

I'LL WATCH FROM HERE

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Honors Fiction Thesis

Creative Writing

University of North Carolina

April 4, 2014

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

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Word count: 22,061

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### Disguises

I had moved back in town to get in touch with David, who I hadn't spoken to in 24 years. David, my son. Those words—in my mouth! My son, my son, my son.

I was on my bed. No chairs or nothing to sit on. If I ever had a guest (I didn't), I'd tell them I only just moved in. The bed works fine enough for me, even if I do look like some teenager all propped against the wall reading my books. I've been reading Dostoyevsky lately. I know, me reading some fancy Russian author!

I had the phone in my hand, ready to dial David. The phone is a wireless. Off-white, matte plastic. Kept rolling its curved back in my sweaty palm. Amazing how far phones have come. I still remember the days of having to cart that awful beige one around the house—when David was just a kid—and tripping on the curly wire all the time. That's about the age David last saw me and I saw him. Still putting around the driveway in his Fisher-Price Super Coupe. That red and yellow Flintstone car that spent most of its time abandoned in the driveway.

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I dialed him. Had found his number in the phone book. Guess he's like his old man, still having a landline. The phone rang several times, each ring seeming longer in my ear. I hung up before it went to voicemail. Didn't want that to be the first time I heard him as a grown man.

I figured I wouldn't work up the courage another night so I mashed the green redial button.

Just two rings and then he said, "Hello." He was wheezing some, as if he'd run to the phone.

He's got a deeper voice than me, I could tell already. Unless he'd just woken up.

I didn't say anything and let him ask Hello again.

"Is this Mr. Larange?" I said. I made my voice all gruff like I was talking behind the low growl of a dog.

"It is."

I looked down to my index card.

"I am calling on behalf of *The Daily*," I said, having made up the name of a newspaper. "I see that you were a previous subscriber, and—"

"Never heard of it," he said.

"Sir," I said. I could feel my normal, higher voice sneak out and betray me. "We have you on clear record as being a prior subscriber."

"Can't be," he said. "And I'd like to be taken off the call list."

That's exactly what I was waiting for.

And so I said, "Ok, sir, I can do that. Can you please verify your phone number so we can remove you from our system?"

He did.

"And so that you do not receive future mailings, can you verify your current address?"

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“Thank you, Mr. Larange. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“Yes, thank you for taking me out your system,” he said, and hung up.

I walked to Lee St. in my sneakers. The sidewalks had patches of ice on them that I kept slipping on. I had remembered that winter around here is colder than people expect, but not cold enough for those good, feathery snows.

Lucky for me I can still walk long ways, even in the cold. And besides there was something hypnotic about the cars passing by with their floating orbs of light coming toward me. When I was little my favorite game on long trips with my dad was to identify cars by make and model based just on their headlights or taillights. Easier back then, when each car looked so distinctly different.

I walked slowly because I wasn't entirely sure that I wanted to get there.

All the houses in that part of town, the historic district, are small. I got to 413. The house was built into a hill, with a steep driveway. The front yard is all dark green ground cover and droopy trees. Looks impossible to run a lawn mower over it, even if he did have grass.

The lights were on. The TV was projecting itself on the wall in the room with the big double window. That was the main street-facing room. The dormers built into the roof were glowing with steady lamplight, too. By the one hazy streetlight, I could tell that the house had white, wooden siding. Never been power washed or repainted.

Next door, there were no lights on and no cars in the driveway. There was a tall hedge separating the houses, with each driveway on either side of the planted fence. I walked up the neighbor's cracked cement drive, leaning my whole chest forward to counteract the feeling of falling I got because of the hill. I wondered how many car bottoms had grated the beige cement.

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When it leveled out, I forced myself into the hedge. Tore a hole in the side of my hoodie doing it. I looked through and saw the side of David's house. Only twenty feet away. There's a side porch with a chipped door on it—which they used more than the front door, by the looks of it.

Guess he has two kids because there was a boy bike and a girl bike leaning on the porch railing.

I was hoping for some kind of movement inside, but it all seemed frozen. Like I was looking at some black and white movie set before filming. It had begun spitting rain again.

I forced myself through the hedge and faced the house. Imagined myself going straight through, swinging open the door like some regular guest. Hanging up my hoodie on a hook and bending down to hug my grandchildren. Hearing music floating on waves from the kitchen, where my son would be stirring a big pot of chili. Being an unstranger in the warm house.

I walked toward the porch and grabbed my hand round the boy bike handlebars, feeling the gummy grips that in their synthetic makeup somehow defied the cold. On the porch I opened the screen door and propped it behind my leg to keep it open, loosened my clenched fist into a more casual formation, and raised my hand to the door to knock.

And it was then that there *was* movement, visible through a glass panel in the door. I saw the head of a blonde woman passing by in a rush. Her hair was bright yellow and reminded me of Linda's.

Linda being my ex-wife who I'd met out in the mountains.

Way back when, I picked up work wherever I found it. I had found a temporary job at a Christmas Tree farm, sawing down the six or seven foot evergreens, dragging them to the trailer,

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and heaving them in. The Pleasant Tree Company sold most of their Christmas trees all the way out in Raleigh, so it was also my job to schlep them there each weekend and stand in the cold, drinking coffee, while families imagined each tree in their wood-paneled living rooms.

Linda's family owned the farm. Her parents were retired and owned the land—thirty acres of rolling hills before the real mountains—and used the farm as retirement income. Her dad helped me out during the week but I did all the work in Raleigh, so I got a pretty good cut of the profits.

But the important thing is that was the year I met Linda. She was short and thick—maybe solid is a better word—and wore oversized turtlenecks the color of oatmeal. Not unattractive, though. We were introduced one night as I was pulling out the dirt road and she was coming in, her dad shouting directions to me so that the trailer stayed on the gravel. Her little car would have to do a dance around the truck to get past. She paused where our cars met. I rolled down my window.

“So you're the big strong help this season,” she said.

We exchanged names through our car windows while her dad stood to the side of the trailer, him a silhouette in my mirror, illuminated by her yellow headlights.

“You look tired,” she said. “Come in for a cup of coffee before you head out.”

I cut the engine off and walked alongside her car up toward the house. That night she told me she was working at the gas station but wanted to train as a teacher so she could move to a city. Any city. Her coffee tasted like shit but I gulped it down, beaming the whole time and nervous about the amount of eye contact to make. Her dad watched TV in the next room.

“You know, I don't have work tomorrow,” she said. “I'm going to come along to Raleigh, help you sell some of those trees.”

She was the kind of girl who just declared things to be.

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That first night it seemed like we were the only ones on the road. It was mostly her talking, telling me all about her wanting to travel the country, to live in the back of a pick-up, or to find a tiny apartment in New York. Seemed all wispy to me, like she'd read of escapees in books. Mainly she wanted to just be somewhere other than home.

"I could be like you," she said. "Just kind of floating."

Meanwhile I was sitting there turning words over in my mind.

By 1 a.m. she had scooted to the middle seat and rested her head on my shoulder. I was afraid to move my arm and wake her. It was kind of a pain to drive with just your left arm, but I made do for obvious reasons.

At David's, I stood at the door, thinking about that flash of yellow hair. What if it *was* Linda? I didn't think so. That blur had seemed too tall, too near my line of sight. I was 90 percent sure it was some other woman, David's wife probably. But that 10 percent, and the rest of my doubt, was enough. I closed the screen door as quietly as possible and slunk away back home like a dog just been kicked.

I've not always been so afraid of Linda.

Back when David was tiny, I was taking night classes to get my electrician license, and Linda was thinking about filling out her applications to teacher's college. I spent most of the day working day jobs picked up at Home Depot, where bilingual men would tell instructions first in Spanish and then translate for me.

I skipped one of my electrician classes one night because I was exhausted. I'd worked on the roof of a house all day under the heat of the big yellow sun.



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When I walked into the house, I knew something was up because the deadlock key we normally kept on the counter was still in the lock. Linda knew of all things that this bothered the hell out of me—someone could just bust a window pane and twist the key.

“I swear to God you better have left this key in the door for a reason,” I said. I sorted through the junk mail on the kitchen table.

She must’ve heard me, because I heard some shuffling upstairs.

I put the mail down and went to go see her about the lock.

I opened the bedroom door and saw her and another man—someone I actually recognized from out by Pleasant Tree Farms. He pulled his Wranglers on. She was sitting indian-style and looking angry as hell at me.

“You’re home early,” she said.

I looked between her and the redneck struggling with his button-fly.

“Go home, Gus,” she said to the half-naked man in my bedroom. “Me and Jimmy need to talk.”

I hadn’t said a word nor would I. I let Jimmy out the bedroom door and then looked a good long while at Linda as she scraped together the end of the sheets to put underneath her crossed legs.

I went back downstairs. In the living room I yanked out the plug to the lamp—first thing I thought of—and jerked the shade off. I wrapped the cord around the lamp’s faux gold base. I checked out the window at the redneck sauntering away in a confused stupor.

“Don’t do anything,” Linda said from the base of the stairs.

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I jogged and eventually sprinted to catch up with Gus on the street. I'll never forget the weird sound in my head, as I ran, of a bass guitar player plucking away inevitably, as if to the beat of my blood.

I came from behind. I beat Gus with the lamp, my hand gripped around the bulb socket, aiming the sharp corner of its base at his temples and eyes and the back of his neck. He was drunk. With my club I beat him unconscious so that he lay in the street and his blood would ooze into the gutter.

When I figured he was good and unable to move, numbed by the pain, I squared a few good kicks to his head. He wasn't dead, but I guessed vegetable.

I stared at him till a police officer, summoned by Linda or who knows who, stopped in the road. He cuffed me and I went willingly, docile and subdued and spent.

I told the court the truth. Anything else would be an obvious lie. I got a reduced sentence on account of the circumstances but when I was done and out, I still walked out like a dog with its tail plastered between his legs. I moved out West for a long, long time. Now as I walked back without even knocking, I considered whether moving back here was a mistake.

The next day I was frying eggs and couldn't get the image of the kids' bikes out my head. They were so perfect—like from a Sears catalogue. I wandered around the apartment to think of some way to see the kids, or David at least. I figured myself happy inside to just know what they looked like.

I burned my eggs to the bottom of the pan and scraped them off, made myself ignore the rubbery texture and solid yolk.

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I knew I'd have to knock on his door somehow. Other than UPS men or kids selling wrapping paper, nobody really went door-to-door anymore.

I supposed salesmen might still hit up neighborhoods. And I had all the time in the world. So I walked to the Goodwill and bought some slacks and a blue checkered shirt and a brown jacket. Found a couple volumes of an encyclopedia and wrapped them up with my only belt. Tied the whole ensemble together with a scratchy wool tie.

There was more time before the bus came, so I went to the public library, a few blocks over, and tired out cologne samples from the magazines. I rubbed the glossy paper on my neck in the bathroom. I felt new.

On his porch in the afternoon, I planned for thirty seconds. My sales pitch would hinge on whether the buyer had kids and wanted to supplement the lousy curriculum with real learning.

I knocked on the door and a boy opened it. He was a little man, only about four foot. He hollered for his dad with his head tilted back behind his shoulders.

The man who came to the door looked like exactly how I saw myself. You don't imagine yourself with liver spots and wrinkles and a floppy gullet beneath your chin. No, you see yourself as David, as still young, with dark brown hair and thick arms.

"Sir," I said. "I see here that you have at least one child, and considering that Barbie bike over there, a little girl, too. Have you considered supplementing their in-school education by having a wealth of knowledge at their fingertips? By having encyclopedias in the home?"

I held out the encyclopedias.

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He was kind and had let me stutter out my whole spiel. While I spoke, his daughter came to look at me between his legs. Her hair was this frizzy puff that barely reached her shoulders. In her hand was an iPad, glowing with a game she must've paused when she heard the door.

He paused and squinted at me, seeing himself in the wrinkled man on his porch, maybe.

"How much?" he said.

I hadn't thought of a price. Hadn't considered him actually buying.

"Well we have a subscription model," I said. "Such that you will get one volume per month so long as you pay. This is to mitigate a high upfront charge."

Before he had a chance to answer, someone from another room shouted. "Who's at the door, Dave? Don't let all the cold air in!"

David the question, with a smile aimed at me. But I'd recognize that voice anywhere.

"I'm sorry to say we aren't interested," he said. "I wish I could. Hard enough to pay the mortgage."

Which was fine, because I could hear nothing really, except for Linda's voice from inside playing over and over in my head, and I was ready to hightail away.

Later I took the bus to the Bass Pro Shop. I was walking with my eyes cast down at the sidewalk cracks beneath my feet. It was silent. The air had stilled itself, took a big breath before it would rain again. I got onto the bus same time as a man in a wheelchair and the bus did this kneeling to the curb for him, a futuristic hydraulic curtsy.

At the store, I made like I was interested in the various camo button down shirts (like I could afford them). Held them to my chest in front of the mirror. A hot-headed high school girl asked if I needed help, because they were about to close.

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“Binoculars,” I said.

“You’re in the wrong section,” she said and took me along.

I bought the only ones I could afford. \$40. While I waited at the bus stop, I unpacked them. Peered through them and at the blurry neon sign of the shop. Focused them. Tried them out on the young employees as they left about half an hour after closing. I zoomed up close to their faces and their glowing red cigarettes as they waited for their parents to pick them up.

I was still in the encyclopedia suit. It wasn’t raining yet but the sky had turned charcoal and there were no stars out. Felt below freezing. I made my way toward David’s house after getting off the city bus.

Didn’t know my plan exactly. Just wanted to see, for sure, who was staying in the house. Or what life they lived. Wanted to know whether David’s face was always so pleasant like it was at the door or if that was some kind of act that he had put on for me, the middle-aged salesman carrying just the V and C volumes of the World Book.

At the house, I figured I wouldn’t see much from the hedge or driveway. Instead I considered that steep front yard, with its tangled ground cover, its incline toward the living room’s big bay window. I got on my hands and knees a few feet away from the sidewalk and buried myself in the ivy, throwing some extra leaves over the backs of my legs and hoping that no inquisitive passerby would notice me holding my breath in the shadows.

The ground was wet from yesterday’s rain and I pinched some of it between my index finger and thumb, and then I smeared it under my cheeks like I was in a stakeout. The mud leaving its mark on my skin and shirt as I wiggled into my hole.

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It all felt important to me that I might see in close detail what lay on the other side of that bay window.

At first there was nothing but baby blue spasms of the TV on the wall. My peripherals were eclipsed in the binoculars and all I could see was the wooden window frame and the glass and the wall beyond it. It was after ten o'clock so I assumed the kids had been put to sleep, by David or their grandma or mother, whose very name I still did not know.

I watched a long while. I took away the binoculars to check the time on my watch. 10:34. I squeezed my eyelids shut to rejuvenate them for the rest of the stakeout.

When I looked back into the binoculars I saw a yellow light come on in the living room. It was Linda. She rose. Rose from the couch and stood in the middle of the room, stretching her arms like a cat. Linda was still a devilish little thing. She had aged, of course. And had grown a bit frail, with bones poking from her shoulders.

She cut the TV off and started toward the window, to pull the curtains closed I guess.

I don't know why I did it. But I rose, too, with the plastic circles of the binoculars pressed hard against my eyes. I held them up to my war-painted face with one hand and brushed the dirt from my slacks with the other.

Linda noticed the movement in the yard. She made parentheses with her hands around her face, her fingers meeting atop her forehead, and pressed herself against the glass to better see me in the yard.

I dropped the binoculars and our eyes met. She backed away from the window and screamed, her mouth a perfect 'O.'

David rushed in. She grabbed him and shouted and her finger was shaking as she spoke to him.

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David ran out of the room. I stayed looking at the window. Linda had calmed down and pivoted slowly to face me and looked down through the yard. She smiled, calm and cool as ever, and dragged the curtains closed.

The screen door whacked on its frame. All I could see was David's tall shape moving toward me like a phantom, and the outline of a baseball bat parallel to his leg, held by both his arms. It had finally begun raining.

I kept watching him and stepped backward, into the street, into an orange pool of light cast by a streetlamp.

"You're that salesman!" he said. "What the hell are you doing?" So Linda hadn't told him who I was.

He was twenty, nineteen feet away from me now.

I ran. I knew he'd be quicker than me so I just hoped he'd figure I wasn't worth the effort.

Right before I really ran for it, though, I looked back one last time. Linda had stepped out to the porch. She walked over to the railing and folded her hands there, as if she were waiting for her grandchildren as they walked home from school.

All around me the rain slowed the traffic and blurred my vision. I felt, as I often do, that I was in a film, or one of my dreams. As soon as I was convinced David wasn't following me, I slowed down. I grabbed one of those free real estate pamphlets outside a gas station to cover my head from the downpour.

Leaning against the Kwik-Mart, I felt my pocket for my \$40 binoculars, so that I could look through them again, at the living room, as if their lenses could have captured the serenity before the chaos. But what serenity? Whose? And I realized, anyway, that they were still at Lee St.,

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beneath the stems of crawling ivy, on top of my imprint in the wet top soil, being pummeled by the rain.



## Pink Lake

The last time the town of Pink Lake filled with water was over one hundred years ago. But of course we knew it could always happen again. Why else build all the houses on stilts?

The town had earned its name from the old days, before the dam was built, and the smoggy sunsets lingered, forever and ever, on the lapping water. Orange and red and bright pink impressions dappled on the water, a mirror of the heavens. Now it was a basin town, one of many that were designed in the last big search for developable land. Not that Pink Lake yielded much in the way of property. It was a tiny lake at the start and a tiny town after.

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For the past couple weeks, a slow and steady rain had fallen. Pink Lake had received more rain in the month than it had in the last year combined. And everyone was worried about the earthen dam, whether it would hold all the water.

I was in the living room, perched above ground, when the emergency alert system blared on the TV. "Find high ground," it warned. "Seek shelter in a building."

I looked outside. The dam itself was still holding, the reservoir not having broken through. But water was gushing over, at a steady clip. And the rain, relentless till this point, only fell harder. Records could be broken.

Dad said, "Don't leave the house, don't go outside." Then he pulled on grandpa's galoshes over his shoes, grabbed the decorative oar above the mantle, and headed toward the door.

I asked him where he supposed he was going, as in did he not just hear the warning? He said, "I'm on the emergency committee. I'll be taking the canoe. Don't leave the house."

Last time there were no committees or approved plans of actions. I don't have to tell you the end result, I think, but I'll just say that a small fissure turned into a big problem.

Since then the building code in Pink Lake has required all homes and businesses to be constructed at minimum twelve feet above the ground. Spindly Cape Cods and Victorians and mock Colonials dot the historic lakebed, all of them on a high plane, like beach houses with no sea.

I stayed in the house for three or so hours and watched the news. I looked out the window and toward the dam, where the water spilled over in a steady flow, as if a faucet had been left running in God's tub.

The next day I woke up to the Emergency Alert System. A siren rang through the town, followed by a recorded voice played through the loudspeakers. "Seek higher ground. Flooding

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may occur.” I looked outside and saw that it had only intensified; a line of water crept toward the house. It was a matter of time until the water lapped against the support pillars.

I heard a knock on the door and went to answer it. It was Rachel, the new girl who had just moved to Pink Lake. Last I saw her was at school, when I was staring at the back of her head and willing her to turn around and look at me. She had big yellow hair and an ample body, especially for someone in the eighth grade. But whenever we saw each other in school, she pretended not to see me.

“You see the water’s creeping toward your house?” she said.

“Yup.”

“Coming toward mine, too.”

“It does that,” I said.

“Want to come outside with me? I want to watch the water rise with someone. You’re the closest person I know.” she said.

I considered Dad, who hadn’t returned from his Emergency Committee duties wearing grandpa’s black galoshes.

“Yeah, of course, why not?”

We walked through the water, which reached about halfway up my shin. As we walked we kicked up champagne clouds of dirt around our feet. The leak in the dam had not stopped.

“I want to climb a tree, to see higher. I want to see all the water,” she said.

We found the tallest tree in town, which was on a hill by City Hall. The hill was originally a small island in the original lake. From it, you could see the whole town and the dam and the horizon full of dark storm clouds.

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Rachel climbed the tree and sat on a thick limb that extended far out, beyond the dry island beneath and above the accumulated water. I followed her up there, clumsy as I was, and scooted next to her on the branch.

“When do you think the rain will stop?” she said. The water, at this point, lapped against the banks of the hill.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

“And what if it doesn’t stop? What would you do?”

“Don’t be crazy.”

“There’s a chance,” she said. “There’s a chance this will be biblical, like Noah’s ark. And we’ll have to float away from here and hope for the best. So, really, what would you do?”

“Well in that scenario, there’s no getting away from it,” I said. “So I’d find someone to watch it with, and accept it.”

I moved closer to her on the branch and put my hand into hers. For what reason, I don’t know. And you’d think I was nervous but when instinct calls, you act.

The rain kept falling and the water kept rising, slowly, until dusk. That’s when the sun burst into the sky, piercing the clouds with red and orange and pink swords of light. The water never even reached all the way to the houses. We headed back. The water was up to my waist and everywhere it captured the sun’s falling image. I waded her home.

## Surveillance

Phillip's father, Ron, had taken to standing at the second floor landing and looking down at the living room. He would drum his fingers on the balcony railing and stare down. He gazed indiscriminately. At what in particular? The furniture? Phillip couldn't tell.

The living room was a great big place with other rooms that flowed into it. The dining room, the kitchen, the entrance hall. At the northeast corner was the door to the master bedroom, which usually was closed. Using the loft at the top of the stairs, Ron could watch the living room from all sides.

Soon enough, Phillip noticed Ron watching other places of the house. The view from above wasn't enough. For instance, he stared out the living room window. He would close the blinds—flimsy, plastic things—and then pull down a few slats to peer through their gap.

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One morning when Phillip had an early swim practice, Ron was already up, before the sun. He was pressed against the big window in the living room. All the lights were off.

“What are you doing?” Phillip said.

“Just watching.”

“Watching what, exactly?”

Ron turned around. His eyes were bloodshot and his cheeks sunken. The space around him smelled sick and sweet. Like salty chlorine. The unwashed smell of a man who spent his time indoors and had been unemployed for too long.

Ron said, “I’m keeping an eye on the house, for you and your mother.”

Phillip stepped to the window, alongside his father. He pulled down on the slats of blinds to look out. The backyard was dark and the other houses across the golf course were dark, too. It was that morning hour when the stars began to slip away, minutes before the sun would peek, and the sky was a dark purple sheet over everything. The fountain in the tiny lake shot water straight up in a shimmering tower that caught stray bits of light. The fountain was on a fifteen minute timer to recirculate the piped-in water. When he was little, Phillip would imagine that a whale lived just beneath the surface, spewing the water from its blowhole every now and then.

Phillip said, “There’s nothing out here, Dad.”

“Not right now, no.”

Phillip walked to the kitchen to grab breakfast, confused and a bit weary of his father this early in the morning. He ate his cereal with his head down, reading on his phone. And then he went back to the living room before leaving, to see whether Ron was still at it, and to say goodbye.

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“Up here,” Ron said softly. He was at the landing at the top of the stairs, at his perch. “Have a good day,” he said, and then resumed his thousand yard stare into the particulars of the room, awaiting any motion, watching the shifting light of morning creep across the floors and walls.

Soon Ron was patrolling at night. Phillip bumped into him more than once, late, after staying up to work on his homework. Ron had turned into a kind of paranoid ghost, floating from one room to the next. Bridget, Phillip’s mother, slept through it all and said nothing about him during the daytime. She had mastered the ability to just not dwell on the behavior. Worry feelings come from dwelling and thinking and mulling things over. At least that must be why she didn’t seem concerned.

A few weeks of Ron’s surveilling the house passed by, almost to the point of it seeming normal. And then one evening he clanked his fork to his glass, at dinner. This is despite the room being silent and dinner being, as usual, just between the three of them. He had an announcement. “I’m ordering home security cameras.”

The three of them were eating freezer lasagna with caesar salad.

“Cameras? Is that really necessary?” Bridget said.

“Yes, when it comes to my family’s safety.”

“Family’s safety? I have to ask. What on earth do you expect to happen? I seriously question your motives behind putting spy cameras in our home.”

“They’re not spy cameras. Security cameras,” he corrected. “Having a digitally connected home is not unusual. And, anything could happen. An intruder. Natural disaster. Rapists. The Dowd’s down the street just got broken into last week.”

“Hardly,” Bridget said. “I hesitate to call a stolen case of beer exactly the work of criminal masterminds.”

The break-in had been reported over the neighborhood listserv, right below the announcement for the next Homeowners Association meeting.

"The point is, it can happen," Ron said.

"Then put the cameras on the outside of the house if we have to have them."

"I'm ordering enough for inside and out. Why not both?" Ron stabbed a clump of lettuce with his fork. "That way, if God forbid something wrong is happening, there is evidence of all of it."

Bridget drained her wine glass. Merlot. "This is getting out of hand."

"No, it's not," Ron said. "You just don't see my point."

"Or *the* point," she said.

"You know, you sound like someone with something to hide," he said, and left the room. He went to his office, presumably to order the cameras off the internet.

"We're going to be monitored like zoo animals. I can't believe it," Bridget said.

In the push and pull of Ron and Bridget's marriage, she had often raced to confide first, talk first, gossip first with Phillip. To get her word in with him before Ron could.

"The cameras aren't so different from now, anyway," Phillip said.

"And what makes you say that?"

"It just fits with how Dad's been acting recently."

"I doubt that he's 'acting.' If he is, that man deserves an Oscar." Bridget said.

"So," Phillip said. "you have noticed his weird behavior, then." He scraped the caked lasagna from his microwavable container onto the side of his fork.

"Of course. You think I'm blind?"



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“I just ask because you act like nothing has changed. You’re about as involved in dinner as that placemat,” Phillip said.

“I am trying not to latch to this. I’m hoping this is a phase.”

“It’s not a phase, Mom. Who cares about the cameras? Maybe it will help him. I want to help him.”

“Help how? That’s what I want to know. You can’t cure his paranoid by just feeding him more of what he wants. This just enables him.” She refilled her glass and retired to the couch.

That night, Ron had ordered a surveillance camera for every room in the house. They came the following week.

Phillip’s job was to wrestle the cameras out of their plastic prisons and hand them to his father on the ladder, when he was ready. With a jigsaw Ron cut open the drywall and pulled the electrical wiring through. Then Phillip handed the camera over and watched as Ron connected the wires, aligned the camera over the hole in the wall, and tightened the screws with the cordless drill.

After each camera was installed, Ron tilted the drill in his hands, so that the screwdriver bit was close to his lips. He pulsed the drill’s trigger two quick times so that its electric motor sounded like the rev rev of a motorcycle. He ceremoniously leaned toward the drill bit and blew away the fine dust collected in its crevices. He looked each time like a cowboy puffing away smoke from the end of a pistol.

It was a weekend’s job. Hours of wrangling wires and shuffling around the house with the ladder. There were cameras in all the major rooms and entrances. Bridget had notched one small win and kept the bedrooms and bathrooms private. After they installed the final camera, Ron climbed down the ladder and smiled for the first time in weeks.

## I'll Watch from Here

He told Phillip to follow him to the office. They sat down at the cherry wood desk. Phillip pulled an armchair next to his father's big leather chair.

Ron said, "This technology is amazing. These cameras wirelessly upload a feed to my computer's hard drive and archive them."

He started a program that displayed a matrix of black screens. The program was called YouCamHome. To receive wireless transmission from all the blinking red cameras, he clicked 'Record' and the black screens lit at once. The rooms flickered into life. The house was shown in angles Phillip had never considered. It all looked smaller from eight feet up on the wall. They had done a good job, with the exception of a few blind spots in corners. Inconsequential, though, because Ron seemed happier than he had been in weeks. He said, "Isn't it wonderful?"

Phillip couldn't say. Was it all necessary? Ron's walking in erratic lines and staring out the window at the neighbors. His literal bending over and putting an ear to the ground, to listen for tremors or vibrations of noise, in the middle of the night? Phillip considered Bridget, who had pulled him aside the other evening and told him that she was soon going to make an appointment for Ron's psychiatric evaluation, or otherwise take Ron to the hospital, to "get him dealt with, by a professional."

But Phillip believed the cameras made Ron happy, less paranoid, more secure. So he said, "Yeah, Dad, amazing."

Ron stared at the screen, at the grid of streaming videos, and smiled, his eyeballs darting from one room to the next, absorbing the constant stream.

"I'm going to give you the password to this program," Ron said, "in the event that anything happens to me."

## I'll Watch from Here

Phillip insisted that nothing would happen to him, that giving the password was unnecessary, but Ron would hear none of it. He made Phillip promise not to tell anyone the password, and even not to tell that he *knew* the password. He said, “You know how important security is to me, and I want you to take it seriously.”

Phillip watched the screens, which stuttered as they refreshed. Nothing happened. The family laptop was now the security headquarters for the least exciting place in the world.

“You know what, let’s go for a walk,” Ron said. “I want to be outside.”

They walked around the neighborhood. It was a hot Saturday. A group of younger kids played roller hockey and mothers were out, walking their strollers. Outside, Ron pointed out the neighbor’s crabgrass and shoddy edges. The sun embraced Phillip as he walked and he pleased in how it held every part of him from all angles, and warmed his skin until it felt hot to the touch. He hoped his father felt the same thing, the same heat on his skin.

It seemed to Phillip for a few minutes as if everything, the staring out the window, the patrolling at night, the dense air around the dinner table, were all already a distant memory. But of course not, Phillip thought, as he watched his father gulp in the fresh air in the bright, hot afternoon light. If it were a distant memory, and if things were going to return to normal, the gnawing feeling of worry would have sunk away. And his father would have stood straighter, rose taller, looked stronger.

Despite Phillip’s initial doubts, it seemed that things really changed. Roy resumed the job search. He left the house each morning in a suit.

Ron was originally an electrical engineer, and the family had been surviving off some money from patents that he had sold and, of course, Bridget’s income. He had agreed to a nondisclosure

agreement when he accepted the I—— Corporation's severance package, part of which required two years away from the field, so as not to divulge trade secrets. But now, the old man was irrelevant in the field, literal nanometers (miles in the world of microchips) apart from recent developments. So he mostly looked for office jobs. Project manager, quality assurance specialist, even administrative assistant. But no one was hiring aged-out people.

He came home in the evenings and ironed his shirt for the next day, determined and resolute and silent. Phillip imagined him riding the train into the city, his hands pressed flat against the cold glass. Phillip knew that Ron was a watcher, too, the kind of person who could not slip into a book during a commute but would instead stare at the people around him, stare at the whir outside the window, stare at the shoes and flickering fluorescent lights overhead. Phillip knew this because he remembered his father from a young age telling him that the people and the world and everything around us were all sacred, to be revered and worshipped and absorbed, not ignored or tuned out. We were all part of a great big system, like electrical pulses on a motherboard. Ron hated that earbuds blocked people out of the world. Ron was the kind of man who, if a pregnant woman were on the train, would hope that her water would break, just so he could observe how strangers formed connections, transcended their little tunneled existences.

After a full day of job searching, Ron returned home every night on a mission. Installing the cameras had ignited a love for DIY projects. He refinished the kitchen cabinets and replaced the front door. He ripped up and replaced the carpet in Phillip's bedroom. He installed a fence. He did most of this in the afternoons, after morning interviews, when Phillip was still at school and Bridget at work.

Bridget worked as a pharmaceutical sales representative. Her employer had just launched a new slow-release anti-depressant injection that had only to be administered once a week, and she

was charged with pitching the drug to doctors and pharmacists all over the southeast. The point of the drug was that volatile patients may be less likely to quit their drug therapy on an 'off day,' and the clinic system set up to administer the drug would be part of the nation's new consortium of mental health facilities. The drug was called WellShot.

For Bridget, every day included long hours of driving and keeping up with the office via handsfree-bluetooth as she drove. She came home late in the evenings, still looking done-up, as the job required. Last year, she had gotten breast implants and had joked to Ron about writing them off as a business expense.

Recently those flavor of jokes had stopped. Ron's paranoia was a desiccant, drying up any humor Bridget had left. Phillip supposed that even though things seemed better with his father no longer lurking about, she kept up her pretense of anger, at least so long as he had the cameras running. She'd made clear her feelings on them. Such as, "I hate these cameras. I can't sneeze without thinking about them. I can't walk across the room without them tracking my every step."

But naturally all these comments were directed to Phillip, not Ron.

For weeks, Ron and Bridget warred in a suffocatingly polite stalemate. Bridget didn't like living in a fish bowl, and Ron argued that she should have nothing to hide. But these bombs only exploded in Phillip's ear; their actual battlefield was a cold one, of quiet airs and falsely polite conversation, saving their ammunition until they could individually speak with their son, their middleman.

Ron came in from the yard one evening, wearing paint-splattered jeans and carrying his koi pond sketches into the kitchen.

Bridget called from the living room, "Really Ronald, why are you doing all this?"

"All what?" Ron said.

Phillip was on a barstool at the granite counter, between the two rooms, sorting and resorting his schoolwork because he had a feeling that the simmering water between Bridget and Ron would soon heat enough to boil over.

Ron stood and stared at the contents of the fridge. He looked so entirely American at that moment, not a 'global citizen' as the politicians would have you believe, but American, of this time and a past time, of this fallen economy and this jobless state of nothingness. Every generation had men like him. Because he at least had paint splattered jeans and a sweat built up and a healthy dose of natural distrust. Maybe these were things Phillip needed to see, and this was all part of some grand plan designed by his parents, and it was all working out in this way for a reason—as a lesson in strength and resilience.

"The koi pond. We have never mentioned wanting a koi pond. The credit card is maxed out because of the damn koi pond."

"You don't like a nicer house?" Ron said.

"Don't put words in my mouth," she said. "I just don't get it."

"You'll like it when it's done," Ron said.

"You're exhausting yourself. Somehow you're more tired than me everyday. It exhausts me to look at you. And I'm the one making the money."

From the kitchen, the *chkt-pfft* of Ron opening a beer.

"Thank you for reminding me of that," he said. "I pay to ride the train in and out of the city every morning and night. I wait in offices and hear the same things, every single day. And then I do the work on the house. It allows me some feeling of having done something. But, thank you for reminding me who paid for this beer. I must have forgotten."

## I'll Watch from Here

“I just wish you would relax. Take a camping trip with Phillip. Go fishing. I don’t know what. But relax.”

“I’ll find another project, if it makes you happy,” he said.

That weekend, Ron asked Phillip for help cleaning the garage. The Last Big Project, he called it, capitalizing each word.

In the garage were the accumulated baggage of family life. Old leaf blowers and weedwackers, broken space heaters, deflated soccer balls, an extra love seat, two fake Christmas trees, once-used camping gear, particle board desks and side tables, and rusted beach chairs that still had sand lodged in their metal joints. Towers of boxes leaned against the walls. It was a mausoleum of stuff.

They worked the whole weekend. They installed shelves and chucked the broken things. It was still a wreck. Phillip kept an eye on Ron, who was just picking things up and putting them down again, in the same spot.

“I don’t want to throw much of this away,” Ron said. He held a glittering pinwheel and blew its blades. “We’ll organize a lot of it, though. And this garage will look good as new.”

“Dad, we could get rid of a lot of it.”

“It just looks bad because it’s not stacked neatly.”

Despite his father, Phillip darted around with oversized bags, shoving everything he could find inside them. Ron lingered in one corner organizing and reorganizing a box of memorabilia during Phillip’s crusade. For hours it seemed that nothing happened. The boxes spawned more boxes, the Nordstrom bags full of baby clothes reappeared in the same spot he had just cleared. Yet just when the mission seemed completely futile, Phillip started to see the shape of things.

## I'll Watch from Here

Eventually the garage—the disorganized wasteland, the cemetery of stuff—had transformed into a cleaner, more sane space. Phillip scanned the room for more to do and met Ron's eyes.

"Looks like we are almost done here," Ron said.

Him saying that should've felt like the loosening of ankle weights, but wasn't there more to do? Anything? Phillip felt that the cleaning was therapeutic for his father, who he still worried over. Bridget had pulled Phillip aside and said she was convinced the man she was married to was crazy, that she had seen him watching and re-watching the archived videos from the house's security cameras. But during the eight or nine hours that Phillip and Ron took to clean the garage, any pretense of *crazy* had fallen apart, tidied itself up. Phillip sincerely wanted to see his father swing a golf club happily again, or to see him come home from a day's work satisfied, not for him to be trapped like an animal in the cage of unemployment, and this time had provided glimpses of that. It was a relief, then, when Ron spoke again:

"Before we finish up, I need to show you something."

Phillip walked over to the worktable, where his father had been sorting his screwdrivers.

"I feel that you have received the brunt force of the problems between your Mom and I. And I'm not one to suggest that you take sides, not at all. You of all people know that I believe we are all vastly interconnected and taking sides is like shorting a circuit, where nothing will work without total co-dependence. You know that I am faithful in that way."

"Yes, Dad, of course."

"But this is different."

Ron closed the black metal drawer of screwdrivers and fished from his pocket his carabiner. The carabiner was loaded with brass keys and souvenir keychains collected during family vacations. There was a tiny silver key there, too, which Ron isolated. Phillip followed him as he



stepped to the big red Craftsmen and inserted the key and flipped the rudimentary lock. Ron pulled at the bottom drawer.

“Take a look in there.”

It was a deep drawer but there was just one thing in it: a pair of men’s boxer briefs. They were red and the elastic had cracked out of the waistband. Beneath the boxers, the drawer was lined with a soft and gummy perforated rubber. The sides were a shiny metal, like the outside of the drawer. Phillip stared into the drawer and didn’t want to remove his eyes because he simply didn’t know what to say, why his father would be showing him locked-up underwear, and he didn’t want to look anymore but had nowhere else to cast his eyes. So he said, “What am I looking at?”

“I have never worn boxer briefs in my life. You have never worn boxer briefs in your life. And I have never been the kind to collect other men’s underwear, weird as you think I might be. I want you to tell me what you think when you see this here. I want you to imagine what you might think if you had found these under your mother and my bed several months ago. I want you to tell me that I am not a crazy person.”

“I can’t say. I just don’t know,” Phillip said.

“Look, I’m going to talk to you now as if you are a man—”

“This is really not something I want to get involved in, Dad.”

“I could say the same thing. But I am involved in it. You are too. Don’t forget how one ripple in a system can move particles on the other side of that system.”

“I just don’t know if this is something I can help you and Mom with,” Phillip said. He started walking away, toward the door. “And besides, it is getting late.”

## I'll Watch from Here

“The truth is, son, that it does drive me crazy. To know that there is a chance that there is another man in your mother’s life, and it’s a likely chance, a chance with evidence. And that I feel compelled to keep this evidence, hidden away. I haven’t talked to your mother about this, of course.”

“Maybe that’s a place to start.” The garage suddenly felt small and cramped to Phillip, who had never seen his parents in the kind of punchy, Hollywood love. Phillip assumed that that kind of love must have happened before his time.

“I know you think she just dismisses me—and she does—but I don’t feel that way toward her, and I truly believe she doesn’t believe what she’s saying. Son, deep down I think that she still loves me. I trust that in her.”

“So what’s with the cameras, if you trust her so much?”

Ron pointed to the drawer, to the possibly soiled boxers that lay there. “The cameras? They prove that this was a fluke. It might have happened once. But now I have peace of mind, at least in my own house.”

Phillip figured that cleaning the garage must have done something good for Ron, something that made him glow or seem younger or more appealing, because he landed a job. He was hired as the manager of a ticketing office for an amusement park which had opened in the cheap land outside town. He announced the job at the dinner table, that votive space, the only place and time where routine family time occurred.

“It offers great benefits. They even give me a retirement package,” he said.

“Whatever suits you,” Bridget said.

“I’m happy for you, Dad.”

“Thank you, son.”

“It’s not quite the same as your old job, is it?” Bridget said.

“Well, it’s a job,” Ron said.

“Maybe, on slow days in the ticket booth, you’ll find spare time to fiddle with semiconductors, like you used to.”

“I did more than fiddle.”

“Well you’ll be doing less than that, now,” she said.

“Could you stop?” Phillip said to his mother.

Bridget scooted out from the table. Her chair scraped along the hardwood floors and made Ron wince.

“You know what? You stay here,” Ron said, halting her rise from the table. He told Phillip to please leave the room because he and Bridget needed to talk.

Phillip left them there and wandered into Ron’s office, fired up YouCamHome, and watched the dining room feed. The two of them talked for a few minutes. Ron gripped his fork in his hand, midair, for the entire conversation. He gesticulated with it as if he were making a stump speech. And then, with a kind of washing away of their argument, Bridget leaned forward and kissed Ron, intensely. If only Phillip could have heard their conversation, known what they had said. After the kiss—long and intense with her yellow hair tilting slightly as their heads recalibrated to a lost art—Bridget stood up, smoothed the wrinkles in her dress, and walked out of the dining room.

Later that night, Ron came to Phillip’s room and sat on his green bedspread. He looked awful, struck down. Phillip asked what was wrong.

"I can't describe it other than to say that the way you and I see the world doesn't work for me right now. There's a Dark Cloud, in my life right now."

Why was it always Phillip's job to be the therapist for grown adults? But he smiled, supportively, as he always had done with his father, because at least he had agreed in principle on their way of seeing the world. Phillip lay in bed and felt too old to have his father sitting on the edge, beside him. The overhead light shone too bright, too strong, and he couldn't look Ron in the eye as he talked. But, as it was, Ron seemed to barely register that Phillip was there, once he started talking:

"There's a Dark Cloud, a big Dark Cloud in my life right now. I can't describe what it is. Your mother thinks it will require clinical attention and I'm beginning to agree. But I realize all that I have told you and all that you know is just a fraction of the whole truth, the greater truth. Because I'm starting to think the great truth is not that we are connected but that we are utterly, totally alone. And that the pride I swallowed in order to take a job pulling ticket stubs means nothing in the big scheme of things."

"I don't think we are alone. But maybe we can talk about it tomorrow, ok?" Phillip said. The talking exhausted him. He hugged Ron, not knowing what else to do.

"Your mother suggests I take that drug she's selling, the WellShot."

"Well, do you want to?"

"You know me and medicine don't get along."

"Why not see how the job goes? Maybe it will help with whatever this Thing is. I'm sure it's just a blip on the radar, not as big as you make it sound," Phillip said. Ron walked toward the door, leaving Phillip to go to sleep. But then Phillip remembered the dinner conversation, that he was proud of his father's job.

“Dad, one thing.”

Ron turned around.

“Tonight, when you and Mom were talking. I watched you two from your computer. I saw that you guys must have made up, somehow. I’m glad.”

“Oh, that,” Ron said. “She was just happy because I admitted to my sadness. Now she thinks she’s entirely right about me.”

Ron’s job required long hours. He knew this going in, and knew that he would miss the time at home that he used to spend on DIY projects. But Phillip suspected in some ways that it reminded him—the hours, at least—of his prime as an engineer, when he would happily devote hours and hours to the job.

During those long evenings, Phillip talked more and more with Bridget. They took most of their meals in the living room, now: microwaved TV dinners that they ate on their laps.

“Do you think he’s getting better?” Phillip asked. This was about two weeks into Ron’s new job.

She said that it was hard to say, and that she wished he would consider WellShot, or at least a medical visit.

“He seems fine every time I see him, though,” Phillip said.

“I still wonder when he’s going to flip on us,” she said. “He’s quiet like this, letting it brew, and then he’ll go apeshit.”

But, he did seem fine. The job seemed to strengthen Ron. He came in while Bridget and Phillip ate dinner on the couch and seemed taller than he had in years. He beamed confidence in every way, just from something so simple as a job in ticket stubs. He filled out his shirts.

## I'll Watch from Here

On the third week of Ron having the job, he had built up enough confidence that he seemed like his old self, from years ago. He came in, as usual, while the others were eating dinner. “Absolutely beautiful day outside. Sky’s blue and the park was full today. I even got tips! This is going to work out better than I could have ever dreamed.”

Bridget didn’t respond, but instead just turned the volume up on the television.

“And as for you,” he said, wagging a finger at Bridget. He picked the remote up and turned off the TV. “There’s something that you need to come clean about. Something that I’ve been meaning to bring up for a long time.” Ron then pulled from his back pocket the folded boxers that Phillip had seen in the Craftsman chest. Ron held it in front of her face, waiting for an answer.

“I have no idea what you’re showing me,” she said.

“Phillip,” Ron said. “If you’ll excuse, your mother and I have to talk.”

The general strategy the next few days was to avoid contact with either parent. Phillip had grown tired of being a personal therapist for either of them. The argument, or whatever they’d had, had resulted in Ron drifting back to his old self. Phillip even saw him observing out the living room window again and kept track of how much time he spent watching the security cameras.

A couple days afterward, Phillip was at the mall when his phone rang. It was Bridget. He said hello.

“You’ve got to get home immediately,” she said.

“What’s the rush?”

“Trust me, you need to get home.”

Once he did, it became abundantly clear why. There were police at the house, photographing what had been the ultimate consummation of Ron with that Dark Cloud, that looming depression over his life—his suicide.

The police were still collecting evidence.

“We didn’t find a note, but did you have any idea why this might happen?” asked one of the officers.

“No idea at all,” said Bridget.

“He was depressed,” Phillip said.

There was only so much gnashing of teeth and wailing Phillip could do. He wanted to see, out of a sickened love maybe, exactly what had happened. Why. Depression alone was not enough to possibly understand the death.

He went to Ron’s old office and clicked on YouCamHome and entered the password. Not even Bridget knew the password at this point; and any evidence that remained on the screen would remain his secret.

This is what the footage showed. 1:44 p.m., timestamped at the bottom right corner. Ron stood in the kitchen and read from the newspaper. He walked down the back hallway, leading to the garage. Ran his hands along the walls, like kids do. He entered the garage and retrieved a rope and brought it inside the house. For a few minutes, he stood in the living room and stared up, toward the soaring ceiling. He moved some furniture around. And, with quick ease and efficiency, he scaled the staircase, looped and cinched the rope to a baluster along the edge of the second floor loft, walked downstairs, climbed on the chair, tightened the rope, and finished the job.

## I'll Watch from Here

That same afternoon. Bridget said she was tired and needed to rest. Phillip listened as she walked away and shut her bedroom door.

Without her there, Phillip went back to the laptop to watch the footage more. He was addicted to it, to see whether there were any clues as to why his father, who had seemed so much on the upswing, would hang himself.

Phillip watched the footage dozens of times more. Scale, loop cinch, walk, climb, tighten, finish. Each time he watched, the video moved faster. He grew impatient and replayed the video in double time. Ron looked, in the sped up footage, like a character from an ancient TV show, one of the Three Stooges just pulling a prank. He anticipated the snap. He seemed both alive and not.

Eventually, he had to stop rewinding. It was enough. He held his head in his hands. He stayed there, for a couple hours, in front of the footage of the hanging body. The clip rolled on.

He was about to close the laptop. But then he caught another movement on the surveillance footage. It was Bridget, as she arrived home in the evening. She ran to the body in the living room and touched the knees in front of her face. Obviously shocked. Dad's hulking mass did not spin or waver. She walked back to the kitchen and picked up her phone, presumably to dial the police.

But the phone call took much longer than a police dispatch would. She wandered through the kitchen with the phone pressed against her ear. She did most of the talking. Her pacing, power walking, on the tile floors eventually slowed, slowed, slowed until she sat at the counter.

Phillip zoomed in on the video. Now she was still talking, but twirling her hair in her fingertips. She held the phone in front of her and pressed a button—the speakerphone. She laid the phone on the table and walked away, to the fridge, where she pulled out leftover food. She



microwaved the tupperware container and ate from it, sometimes restraining from another bite so that she could say more to the phone in front of her meal. Phillip had never seen the woman talk so much in one sitting. And that she was smiling, laughing on the phone. Where were the police? Who was on the other end of that line?

Phillip decided to rewind long before the suicide, to see whether any other phone calls had been made. There was no time that he could remember Bridget laughing so easily, at least not in the past couple years.

The day before the suicide, in the middle of the day, there was movement. This was when Ron was at work, pulling ticket stubs. The footage showed Bridget, back in the house. And she, too, was supposed to be at work.

This is what the footage showed. Bridget walked to the camera in the corner of the living room, fully aware of its recording her. She raised her hand to the lens and raised her middle finger to the lens. And then she pulled out her cell phone and dialed someone. Within minutes, the front door of the house was opening and a man, younger than Ron and blonder and stronger, came into the picture. She talked to him and then he undressed her, in full view of the camera. They were both naked and sprawled on the couch—specifically in the room that had a security camera installed.

That was when Phillip chose to stop the tape. He had seen enough to know. This was a woman who his father had forgiven and held faith in, despite every sign saying not to, and a woman who played a kind of ruthless chess with the people in her life.

Phillip closed the laptop screen, and swiveled his head to take in the room around him. This was the house he grew up in. The sound of water traversing the pipes had stopped; Bridget was done in the shower. He stood up and walked to the garage. He was operating on a primal level

then, at a stage where a vital connection between rational thought and sensory feeling had been severed.

In the garage, Phillip pulled out a cardboard box that he remembered specifically from when he and Ron had cleaned the garage. He retrieved a thin rope, normally used for tying luggage to the roof of their car on family road trips. The transgression of Bridget—against the person whom she claimed to want to help, against the person whom she claimed was crazy—deserved swift justice.

Ron stood outside the bedroom, the rope strung between his hands. He stared at the solid wood door in front of him and examined its brilliant paint, its luster, the liquid physicality of it. It was a recent coat of pure white, applied within the past few years. He picked away at a glob that had dried—the door's only imperfection—and flicked it away. At a closer proximity, breathing in the landing's sunlit dust motes, he wanted more than answers. He didn't need answers when the evidence was there. And who cared that she would never know that Ron knew the computer's password? What she had intended for Ron to see, what she had shown in the flesh, was seen by the one person who could take revenge.

Even if what his father did was the ultimate consequence of a dark, dark depression — it was aggravated by the one person in his life who could have done something.

But even then, for a moment, Phillip weighed the two possibilities for her. One, a quick and instant pain, a squeezing away of life, and no hope of escape—or Two, another body, a constant throb in the heart, a reminder, a torment worse than death for any mother, because he did still have the rope and the railing. But this was a woman who could clearly not feel, not for her husband nor for any man. He knocked before entering. He wanted her to see him before she struggled.

## Famous

I have only been mistaken for a celebrity twice in my life.

The first time I was nine years old and still had straight, blonde hair untarnished by puberty and its menacing curls, and I was in New York staying with my awful aunt Greta, my parents being out of the country for two weeks to pick up my little brother from Russia, and there was a lady on the subway beside me who thought I was Michelle Tanner from Full House, that adorable little blonde with all the sassy lines, and I denied it up and down, but this woman beside me was *so* certain of my celebrity status that she whispered in my ear, “I saw the damned show yesterday!” and “Don’t deny it!” until she got this wild and crazed look in her non-lazy eye that I could only assume was a kind of unrequited love, the most intense kind of love, which I must admit that wild and crazed look melted me like a laser beam on butter, and the whole time Aunt

## I'll Watch from Here

Greta was asleep next to me, tranquilized by her years old accustomedness to the city, and so, before our stop, I decided to fulfill the love of the woman next to me, the woman carrying two black trash bags, the woman with the orange mullet and the camouflage pants, the woman who wanted me so badly to be the girl on Full House who at the end of each episode provided the moral of the story with a wink; I returned her love by tearing out a piece of pink, Hello Kitty paper from my spiral-bound notebook and then I loopy-cursived the signature of Michelle Tanner with my rolling gel pen, and then I handed it to the lady delicately, as if I were handing her a dream-come-true, and the best part was watching her tears collect and splat down on the sheet of paper, pure happiness.

I forgot all of that, I had obliterated it from my memory, erased it from the tree lines of my being, forgotten until the second time I was mistaken for a celebrity, which that time was a month ago and also on a train, this time a touring train, one of those steam locomotive types, carving through the wine country of South Africa, where I was on assignment, when this American man sat down and said in his foreign accent that he was “70 percent sure” that I was Charlize Theron, which I could kind of see, considering that Charlize and I had both taken to a very short, boyish haircut, but of course I’m no South African goddess, yet I wanted to play along, and so it was toward the man who had a beautiful jawline and his 70 percent confidence that I lifted my eyebrows, afraid to talk because talking would betray my non-South African accent. Me lifting my eyebrows until he said, “Ok, 80 percent” with a nice wink like a twitch, after which he crossed the burgundy-carpeted aisle to sit beside me, and I wondered whether sitting next to each other with the view of the wineries out the window meant that we were supposed to kiss, and I hadn’t kissed anyone in months, but that would be too forward for a celebrity, so I reached instead for blank paper in my bag so I could write him a fake signature,

## I'll Watch from Here

and I had a smile on then because of my game, a shit-eating grin because of my game, but then I felt the presence of the man in a physical way, and I realized this man had been 100 percent aware that I was *not* Charlize Theron, because this man had this grip on my left leg, in such a spot that made me remember all at once those two long weeks in New York—when I was staying with Aunt Greta, who at nighttime also grabbed my leg in a similar way, Aunt Greta who I'd forgotten as soon as we shoveled dirt on top of her, but who this man had resurrected in his fingers.

## Feed the Algorithm

In the musty, rented room above the Greer family's garage, Roy sits at his desk, turns on his PC, and logs on. It's dark and drafty in the room—the only light comes from the blue tinge of the LCD screen. He authenticates via fingerprint scan.

After authentication, the PC's browser presents the site list. Currently Roy can afford only the lowest tier of net access. The best rate for this subscription level is \$9 per month, paid by check to YouFiberNet, a private-public corp. That gets him three sites.

The three sites include one news page, plus one family safe, FCC-approved video submission site, and one match site.

*Just for You News!* reports either: A, wars in faraway places (who can care?) or B, local events, like the rescue of the Santiago's tabby cat or the ribbon-cutting at the GroceryMart.

As for the video site, all of its content looks from old-old times. With fuzzy resolutions and orange timestamps and weird aspect ratios. Most of the videos are from Christmas mornings, with pajama-clad children beside Frasier Fir lookalikes. The parents behind the camcorder give little stage directions—"Open that one! It's from Santa!"—and sometimes murmur indecipherably behind the camera. Their little vocal sighs, sometimes they sound like emissions of love.

Roy is uninterested in the video or the news site. He's seen it all. So it's *matchmeup.com* tonight, for the first time.

Which is surprising, given how when Roy was in high school, all his friends made fun of the very concept of these matchmaking sites, which were then moving from their staked territory (old maidens, receding hairlines) to new markets—high school and college romances.

This making fun was part of the daily bonding among his friends back then, conversations which look almost sacred now. Roy and his teammates would be assembled in the locker room after basketball practice, sweaty and in various states of undress, unwilling quite yet to bundle up and head home for their separate family dinners. After running suicide drills or shooting endless free throws, all of them were drained and leveled and somehow able to talk to each other in a more serious way. To talk on a more respectful, fraternal plane than at the lunch table. They leaned against the tapioca colored lockers and felt the cold metal on their backsides. They spoke in a lower volume than normal.

Those days Roy sat on the bench and soaked it all in, being the group spectator. He echoed a few of his more vocal friends every few minutes.

As for the matchmaking websites, the team unanimously mocked all their advertisements and promises. After all, who needs the web to tell you who you are compatible with? What's the point of a 100 percent guarantee when everyone knows that relationships are like gravity—what goes up eventually comes down? Who in the first place trusts an algorithm written by some underpaid, East Indian?

But times change. Roy hasn't spoken to that group of guys—not even Ben Friedman, his best friend back then and fellow bench warmer—for a couple years now. Who knows where they all are? Certainly not in the line of custodial work, as Roy is, at the university. Custodial being the politically correct term for scrubbing toilets.

So tonight Roy creates a profile. He types his full name and government ID number into the user registration field. A recent photograph of him—his ID photo, valid for 12 months—automatically populates his profile. Facts about him physically, from his last visit to the doctor, flash onto the page. Six feet tall, 160 pounds. Predisposed to high blood pressure. White skin, no blemishes. Excised mole, noncancerous, behind right ear. Brown hair, straight. There is no way to lie or exaggerate or even edit the information on the site.

There is a space that is labeled *Length of Private*, but its numeric entry is covered by a thick black bar. Next to the space is a yellow, winking smiley. Clicking on it informs him that publicizing XXX data would of course be a violation of privacy. Instead, broadcasting one's XXX data is a paid, opt-in feature of the site, available to both men and women, payable by all major credit cards.

The rest of the profile is a subjective questionnaire to build his personality profile. The site prompts him to complete the questions before he can view any potentials on the network. The questions are listed in black text on a white background. But to the right of the questionnaire is a



motivating graphic—a computer generated blonde woman. She is behind black iron bars. She is very sexy, beautiful, virginal, etc. There is a graphical lock on her cage's door, and a golden key twists a smidge for every question Roy answers. Beneath the caged woman is a flashing text:

*Answer all the questions to 'unlock' your soul mate!*

He clicks through questions about his patterns of appetite, his racial preferences, which side of the bed he prefers, his carbonated beverage brand loyalties. The questions go as shallow as cat vs. dog (no option for both; he chooses dog) and as deep as spiritual/philosophical convictions. For the belief question, there are check buttons for 1) old-fashioned God-type worship, 2) atheist, 3) apathetic, and 4) spiritual but unreligious, which he selects.

All the while, the golden key twists and the blonde smiles bigger and bigger.

Roy completes his profile and a matrix of beautiful women appear on the screen. All of the women have ski-slope noses. There are blondes, brunettes, and redheads. Several of them have horn-rimmed glasses that remind him of his childhood librarian, in a good way.

Somehow the algorithm has taken into account Roy's innate preferences and filters away the obese as well as the too-skinny. He scans through the rows of their pictures and tries to find someone, anyone, with a bit more pudge. None of the women have a chubby neck or even a portly fullness to their cheeks.

Roy is sure there was no question related to preferred weight, so this judgment on behalf of the algorithm seems a bit unfair. Even if it's right.

The first step in the *Match Me Up* process is initiating a chat. Roy picks the least flashy blonde on the page. More like dirty blonde. And with a mole beneath her left eye. But before he can click on her image for an expanded view and to chat, he receives a chat message.

“Hiya Roy!”

The avatar is of a freckled brunette with impossibly straight teeth. She is tagged—literally to the side of her avatar with boxes of text—with their commonalities: the title of a favorite book, similar wealth aspirations, and left-of-center political views.

“Hello,” he says back.

“My name is Helen. My age is 18. Would you like to video chat?”

He hears the trilling video-invitation before he can respond. The live-preview window shows Helen, smiling, with bouncy curls falling around her face and shoulders. She looks as though she took great time to look unfussy about her hair and make-up. He reads vibes of trying hard to seem laid back.

But, he checks their deeper compatibility report. A few questions—she abhors pets, for one—have a red flag beside them. When he hovers his cursor over each red flag, a speech bubble appears: *Compromise is the foundation of successfully matched couple!*

Roy accepts the video chat, and Helen talks fast like a junkie.

“Where are you from, Roy? I believe that we are 98 percent compatible. I have never had a compatibility rating above 95 percent.”

Helen has an accent that he can’t quite place. It’s a kind of formulaic biting off of each word, with no harmony or rhythm.

He says, “I’m from the East coast, and where are you from, with that beautiful accent?”

“I’m from Germany, of course! Don’t you know of this website’s popularity in Ger-ma-nee?”

He didn’t. But it didn’t matter, because she kept talking.

“The East Coast? I have always wanted to go. But you know of the exit restrictions currently in place in my country? Surely you do,” she says. “I believe I am most jealous of how it is much warmer where you live. Look at the fact you are wearing a short-sleeves!”

She lifts a beaver's fur hat to the camera and fits it on her head carefully. "Do you fancy the cold?"

There is something that feels so wrong to him about this—the data, the already-populated fields containing all his vital information, the government populated ID photo. Yet at the same time, it feels right, it feels so right for someone who needs this. And it feels right on a level of sophistication that only software could create.

Crucially, Helen's video screen glitches. In a moment, the frame resets to ten previous seconds. She lifts the beaver fur hat one more time and says again, "Do you fancy the cold?" It happens once more, and Roy hovers his mouse over her image. There is a pause, rewind, and fast forward button. The choice here is clear, to choose between a near perfect visualization or to just go to sleep empty-handed. And which is the more lonely?

He pauses her one more time, so that she may say again, "Do you fancy the cold?"

"I do," he says, grabbing his pants, trusting in the web interface. "Oh, I love it."

## The Dreamhouse

The boys are in their sleeping bags and it's dark. Gary fidgets. He's unaccustomed to the gaps between the floorboards. Sweeping has done zilch in the way of comfort. His cousin Jay, always in another world and numb to physical reality, probably feels like he's laying on a cloud.

They had gone to where the creek butts against the road. Jogged for three miles through the woods, headed west, toward the sun's falling image. And then they saw it. An old deer stand, where the trees thinned. Perched among ferns and roots and stands of stinging nettle. Just beyond it, a pasture of billowing grass, maintained by the deer now protected by county law.

Old hunters erected this building. They nailed the plywood sides to the two-by-fours. They dragged the wood here from the road. They covered the tiny space with a slanted roof, years ago.

But that was a long, long time ago. The building, on stilts, has begun its fall back to the natural world. It has discolored until it matched the nondescript, loamy soil. The stilts show signs of rot, potential buckling. Steps are missing in the ladder. To anyone else, it looks like a ruddy old deer stand, decades out of commission.

But to Gary and Jay, who have witnessed it before, this is the Dreamhouse.

Gary rolls over on his stomach, then again on his back. "You're sure this will work, the same as it did before?" he says.

"Trust me, bro. It'll work."

Jay is wearing 3-D glasses. They have blue, soft-plastic lenses. They seem to Gary like a mockery of the goal at hand. But Jay claimed his 'Innate knowledge of the paranormal' to silence Gary's protests. Gary just hopes that the ghost-summoning will still work and the ghost won't be offended.

"I trust you." Gary says.

Jay says, "What could you be worried about? It worked last summer, didn't it?"

"Last summer wasn't quite so important. Last summer we were playing around. And last summer, I could've been hallucinating and imagined Belle against the wall, even though she wasn't really there."

"Belle was real," Jay says. "I saw her too."

A moment passes between the two boys. The crickets are in symphony with a bullfrog. Gary scrunches his eyebrows and sends out negative vibes, nervous to speak, hopeful Jay might feel his frustration. Gary is the kind of shy kid who hopes people pick up all his cues, even in the pitch dark of night, camping out in a deer stand.

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“Ok, ok.” Jay removes and folds the 3-D glasses and lays them on the floor. “Now that I’m not being attacked by your totally negative energy, let’s do this.”

Gary says ok and makes final adjustments to his sleeping bag while Jay gives instructions. “I’m going to count backward from 100. On practice runs, I fall asleep at around number 46. I’ll listen to your breathing around 60 or so to make sure we’re on track.”

The surefire method of calling forth a ghost, as far as they know, is falling asleep at the same time.

“And make sure you are thinking of her,” Jay says. “The image has to be clear in your head for this to work. Like to the level of facial wrinkles, misplaced hairs, mole beneath her eye. She had a mole beneath her eye, right?”

“Yeah. Got it.”

“Young Gary, I sense doubt. You haven’t already fuzzed on the specifics of your own mother’s face, I hope.”

“Jay, she’s my Mom. Would you fuzz on details of your own mother’s face?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. But focus.”

Gary says ok, Jay starts counting, and after a minute, the two fall asleep.

Two weeks before, Gary sat in science class. It was only a couple days Gary’s mother being found on the side of the road in a tangle of bent bicycle and body parts.

He was in freshman biology, a class held in a godforsaken trailer wedged behind the building between the steamy greenhouses and the student parking lot.

Mrs. Zuber, the teacher, stood at the front of the class. “This is today’s worksheet,” she said and waved a sheet of paper. “Before anyone asks me why this is important, how it applies to

your life, et cetera, please consult Objective 9 in your state-approved curriculum handbook.” She drones on and on.

How lucky Gary was to have found the Dreamhouse last summer. Otherwise, he might have had to croak his thanks at the funeral, or taken time off school. He might have locked himself in his bedroom, with the electric fan on and his miniature TV tuned to the Home Shopping Network, the only channel it received. He might have had to feel a need to say goodbye. But all those rites were smoothed over by the Dreamhouse Where, in the dark of night, between plywood walls, the dead could wander back, as though nothing had happened, and speak.

Outside, the sun scorched the grass. It was late May, but the annual drought had started early. Soon the lakes on the outskirts of town would dry up and become crumbly oatmeal pits, Martian landscapes. It was mirage weather.

Inside, the A/C unit expelled hot air and rattled like Gary’s father’s Pontiac. Last period was gym, and a sweet stink hung in the air.

Gary spun his pencil in the crook between his thumb and forefinger and counted the days until Jay would come back. Then they would assemble a plan. Probably the ghost of Mom may be unwilling to talk. Possibly porous, shrouded in a smoky blue haze. And if she didn’t die immediately, her ghost-self would be her butchered remains, wouldn’t it? Extensive road rash included, with her skin that looked gnawed at by the asphalt.

But, it would be her. That was enough to believe in, until Jay would come back for the summer, as he always did. Whether out of a superstition against breaking routine, or a fear that the Dreamhouse wouldn’t work without his cousin there, Gary had steeled himself in patience. And besides—what’s the rush? The dead stay dead, at least in the literal sense.

## I'll Watch from Here

Mrs. Zuber made her rounds while everyone worked in a comatose silence. It was quiet the way the DMV is quiet, where you wait with nothing to do but to study the shapes of road signs and stare at the back of strangers' heads. Gary sat at the back of the room with the quiet kids. Instead of doing the required worksheet—who could care about Punnett Squares?—Gary stared a million-mile stare—through the blackboard, out the walls, beyond the school, far into the woods, at the deserted hunting stand, at the Dreamhouse.

Mrs. Zuber neared Gary from behind. He felt her hovering over his shoulder.

“Are we focusing on our worksheet?” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“There is nothing here.” She jabbed a finger onto his paper.

“I do the work in my head first.”

Mrs. Zuber put her hand on his shoulder. She squatted down to speak at his level. “Is everything ok?” she asked. Her breath smelled like reheated coffee.

Gary said he didn’t quite follow. He pointed out everyone else not doing their work, too. “It’s hot in here,” he said.

“I mean given everything that has happened,” she said.

All the other students’ eyes were glazing, sinking into their faces. Mrs. Zuber continued, “You know of course that I saw it all on the news. Horrific.” She moved even closer to him, her head now perilously close to his cheek, indicating her disregard for any legal advice she might have received pertaining to allowed proximity to students, i.e. the district’s personal bubble rule. “And I haven’t said anything till now, on account of giving you space. Besides, you and I both know we don’t have a grief counselor, guidance counselor, or even training on how to deal with



issues this traumatizing. There's not even a PDF for me to consult. Budget cuts, budget cuts. Not that that concerns you, I know."

"Hmm."

"What I am trying to say is that I am here, we are all here for you, Gary. Open up to any images you can't shake or emotions you cling to. Lord knows I sure could after watching Channel 4. I am no trained counselor, but I can wear that hat if you want me to. Say what feels right, when it feels right."

Gary considered her speech. Which notably contained more words than she had said to him all year. It seemed genuine—a way out of loneliness. But, irrelevant nonetheless.

"Thank you, Mrs. Zuber."

"Is there anything I can do? I've called your father and got no response either time. I left messages."

Behind Mrs. Zuber, a kid sent flying a paper airplane, made from her state-approved worksheet. It fell well short of any desired flight route, seems to wilt in mid-air.

"Anything at all?" Mrs. Zuber asked

"Please, don't worry," he said, thinking out a line he had heard in a popular TV movie, "because I have faith in something, something that makes me believe she is not really gone. Something bigger than me."

"Oh. *Now* I understand," she said. Mrs. Zuber, an antique, never caught references.

She stood up, removed her hand from Gary's shoulder, and repositioned herself to the front of his desk. She stretched her forearm toward him, the palm of her hand facing up, near his chin. She rolled her shirt sleeve back to show a plain gold bracelet. Attached to the bracelet was a

cross. She teased it between her fingers and said, “I see we are both believers. Your mother raised you well, after all, didn’t she?”

“Hah!” he said, victim to his impulses. “I guess you could say that. Sure.” He picked up his pencil and scribbled his name at the top of his paper, hoping to send Zuber a message.

She smiled uncertainly, rolled her sleeve down, and walked away. Her back was to the class now. She began her usual kowtowing to the smart kids, up front, who wanted answers. She wouldn’t be back here.

He looked back out, zooming through the walls and the woods, thinking of Jay, and of the ghosts they had seen, of the ghost they would soon summon.

The tradition of stowing Jay at Ray and Lyn’s house during summer vacations had been cemented for a few years. Or for at least as long as Jay’s parents had been in Africa. His folks—Gary’s aunt and uncle—were missionaries. Their work invaded their personalities until they became fiercely positive, relentless, opinionated, identical. The pair’s lifelong dream was to spread Christianity throughout central Africa, and to do it fast. They wanted to pump goodwill and almighty praise into the continent before the influx of Chinese and Arab stimulus money tainted every nation with a reverence for wealth and a predisposition for greed.

Like their son, they were rosy-cheeked and red-haired, with yellowing teeth and zero interest in manual labor. They sunburned easily. Their labor-free form of spreading the gospel was one that depended on the aid of a travel-along maid named Marion, who did their laundry, lugged their bags, cooked indigenous meals and listened to them read from the Bible, all in exchange for the vague, unwritten promise of a VISA. Luckily for Marion, her employers didn’t involve her in the work of Christ. The married missionaries did a small amount of preaching, and a larger

amount of visiting various towns and replenishing Bibles that had been used for survival purposes, like starting fires for wood stoves. It was no place to raise a child (malaria nets can only protect so much), and so Jay's parents sent him to a prestigious boarding school for the time being.

The school promised a well-rounded education, including theology. It was in a valley town, a few hours west of the piedmont, where all the locals started drinking about the same time that *The Price is Right!* aired. By noon, most would have climbed back into bed or walked to the store to refill.

The school was the only place then where real dialogue or adventure or intellectualism occurred. It was an enclave in the backwards town. And even then, the serious thinking at the school was more of a drizzle than a rain storm. Steady but not enough to wet. If there were any tempest of intellectualism, any lightning rod for right reason, Jay was it. Jay: the nerd, the redheaded wonderkid who soaked in the world around him, the recluse, the reader who skipped Mass. Who had, in his burrowing way, shown a keen interest in, among all his other pet fascinations, the paranormal and occult.

May. Jay checked out every book he could find on ghosts, unexplained phenomena, witchcraft. All year long, he had been consumed by a vision he and Gary had shared in the Dreamhouse last summer. An inexplicable cold, a flashing open of eyelids, the sense of falling. The gradual appearance, in the doorway, of a familiar girl, an every girl, dressed in muddy overalls, galoshes, and a thick, winter jacket.

He had played a game of distraction—schoolwork—for long enough; it was time to understand the rational, scientific response behind seeing a girl float in to his life. The school didn't have very much other than historical accounts. Old, dusty volumes of what 'mad' people

claimed they witnessed. Deathbed revelations of mentally ill, involuntarily committed to hospital.

So when the school library failed him, he had gone to an alternative book store downtown. Jay knew the store for publishing weird pamphlets for anarchist groups and the United Atheists, alongside their more popular feminist texts.

He walked in on a bright Saturday, in May, a couple weeks before school would close for the summer. He browsed absently until a woman asked him if he needed help.

"I'm mainly interested in ghosts. How they are summoned, reached, interacted with." he said.

The cashier was a young woman with a home haircut, cut jagged along her fringe. She wore thrifted clothes that looked decades old. A blazer with shoulder pads and stonewashed Levis. Her skin was mottled with dark patches, like she had been burned once. Yet despite looking like she had slept in an alleyway, she stood upright and gesticulated enthusiastically when she talked.

"Ghosts? We've got 'em. The ethereal? That too. The dead? Sure." she said. "We've got it all. You want fiction or nonfiction?"

"Nonfiction. I'm on a mission to disprove our monotheistic notion of the afterlife."

"You want to talk to a ghost, someone you knew?"

"Not anyone in particular. I'm more interested in the experiment. Academic purposes."

"Good for you, kid," she said. "Go to the back left corner. That's our nonfiction section. Look for the 'Bizarre Phenomena' shelf," she said. He walked away, into the quiet back of the store, stepping carefully on the uneven wooden floors. As he walked, the employee said, "Good luck finding your ghost!"

There were texts on Paganism, old and forgotten cults, rumored murders within the Catholic order. If he could buy all of them, he would—the unusual books seemed so scandalous even to

look at. Until this point, his soaking up of the world around him had been limited to the scandals of Nathaniel Hawthorne, school-approved texts.

But there was nothing on what he was interested in, the unearthing of ghosts that belonged, clearly, to a specific time and place. The girl in the muddied overalls. The Dreamhouse as refuge for the dead. He was about to turn and give up, until he noticed a small, square book jammed along the sidewall of the bookshelf. *Dreams and Architecture: The Interplay of Buildings and R.E.M.-Style Dream Sequences*.

The ghost of last summer was real, he knew that, but the book hit a note. Like its scientific title was hiding something that only certain people might understand. Inside the book were pictures of haunted tobacco plantations, with crude drawings of slaves lingering on the grounds. Captioned, 'Figure 31. An artist's portrayal of the slave hauntings at Nagodoches. Completed with oversight by Nagodoches dreams 1, 4, 5, 7. (See pp. 57-60).' Other dream illustrations depicted Native American burial grounds, Best Western motels, fraternity houses.

Jay grabbed the book. He hoped it would provide some clue as to how it happened, the mechanics of it. To corroborate his and Gary's theories of how the Dreamhouse worked, to confirm a world different from any he had been exposed to before.

Last year, before they even knew about the Dreamhouse's effect, Gary asked what Jay wanted to do for the day. It was one of the first days in their summer.

"Weather's nice," Jay said. "We could go outside."

"Would you play soccer? Throw a football?"

“Let’s not be barbarians,” Jay said. “You know that soccer’s worldwide dominance is thanks to the bastard British Empire, right?”

“What?”

“Soccer was used as a diversion. While they plundered and ravaged.”

Jay, who had no qualms about sounding like the know-it-all boarding school kid (“I might as well own the assumed identity, and besides, I like it!”), opened his book on the table. He read for a few minutes. Gary watched his eyeballs and concluded he was pretending to read, for dramatic effect.

“So, football?” Gary pointed his spoon at Jay. “It’s entirely American. Our empire hasn’t spread far enough to spread football yet.”

“That’s so not the point.”

They were home alone. Ray and Lyn trusted the boys not to wreck the house, an old split level with a cracked foundation and saggy ceilings. It reeked of forgotten onions and was chock-full of useless stuff. It suffered from gross inattention, while its inhabitants drew out lives so far away from the physical, material world that to suggest staining the deck or replacing shattered windows would be like proposing a murder plot. The untidiness and smell of onions, plus the faded paint and rotted deck, all underlined that the house itself was returning to nature.

The boys were at the kitchen table. Gary hated soggy cereal, so he spooned his cornflakes, ate them dry, and swallowed down each bite with a sip of milk. He did the routine a couple times and then said, “Well, I’d like to get on with people in this neighborhood this summer, unlike last year. I had no friends last year.”

“You say that,” Jay said, “And I know you mean it. But you haven’t seen this.” He pulled a skinny newspaper clipping from his lap and slid it across the table. The headline read, ‘Missing

Girl Found, Slain.’ There was a picture of the girl with her hair whipping from the wind of a beach, the ocean her background. But the clipping was old and yellowed. Her date of birth was 24 years before. “She lived in this house. I did the research.” Jay said. “I want to explore, see if we can find her grave. There’s cemeteries all over these woods.”

“Where did you find this?”

“The clipping I found in Uncle Ray’s desk. It was with all the house stuff, the mortgage papers.”

“You went in his desk?”

“I’m inquisitive by nature,” Jay said. “Besides, look what it can produce.”

“I never knew we were on some dead person’s ground.”

“Don’t you realize that you are almost always on a dead person’s ground? There is only so much land for so many dead people. Someone has probably died in this room. Do the math.”

Gary looked again at the clipping, dated some forty years ago. “Her family might be gone now, too.”

“Then maybe we’ll find their tombstones, too,” Jay said. “Let’s go.”

They ran through the woods at breakneck speeds, looking anywhere for where they might find a cemetery. Only late in the evening, when they were close to giving up, did they find the deer stand along the field.

“Let’s check it out,” Jay said.

That night, they decided to stay in the Dreamhouse. It began with a dare from Jay, who didn’t believe that Gary could last a night in the woods. Late into the night, they talked about Belle—the slain girl from the newspaper clipping. And though they were disappointed that they hadn’t seen her tombstone, or any cemetery anywhere, they were confident they’d find her.

“Where do you think she is?” Gary said.

“Who knows? For all we know, she’s buried in the soil outside your house. It’s just good for you that you don’t have a vegetable patch, using up her nutrients.”

It must have been their talking through the night, their obsessing over the newspaper clipping, their laying the clipping down on the dusty wooden floor beside their heads as they slept in a muggy silence. Whatever it was — they woke up, at the same time, in the middle of the night. And pressed against the doorway, with moths dusting her in the moonlight, was a 4’10 Belle, standing, in wait. Neither boy said a word until the next day. And even then, they did little else but name their new hideaway—The Dreamhouse.

Lyn had been killed in a hit-and-run. The police knocked on the door at 10:44 p.m. This is after they had been contacted by Ray and Gary the hour before, when she still hadn’t come home. Or, that is, Gary made the call. Ray was in his big pink chair and watching TV. He had said, “She’ll come when she comes home. Let it be.” That night he had been at his weekly poker tournament across town with the only friends he had in town. There were no evidence of bike lights or a protective helmet. There were no witnesses. It happened on Gecko Creek Road, a sleepy secondary road about half a mile away from downtown, where the development stopped and the trees thickened. The police found her body on the way to meet with Ray and Gary.

When she died, everyone in town started asking questions. Why Lyn, the poor mother of that little boy Gary and the wife of that good-for-nothing husband, Ray? Why Lyn, who had been a fixture for so long that she seemed cemented in, like a street sign? Why Lyn, who no one had any reason to dislike? The same could not be said for all the other leaches and backstabbers and good-for-nothing mopes in town.



It seemed personally unfair to them that she should be the victim. Even the mopes might have thought so. Mostly on account of everyone being in love with Lyn the same way you are in love with a lightning bug—in a trance, fallen under a childlike wonder, and if you have any respect, from a distance.

This is because for most of her adult life, Lyn was an amateur magician. Without any money or desire to go to college, she picked up a trade of her own. Why not? And there was little else to do in the town, where women usually became teachers or bank clerks or stayed at home, with their children. She taught herself. And everyone, from the Mayor all the way down to the county sanitation workers, had seen her perform.

Most days Lyn went to town on her bicycle. She would throw her supply box in the basket on the front of the bike, roll out of their gravel drive, and pedal the couple miles to the town's main street. It was a heavy, steel cargo bike that she had spray-painted hot pink. The supply box contained all the bare essentials of a magic show: her cape, her multiple decks of cards, her chopping block, her knives and needles.

She performed rain or shine. Years ago, Gary used to ask her why she had to leave everyday. His father Ray, after all, spent most of his time in his wheelchair or big pink recliner, staring at the TV or writing letters to the President that bemoaned government spending. Gary's questions came at an age when he still sat on her lap during breakfast and she spooned his cereal, when all of this still seemed temporary to her, when the dappled light filtering in the trees around their one-floor ranch still seemed a reflection of the beauty of the country, not its suffocating isolation. She would answer that she enjoyed the work: "I like being outside and entertaining people, baby boy. I like making people go ooh!" Normally, these reassurances were enough to plug Gary's waterfall of questions, to ease his separation anxiety.

## I'll Watch from Here

Later, as Gary grew older and he started asking why magic, not accounting or working the register at the Piggly Wiggly, he was no longer *baby boy*. She couldn't blame Gary because children can't imagine jobs outside the world they see. And so she'd say, "Well, someone needs to put food on the table, and this is the best way I know how."

Not that Gary didn't care about the magic; he was just concerned about the finances. Bagging groceries simply paid more. Lyn, however, believed that if the economy were better, people would throw more in the hat. She always believed the economy would improve, and soon. Look at the DOW and NASDAQ! It will be a matter of time. Darkest before the dawn, etc. etc. All indicators always said up.

She had started teaching him a few card tricks and training him how to maintain his secrets and composure, how to establish a wall between the show and the people on the sidewalk, so that the audience could happily believe. She imagined ways to incorporate him into her act. Gary played along and learned, sometimes even accompanied her to town.

Lyn's street corner was within sight of the the pharmacy and the town's only bank. It guaranteed visibility to all passerby. Plus there was shade from a large tree next to the post office, which protected her milky skin. Under the shade, she guessed people's cards, suspended coins in midair, shot fire into her palms, pulled gemstones from behind kids' ears. And when each day was up, or until she earned enough to pay for the groceries, she packed up and cycled home in the falling light.

Once, a greasy-haired man was traveling through town and watched her do a few tricks in front of the Gersham's kid, on her permanent street corner. The greasy-haired man wearing a Hawaiian shirt watched from a distance until she finished. He gave \$20 into her top hat, slowly and dramatically, so that she would notice his generosity.

"I'm very impressed," he said. "Some of that actually looked physically painful."

"No physical pain at all," she said. She packed her box and thanked him for the tip, but the stranger lingered.

"I have something to talk to you about," he said.

He told her that he had taken a year off work to travel the United States, floating from town to town to taste the local flavors of the US. of A. He had been bitten by the travel bug at his previous job, as a server on a cruise liner, the Happy Happy Cruise Line. He'd gone to St. Lucia and Jamaica and even Alaska. He was currently on a tour of the South's best barbecue establishments, but that was just one leg of a 'lifelong journey.' Who could stick around in one place after having seen clear blue waters one week and bobbing chunks of ice the next? And then the conversation moved into one of economics.

"The entertainment industry on cruises is booming, let me tell you," he said.

"I'm sure it is. I've read about it myself. I'm sure it's quite the life."

"No, I mean it is *booming*. Dynamite, money wise. And you should take advantage of it. Get it while it's good so to speak. What I'm particularly interested in," he said, "is partnering with you. I know the ins-and-outs of the industry. And you have good, raw talent. Plus you can clearly command a crowd. I look at you and I see dollar signs. I see retirees shaking the contents of their wallets into your hat."

"I'll keep my talent here," she said.

He asked why, with the smiling desperation of someone nearly out of cash. Lyn knew the look.

“I get seasick easily,” she said. Would he have believed her if she had said she had roots here? Roots tapped deep in the ground and reasons, good or otherwise, to stay here, for good? She wished him good day.

It is true that not everyone in town attended her funeral. But most people did. And what weather that day. Clear blue skies and the last hints of a cool spring morning. Pearly dew caught in fresh spiderwebs.

Soon after, it became clear that the lipstick had worn off the town, leaving an old and crepuscular and senile place behind. A place which long ago boomed with a textile industry. People who once made excuses to bumble downtown now had no reason to leave their tiny castles.

It wasn't long until the town finally accepted its role, as many rural towns do, as a containment area for the unemployed. Hot and dusty and boarded-up, with no high-speed internet or cable TV or Wal-Mart. Of course, many of the businesses had closed up shop a long time ago, but there had been Lyn, the diversion whose existence seemed to suggest an active resistance against reality, and dollars, and the spread of a capital 'D' depression, in each person's headspace, that had been contaminant for decades. With her gone, people began to wither. Though maybe they had been all along.

Of course she was a striking woman. Not beautiful, exactly, but symmetrical, strong and thick-boned, with a Roman nose and black hair that caught other colors in its dark sheen, like motor oil. And she glowed with an infectious energy. Maybe it was a learned trait, from performing in street corner shows for so long. Maybe it was her teeth, shockingly white and straight assemblages that contrasted with her dry, chalky lips. She was tall, too. Over six feet.

## I'll Watch from Here

Sometimes when no one was around and she had downtime, she read. Reading allowed her to forget the cape and the sidewalk and the heat of mid-afternoon. This was a woman who could read poetry and not beat it with a garden hose—she just enjoyed it for what it was. When she wanted fiction, she read Hemingway, mostly. His stories (and his style of writing) were instruction manuals for the life she wanted to live—powerful, realistic, uncompromising, unsentimental, yet somehow imbued with a kind of inimitable magic.

Gary and Jay wake up the morning after they have attempted Lyn's summoning. Birds are chirping and the air is sweet with the scent of honeysuckle. And Jay is the first to speak.

"That was incredible. The detail! Did you hear everything she said?"

The night before, Gary had seen nothing. He slept like a baby, solid as a rock. With no dreams, no visitations from the dead. Something hadn't worked.

"I'm not sure if I remember exactly," Gary said.

"I'm sure you do! It was your dream."

Gary explains to him that nothing happened, that the world they were dreaming up was not one.

"I admit that I did not see Aunt Lyn in the Dreamhouse either. But think of the differences from last time. Last time we hunted for gravestones. We talked later in the night..."

"Maybe it was a one-time deal, Jay."

"No, it can't be," Jay says. More than anything he wants this to have happened—not out of any specific reason to see his Aunt Lyn, but perhaps out of the desire to create his own divinity, his own controllable world. "I know! We didn't have an artifact. A newspaper clipping. An old dress. Anything."

## I'll Watch from Here

“It’s okay,” Gary says. “In some way I am ready to do this the right way. Let’s go visit her actual grave.”

And then the boys pack their things and head home, in silence, under the canopy of trees, walking a path along the once-hallowed grounds of the forest. They wouldn’t try again.

## The Mountain Road

In the car is twenty-one year old Stephen and next to him is Georgia. It's dark. The car's headlights probe at best fifteen feet ahead. It's summer in the cool mountains.

Stephen looks over to Georgia. Her hair is like wheat in sunshine. He has never been laid. He glances at her and she keeps her head turned toward her window. Possibly she is able to see his reflection in the glass as he swivels his head from watching the road to watching her.

"How long have you worked at the Taproom?" he says. These are all formalities.

"About a year. But I hate it. You get hit on constantly and have to deal with the locals, who know me," she says.

"Then why work there?" Stephen says.

## I'll Watch from Here

“As if it were that simple,” she says and turns to him. “There’s just no other work.”

Stephen can’t know what to say to this; he hasn’t worked before. They are in the family’s extra car, an Old Plymouth. He had told Dad he’d come on the trip so long as he could drive separately, get away every now and then, have some fresh air.

And fresh air is what they get. The music is pumping through the 4-speaker system and the wind snaps through the open windows. The speed limit signs mean nothing.

He had seen Georgia as she was taking orders from another table. She had dark brown hair that reached far down her back and wore a sun dress, dotted with small flowers. He went to her then, and said, “When do you get off work?”

She said, “The best you can do is giving me a ride home, saving my dad the gas.”

At that point he had a little bit of alcohol in his system, which he knew as the great equalizer in situations such as this, with beautiful girls such as her.

At the property, 12-year-old Robert darts ninja-style around the fire pit. He paces around the site. He holds a box of matches in his hand. Would Dad want me to do it this way? Did he say to strike only on the side of the box? Or strike *anywhere*, like the box says? On a rock? On my own arm? JK about that last one.

The Dad-unit left twenty, thirty minutes ago for extra wood. This is all standard operating procedure for camping in the wilderness, also known as preparing for the coming governmental collapse and world apocalypse, also known as father-son time. The stars are out and it’s better not to think about the dark woods considering how dark it still manages to be out here, deep and far away from anything.



## I'll Watch from Here

The property is a piece of land that Dad bought years and years ago. It's high in the woods of the mountains, but not the pretty mountains that you see on postcards. This is the reach of the Appalachian where people explode their houses when they cook drugs in them. These are the mountains where you cannot understand the people, and they have no desire to change that.

Dad would say, and has said, "There's no such thing as 'modern' up in those mountains. And that's the way I like it." Robert wonders what is older brother Stephen is doing. This is the first time he got out of the required night in the woods.

Robert strikes the match along the box and holds the the glorious teeny flame above the wood that glistens wet with lighter fluid.

And so he counts down from ten and drops the match. And boom, huge flames spring straight from the earth at his command, and he is engulfed in the light of his power.

Georgia is still quiet.

Maybe she knows he likes to look at her hair and she is just showing off the back of it.

Pressing down on the gas makes the V-8 engine churn. Only halfway there, and the ride is already feeling long. The place that Stephen's family rents every year is a tiny house on the side of the mountain.

Stephen looks to Georgia who is still staring out the window. Still no eye contact.

"You don't talk much," he says.

"Oh I talk plenty if you get me started."

"Ok," he says. "You got family around here?"

"I'm all who's left. You?"

"My kid brother and Dad. We're renting a place up here for the weekend."

## I'll Watch from Here

“Just one brother? What’s his name?”

“Bobby. I mean Robert. But don’t worry—they aren’t there at the house tonight.”

He waits. Nothing.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he says.

“Most men at the bar say that.”

Had he sounded that insincere? They *were* nice eyes. Are. Nice enough. Had he just pigeon holed himself in the category of ‘most men?’

“Keep your eyes on the road.”

“I mean it Georgia. Your eyes got me snagged.”

She looks back out the window at the town lights in the valley. He quits on the compliments. He thinks, should’ve queued up more songs on the iPod.

“Well I guess you have fine bone structure,” she says. “Really you could be famous with that jawline.”

Stephen turns his head and his eyebrows do these two jumping jack things. He looks at her boobs and then looks back at the shameful road.

“Don’t worry. I don’t bite,” she says. And after so little but so much that she has said, she wants back her blissful muteness, her old mystique.

Dad-unit is approaching. He has twenty or thirty sticks in his hand, all about the thickness of a man’s wrist. When do the fingers and wrists of fathers suddenly thicken to sausages and small tree limbs? Note: observe wrist growth over soon-to-come adolescence. Note 2: how big are Stephen’s wrists?

“This fire is way too big,” Dad-unit says.

“You don’t like it? I can’t help it. I’m a pirate. Pyro.”

“Son, the point of the fire as we know it in survival or escape situations is to maintain warmth and safety in cold climates. To cook raw meat and boil water to eat safely. You will not be building bon-fires. You will not be seen or heard in these woods or any woods. Your fire will not reveal you and you will not reveal yourself.”

Robert puts his hands through his hair and does the I’m-So-Frustrated-With-You-and-Your-Conspiracy-Theories face, which he has recently amended to include a small but significant puffing of air from the nostrils. Like, to indicate disdain. He had learned it from Mom.

“Are we going to do s’mores?” Robert says.

“You know these camping trips are not drills, Robert.”

The fueled car is parked less than a mile away. You can about see the road from here. Heck, you could hear a gang of Harleys go by a while ago.

“These are not lessons you can learn in a book.”

Robert has in his pack two smuggled books for light reading. Reading by lamplight.

“These are lessons you will need. Soon.”

Lessons for the coming apocalypse blah-blah. Lessons for the government falling to the Chinese blah-blah. Lessons for the Colorado River’s drying up and the war for water blah-blah.

“I hope you are paying attention, son. I do this all for you because I am downright scared for you, for you to learn the importance of your physical safety, emotional safety, privacy. Hell, we are lucky there’s no reception here—they could track us.”

Did he say no reception? Wow, Dad-unit is right about one thing tonight! Phones don’t work out here. Robert gets no reception and he knows because he checked. Twice.

The receptionless phone is a phantom limb for the child.

“You don’t bite?” Stephen says.

“Look at me,” Georgia says. “I can tell you are nervous but you’re cute. Don’t try so hard. And don’t worry. I’m into you.”

“I’m not trying hard. Just trying to talk is all.”

“Stephen I’m comfy with quiet spaces between words. Quiet doesn’t mean awkward or angry or upset.”

Stephen looks at Georgia who finally looks back at him for more than one millisecond.

Her face is rounder than he remembers from earlier. Straight white teeth. Is she smiling or just halfway talking? He smiles back. Ok, he’ll try the quiet thing where they both just sit in the car and think. Maybe she’s telepathic and will sense what he is doing to her in his mind. He’s only looked at her for a few seconds but damn the time-space thing is weird when you are driving or you are falling for someone.

Stephen focuses back on the road. And on the straight section of asphalt in front of them, a deer stands immobile.

“Oh my god,” Georgia says.

Stephen stays quiet and determined and he swerves the car into the oncoming lane, and the gas-guzzling monstrosity is fishtailing but misses the deer, and the couple careens inevitably toward the guard rail in the dark night.

The Dad-unit, the father of all paranoid conspiracy theories, is still talking.

“We live in an age of austerity. You will learn soon what austerity is, since I think I will lose my job and then I swear to God we will refuse all support from the government, as the government is an agent of our nation’s very decay.”

Did he say he would lose his job? Please don’t confide in me the twelve-year-old, thinks Robert.

“It all started with 9/11. Or the Challenger explosion. Or Libya. I can’t remember which now.”

The fire still has huge flames that Robert stares into until his eyeballs dry out.

“What I am here to teach you son is that *everyone* is on their own. We can’t be bleeding heart liberals trying to save everyone or else we’ll be trampled by the collective. Do you hear me? Dog eat dog world out there.”

Dog eat dog. Doggy dog. Bored. When can we go home is what Robert wants to know.

As Dad-unit keeps talking—is he talking about Mom now? Please no, that’s too soon—Robert looks around at the woods.

His eyes adjust to the dark.

Between a few trees he can see the elevation go back up. That’s how they’ll get back to the car tomorrow at the base of the mountain. At least the walk isn’t long and the drive is pretty short.

When Dad-unit or anyone just keeps talking like that you can tune them out entirely and it becomes this weird kind of silence, like you have cones on your ears. He closes his eyes. The Dad-unit won’t notice.

He hears in isolation this tumbling-crashing noise but it’s quiet and maybe kind of far away. But definitely not the sound of, say, Dad crushing a can with his foot. No, this is a big noise and

time slows down for it and it is lasting way too long until like *thud* it is over, and it's still all dark outside the campsite. And did he just feel the ground like shiver under him or is that his imagination or something else?

Stephen is bleeding bad from his head because the airbags didn't deploy. Faulty. Manufacturer recall recommended. The car is a crumpled heap. He can't move and neither can Georgia, and he tries to hear whether or not she is breathing but he can only really hear this incessantly slow ringing in his head. The ringing in its individual warbling notes. Its undulation. Like waves on the beach.

Definitely not something in his imagination. Robert has never felt the ground shiver like that. Boom, boom thud goes his heart.

"Did you hear that, Dad?"

"And if you look at the value of the dollar compared to the Euro over the past ten years, you'll clearly see—"

"Dad, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"I don't know. A crash, I think. A car crash? I don't know."

"No, I didn't. I didn't hear anything. But as I was saying—"

"There was definitely a crash. I could hear it. I could feel it."

"Ok, I heard something. Maybe a tree falling. Trees fall. We're all alone out here, remember that," Dad-unit says.

## I'll Watch from Here

Robert feels for the phone in his pocket. Still there. Probably still no reception. Definitely still no reception.

“I’m going for help,” Robert says. He lifts the phone out of his pocket and holds it up to try to get some signal.

“Jesus, son! Put that government tracking beacon away. Have you learned nothing?”

Robert is deaf to Dad. The thick and strong hands of fathers grab the boy by the shoulders and forces him to the ground.

“Listen. You are not leaving this campsite. You leave this campsite and you abandon the very vital and essential point of survivalism, which is to stay in your shelter zone through the night.”

The boy stands and does not fight. He does not respond. He holds the phone up to the sky and is guided by its glowing blue screen. He wanders up the woods and toward the car where he knows he still will probably not get reception. He leaves behind the Dad-unit who is shouting into the fire, “You’re on your own! I’m staying put here and you are on your own.” He walks, all the while replaying in his head that awful noise he will never forget.

## Dirty Tattoo

Last I saw Eileen was when I was walking down the street, handing out resumes to anyone wearing a suit. I passed a tattoo parlor and saw her there, through the window. Why they don't put up privacy screens or tint the windows is beyond me.

But so she was lying there, face down, getting a tattoo on her back. The tattoo was of a giant tree. It started low, and the tree trunk traced her spine. Or more like her rod. She had scoliosis when we were in high school and had a big steel rod installed to keep her spine straight. I was the one who helped her get back on her feet after the surgery. Literally speaking. I helped her re-learn walking and standing. I held ice packs against her and rubbed prescription lotion on her scar.



## I'll Watch from Here

The first time she looked at her back, straining her neck to see the mirror, she came to find me, in the other room. I asked her what was wrong and she said, “My scar. It’s so disgusting.”

“No it’s not.”

“I can’t believe you haven’t said anything yet.”

“Really, It’s something to be proud of,” I said. Then I told her that I would convince her that I loved it, because I did.

Anyway, I could see through the window that the tattoo was fully outlined already. She had come in for a coloring. The artist was filling in the leaves that fanned out across her shoulder blades and drooped toward the pinch of her hourglass. The trunk had already been filled in with a beech color; slightly darker than the surrounding flesh. It blended into the color of her old scar exactly.

The artist held the tattoo machine with his right hand and had rested his left hand on her skin. On the curve of her shoulder. That reminded me of when she’d be down on the bed and begging me for it. “Pound me,” she’d say, “I deserve it.” We were rough and would always talk about ropes, about tying each other up and binding our mouths, but we never did.

Of course, you know that talk like that can go too far.

I watched as the tattooist worked. Did he draw that tree? Did she? The design was more like a Hollywood perversion of a tree—too much color, more saturated than real life, cartoonish. But, most art is that way.

The more realistic thing was Eileen. I knocked on the glass window to try for her attention. I thought, Let me have a look at your face. Let us reunite one last time. She didn’t budge, clearly under direct orders to not move. The tattoo artist didn’t move, either. He worked like a monk.

## I'll Watch from Here

If she picked up her head and looked at me, would I have gone in and talked to her? Well it's probably no point speculating. I'm not sure what I would have said. But I do know that beneath that ink was her freckled skin and her long, beautiful scar. I wished for her that the tattoo was less permanent. If only it could be mutable, changeable, erasable. Like dirt on a floor, which when you see it, you say, 'Under all this grime is a really clean floor.'

But she of course knew the ink was permanent. Of all people, she—who had told me through the years how much she hated tattoos—knew there was no turning back.