couldn’t see them. Now she said, “Thank you,” again, just to watch them move.

“Is there anything you’d like me to change? It’s important you tell me now,” Minnie said. She rested her hands casually against the back of Karen’s chair.

“What color is this lipstick?” Karen asked. She wanted to wear it every day.

“It’s Revlon matte, a shade called *Romance*. Do you like it?”

Karen tapped her foot. She couldn’t stop looking in the mirror. Her cheekbones were strong, prominent, made her look thin. The wrinkles on her forehead had smoothed. Her eyelashes were thick and full. “It’s perfect,” she said.

“I’m glad you like it. Now, let’s get you checked out and on your way. When will I see you again?” Minnie said.

“July eighteenth.” She looked in the mirror one last time before she stood up. Even her nose looked more defined. She straightened her shoulders tall and strong. Who cares if she wasn’t used to a place like this? She looked like she belonged, and that was all that mattered.

Karen paid the bill and gave Minnie what she wanted to be her most gracious and warm smile. She waved a goodbye as she walked toward the door.

“Congratulations again. I’ll see you soon,” Minnie said as Karen walked away.

A burst of humid warmth hit her as soon as she opened the door. She felt it breeze along her perfect skin and hair. She sat in her green 1994 Toyota Corolla, her first and only car. It was

already noon, and she was supposed to meet John at noon. John didn't like it when she was late, and especially when he had somewhere to be. He wanted to get his haircut after lunch.

She turned the AC up and began to drive to the Red Lobster. Once he saw her, he'd understand why she was late. She was beautiful like her mother.

When she stopped at the first traffic light, she pulled down the mirror to look at herself again. She squinted her eyes in the white summer light. The sun shone against a smooth film of perspiration on her face. She, Karen, was radiating.

A man in the car over winked at her. He could've been squinting in the sun, really, but she gave a wave just in case. The light turned green.

She always drove the exact speed limit, but today, she drove 60 mph in a 55. If she were pulled over, she was sure she could talk her way out of a ticket.

She turned into the Red Lobster and parked. Maybe John wouldn't even recognize her. She wished she had time to buy a new dress. Hers was still the shapeless paisley, but she imagined that it flowed the way Minnie's had. She pulled a safety pin out of the emergency sewing kit in the glove compartment and clipped the waist in the back so it looked like she had more of a figure.

When she opened the door to the Red Lobster, she hoped that everyone might stop and stare. But they continued to murmur among themselves, not even looking. Before the hostess even spoke to her, she saw the back of John's head at their favorite table.

She walked over, swaying her hips side to side. She breathed deep for a moment. "Hi John," she said from behind him in her softest and most alluring voice.

"You're late. I've already ordered everything." He said this without turning around to look at her.

She made sure she was standing straight and tall. She put a hand on his shoulder.

He turned. His eyes widened and then narrowed. He pushed his lips together. “What’s – what’s that?”

Karen pulled her hand off his shoulder. It hung limply at her side. “I got my makeup done to surprise you.”

He folded his arms against his chest. He continued to look at her, his eyes narrowed and unblinking.

“You don’t like it?” she said. Her shoulders slouched. She bit her lip and she could taste the lipstick. It tasted like plastic.

“Karen, I like you when you look like your normal self. I didn’t ask for this.” He gestured at her face.

“But I look better. Don’t you think I look better?” Maybe he was right. She looked around to make sure no one else was looking at her. She didn’t understand. Minnie had called her pretty.

“Better? You’re fine as you are. Just fine. Come on, Karen, who told you this was a good idea?”

Karen rubbed her left thumb in her right palm. Was Minnie lying? She thought about Minnie’s hands in her hair, how sure they had been. She had seen it for herself in the mirror – she was pretty. She had felt it.

The server brought calamari and he turned to look at it. It steamed in front of him. “Look, why don’t you go to the bathroom and take it off? We can have a nice lunch and forget anything happened.” He reached for her hand and squeezed it.

“I paid money for the appointment. I spent hours there today.” Karen felt the warmth of his hand in hers. Her armpits cooled with sweat.

“I love you Karen. I love you the way you are. I don’t want you embarrassing yourself.” His hand let go of hers.

Karen looked down at her hand. It was still pale and flaky. She felt her thighs touching – she never had nice legs. Her calves poked out from under her dress, pale and bulbous, with thick blue varicose veins. She stood there for a moment.

“Just don’t take too long – I have to get my haircut after this,” John said. His words were thick and muffled by the calamari.

The safety-pinned waist of her dress felt too tight. She was right – John was the only person willing to tell her the truth. She pointed her face to the ground so no one would see her and headed toward the bathroom.

Karen pushed through the sliding door. A drain in the middle of the floor had stopped up and the ground was covered in a thin opaque puddle. She pulled a paper towel from the rotating dispenser.

She rested her hands on the sticky plastic counter and looked at herself in the mirror for so long her knees began to ache. Her hair was still puffed up, thick and full. She could still see the wrinkles under the pale cream on her forehead, but only if she looked hard. She had thought she looked better.

But John had always been honest with her, and he loved her anyway.

A woman in her thirties walked out of the stall behind her and turned on one of the faucets.

Karen averted her eyes, hoping the woman wouldn't notice her. She ran the paper towel under the only other sink in the bathroom.

"Honey," the woman said, "Where did you get that lipstick? I love it."

Karen glanced up and looked away. "Oh, I don't know." She pressed soap from the dispenser onto the towel. She didn't want the woman to look too closely at her.

"Do you know what it's called? I've been looking for a new lipstick myself." The woman rubbed her hands together under the faucet. Her hands were smooth and tan, and her nails were manicured long and red.

Karen rubbed the soap along the length of the paper towel. It spread in thin pink globs. "It's Revlon something. I think the color is called *Romance*."

"I like it on you. It really brings out the hazel in your eyes." She smiled. Her own makeup looked smooth and effortless. She wore a yellow dress with a thin belt at her waist. She looked like the kind of person to wear heels anywhere – the kind of person who normally wouldn't talk to Karen.

"Really? I was thinking I wouldn't wear it again," Karen said. The sink was still running but her hands weren't moving anymore. She looked in the mirror. Even in the florescent bathroom light, her eyes did sparkle.

"Oh yes. It's pretty on you. Sometimes you find that one shade that's just perfect. I wore L'Oreal British Red for, gosh, probably five years." She laughed.

Karen laughed with her. She didn't know if five years was a long time for lipstick but she didn't care. This woman was beautiful and she saw her as someone like her. "Well, I like what you have now. It's very subdued." She wasn't sure if women called lipstick subdued. She hoped they did.

“Thank you. A little too subdued, if you ask me. I’m ready to find something that pops again.” She closed her fists and opened them fast to make a popping gesture.

Karen had always seen women in the bathroom talking, but no one had ever talked to her before. Her heart beat fast. Before she could complement the woman on her eye makeup, a knock rang against the bathroom door.

“Karen, are you in there?” It was John.

“Yes,” Karen said. She shrugged to the woman, hoping it looked casual.

“What’s taking you so long? I’ve already eaten,” he said. His voice was sharp. It cracked at *so long*.

“I was just chatting to someone,” Karen said. She hadn’t meant to make John wait. She knew how much he hated waiting.

“Well I have to get to my haircut now.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be done soon,” Karen said. She tried to make her voice sound light.

The woman started to rub her hands faster. Her heel clicked against the floor as she stretched for a paper towel. She was moving fast now, trying to stay out of their conversation. Karen didn’t want her to go – they had been chatting so naturally, like friends.

“Come on, Karen, don’t make me late.” John knocked on the door at the word *late*.

“I just need another minute,” Karen said. She raised the paper towel to her face, but couldn’t wipe it against her skin. It was smooth, without any wrinkles, without any acne, smooth like porcelain. Her skin looked like her mother’s skin, shimmery and perfect, the way it looked when she stood on her toes to kiss her mother’s cheek.

Karen looked over at the woman, who gave her a short wave and backed around the puddle toward the door. She didn't know what she could say to the woman but she didn't want her to go yet.

"I'm going to count to three. If you're not out by then, I'm leaving this restaurant," John said.

The woman stopped at John's voice outside, and turned back toward her. She was mouthing something to Karen but she couldn't hear what it was.

Karen ground her back teeth against each other. She looked at herself in the mirror.

She put a hand on the plastic countertop to steady herself.

The two women looked at each other as the countdown began.

The End.

TWA Museum

Mia walked into the old office building entrance and followed a series of paper signs on the wall indicating *TWA Museum This Way* →. Peter, Mia's father, walked behind her with taut knees and short steps. He promised her a half-hour visit and he would fulfill his promise but not a minute more.

"Welcome to the TWA Museum," a woman with a volunteer badge said when they reached the main room. It was small, but every wall was covered in a floor-to-ceiling glass case.

The cases were packed with old flight attendant uniforms, model planes, magazine articles, maintenance tools. “One adult ticket and one senior ticket, I assume?”

Peter grunted. Even at 88 years old, he had a hard time calling himself a senior. He leaned his elbow against the counter for support. His face was covered with dark sun spots, but he still had most of his hair, which had faded to a sandy-brown.

Mia handed her the money for the tickets. “We’re excited to be here. My father worked for TWA for over 30 years. He was a flight safety instructor.” She was wearing a white button-down, but it was a bit wrinkled. Peter wondered if she’d been busy recently.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to have you. We’re love when our old employees come by. We all worked for TWA ourselves – I worked in the copy room,” the woman gestured to herself. “That was back when we mailed paper tickets.”

Peter just nodded. He hadn’t left the house in the past week and he was already tired of talking to people. After he retired, he used to meet every Tuesday with a group of eleven retirees, old instructors and pilots. The funeral for the last of the eleven, Greg Bridges, was last week. Mia would only attend it with Peter if he would visit the museum with her that next Tuesday.

“Let me know if you have any questions. John in the back gives tours of the facility, if you’d like one,” the woman handed her a small receipt.

Mia rubbed the receipt into a ball between her hands. “We’d love a tour. Wouldn’t we, Dad?” She rolled her sleeves up to her elbows.

“I don’t know if we have the time.” He glanced at his watch and felt the stubble on his chin. The skin on his neck hung loose.

“Really, we’d love a tour,” Mia said. She kicked Peter’s foot under the counter.

Peter folded his arms across his chest and looked down at the floor.

The woman paged for John through a walkie-talkie and he walked up from the back. He was middle-aged, with buzzed white hair and circle-rimmed glasses. He wore light blue jeans and a red polo. When he shook their hands, he used large, friendly gestures.

After they all introduced themselves, John said, “Did you both know that we’re in TWA’s original building? Yes, it started here in Kansas City in 1924.”

“Did you work in this building, Dad?” Mia asked. She smiled at him. “My dad worked for TWA for 33 years teaching flight safety.”

“34 years. We had a safety training building, a couple of streets over. I never worked here.” Peter said. He would’ve worked any of those 34 years again – even with the know-it-all pilots and the layoffs. But here, he felt ridiculous, visiting a museum of his own life.

“Well, Peter, it’s so great to see one of our own. I was in IT a while back, and I love these tours because people like you teach me what it was like to be on the front lines.” John put a hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, it was a long time ago now,” Peter said. He’d rather be talking to people who could remember with him. He thought about the Tuesday meetings at Greg’s, how his wife would always make finger sandwiches. When the first of them died, they all attended the funeral in their old Air Force uniforms, pressed and starched.

John nodded. “Let’s get started with the tour, shall we? This building in particular was mostly for administrative offices, even Howard Hughes’s. But we have some of the old safety equipment, which I bet you’ll remember. In fact, let’s start there.”

Mia kept nodding and murmuring in agreement. She walked fast. She reminded Peter of her mother, who was always so positive, more positive than Peter would’ve liked.

They followed John into a nearby room, where old flight simulators lined the walls. They were black metal boxes, taller than a man, and they were covered in switches and gears in a cockpit.

Peter pulled his glasses out of his front pocket. They were thick and smudged and the ends were slightly bent. He looked up and down one of the simulators, leaning slightly forward. He bit his bottom lip and ran a finger against the stubble on his chin. It'd been so long since he'd seen one.

"Now this was the highest-tech safety equipment in the 1970s, as I'm sure you know. Our program was the best in the world at the time. We recently fixed up one of these simulators, so we can turn it on." John walked over to the machine closest to the door and flipped a switch.

The machine turned on with a great whirling noise. The buttons lit up and the area around switches brightened with different colors. Some of the instruments emitted a steady beeping. Different colors flashed up and down the simulator. "It looks like a Christmas tree," Mia said.

"Now, instructors would use these to simulate different disaster scenarios to pilots-in-training. Let me give you an example," John said. Then he straightened his back and put a finger in the air. "Wait. Why don't we have our resident expert show us how it's done?"

Peter didn't look John in the eyes. His shoulders slouched and he rubbed his foot against the floor. "Oh, I don't know. I've been retired for twenty years now."

"Dad, why don't you show us? I'd really like to see," Mia said. She put her hand on her dad's arm.

"It's been so long. Too long, I think." He used to use the machines every day, but now he wasn't sure if he'd remember which switch to pull. He shrugged, hoping it looked casual.

“You could just give us a snapshot of what it was like.” John nodded his head again and again. “I can use what you show us on future tours.”

As an instructor, Peter remembered how important storytelling was in teaching. He used to tell jokes throughout his classes to keep people interested. “Well, I can see if I know where the old switches were.” He stepped up to the side of the simulator, which was still beeping and whirling. “We’d have the pilots stand here.” He pointed to the area in front of the simulator.

John walked over to the spot. He leaned back on the balls of his feet.

“And we’d create a scenario. Like you’re first-in-command of a 747, you lose thrust in one engine.” He kept his voice level and uninterested. He flipped a switch down and the simulator started to beep fast, a loud, blaring noise.

Lights flashed up and down, and Peter remembered what it was like when he first trained new pilots, their wide eyes and shaking hands. He was talking faster now. “And all of the sudden, you’ve lost thrust on the second engine.” He flipped another switch and a higher-pitched beep joined the first. More lights flashed, bold and red.

The pilots would have studied the switches but as soon as they stood there, they’d freeze. He’d run the simulator again and again until they knew it by heart.

He flipped the switch back and all was quiet. “I tested Air Force One when the 747 was just coming out, and those guys didn’t break a sweat. They said it was easy.” He shrugged. “So I turned off the lights and turned on a smoke machine and tried it again. They didn’t think it was so easy then.” It was the sort of story the retirees would tell at the meetings, laughing over mint lemonades dripping with condensation.

“I didn’t know you trained Air Force One?” Mia said. She pressed her hands together, cracking her knuckles.

“We taught everyone.” He waved a hand, the top of which was purple with a large uneven bruise. He had only bumped it against a doorframe, but he bruised easily now.

“I love that story. I think I’ll use it on future tours.” John smiled before he turned the simulator off completely.

Peter was glad they were teaching the importance of flight safety. When he first joined TWA, they were only training the flight attendants with a safety pamphlet. By the time he left, he had co-authored a manual as thick as the length of his hand. But now, everything had changed. They used computer simulators for training, not these mammoths.

“Next on our tour, and I think you’ll be really interested in this. We have a functional MD-83 in our old airfield. Would you like to see it?” John said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Peter said. He looked at his watch. Their half an hour had passed. And he hadn’t stepped in a plane since his early retirement, seventeen years ago.

Mia started toward the door so they would have to follow. “Of course we would, Dad.” He knew she wouldn’t give up easily. *My time is up*, he had started to tell her, his eyes looking at nothing in particular. *Of course it isn’t*, she’d say stubbornly.

John took the lead. His belt was buckled so tightly that his jeans crinkled at his waist. He seemed to bounce when he stepped. The back of his neck was red with sunburn.

Peter followed next to Mia. When he rested his hand against his side, his watch slipped down his wrist. There was a pink indentation mark where it had rested.

They walked from the darkness of the old maintenance area – *in operation from the 1920s to the 1960s!* John said – into the light of the afternoon. It was warm for March. The sky was bright white and the air smelled musty with future rain.

The old airfield looked like any airfield, a flat asphalt lot. Peter remembered the first time he flew a jet in training, how the asphalt stretched in front of him and then receded far below, invisible in an ocean of whites and blues. That was back when air compartments weren't pressurized, and he wore an oxygen mask and pressure suit.

As they walked across, John explained the history of the plane. "We called it the Wings of Pride. The MD-83 was bought by TWA in the 1990s, after your time. Employees themselves raised the money for the \$233,000 monthly lease." His right shoe squeaked as he walked.

They stood in front of the plane, and it stretched past them with a gentle shining curve. On the side, it said, *Sponsored by the Employee-Owners of TWA*. It was bright crimson red with clean white detailing. It was quiet now, turned off, but he knew the intricacies of its inner workings, the underlying power. He felt its presence now, smooth and majestic, humming just under its surface.

"Why is it red? I thought they only had white planes," Mia said. A gust of wind whipped her hair above her head and she sighed as she pressed it back down. Her skin was dark under her eyes and Peter wondered if she'd been sleeping enough. She seemed more tired than she let on.

"TWA made it different to thank the employees for their contributions. American painted it white after the merger, but we changed it back of course." John began to walk up the metal stairs leading to the plane's door.

The stairs were taller than normal and more narrow. The metal frame bounced just slightly with every step. Mia positioned herself to walk up the stairs behind her father. Peter knew she didn't want him to fall. He didn't like when she worried but he pretended not to notice.

The interior of the plane was dark, the only light slanting in from the windows. It smelled faintly like stale urine. They stood in the aisle and John said, “Now, since American flew the plane after the merger, you can see they changed the seat layout to their own.”

The seats were narrow, upholstered with a cheap rough fabric. Peter was from the days of the DC-10s and L-1011s, when there were lounges even in coach and every passenger was addressed by name. He still had the old china sets from first-class dining.

John was talking about the history of the plane, the foundation which purchased it just a few years ago, but Peter wasn’t listening anymore.

He was remembering how many stagnant planes he had been in – more than planes in flight. He’d take a crew of flight attendants or pilots inside, and in the dark stale air, he’d explain the mechanics of passenger oxygen masks, life rafts, and emergency exits. Sometimes, during his lunch break, he’d sit alone, eating his sandwich in the quiet peace of an empty plane.

That’s what the group of retirees shared, a reverence for flight. Greg, the last left, used to talk about his first flight, the feeling of fear and awe when the wheels just kissed the ground, his grey eyes watering.

John tapped his foot and said, “The next stop on our tour is the cockpit. Now, this is a fully functional plane, like I said before, although we’re working on its flight certification. We ask that you stand behind the yellow line.” He pulled the door open.

Grey light streamed in from the windshield. A steady, cool quiet settled in the plane.

The instruments lined the front and top of the cockpit, as far as a pilot could reach. There were so many more than in those early jets that Peter had flown. He recognized the compass indicator RMI, the pedal adjustment knob, the hydraulic pumps. After all these years, he still

knew the instrumentation, its placement and function, like an old friend. His career of flying had laid latent, hidden under papery skin and sandy hair.

“May I step over the line?” he said. His voice was so soft, he didn’t recognize it.

John frowned. “It’s really against protocol.” He opened the door to step outside again.

“Not that I don’t trust you, I do.”

“He’ll be alright, won’t you Dad?” Mia said. She leaned her hand on his arm.

Peter nodded, grateful to Mia. He thought maybe he should thank her later. His fingers itched, so close to the instruments.

“Well,” John nodded as he rubbed his hands together, “Don’t go too far though.”

Peter stepped over the line. He could see it now, the hostesses bustling in their bright blue jackets and skirts, their hair styled just above the shoulder. He imagined the faint murmuring of the passengers, the clunking of briefcases into the overhead compartments.

He ran his hands over the instruments, softly so as not to change anything. Somewhere in the distance John was saying, *I’d appreciate if you didn’t touch that. I think it’s time to go*, but Peter wasn’t ready. He sat in the pilot’s seat, and the foam sank down with him. He flexed his hands on the cold shiny plastic of the nose gear steering wheel, and it was good to have his hands on a wheel again.

Peter thought about his first flight, the instructor talking in the co-pilot seat, the cool glass windshield of the jet, the air pressure rising. He imagined the hum of the plane, this plane, force-retired but still able to fly. The moment before a plane took off, when the wheels were just inches from the ground, and anything and anywhere was possible, that was when he felt free.

He closed his eyes, pressed his hands on the wheel, and remembered.

The End.

Seven Losses

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One – October 8, 1948

The first funeral Mary attended was her grandmother's when she was six years old. Her mother had bought her grey stockings for the funeral, and Mary swung her legs back and forth in the pew, looking at the stockings. She was glad, really, because the air in October had cooled and she could wear these on her walk to school.

It was a Polish tradition, her mother said, to put one's hands on the dead and say last words. Mary stopped herself from skipping to the casket because her mother had told her to be very quiet. The casket was pine because they couldn't afford mahogany, but Mary didn't know the difference. She stretched her back tall to see over the edge.

She expected her grandmother would look like she was sleeping. Instead, there was a still white shell. Her cheeks laid flat against the inner ridges of her teeth. The skin on her face was yellow and smooth, not lined with old-age wrinkles. She couldn't believe it was her Babciu, the woman who only spoke to her in Polish and wore black wool skirts. But her hair was the same, pulled tightly back from her forehead in a thick white bun.

If her mother's mother could die, then Mary's own mother could die. She imagined her mother's thick dark hair spread on the white satin pillow, her hands folded quietly on her stomach. Mary's mother's hands were always moving, knitting and cooking and sending notes of encouragement to the nearest hospital in Springfield, Missouri. Her fingers were long and tapered, with rough pads at the end from needle pricks when sewing.

Mary looked back at her. Her mother's shoulders were straight in her navy sweater – a new black one was too much money but navy was dark enough. The sleeves of her sweater were rolled up to her pink elbows, and her pale forearms shook slightly.

The hairs by her mother's temple were already silver.

Her mother put a hand on her left shoulder and whispered to her, "Now reach for her hand and say goodbye." Mary reached for the hand, and when she felt the cool hard bone of her knuckle, she pulled her arm away and stepped back fast.

Mary felt the back of her stocking rip. She turned around and saw the end of a nail jutting out of the back of the pulpit, a thin line of blood running down her calf. She opened and closed

her hand, feeling the cold spread from her fingers up her arm and shoulder, over to her mother's silver hair.

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Two – November 17, 1954

Mary's dog Red was a big dog with shining golden fur and black radiant eyes. He smiled so big his dark gums showed. He always smelled a bit stale because he loved to swim at the nearby lake. Everyone in town knew him by his maroon bandana.

Mary's mother had bought him as puppy from a woman outside of the grocery store one late afternoon when Mary herself was a baby. Mary's father had gone out again on a drinking spree and she thought a dog might add an extra layer of protection.

When Mary was twelve years old, she woke up one morning and Red was quiet, his body against the foot of her bed. She reached out a finger and touched the tip of his ear. It was soft and feathery and cold. She held his face in her sleep-warmed hands for a long time before she called her mother over.

While her mother hugged her, she ran her fingers through Mary's hair. Her hand was warm against the back of Mary's head.

They pulled Red into the woods out back. The ground was cold and they took turns digging a hole for him and his favorite bone. When it was big enough, Mary untied the bandana around his neck and pushed dirt over him, her fingernails and the lines on her hands brown with dirt. It made a soft pattering sound like rain when it fell.

To make a cross, she held two sticks perpendicular and wrapped twine around and around. It burned a thin pink line across her palms. She planted it in front of the grave. Mary didn't want to leave Red outside by himself. She thought about the way he used to shake under

her bed when it thundered. She sat on the pile of dirt near him, and when she hummed, she imagined he could hear.

Her mother stood next to her. “We can get another dog,” she finally said. She put her hand on Mary’s shoulder.

Mary pushed her hand off. “I don’t want another dog,” she said without looking at her. “You don’t understand.” She picked at the dirt underneath her fingernails and squinted her eyes, waiting for her mother to tell her she had been rude, it was time to leave.

Instead her mother brushed the leaves away and sat next to her, holding her knees close to her body for warmth. She started to hum the song Mary left off, an old Polish lullaby. Her voice wove through the trees around them, off-tune but soft in the cold woods.

Mary’s nose was running and she kept wiping it, her sleeve streaked with dark lines. Her hands shook as she tied the bandana to the top of the cross. It sailed, a faded burgundy, in the sharp November wind.

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Three – April 8, 1966

Mary lay in her bed, the shades drawn. Water ran from her eye onto her pillow but she wasn’t crying. She was twenty-four, and had been married to Chester, an electrical engineer with kind eyes, for three years. She held her old baby blanket to her nose, felt the rough crocheted yarn, smelled its must.

She had been to Dr. Monroe again, and he said Mary and Chester’s blood types were too “incompatible” to have children. She had been lying in her room for two days now. Her mother had come to stay while Chester was at work, leaving trays of food outside her door.

Throughout the morning, Mary watched the light from the shades move across her bed. She looked at the grey water stain on the ceiling and the bent television antenna and the white marks from her face creams on her dresser. When the light from the shades reached her face, she pulled the baby blanket over her head. She heard a knock at the door, three sharp *ticks*.

“I’m not hungry,” she said, her voice muffled by the blanket. It used to be white, faded into a soft yellow.

“I don’t care if you’re hungry,” her mother said. She opened the door with an awkward jolt and a flood of light from the kitchen illuminated the room. “We’re going to do some Spring cleaning.”

Mary closed her eyes, but she could still see the light, red through her eyelids. “I’m not cleaning anything,” she said.

“Yes you are. You think I’m doing this on my own?” Her mother was already straightening the creams on the dresser, rubbing at the stains with an old rag. Her arm moved clumsily, her knuckles swollen with early rheumatoid arthritis. She opened the window and cool air rushed in.

“I’m not cleaning anything,” Mary said again. She closed her eyes. Her pillow smelled sour.

Her mother pulled the covers off of her and she shivered without them. “Feet on the floor.” When Mary didn’t move, she said louder, “Feet on the floor,” the way she did when she used to wake Mary up for school. She shook out the duvet and threw it in a mass on the floor.

“I’m tired,” Mary said. She pulled the baby blanket around her shoulders like a shawl.

Her mother was already shaking the pillows out of their cases, throwing them onto the floor with the duvet. With each addition, the pile slouched. She pulled at the sheets, the fitted sheet snapping up from the corners of the bed and yanked them out from under Mary.

Mary didn't want to lay on the pilling mattress, so she stood up.

Without looking at her, her mother said, "I left a bucket and mop in the kitchen for you." With the rag, she dusted the blinds.

"But I don't want to wash the floor. I'm tired," Mary said. She put her hand on her hip.

Her mother didn't even turn to her. She opened the door to the bathroom to take a look. She was wearing her cleaning clothes, a checkered summer dress that buttoned down the front. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and her black sandals squeaked against the tiled bathroom floor.

With nowhere else to go, Mary turned to the light of the kitchen, holding the baby blanket tight around her shoulders.

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Four – September 6, 1970

The doctors had been wrong about the arthritis. After a series of fevers and rashes, her mother had been diagnosed with lupus a couple of years ago. Now she was in ICU with pneumonia, her breathing strained, the tips of her fingers blue.

The nurses had said they had to go home. Now Mary and Chester sat in the living room with microwavable meals on green plastic trays. They faced the television even though there was nothing on and held the untouched meals in their laps. Chester rocked in his faux-leather lazy boy, back and forth.

The silence was cold and metallic so she finally said, “Do you want a honey bun? I want a honey bun.”

Chester shook his head No. He was normally so clean-shaven but there was dark stubble around his lips and cheeks. He lay back and looked at the popcorn ceiling.

She got a honey bun from the kitchen and sat on the couch, unwrapping the plastic. It crinkled with loud, tearing noises.

“I wonder when Mother will be released,” she said like every night the past week. She shook her leg up and down and kept pushing her hair back from her face. The honey bun stuck in her fingers but she didn’t take a bite.

For the first time Chester didn’t say, *I hope she’ll be home soon*, like he said every night.

Instead he sat there rocking and she sat there holding the honey bun and that was the last time they talked about Mother coming home.

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Five – September 11, 1970, 7:42PM

Mother.

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Six – July 19, 2011

Chester had fallen a fourth time, and their social worker didn’t give them a choice. She said he was unfit to live alone and he had to move into a care facility. And where Chester went, Mary went as well. They had sold the home they retired in, and now were clearing Mary’s mother’s home as well. She had never talked about her mother’s death, but she felt it here now.

Mary had gotten the house in her mother's will. She'd dropped by every once in a while, given it a good cleaning a couple of times a year. They kept it these past thirty years, thought they would rent it out, but there had always been another tomorrow. Now they had moved the furniture they could – a few dressers, the coffee table that Mary played under as a child – and sold the rest.

Mary walked through the living room a last time. The carpet had greyed with age but there was a preserved white rectangle where the couch used to sit. The blinds were closed to save air conditioning bills for the next family, the Robinsons.

She walked through the bedroom, which she and her mother had shared back when her grandmother lived in the other room. When Mary would wake up, her mother was often clanging the small beads of a metal rosary. Across from the bed, the wall was scuffed from the desk Chester built her mother. He had bought the wood at a lumber yard, sanded and treated it. It was her last Christmas gift from him.

At one of the bedroom's doorframes, Mary looked for the marks her mother had made with her childhood height. The lines were faded from the sun, but they were still there. She had always thought she'd add her own marks for her children. *11-5-1943, 12-1-1945*, all the way to *11-8-1956*, even after her old dog Red died. He was the only dog she owned, and it was so long ago she squinted when she thought about him.

She remembered how her mother had reached above the frame for a pencil. Mary reached now, moving her fingers along the top edge, which was gritty with dust.

The pencil fell from the frame and bounced along the floor. Mary picked it up. It was short, not the bright yellow of pencils of today, but the dull yellow of pencils from the 50's.

“Honey, are you ready to go?” Chester said from the kitchen. Their friend Edith had been helping them move and was waiting in the car with the last of their things.

“Yes,” she said. She ran her finger along the length of the pencil, rubbing off the dust, and put it in her shirt pocket. She walked through the home she had grown up in, turning off the lights as she went.

In the kitchen, blue light streamed through the windows above the sink. Mary could see motes floating in the air. The sink dripped. She wished they could’ve fixed it for the Robinsons, but figured they’d understand. They were nice people.

“Are you ready to go?” Chester asked again. His walker caught on the carpet as he moved onto the kitchen tile. He wasn’t supposed to be using a walker, he was supposed to be in a wheelchair, but he just couldn’t give it up.

Mary helped him untangle the walker from the carpet. “What if they paint over my height lines in the bedroom?” she asked. She pulled the pencil out of her pocket and held onto it tight with her right hand.

“Maybe they won’t,” Chester said. He put his hand on her left shoulder. He started that decades ago when she told him how her mother used to.

“But what if they do?” she rolled the pencil back and forth. She liked the warm pressure of his hand.

“They’ll still be there, even if they’re under paint,” Chester said. He moved his whole body when he looked around the room – Mary noticed his neck had been especially stiff recently.

She stood there a long time, wishing they had fixed the sink. She held onto the pencil and felt the stillness of the house. She knew Edith was waiting, so she finally said, “Let’s go.”

She walked behind Chester in case his walker caught on the carpet again. She turned off the final light and stepped carefully over the threshold. She looked back before she closed the door.

The house was empty and she felt that emptiness inside of her, an unsettling dark quiet.

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Seven – November 30, 2016

The nurse who had known Mary and Chester the best over the past five years organized Chester's memorial service. She set up four chairs in the activities room, one for herself and three for Chester's friends. Mary wouldn't need a chair because she didn't move from her sticky vinyl recliner. She had stopped talking half a year before. Doctors said she had dementia, but the nurses just called it old.

The nurse looked through Mary's drawers for black clothes but couldn't find any among the quarter-length pants and colored sweaters. She found a disposable plastic tablecloth from last Halloween and tied it around Mary's neck. It covered her like a tarp.

Mary opened her mouth and let out a long, tuneless droning noise. At first it didn't sound like a word, but the longer she droned, it was clear there were two syllables. The droning continued and the word was *Mother*, again and again, deep and low.

The nurse wheeled her to the activities room. Mary's elbow propped her arm up and her hand curled in front of her face toward her shoulder. The nurse tried to move her hand so she could see, but she was rigid. The nurse wiped the drool that had pooled under her chin onto the tablecloth.

A pastor, who normally came to speak on Wednesdays, talked about the love of God and Mary's voice continued to ring, a cracked warbled noise. He talked about Chester, the way he

always combed his own hair, even on the day he died, and Mary droned louder. He talked about how long they had been married: 53 years. But no one could hear him now because Mary's voice amplified, a swollen pulsating throb.

The nurse wheeled her back to her room. There, the nurse took the tablecloth off and turned on the television. Mary didn't look at the television. She looked at the empty bed beside hers. She moved her right arm, pressed her hand on her other shoulder.

The nurse pushed her arm back down. She angled Mary's chair so she had to look at the television. She shut the door behind her and walked back to the memorial service.

Mary didn't look at the door when it closed. She droned on, a deep hollow animal noise, filling the stillness of the room long into the night.

The End.

The Rabbit

Anne and her mother walked through the sliding doors of the Pet Supermarket. It was late afternoon in November and the light outside was already fading. It smelled like fur and pine chips. “Are you excited?” her mother said.

“No,” Anne said. She looked down at her tennis shoes, which were scuffed at their backs. She thought a smelly pet shop was a crummy way to spend a birthday.

“Oh, sure you’ll be,” her mom said, her voice unnaturally high. She put a hand on Anne’s back as they walked further into the store.

They had moved to Georgia a month ago, after her mother's last breakup. She found a new job as a CNA here in the middle of the Anne's school year. Anne's dad had never been in the picture, but there had always been a steady stream of men. Her mother said the move would be good for both of them.

But Anne knew it wouldn't be a good move. She missed Ms. Alpern, her English teacher with curly blond hair and kind green eyes. Ms. Alpern used to ask Anne about her day, sing in class, and write notes of encouragement on papers. Everyone in that class knew each other by name.

Every Friday since the move, her mother would ask, *Do you want to invite any friends over?* And every Friday, Anne would say, *No*. She still ate her lunch alone in the high school library, sitting between Science Fiction and Geography. That morning, her mother said, *We're getting you a rabbit for your birthday. I got my pet rabbit when I was 14, and he was a great friend to me.*

"I found the rabbits last week. Let me show you where they are," her mom said. She had come the week before to check out the rabbits, and insisted on going back to this Pet Supermarket, even though Anne found one that was closer.

"Look, now I've come, and I still don't want a rabbit. Can we go?" Anne looked back at the door. The fish tanks glowed blue along the wall near the door.

"You'll love it when you see it, I promise," her mother said. Her arms swung as she walked.

They passed a woman who was holding onto the leash of a jumping husky. The husky looked at Anne, his blue eyes dancing. Now, a dog could be a true friend to her. But her mother

was allergic to dogs, so instead they were going to get a rabbit that only pooped and ate and pooped some more.

Anne walked carefully. A thin layer of pet fur covered the floor and made it slick. They passed the green-and-yellow parakeets, who pruned their feathers and hopped stupidly into each other. They found the glass enclosures that held small animals. Anne saw a ferret in the first enclosure, with its unnaturally long body and thinning hair. It squirmed as it pushed its dry pink nose into its bedding.

“Here they are,” her mother said. She smiled and the creases next to her eyes pinched together.

The tag on cage said, *Rabbits, Male, Ideal for children 12 and up*. There was only one rabbit there. He laid on its side, breathing heavily. He was enormous, with a thick roll of fat at his neck pushing into his face. His fur was an eerie white, and his eyes glowed with pink irises and bright red pupils. His lower lip was slightly open, and Anne could see his long yellow front teeth.

“It’s nice of you, Mom, it really is, but I still don’t want him. He’ll probably bite.” Anne crossed her arms across her chest. All the animal smells were making her nauseous.

“Just hold him. They’re so soft, and I bet he’ll like you.” Anne’s mom bit her bottom lip. Her shirt was wrinkled and there was a small brown stain from her coffee earlier. She wasn’t wearing any makeup and her light eyebrows blended into her skin. Before Anne could say anything, she waved to a man in a dark green polo.

“How can I help you?” the man said. His shirt stretched tight across his belly fat. He had short silver hair and a thin mustache. His nametag said, *Hi, my name is Mitch!* He looked only at her mother.

“We’d like to hold the rabbit, if that’s alright?” She brushed a strand of hair out of her face.

“We’re not sure if we’ll buy him,” Anne said. She gave her mom a tight smile.

“Sure, it’s good to see you again.” He winked to her mother. “I’ll just get the key from the manager.” When he turned around, Anne could see that his jeans were torn at the backs of his heels. The keys on his belt made a jingling noise as he walked.

Anne looked at her mother, who watched him walk away. “What did he mean, ‘see you again’?”

“Oh, I saw him here last week, when I came in to look around at the pets.” She shrugged and looked away.

“It’s time to go,” Anne said. She turned toward the door.

Anne’s mother stepped closer to her as she whispered, “Just do what I say this once. This is my birthday gift to you.” She pulled down on her shirt to straighten the wrinkles. They bounced back up. She positioned her arm to cover the coffee stain on her shirt.

Anne looked down at her own grey sweatshirt. It was pilling under her arms and almost reached almost down to her knees. “Mom, the rabbit’s just going to poop everywhere. I don’t want to clean up after him.”

“You won’t mind when you become friends with him, I promise. Look how cute he is.” She pointed to the cage and winked at Anne.

“Or maybe, we can move back to Virginia, where I already had friends.” It wasn’t the first time Anne had brought Virginia back up. Ms. Alpern used to bring fresh bread into class every Friday. Most days, Anne would stay late and talk to her between classes, sharing her

dreams of becoming a nurse. Her room had so many lava lamps that it glowed a bright comforting purple.

In this new school, Anne didn't know where she fit. Between classes, she'd watch people pass her in the grey hallway and words stuck in her throat.

"This is better for us, and it'll be better for you soon. As soon as we get settled." She looked over at Mitch, who was back, unlocking the top of the cage.

He picked up the fat rabbit. He hung limply in his hands, sniffing the air lazily. Mitch hoisted him up to his shoulder to show her how to hold him. "Here you go," he said. When he leaned toward her, he smelled like cigarette smoke and sweat and cleaning solution.

The rabbit was heavy in Anne's hands. She looked into the pink of his iris, the edge of white around his pupil. He sniffed her ear and rubbed his face into her shoulder. His sharp yellow nails dug through her jacket into her arm. Silvery white hairs floated through the air around him. One caught in her nose and she sneezed.

"He's really something special, isn't he?" Anne's mother said. She was looking at Mitch.

"Oh yeah, he's been here a while so I've gotten to know him." He smiled back at her. "Would you like to hold him?"

Anne's mother nodded. She pulled her hair back and smoothed it on the top.

Mitch pulled the rabbit over to Anne's mother. She looked up to him, their faces close, and reached out her arms. When he put the rabbit in them, he pressed his hands a moment on hers. The backs of his hands were covered in long dark hairs.

Anne tapped her foot against the floor. "I don't like this rabbit. I think we could go."

“Anne, he’s the perfect gift for you. He’s so cuddly.” She bounced him in her arms like a baby. He flopped up and down awkwardly. The florescent store light shone through the ends of his ears, and Anne could see his pink flesh, the crisscross of veins.

“Really, I don’t think you could go wrong with this one. He’s really calm,” Mitch said. He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back on the balls of his feet. He winked at Anne.

Anne started, “I just don’t think – ”

“We’ll take him,” her mother said. She raised her eyebrows and nodded her head to Mitch before she looked at Anne. “Honey, this rabbit will be a great friend.”

Before Anne could say anything else, her mother was already asking for advice on the best cage to buy, the most natural bedding, the food that wouldn’t clog his digestive system. She put the rabbit back in Anne’s arms while she and Mitch talked about the healthiest options.

Anne’s stomach had burned when her mom told her they were moving away from Virginia. She felt nauseous at school, when those who walked by her didn’t even look at her, the hallway alive with a river of people and the river parted around her, quiet and alone and untouchable. And her hands shook now, while she held the rabbit her mother tried to buy as a friend. She felt the weight of the rabbit, the fat of his haunches pressing into her hands.

“Mitch will help me get everything we need. While you watch the rabbit, of course,” her mother said. They stepped into the closest aisle.

Anne realized that she was alone again. She watched Mitch and her mother as an outsider, their voices bubbling up with tones and hues, but there weren’t any words because she wasn’t listening for words. She held onto the rabbit tightly but he stayed lax and unmoving in her arms.

Her mother motioned her to follow them up to the cash register.

There, Mitch un-popped a cardboard box and pushed the rabbit inside. He slid in with a heavy thump. He smelled the side of the box, and satisfied, flopped onto his side. His stomach hairs brushed along the floor of the box with each labored breath.

“Maybe you could give me your number, in case I ever want to check in on the little guy?” Mitch smiled at her mother. His teeth were uneven and yellow, his lips flecked with chapped skin.

“Oh, of course. You know, I bet he’ll miss you.” She didn’t blink when she listed their home phone number. She had set up the home phone earlier that week.

Mitch wrote it on the back of a discarded receipt. He turned to Anne and said, “You know, it’s easy to go above and beyond with someone pretty like your mom.”

Anne’s mother laughed and Anne pretended to be absorbed in a magazine entitled, *Reptile Magazine, Your Source of Reptile Care*.

On their way home, Anne’s mother said, “What do you think you’re going to name him? We can tell Mitch, if he ever asks. He wants to check up on him from time to time.” She tapped her hands to the beat of a song on the steering wheel.

“It’s just a rabbit.” Anne looked over at the box. The shadows of the trees slanted across it again and again.

Her mother sighed and stopped tapping her hands against the steering wheel. “You know, I’m just trying to do what’s best for you.” After a few minutes, she turned up the pop station and hummed it softly to herself.

After they parked, she helped Anne unpack the cage and bedding from the car. They carried it all through the sliding door in their basement to set it up. They attached the walls and ceiling of the cage and sprinkled dyed-purple bedding onto its floor. Anne filled the water bowl

with cold water and food bowl with the seeds-and-pellets mixture Mitch recommended. She pushed the rabbit from the box into the cage.

The rabbit pressed himself into his bedding. His fur was even whiter than the basement carpet and stood out near its faded cream. He pressed his ears flat against his body, which was uneven with clumps of fur and lumpy fat. He licked his paws and wiped them against his face.

“Do you need anything else?” her mother asked. She put a hand on Anne’s shoulder.

“No,” Anne said without taking her eyes off the cage. Had her mom asked what she wanted for her birthday, she would’ve said she wanted a picnic.

She pulled her hand off Anne’s shoulder. “Well, I’m going to check the answering machine, you know, to see if anyone called.” She opened her mouth to say something but closed it again. “Happy Birthday, honey.” When Anne didn’t say anything, she walked up the stairs, her steps slow and heavy.

Anne didn’t turn to see her go up the stairs. She looked over at the rabbit, who licked the water in the bowl. There were already hard brown turds on the floor around him. She sat on the floor next to his cage, trying to think of a name. He looked back at her blankly. He was a nameless rabbit, and she was like him in that sense, nameless to most people.

Anne could hear her mother’s voice rising and falling upstairs on the phone. It was high-pitched and fast, the way she usually talked to men. She thought of the way Mitch smelled, the shine of grease in his silver hair, and her stomach burned in anxiety.

It was Sunday, and she thought about going to school the next day, her mother dropping her off, and no Ms. Alpern to talk to. She’d chew the over-soft broccoli while pretending to read a book during lunch. She held the same book every day – *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* – but she made sure to turn the pages in case someone was watching.

The rabbit closed his eyes, and even his eyelashes were white. He was so fat and stupid now, but maybe he wasn't always. She looked over at the sliding door – she thought of the cool open air outside, far from this musty basement. She could step outside, leave her mother alone in this house, alone the way she felt.

But she remembered her mom that morning, how excited she had been about the rabbit. She had even wrapped Anne's old book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, to tell her the plan. At least she had tried this year.

Anne felt bad for not answering her mother before; maybe she should apologize for turning her away. She started to head up the stairs. She switched off the overhead light, and moonlight poured through the basement's sliding door. The rabbit's eyes glowed garnet in that light, hovering just over the floor.

Upstairs, she walked over to her mother's room, alive with chatter. The hallway was dark, with only a slant of yellow light from her mother's door. Grit from the floor stuck to the bottom of her feet. She held her fist in the air for a moment before knocking on the door. "Mom?" she said.

"I'm on the phone," she said. "What do you need?"

"I wanted to say goodnight." Anne said. She wanted to wait until she could see her mother's face to talk to her more. She tapped her foot against the ground. Her hands were sweating and she dried them on her pants.

"Oh, goodnight, Honey," her mom said. She didn't open the door.

Anne stood out in the dark hallway. It was so quiet and the quiet rang in her ears. She knew her mother hadn't really tried, not as much as another mom would, not as much as Ms. Alpern would. They moved so quickly, Anne didn't have the heart to tell her she was leaving.

“Oh, it wasn’t anything important,” her mom said on the phone.

Anne clenched her hands. The words *anything important* rang again and again in her head. She thought about Mitch, his hands on the rabbit, the dirt under his nails, and felt the burning pit in her stomach. Her face was sweating and she had a headache.

She needed to get away from the quiet of the hallway, so she went back down to the basement to be with the rabbit. Lying against the floor, the whites of his eyes pressed out from the side of his face. His whole body moved up and down with each breath. Upstairs, her mother raised her voice, fast and excited.

Moving boxes were still stacked along the walls, and each had a name: *Grandma’s China, Old Books, Christmas Ornaments*. She was the one who was nameless, in the dark quiet of a basement she didn’t know.

The rabbit and Anne, they could go somewhere, even down the street, even in the clear empty yard to take a deep breath. They could stand in the middle of the grass and feel the moon on their faces. They would be out of this strange house and they would be together.

Anne picked up the rabbit, and who unsteadied her with his weight. She leaned forward and then straight. He slid down to her stomach and she hoisted him back up to her shoulder. He was hard to manage but his heaviness was comforting.

Anne walked over to the basement door. Her fingerprints marked the glass, and it slid open smoothly. The November air trickled in and settled in a dark chill. The rabbit was warm against her chest.

The End.

Days

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96

It's 96 days until your older brother's going to die. You know he has pancreatic cancer, you know he could die, but you know it like you know the weather report for next week, which is always wrong, but you've started to follow it anyway because rain makes his joints ache. He

graduated from Notre Dame last year with a Political Science major, you've been telling him about the jobs he can get now that he's not in school.

"Foreign secretary," you say, "To somewhere exotic, like Botswana."

"You think?" he says, smiling.

"Chinese acrobat," you say.

"I thought I might work in sales," he says.

...

78

Your brother's in the hospital. Your mom picks you up early from school, she tells you it might be a serious complication. You know this the way you know the fire alarms at school could signal a real fire even though it's always a drill.

When you see your brother, he's coughing. "I'm just dehydrated," he tells you, "I'll be back to new once they pump me up again." Clear fluid is flowing through a tube into his arm. You start planning his future again.

"Fearless Sherpa," you say.

"Business Analyst," he says.

"Premier of Russia," you say.

"Consultant to the Premier of Russia," he says.

...

52

You were supposed to watch *Forrest Gump* with your brother tonight, but you have a history exam tomorrow and you're behind. He was looking forward to watching it with you, but

you know this the way you know the presidents in order; that is, you know it without thinking it through.

“Warehouse manager,” he says.

“I need to study,” you say.

...

34

Your brother’s 119 pounds, and he wears thick baggy clothes. You know his weight the way you know it takes 17 minutes to drive to your shift at the movie theater, that if you push it on I-4, sometimes you can change that, make it in 13. You offer to get him ice cream but he says he isn’t hungry.

His feet have swollen up with extra fluid and you can see his fat yellow toes poking from underneath his sweatpants.

“Professional salsa dancer,” you say.

“Please,” he says.

...

19

His bedroom is across from yours; normally you hear when he throws up at night and stay up with him. But you were so tired, you fell asleep early last night. Your mom told you he had a bad night, and you know that he did, but you know it the way you know people go hungry in rural Georgia, which feels far away even though it’s a half-hour drive.

He’s been sitting outside all morning. The sun is burning his face bright red, but it’s nice to see some color.

“Lifeguard?” you say.

His eyes are closed with his head leaned back against the chair. He doesn't open them.

"Not today," he says.

...

8

He's been too tired to get out of bed for the past week, and he has 24-hour nursing now. You know about the nurses the way you know you're allergic to peanuts, that it's best to avoid them.

You take a break from your homework and walk over to your brother's room. The nurse is sitting in the corner organizing his pill containers with short swift movements. You pretend she isn't there.

"News anchor for CNN," you say.

"Risk manager," he says.

He lays his head back then and you try not to look at the nurse when you turn around to leave.

...

4

Your mom comes to the school and takes you out early, says he's in the hospital again. "He couldn't breathe, but now he has an oxygen mask," she says. Before she opens the car door, she crumples against the car, takes a deep breath.

And you know it's bad the way you know you haven't slept for the last three nights.

When you get to the hospital, you walk into your brother's room. He looks at the ceiling and then over at you but he doesn't move his head. Translucent tubes puffing with gas are hooked into his nose.

“Pope,” you say.

He lies there a long time and you think maybe he didn’t hear you over the puffing of the tubes.

“Pope,” you say again.

He closes his eyes and goes to sleep.

The End.

The Bassinet

Patty waited, flipping through DVR-recorded cooking channels and pacing between her living room and dining room. It was getting late. Pink sunlight streamed in through the translucent curtains.

The doorbell rang.

“Hi Tom.” Patty opened the door the way she planned she would, with a long smooth movement. Her arm rattled with bracelets.

“Hi Mom,” Tom said. He hadn’t shaved his beard in a few days. His hair had been pushed back and shined with a thin layer of grease. He gestured an open hand toward the woman next to him. The dark hairs on his arm were long and flat. “I want you to meet my girlfriend, Gina.”

Patty looked at Gina. The word *girlfriend* rang in her head. Tom hadn’t told her about a girlfriend. She had thin blond hair and looked much older than Tom, almost forty. She wore a bright pink shirt, tight around her belly. She was pregnant, probably five months, Patty would guess.

And Tom certainly hadn’t mentioned that.

When she didn’t say anything, he looked down and kicked the back of his right shoe with his left foot.

An autumn wind blew through the door. Leaves swirled around them and settled on the white carpet she just had professionally cleaned. Patty could feel the sweat building under her arms. She couldn’t believe it. They were having her grandchild – and they weren’t married.

She didn’t know where to begin. “Come in,” she said.

“Thanks, Mom,” Tom said. He walked in first, crunching the leaves into the carpet.

Gina followed. She looked down and avoided stepping on the leaves. She was bent over a bit, maybe because she was front-heavy, or maybe she just had bad posture, Patty couldn’t tell. They all stood facing each other in the foyer.

“Well, why did you stop by?” Patty finally asked. She forced a smile and her cheeks felt tight and plastic. She cracked the knuckles in each finger. It was a bad habit, she knew.

“You know my old cradle? We were thinking, well, I was thinking—” Tom looked down at the carpet, “—Maybe we could have it? For our son.” He was thirty years old for goodness sake. How many times did Patty have to tell him, *Look at me when you’re talking to me?*

“Oh,” Patty said. She was breathing fast. The bassinet had been passed down for three generations. She had saved it for Tom and whomever he would marry. She couldn’t believe he would barge in here with his knocked-up girlfriend and ask for her favorite heirloom.

Or she could believe it, and that was worse. The bassinet was in her basement now, covered in a thin film of grey dust. “Can we talk about this for a minute?”

“Sure,” Tom said, “I mean, sure.”

Patty clenched her hands so tight she could feel her fingernails pressing into her palms. She didn’t want to yell in front of a guest, even if the guest was a floozy. She didn’t know what to do, but she just couldn’t stand the quiet, so she finally said, “Do you want to sit down?”

“Sure,” Tom said again, but neither he nor Gina moved. He opened his mouth and shut it again. He started kicking at the base of the leather couch. “Is Dad home?”

“No, he has a late night at work.” Her husband Jim never cared much about that bassinet, but she just couldn’t let it go. She thought about Tom in it, his tiny pink hands. The way he stretched his arms and they didn’t even reach the sides. His first night home, she stayed up all night watching him breathe. Each time his little chest rose, it felt like a miracle.

Gina still hadn’t said anything. She was looking around the room: the paintings of ships on the wall, the mahogany kitchen table, the brick fireplace.

“Well, while you’re here, why don’t I make you a snack?”

They both nodded.

Patty didn't have proper dinner food – she only had enough for her and Jim – but she did have chips. She heated up some queso dip and pulled out a couple of frosted glass bowls. It poured in slowly with thick globs. While filling a salsa dish, she remembered that she had some jalapenos, so she pulled out her new cutting board, the one with ruler marks.

One of the kitchen chairs screeched against the floor as Tom pulled it out from under the table. He sat on it without pulling out a chair for Gina.

“I like your cutting board,” Gina said. She ran her hands through her hair again and again. She finally pulled it into a ponytail.

Patty stopped for a second. Tom never noticed details like that. “I got it at Costco on sale.” She turned to Gina with a tight smile. After pouring the jalapenos into queso dip, she placed the bowls on the kitchen table.

“I went to Costco last week, to compare diaper prices,” Gina said. Her nails were dirty, Patty noticed, and covered in mostly-chipped blue nail polish. She always told Tom to find a girl with clean nails – *You can tell a lot about a person by their nails*, she'd say.

“Gina is so good about that kind of stuff. You know, I wouldn't even know where to start.” Tom dipped one chip in both dips so queso cream streaked through the salsa.

Where to start? He could start by asking Patty. Her stomach dropped and she tried to remember the last time he called just to talk.

He rubbed his stomach, which was rounder from when Patty last saw him. Dark circles rimmed under his eyes and his shoulders slouched more than she remembered.

“So, how did you meet?” Patty asked.

“We met at work.” Tom said. A wet chip crumb fell out of his mouth and onto the table. Tom worked as a land surveyor, *Like George Washington*, she used to tell people. She was proud when he finally secured a stable job.

“I’m the receptionist for the developer’s main office,” Gina said. She poured some chips from the bag onto her plate. She took a chip and chewed it quietly, sitting straight against the back of the chair. Maybe her posture wasn’t so bad.

“She started working there, oh, probably half a year ago. I looked at her and,” he snapped his fingers, “I just knew, that girl is something special.” He pulled chips directly out of the bag instead of pouring them onto his plate.

“And how did you both get off work today so easily?” She checked her phone to see if Jim had called. She hoped he’d be home soon. She stood at the counter, tearing pieces of a napkin into long thin strips.

“Well, that’s the thing. The office has been closing early a lot. Business is down since winter’s coming. That’s why I thought, you know, you could help out. With the crib, maybe some cash.” Tom rubbed his hands together slowly. Queso had dribbled from his lip onto his chin.

He didn’t deserve cash and he certainly didn’t deserve the bassinet. “Where are you living now anyway?” Patty asked. Her mother-in-law gave her the bassinet right before she had Tom. Patty had run her hands on the cotton inside, asking, *Are you sure it’s soft enough for the baby?*

“We found a small apartment near work. It isn’t too big, but should be big enough for the baby.” His head was propped up, his elbow against the table. His eyelids were starting to droop,

the way they did when he was tired as a kid. He dipped chips into the cheese, fishing for the slices of jalapenos.

“And what will you name the baby?” Patty said. She tapped her foot against the tile kitchen floor. She had scrubbed it earlier that day, bleaching the grout.

“We thought we’d name the baby James, after Tom’s dad,” Gina said. She’d dropped some salsa onto her shirt. A chunk of tomato rested on her stomach and the red watery liquid diffused into the cloth of her shirt but she didn’t look down.

“James is a good name.” The whole napkin was in shreds so Patty was picking up the shreds and ripping them further. The light from the window slanted yellow along the table. Tom folded his arms on the table and rested his head on them. With his chubbier, softer profile, she could see his child-self, the boy who cried when he fell on the playground.

“I like the eagle figures on the fireplace,” Gina said.

“They were my father-in-law’s. He was a Marine.” Patty smiled, until she thought about what her father-in-law would say if he were alive today. He would beat Tom’s ass. He was the first to sleep in that bassinette. “He believed, you know, that marriage was important. Do you think you’ll get married soon?” She poured herself a glass of white wine.

“Oh, that’s for old people.” Pieces of chips sprayed across the table from Tom’s mouth. “Gina and I know we love each other. Marriage isn’t something important to us.”

Gina blinked several times. She looked down, her face red, but didn’t say anything.

The room was quiet for a long time, Patty wiping the counter in small hard circles. She wiped until her elbow hurt and then some. She knew Tom wouldn’t change his mind, and her yelling in front of Patty wouldn’t help. How had she done so wrong with Tom? She used to wipe

his face with a warm cloth and take his lunches to school when he forgot. And what would happen with this child? Her grandchild, James Walker II, a bastard?

“Well, are you all done eating?” Patty said. She looked at Gina, who said yes, and at Tom, whose face was pressed against the table. His eyes were closing but he was still awake. He nodded his head. The side of his mouth was open. It would just be a minute before he was asleep for good.

Gina looked over at him with her grey watery eyes. She seemed older than forty now. Her hair was thin and the skin under her neck hung a little loose. She closed her eyes and Patty could see the delicate wrinkles that framed them.

Patty picked up the dip bowls and carried them to the sink. She had started using all-natural dish soap and squirted it into each bowl.

Gina put her hand on the table to steady herself. She shifted her weight as she stood up. She ripped a paper towel from the roll and wet it in the sink. She began to wipe down the table and counter, starting with the queso dribbles between where the bowl had sat and Tom’s plate.

Tom never helped Patty in the kitchen, and neither had his old girlfriends. She looked over at Gina, who winced every time she bent to wipe the table. She remembered how sick she had been when she was first pregnant with Tom. She wondered if Gina had been sick as well.

“Are you from this area originally?” she asked.

“Oh, we moved a lot when I was a kid. But I’ve lived here for the past few years,” Gina said. She looked down at the metal trash bin, which was full. “Would you like me to take the trash out?”

“Oh no, I’ll have Jim take that out when he gets home.”

Gina placed the used paper towel on the top of the pile and pulled out a chair to sit again. She was too bent for someone her age. Thin blond hairs had fallen out of her ponytail, framing her face. They almost looked white. Her shirt had pulled up and showed the bottom edge of her stomach, which was lined with stretch marks. She pulled it down. The fabric was cheap and it didn't stretch well.

Patty was sure Tom still went out drinking with his friends most nights. She wondered if Gina had friends as well, or if she sat at home alone. "You know, I can give you money to buy a crib."

Gina looked over at her. She smiled thinly. "Thank you, but I don't need any money," she said. She scratched at some wax finishing on the surface of the table.

Tom let out a big snore. Some of his drool dripped onto the table.

Patty could see the way his hair was thinning around his crown. She rubbed dried salsa off the corner of her mouth with a napkin. "How can I help you then? I'm sure it can be hard to have a job when you're pregnant." Patty didn't have a job when she was pregnant. She was newly married and rosy with joy, and her mother came every week to vacuum the floors and stock the fridge.

A drop of sweat ran down the side of Gina's face. She wiped it with the back of her hand. "You really want to help?" She looked at Patty's wedding ring. "I understand if you don't."

Patty twisted the ring around and around her finger. "I'd like to."

Gina looked her in the face. "Well, it was actually my idea for the bassinet." She looked away. "I think it would be special for James."

Patty breathed out. Of course it'd come back to the bassinet. It just didn't feel right to give it to someone who wasn't part of the family. She brushed a crumb off her blouse. Her hands

nails were clean and oval with a French manicure. “Buying a bigger crib would make more sense, though, because the baby will grow.”

“I appreciate your offer. But I can afford a bigger crib.” Gina smoothed out a wrinkle on her shirt. “I’ve started a second job at a call center and have been saving up.”

“It’s just that —” Patty looked at the ceiling as she thought, “— the bassinet, well, it’s a *family* heirloom.”

A pink blush started at Gina’s forehead and moved down her face. She looked over at Tom, who was still fast asleep. “Oh, I see.”

Patty couldn’t just stand around and look at her – she needed to do something with her hands. She pulled a broom out of the kitchen pantry and started to sweep the leaves up that had blown in earlier. She was careful to sweep lightly so she didn’t push the leaf crumples further into the carpet.

Gina walked over to her, and without saying a word, bent over to help. She picked them up with her right hand, gently untangling them from the strands of carpet. Cupping with her left, she held the pieces carefully. Her pink scalp showed through her light hair.

While sweeping, Patty watched Gina, her slow awkward movements, her eagerness to help. “Why do you want the bassinet?”

“Oh I don’t know,” Gina said. She was having trouble untangling a piece of brown leaf out of the carpet and poked her tongue out of the corner of her mouth while she focused. “I want my kid to have, well, a sense of family.” She bent too far forward and wobbled, unbalanced. Her face was so pale.

“Honey,” Patty said, “That baby won’t know where he’s sleeping.”

“But I will,” Gina said. She didn’t look up at her.

Patty nodded. Before Tom was born, she remembered painting a tree on the nursery wall and hanging pictures of the aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. She wondered if Gina had a supportive family of her own. She thought probably not, since they hadn't offered Gina her old bassinet, if they had even kept it. She pulled the dust pan up. "I think it's clean enough."

Gina put a hand on her lower back and stretched toward the ceiling when she stood up. She pushed the leaves from her hand into the dust pan. She must've been sweating because some of the pieces stuck to her palm.

Patty opened the trash can and emptied the dustpan on the pile.

Tom snored loudly. His mouth was still open and his teeth were yellowed. He had slept in that bassinet, cried in it, smiled his first smiles in it, and here he was, asking for the bassinet and money and probably hoping for the money. Tom wouldn't care about it, not the way Gina would. And she was carrying Patty's grandchild, married or not.

"Maybe you could borrow the bassinet, for James," she said. She put the broom back in the closet. "If you want it even. You might not like the way it looks."

"We could take a look." Gina sighed quietly. She held in a smile by pressing her lips together.

They walked through the rest of the house into the basement, through the finished living area to the unfinished storage room. Marked cardboard boxes and shadowed masses lined the walls. The floor was concrete, and the walls were cinderblocks painted white.

Patty's hand was shaking, and she steadied it before pulling on a chain connected to a bulb in the ceiling. With a hand, she motioned for Gina to follow her to a corner. She pulled on a trash bag covering one of the masses to reveal the bassinet.

Patty hasn't seen it in a couple of years, had no reason to. The bassinet was just as she remembered, a white wicker base with soft yellowing ribbons woven throughout. The Victorian legs fed into a smooth curved rocking foot. A cotton cloth smoothed along the inside of the basket and ruffled at the top.

"I've never seen anything like it," Gina said after a long time. She ran her hand slowly along the gentle cotton ruffles. Dust floated in the air and gleamed in the light.

The room was filled with a soft quiet and Patty could hear Gina's breathing. She looked down at Gina's stomach and wondered if James would have dark hair like Tom's. She remembered the first time she felt Tom kicking, the spark of fear and joy.

Gina smoothed the wrinkles on the baby blanket inside, which Patty had crocheted years ago with the softest blue yarn she could find. "This was Tom's blanket?"

"Yes, it was. I finished making it just a week or two before he was born. It was the only time he's been early in his life." Patty smiled.

"It's beautiful," Gina said. She kept looking up and down the length of the bassinet. She moved her hand away slowly and rubbed her thumb in soft gentle movements on the side of her stomach.

"Why don't you borrow the blanket, too?" Patty tapped her fingers against her leg. She always used to tell Tom not to fidget. "I don't see myself using it these next few months anyway." She laughed, a short awkward *huh*.

"Are you sure?" Gina wiped a bead of sweat away from her forehead. When Patty nodded, she said, "Then I'd love it," a little too fast.

The light above them flickered and dimmed. Patty looked around the room, trying to think of something else to say. Finally she said, “The bassinet’s pretty heavy, so why don’t we get Tom to carry it up the stairs?”

Gina nodded, but neither of them moved. They stood together, facing the bassinet, looking at the details in the seams, the pilling where Tom used to sleep. Gina ran her finger along the bottom of her stomach and Patty traced her fingers along the beads on her bracelet. The light had dimmed but neither bothered to turn on another one. They stood there for a long time, together in the darkness, and listened to Tom, still in the kitchen, snoring.

The End.