ABSTRACT

MY MAGNUM OPUS

by Catherine Averill

This thesis is a novel exploring the question of fate versus free will as well as how coping with the trauma and grief that accompany an unexpected death can lead a survivor to begin exploring the world around him in a new way. The protagonist, Sam Mastin, attempts to find answers that may not be available to him or anyone until he is given the freedom to create a new life, inspired by episodic dreams of a woman writing his life story. Mastin discovers that finding out the truth is a tricky feat and one that comes with its own pain.
MY MAGNUM OPUS

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My Magnum Opus
I was young once, like everyone, and didn’t care about much of anything. I thought my life would be monotonous and tumultuous at times, but more or less like everyone else’s. I was born and raised into a middle class family and my assumption, like most middle class children, was that I would die that way, with some debt and a number of mistakes and certain happinesses accumulated along the way. And then one day there I was, all alone at thirty years old on a humid August afternoon, with a dead wife, and drinking burnt coffee with a stranger, trying to figure it all out.

According to the police report, the bullet had already finished its business in Julie’s brain when this stranger, Bill the gas station manager, walked past her body on his way home from work. The spent shell was never found. Hopkins, the lead detective, told me that it was likely either picked up by the shooter or moved somehow in the shuffle of the first responders arriving and shutting down the crime scene. The autopsy revealed that the bullet entered her right temple and exited through the left, which the police already knew because they found the bullet wedged into the tree her body was leaning up against. They also found antidepressants in her system, which I wrote off to a false positive because she hadn’t been on any and her doctor confirmed that she had no prescription.

When I asked Bill how it went, how he found her, he said that he had been tired after working two consecutive shifts due to a scheduling miscommunication, so when he passed Julie’s body he thought she was just another college student who had spent the afternoon drinking too hard and decided to rest against a random tree—a not entirely uncommon sight in Milwaukee’s Riverwest neighborhood. That is, he said, until he saw her hair, knotted and tacky with blood and he was brought back to the cold autumns of his childhood when he would follow his grandfather out to the tree stand in the wooded back acres of the family home in order to wait for deer, to watch the old man make use of his good aim and swift trigger finger.

I made him tell me everything he knew.

Despite the fact that he was well over six feet tall, at least six inches taller than me, and had a good sixty pounds on me, he looked small and nervous as he considered what to say. He said her brown hair was all around her face and he brushed it away to find her mouth so he could perform CPR, a well-intentioned, useless endeavor. He saw the diamond earring in her right ear, the diamond engagement ring and white gold wedding band on her pale left hand, her eyes open and searching. He said her face was serene, not like sleeping or dreaming, but like someone
meditating, considering what to do now that the day’s tasks were finished and the night was open and full of possibility.

This was not what I wanted, but I didn’t hold it against him. What I wanted was the impossible. I wanted him to tell me what she was doing in that neighborhood, why she was walking there by herself when to my knowledge she had no business there, or who she was walking with if she wasn’t alone. I wanted him to tell me what no one could tell me: who ruined my life.

“I wish I could be sorry enough to make this right,” he said, and I laughed a loud, awkward laugh, the kind that demands the body to fold over on itself, which caused me to bump the table and spill a good portion of my coffee and his. This helpless man in glasses had only agreed to meet me for coffee so I could tell him everything was okay, I didn’t hold it against him, I knew it had nothing to do with him, he was absolved. The man just wanted to hear that I was grateful that he called 911, as if that made a difference or could have saved her. He wanted to know that I understood his strange entrance into the play that is my life was not his intention, but I refused to tell him that I understood anything. If he was ever going to know what his part meant, then he knew it already, knew it from the moment that he realized the woman on the sidewalk was just another lifeless thing now, no longer a person.

There was nothing I could do to make the image of Julie’s body disappear for this man or for myself, so I kept laughing as he cleaned up our spilled coffee with his napkin and I laughed harder when he pretended to receive a text from his job.

“I guess you weren’t ready for this,” I said, still laughing as he tried to excuse himself from our strange date. “You should look into acting classes.” He gave me a strange look, put down enough money for both of our coffees and told me if there was anything he could do for me, ever, to just call. I told him he could get a better script.

After he left, I borrowed a pen from the waitress and began drawing on my paper placemat, over the ads for chiropractors and coupons for $3 off an oil change at some local garage. I drew circles and arbitrary curves which looked like a tree or a gutter or the impossibility that there were no witnesses to the shooting of a woman on a residential street on an early summer evening.

I thought about going to the gas station to see if Bill had actually gotten called in. I imagined going there and asking for him, and when they told me he wasn’t there I would demand
that the person working the counter call him in, right away, tell him there was some emergency with the pumps. And when he got there I could confront him in front of his employees and say things like, “Cocksucker!” and tell him what dirt, what shit-stinking garbage he was for lying to me. Instead, I decided to go to a bar first and get drunk, then fight him and do the kind of damage that gets you in jail, at least overnight. Just for a change of scenery.

But it was pointless. I knew that if I ever went to that Shell station or down to Landmark, our bar, for the two dollar microbrew Tuesdays or when I scrawled my phone number on a beer-soaked Miller Lite coaster for whatever woman was sitting next to me as the lights came up, that I would just be trying to get back to Julie.

What I really wanted was to read poems to her again like we did in the old days, when we were teenagers and new together. What I wanted was to lie next to her and say, “I like my body when it is with your body.” What I wanted was to be Bill in his Shell shirt and throw my still-breathing body on top of whatever was left of her, one last time on that sidewalk, brush the hair away from her perfect right ear and whisper, one last time, “And possibly I like the thrill of under me you so quite new,” like we were still just kids who really thought she would be a famous artist, a writer and painter like e.e. cummings.

Believe me, I didn’t want to be in some basement bar holding the bony hand of some woman I just met who was wearing a shirt so revealing I couldn’t help but respect her body’s superhuman disregard for gravity. Her hair was bleached so much it was nearly translucent, as if she was trying to tell the world she wasn’t from around here and wouldn’t be staying long. I wanted to defy physics with her, or I wanted to look her in the eye, calmly, and explain to her how disgusting she was for making me want her, drunk as I was and considering everything else that she could never understand.

When she struck up conversation as I was trying to close out my tab the hour previous, I could see all she wanted was a free drink. Maybe I should have told her my story, made her buy me a drink and then ignored her for the rest of the night, but instead I asked her if Miller Lite was okay because it was on special and I wasn’t sure how much money I had left on my debit card. She winked at me and said, “I prefer screwdrivers. Miller Lite just tastes too much like beer to me,” and I laughed because she was dumb and honest and pretty enough, at least in the dimness of the bar, and because everything seemed funny to me.
I got her a Miller anyway because I didn’t necessarily want her there. She drank it anyhow and kept talking to me, taking time to brush her hair out of her eyes periodically so she could look at me. I realized I could have said anything to her, or nothing at all, and she probably still would have gone home with me if I just winked back. At one point she asked what I thought of her breasts and I told her the truth, “My dead wife’s were better,” and she said, “You’re so funny,” and touched my knee. It came out without me realizing what I was saying and I felt cheap for even mentioning Julie to this woman, so I smiled and said, “I know,” and didn’t mention her again.

Girls like that, you don’t bring back to your place because they’ll try their best not to leave. Ever. It hadn’t even been a week, so all of Julie’s stuff was still there, and I knew it would still be there until I could convince myself of the right thing to do in this situation, so I told the girl we would have to go to her place or we would have to go home separately and that would be that. I didn’t want to sleep with her and I didn’t want to sleep alone, so I didn’t make much of a campaign for either option.

“I don’t think my roommate would like it if you came over,” she said. “She’s been getting really uptight about shit ever since some guy I brought home stole her laptop and leftover pizza after I passed out.” Right then, for the first time since I was eight and declared myself an atheist, I wished I believed in heaven because I wanted Julie to know that my decision to have sex with this woman did not reflect on her or what we were, it just seemed like an easier thing to do than fight the poor guy at the gas station or go home to an empty, unmade bed.

“Well, I’m just moving into my place,” I told her, “and I haven’t gotten any furniture yet, so we’ll have to figure something else out.”

“There’s this house I know about just a little ways down on Oakland,” she said, “if you’re not too concerned about other people.” I wasn’t sure what she meant, but I felt messy and I felt like finding out.

“Let’s go see it,” I said, and she grabbed my hand. We half-tripped, half-jogged our way there, nodding at the other drunks walking past like we all had gained access to what we thought was the most exclusive club in the world, but was actually just one of those discount warehouse membership clubs.

The house she led me to had dirty white vinyl siding and a No Smoking window cling affixed to the front door. She tried the doorknob and when she found it was locked she stuck her
finger into a gap beneath the nearest window sill and pulled out a key, which she used to open
the door.

“Honey, I’m home. And I’ve got fucking bacon,” she yelled into the darkness. As my
eyes adjusted I saw people in varying stages of consciousness around the room. Some looked to
have collapsed on the furniture, but most were on the floor, a clutter of torsos, limbs, and heads. I
wanted to kick their bodies to see if they were alive, then kick them again if they were.

I followed the woman upstairs and into the bathroom which was gracefully empty.

“It’s the only room that locks,” she explained as she closed the door and pressed the
button on the handle. “So?” she said, raising her left eyebrow. She stepped out of her flat, silver
shoes while pulling her shirt over her head. Standing there in only her short sequined skirt, she
lost whatever appeal I had tried to convince myself she had back at the bar.

As I tried to maintain my balance and keep my vision straight, I considered whether I
should cover her up and take her to her apartment or figure out where her parents lived and take
her to them, tell them it wasn’t my fault, I didn’t do anything, they ought to sit her down for a
long talk.

All I really wanted was to be asleep in that moment, then wake up sober in my own bed
with Julie there next to me all cast in warm sun, hair across her face and frizzy from a night of
restless sleep. I would inch closer to her in the bed and kiss her as means of apologizing for the
adultery of what my life had become in these last few days, for the unfaithfulness of imagining
her dead and nearly fucking another woman in a dream. Only, this wasn’t a dream, which I knew
not only because I hadn’t been able to sleep more than a few minutes at a time since I found out
about Julie, but also because I could feel the woman’s hand in my pants.

“Can we maybe turn on a light?” I asked, thinking that might make her stop. She made a
strange, low growling noise and reached over my right shoulder to where the light switch was,
turned it on, and grabbed me by the back of the head as the room filled with red light. My
instinct was to stop this woman from kissing me, then demand to speak to whoever actually
claimed this place as their home and explain that these tinted red light bulbs were meant for
college parties and sleazy night clubs, not to try to recreate the bathroom from Psycho in a drug
house.

“Give me a minute,” I said, shrugging the woman’s arm off my shoulder. “I don’t even
know your name, and besides, this isn’t good. It’s not right.”
“What do you mean? I’m not a whore, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she said. “And my name is Kellie.”

What I wanted to say to her was, “I’m so tired I may never sleep again and I drank a lot tonight, but not enough for this. You can do better than me, than this whole situation, probably. No need to feel offended.” What I did say was, “Kellie. Great. I don’t really care,” then turned away and left, shaking my arm loose as she reached out to stop me.

My house on Frederick was less than a fifteen minute walk north from this awful place and even though I could feel the beer sloshing around inside my body, I decided to walk east to the park overlooking Lake Michigan to see the bench where I had proposed to Julie. The bench sits alone in a grassy patch of grass where Water Tower Road connects Lincoln Memorial to North Avenue. I picked the spot because we used to sit on the bench together in the cold autumn nights beneath an old quilt from my grandmother, back when we first started dating and were too broke to afford proper dates. She would make up stories about the stars and I would make up stories about the people by the lake and we would make up stories about our future, together.

When I got to the bench there was an expensive-looking corkscrew next to a bottle of Fish Eye and a couple Jimmy John’s wrappers. High school kids from Shorewood, probably, trying to get drunk off a bottle someone’s cousin bought for a fee, or stolen from their parents’ stash of cheap wine along with the corkscrew. After kicking everything off the bench, I laid down on it and looked up at the sky as the streetlamp flickered on and off.

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I fell into a strange sleep there with the cool lake air blowing over me. Just before waking I dreamt that I was back in front of the house on Oakland with Kellie and we were greeted at the door by an old woman who was two feet tall, but perfectly proportionate. My waist was at her eye level and she tipped her had back as far as she could and said to me, “Have a look around,” then stepped out of my way.

I left Kellie at the door and felt myself being pulled by some energy to the back of the house where I sensed the kitchen was, but she came up behind me, took my left hand and said, “No, this is the way,” and without looking at my face led me into the room at the front of the house, away from the dark hallway.

Before I entered the room I could see that it was lit with the same red light bulbs and there was a loud mechanical whirring that I could feel in my chest and my head and my eyes.
Kellie tipped her chin and said, “You first,” and I entered the room. A piano started playing as I stepped in and I saw Julie, sitting sideways on a wooden piano bench, rocking back and forth in time with the slow song and moving her hands together and apart as if playing an invisible accordion. Her face looked airy and she was giddy and flushing with vitality. Her curly brown hair was pulled back in a loose bun and despite the vigorous, steady rocking, she maintained the perfect posture that she once told me her mother had drilled into her when she was a young girl.

There was another woman in the room who looked to be in her sixties. She had long curly hair, a bit darker than Julie’s and streaked with gray. She was standing on the other side of the piano with her back to it so I couldn’t see her face, and to Julie, and her hands were moving quickly across the air. I understood that she was the one making the music from the piano, though the keys weren’t moving and she couldn’t have possibly been touching them. She played the same few bars of music over and over in perfect time and her movements seemed hinged to Julie’s in a way that looked mechanical, but natural. In between them was a large yellow Labrador, rolling on its back in time with everything else. It was only when I saw the dog that I realized they all were dead and had been stuffed and somehow mechanized together like a whirligig.

I was staring at my wife, wanting to say something to her, to ask something of her, but Kellie stood in front of me and said, “They’re great, aren’t they?” and then pointed to the old woman. “She is showing herself what she’ll be someday.” As she said this, the old woman turned to me, still playing the air, and I realized that the older woman was Julie, too, and her face was wrinkled and stretched with the sadness of unknown decades.

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Then my eyes were open and I was back on a bench by the lake, covered in sweat despite the cool air. I tried to sit up and go home, but couldn’t because I was still heavy with sleep and alcohol and the fact that I was awake again, and alone.

There is a pessimistic and, I suspect, accurate part of me that thinks this is what Julie’s parents, Jan and Phil Wallace, wanted all along. Me, failing and alone. Though of course this isn’t how they wanted it to happen.

When we were dating back in college they were nice enough to me. Julie would take me up to their place in Shorewood for dinner or to visit. Over breaks when the dorms were closed and I had nowhere else to go, they let me stay there, though I suspect this wasn’t because they
liked me, but was merely done out of pity for an orphan who had nowhere else to go and to make Julie happy.

The two years we broke up, our junior and senior years of college, were probably the happiest time of my not-yet-in-laws’ lives. That was when Julie was dating Bradley Parker, a particular kind of Marquette asshole who lacked even the basic decency to go by Brad. I would see them walking around by the lake or holding hands and wearing matching Marquette sweatshirts, even though she was still attending UW-Milwaukee, and I couldn’t believe he would deign to grace our public university with his presence, not to mention date one of its students in such a public way.

Back then I couldn’t even hold onto my anger properly. I knew we broke up because she wasn’t happy with me, but the precise reasons were murky even then. At various times before she called it quits, she said I didn’t listen, I didn’t spend enough time on school, I didn’t spend enough time on her—generic complaints and not ideal, certainly, but nothing I thought was of any real concern. But when she finally told me she was dumping me, while we sat in my dorm eating microwave burritos, I asked her, maybe with some forgotten profanities, where I was supposed to get all this time from and she said, “I don’t know, but I make time for you and school. And my family.”

From the way her eyes bugged out at her own words, I could tell even she was surprised she had gone that far.

I didn’t tell people about what happened to my parents because I don’t handle perfunctory pity well. Whenever anyone finds out you’ve been orphaned by a car accident a week after your eighteenth birthday and a week before your high school graduation, they start sounding like Hallmark sympathy cards: “I’m so sorry for your loss.” You can practically see the loopy pink cursive coming out of their mouths.

When I started college I put it all behind me and tried to start over. Of the two of us, my sister Betsy, seven years my senior, was the obvious choice to handle the legal aspects considering she was finishing her law degree in California. She worked with our parents’ lawyer to divide their assets and when everything was straightened out I got enough money to pay for college expenses with a few thousand left.

I rented a small storage unit to store some childhood possessions I couldn’t quite let go of. The only things I took that belonged to my parents were my mother’s music box that played
“Ode to Joy” and their wedding album, a chunky, ugly thing with a fuzzy brown and beige cover filled with sepia tone pictures of my parents and their wedding guests who I had never met. As a child I used to take the album off the high shelf of the bookcase in our living room and page through it, squinting to match the happy, young couple to the people I knew as Mom and Dad. They married in Nebraska, where they were both from, but moved to Wisconsin shortly after the wedding when my dad got work at the Miller factory after struggling to find employment in Nebraska. My mom worked at the reception desk of a dentist’s office. We didn’t live extravagantly, but we never went hungry. Of everyone they knew in Nebraska, their parents were the only people who came to visit, though no more than once a year and sometimes not even that. I remember more about each of their funerals, all of which occurred before my fifth birthday, than I do of them as people.

With no real family to turn to in the state after my parents’ death, my best option was my friend Emily. Emily was the sister Betsy could never be and the first real friend I ever had. We met in homeroom freshman year and hit it off right away because we were the only two not wearing preppy clothes. Right before school let out for winter break I told her I loved her and she said, “Sam, you know I’m gay, right?” and I said I did and that I didn’t mean I was attracted to her, just that I loved her.

Besides Julie, she was the only girl I ever loved. Though Emily and I haven’t kept in touch very regularly over the years, I still feel the same way about her, especially for her offer to let me stay with her family that summer. When Emily moved to Minnesota for college I made stupid jokes with her about how I was jealous that she would be living in an all girls dorm, but when she and her parents backed out of the driveway and headed west, I cried until I had trouble breathing. My only consolation in being alone was that I could start fresh, reinvent myself like you’re supposed to do in college.

When I met Julie while hanging out with some friends that October, I really believed that my new life would be better and my luck had changed. The first night we met, we got to talking about how we thought college was supposed to be a time for crazy, irresponsible decisions, but neither of us had made any. She grabbed my hand and said, “Will you cut my hair?” and when I told her I had no idea how to cut hair she said, “I don’t care, you can’t really tell if curly hair isn’t cut perfectly. It’ll be the first start of our new spontaneity. Plus, I’m sick of it being so long. It’s too heavy to curl right.” I told her I though it looked good and she said, “Well you can just
keep what you cut,” and laughed. She borrowed some scissors from a friend and we sat outside
of the dorms cutting her hair by the streetlight and when I was done, in the interest of our new
spontaneity, I kissed her. It was the real beginning of everything.

Over the next few weeks I revealed more about myself until the night when I told her
about my parents. She said, “I don’t know what to say,” and then sat with me on my bed,
wordless, until we both were tired enough to fall asleep curled up close.

The only other person who met me after my parents died that I told about the accident
was Flipper. He was Julie’s and my old neighbor and fast friend despite the fact that he was only
eighteen when we met him, five years our junior. Flipper was curious and a quick learner,
already a sophomore at UWM thanks to AP tests and taking summer classes at the community
college. Besides being intelligent, he was the easy-going kind of person I wished I could be and
seemed to know everyone, though he preferred our company. We loved having him around, but
could never figure out why he spent so much time at our place. When we finally asked him why
he spent so much time at our place, braver after a few hits of pot, he said “Because. You two
don’t have any drama, but you don’t take yourselves too seriously. Especially for older people.”
He smiled, showing his large smoke-stained teeth. Julie and I looked at each other, unsure if we
had gotten a serious answer or if he was avoiding the question because he didn’t know either, so
we dropped it.

One night he was over and we were talking about Marxism and class mobility and he
asked what our parents did for work. I wasn’t sure how to answer, if I should just say what they
did before they died or tell him the truth. I hesitated to tell Flip because of what Julie had said
when we broke up, even though it was years after I first told Julie and I knew she didn’t mean
what she had said. And she had given me something to think about. It probably should have
occurred to me sooner, but it was only when Julie said that to me, my mouth still tasting of salty
mashed beans, that I realized that people who still have their parents will never quite understand
the driftless nature of being unbuoyed by anyone, the act of being turned from lagan to derelict in
one fell Oldsmobile-meets-semi-truck swoop.

As I was telling Flipper, I remembered the flash of vindictive smugness in Julie’s eyes in
the moment the words came tumbling out, the moment before regret emerged, was unforgettable
and, I thought, unforgiveable. After I told him, he said, “Now I feel like an idiot,” apologized
and changed the subject immediately. I loved him for not dragging it out or asking more than I
was willing to tell. Ultimately, I loved him for not bringing it up again, especially not in the way Julie had.

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Head still pulsing from dehydration, I wished that these weren’t the memories that came back to me, especially breaking up with Julie, after nearly sleeping with a woman I had just met. But I have never been able to stop myself from going down ugly avenues of memory, even when I know they will only make things worse and make me dwell on all my mistakes. That was the beginning of my self-imposed celibacy, the moment when I promised I wouldn’t sleep with anyone else for at least the first year, heaping suffering upon suffering in order to prove I still loved her.

Last I heard, Flipper was in China and I had no way of getting a hold of him, so I decided to try Emily. It was just after sunrise and I didn’t think she would be awake, but I found my cell phone in my pocket and called anyway. When I got her voicemail and heard her bright voice saying, “Hey, hey, it’s Emily and I’d love to talk to you, but… I’m doing something else. Leave a message and we’ll talk soon,” I swallowed hard, considered the bad form of leaving news like this on a voicemail. Finally I said, “Hey, it’s Sam. Julie was shot. I guess I don’t want to talk about it, but I wanted you to know. I’m turning off my phone, but I’ll talk to you sometime.” My phone had been ringing regularly as news traveled around with people offering condolences and checking to see when they could drop off food that they had made as if I cared about a tuna casserole. I stopped answering the phone for anyone but my sister Betsy and Julie’s parents.

After twenty minutes of massaging my temples and the bones around my eyes, I managed to get up and make my way through the early morning fog coming off the lake. Eventually I arrived on my porch, though I don’t have any distinct recollection of the walk itself. I had taken the same route enough times with Julie over the years that muscle memory kicked in and I felt the loneliness swell up in me and deflate into despair, a deterioration like a time lapse video of a flower blossoming and withering.

Once I found my keys, curiously in my back, left pocket, and let myself in, I realized that the foul smell I assumed was the city was actually me. Beneath the shower head’s spray of cool water, I thought about how the last body I had touched was not my wife’s, but the unfamiliar smoothness of a woman from a bar. If only I could have made the water cold enough to freeze my skin cells so that I could pick each one off individually with tiny tweezers.
I couldn’t find a towel in the bathroom because Julie had done the laundry but hadn’t refilled the linen closet before she left the house that last day and I hadn’t yet taken a shower in those four days since. Walking to the dyer in the basement, it struck me that I would not be able to anticipate how many other small routines would call out to her absence. Worse, I was afraid of the day when I would fill in all the gaps she had left.

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Dried and dressed, I went to Hotch-A-Do for breakfast. Not so much because I was hungry, but because I thought I should get out of the house and because she was everywhere there, reminding me of the only question worth asking anymore: What the fuck? Any other question I came up with was just a more nuanced, wordy derivative of this perfect, all-inclusive question. Who killed her, why, what was she doing there? What the fuck? What did I do to piss death off this time, what could I do to help find the killer, what could I do ever again? What the fuck?

I walked back south, more or less retracing the path I had taken home not two hours earlier, down Oakland past city buses and commuters, walking the blocks of brick or stone apartment buildings and cheap houses with rundown lawns. Now, however, there were people around, riding bikes or holding hands with each other or jogging or walking alone while talking on cell phones, and they all seemed to be extras in a movie about my life. They were unremarkable in every way, which was particularly upsetting because it would have done me some good to be able to remark upon them. It would have been nice to notice, say, a fat man with an unhappy mouth and think, “You could do something about that, sir,” and then think, “I am not a bad person for being critical of this stranger. I’ve earned the right to judge everyone now,” and then think, “The new situation of my life can’t be an excuse for me forever,” and then think, “It’s time to stop thinking,” and then just feel guilt.

When I got to Hotch-A-Do ten minutes later, I was worn out. My head was still sloshy and I was beginning to sober up, but still didn’t quite trust the muscles in my legs to hold me up when I stopped moving. Inside the restaurant were two hipster girls with the same dyed red pixie cut playing shuffleboard while waiting for their food to arrive. They looked like they were having fun. I resented them because from what little I knew, shuffleboard didn’t seem to be a particularly fun game and I couldn’t bring myself to be happy for someone who could enjoy the tedium of sliding a puck across a table.
“I think you’re doing it wrong,” I said to the girl on the far end of the table.
“What do you mean?” she said. “No, we’re not.”
“I don’t think the entire restaurant can quite see far enough down your shirt when you bend over,” I said. The girl raised an eyebrow and her mouth twitched like she was going to laugh, but she didn’t.
“You’re fucked up,” the one closer to me said.
“You have no idea,” I said and winked at her as I walked away from them toward the carry-out counter at the front of the restaurant.

There was a constant pulsing, humming sound in my ears, like someone running their finger around the lip of a wine, but I managed to focus long enough on the menu to order the Hotch Hash, a mix of vegetables, potatoes, goat cheese that I usually got after a hearty night of drinking. “There,” I thought after I had ordered. “Thirty seconds of doing something other than pitying myself.” It seemed like a reasonable step in what I’m sure would be dubbed “the right direction” by professionals, so I decided to go home and drink whatever alcohol I had around the house to celebrate.

At home, after finishing my food, I managed to find the better part of a bottle of Absolut, dusty at the back of the liquor cabinet, and turned on the DVD player. I pressed the play button, neither knowing nor caring what was in the machine, but just wanting to see something. Without looking at the screen I instantly recognized the movie from the sad piano music. It was one of Julie’s favorites, a foreign film called Russian Ark, and it was near the end. I sat down on the floor in front of the couch, leaned my neck against the center cushion, and took a large swallow from the bottle.

The vodka went down smoothly and I took another hard swallow as the camera of the movie left the building. The piano music in the background slowed down and eventually stopped altogether, then was replaced by slow, layered strings while the shot remained focused on some ethereal water. Then the waves faded into blackness and were replaced by two people, a man and a woman, trotting down a snow-covered walkway while holding onto each other, trotting faster and farther from the camera as the music picked up until the camera all but stopped moving and let them continue on alone, unwatched.

On Saturday nights, when we were still recovering from whatever late night we’d had the night before, we would each pick a movie to watch. I usually stuck to comedies, wanting to find
a reason to laugh and strike a balance for Julie’s moods which often brought her down so far she wouldn’t tell me what she was thinking about or what, if anything, had caused them. But she would normally pick this or other similar movies, artsy things that reminded her of her aspirations, long ago, to be a painter. When we first met back in college she was intending to be an art major. She told me that she wanted to make the kind of art that made people experience and appreciate life again, at least for the time they were in front of her work and maybe for the times later when the memory of it came back to them unexpectedly.

And again, there was the memory of Julie coming back to me, the movie of her life with all its transitions and scenes, all the backstory that I knew so well, but never well enough. I took a few more long drinks from the bottle and tried to come up with something to do. My in-laws, Jan and Phil, were handling the funeral because they’ve never had much faith in me. As pathetic as it is, when they came to my house after hearing about Julie and my father-in-law touched my shoulder and said, “We’ll take it from here,” I just nodded and felt a numb kind of relief. He told me all I needed to do was make sure I had a suit and, if I could get myself together, a eulogy. Of course the look on his face told me I better find a way to get myself together.

With that in mind, I began to scrawl on an old, unread newspaper I hadn’t removed from my coffee table. “Julie was a good person. Now Julie is a reminder to us that most people aren’t good,” I wrote over the front page news about the current state of the economy. Too generic and bitter, I thought. I crossed out the lines and turned to the sports section. I wrote, “Thank you all for coming. Julie would have been pleased to see you all here,” but it sounded like I was accepting a Grammy so I scrapped that too.

On the next page in the sports section, I tried my hand at honesty: “I want you all to know how much it means to me that you could make it here. I want you all to know that I will not rest until I find who did this to her and to me and to all of us. And when I find the fuck who did this I will lop off his penis, shape it into a gun, and pistol-whip him with it until I can think of something better to do. Please join us for hors d’oeuvres at Julie’s parents’ house.” I felt like this one had promise, but no one, especially Jan and Phil, would stand for it because people don’t want honesty.

On a cloudless, quiet day like this, if Julie were here, she would probably have gone for a walk. When I found out about her death, I took two weeks off from work, so it was unusual for me to be around during the day. But if it was a weekend or I was home for some other reason,
she would have invited me along because she thought I didn’t exercise enough. As part of our routine, I would have said no. That’s what would have happened the Saturday that she died if I hadn’t already agreed, the day before, to go into work to finish some complicated applications that had arrived late but needed to be rushed through so an agent could get the commission he was expecting for the month. No point in thinking how differently things might have gone if I hadn’t wanted those four hours overtime.

Knowing I couldn’t escape her, anywhere, and wishing for even the mundane experience of a walk with her, I stumbled out of my house for the second time that day. I felt myself walking strangely, my long legs stomp-marching the pavement in the determined walk I adopt when drinking so I look like I’m still in control. My armpits were wet within three blocks, so I rolled up the sleeves of my t-shirt and kept on.

Consciously it wasn’t part of my plan, if I could even be said to have a plan at that point, but I ended up taking the bridge over the Milwaukee River and going past the spot—the house on Bremen where her lovely body was found by an unsuspecting passerby, like a scene from a network crime drama. Every tree was haunting in the sunlight.

_I should talk to the people who live here_, I thought. _I’ll see what they know, maybe they’ll tell me something that they forgot to tell the police_. Bolstered by alcohol and desperation, I was certain I could do something to knock loose an important detail in some neighbor’s memory. Things like that happened all the time in books and movies and, for all I knew, real life.

I was afraid to check the trees for the scar from the bullet, but figured I had the right house because of the small porch with a three foot high door beneath it to access storage space, the only place on the block that matched Bill’s description of where he found Julie. I climbed the uneven stairs to the porch. At the top, I put my foot down on a loose board and stumbled, but caught myself on the rotting banister and made my way to the door, still confidently clumsy thanks to the alcohol. The inside door of the house was open and a small white and brown cat paw was sticking out of the gap between the screen door and the threshold. I tried the bell, but it didn’t work, so I knocked on the door loudly a few times.

A man in his mid-twenties wearing a short-sleeve plaid shirt and faded jeans came to the door and looked out at me. He had light brown hair and a reddish goatee and the look in his eyes made clear that he was already tired of whatever I wanted from him. Or maybe he was just tired in general. “If this is because you recognize the house from _American Movie_,” he said, “then yes,
this is the house. And no, you can’t come in and have a look around. People live here and we’re sick of being treated like we live in some kind of a museum that is open to the public at the public’s whim.”

I realized that he was right, that it was in fact the house from the movie and suddenly felt embarrassment stack up in my chest. Not only did I feel embarrassed for myself for having a real reason to be on his porch, but I was also embarrassed for how the man would feel when he found out that I wasn’t just some indie film buff gawker, and finally, embarrassed for all the people who had come to this house before me on such a bizarre and outdated pilgrimage.

“You’ve got it wrong,” I told the man. “I’m here because of my wife. The dead woman,” I said, pointing my thumb over my shoulder at the tree by the road. It came out too quickly, too bluntly, but I was afraid he would close the door before I could get anything out of him. I tried not to slur my words. “I just wanted to know if you saw anything that day.”

He blushed as if his skin was trying to match his beard. “Oh. Sorry. Uh, come in. I don’t know what help I can be, but,” he said something I couldn’t hear as he bent down. He reappeared a few seconds later holding a cat in his arms like a baby. He then pressed the door lever with his elbow and kicked it open a bit to let me in.

Just inside the door was a living room with a few pieces of mismatched furniture: a dirty off-white couch with cushions sunken so far into the frame it looked unusable, two chairs with clashing plaid patterns, a coffee table with a map of South America sandwiched between two layers of glass, and a decoupaged side table covered in drawings of 1950’s pin-up girls. The walls were covered in a mix of postcards featuring quaint images of American towns I had never heard of and propaganda posters written in Spanish.

“So what do you want to know?” he asked. “I wasn’t home when it happened and neither were my roommates. I sort of wish we were because, oh, that sounds wrong. What I mean is, I wish I had something to tell you. Do you want coffee? Almond milk? Waffles?”

I asked for some coffee because I felt myself sobering up and also because I wanted a minute to clear my head and figure out what I was doing here. He set the cat down on a chair and said to him, “Here’s a new friend, Walnut,” before heading into the kitchen, looking over his shoulder at me before he disappeared from sight. I watched the cat as he stretched its front paws forward then rolled over on his back and gave me a charming, sideways glance that said “I know you want to rub my belly.” Though I don’t usually care much for cats, I leaned forward and
scratched the warm white fur of his stomach briefly, pleased by the gentle hum of animal satisfaction.

While the man was gone I noted that he seemed nervous and wished I had planned this ahead of time so I would have a notebook like a real detective, or at least an idea of what types of questions to ask. If I had a notebook, I would probably have written down that he hadn’t introduced himself (although I hadn’t either). More important, he seemed nervous for no reason and I could have put a star next to it to indicate that maybe guilt or knowing something he couldn’t say was the reason for his nervousness. But that would be foolish, blaming this kid who was nothing more than a college student who had the misfortune of having my wife die in front of his crappy rented house. And honestly, what kind of killer would leave the body right outside his own home?

When he came back with a mug of coffee and held it out to me with a kind, apologetic smile, I tore the page out of the mental notebook. This kid was as guiltless as his cat.

"I know you said you didn't see anything, but have you noticed people hanging around here with, like, weird tattoos or piercings or anything?" The question seemed hopelessly stupid even as I was asking it, but I felt like I had to get him talking, just to see if he knew something without realizing its significance.

"I didn't realize the police had a lead," he said. “That’s encouraging.”

I coughed. "They don't, I was just thinking that criminal types usually have some distinguishing feature or something. I mean, someone with a scar maybe? Or a sinister-looking fedora?"

The man was at least as uncertain as I was about how serious my question was. "Listen, man. It's Riverwest. You just described everyone in a two mile radius. If you want someone suspicious in this neighborhood, maybe you're looking for a guy in a polo shirt with a popped collar. Didn't the police say that there was some symbol left by the body?"

“Yeah, turns out it was a bookmark that some college kid dropped. A muted trumpet from the only Pynchon book people read.” He stared at me blankly. "Anyhow, everything's a dead end." I saw him flinch at the phrase. Fuck you, I thought. I'm the one who should be flinching, but I knew I would probably do the same if I were in his position. He looked at the clock and I said, "I guess I should be going. Thanks for your help or time or whatever.”
He looked relieved that I was leaving and that I understood he really knew nothing. He walked me to the door and said, “No problem,” then looked like he wanted to say something more, but didn’t.

The cat trotted along behind me as I left, so I made sure I shut the screen door tightly. Immediately, the cat’s little paw appeared beneath the screen door, sweeping the porch left to right to left as if waving goodbye. Even though I hadn’t learned anything new, I felt glad that at least I wouldn’t have to come back here and intrude any more into their lives.

I went around to some of the other houses on the block hoping that someone would be able to give me something, anything, even though I knew the odds that anyone was paying attention at the precise moment I needed them to have been paying attention were slim. Most people weren’t home, but the few that were seemed to be either drunk or high, college kids who didn’t seem capable of engaging with reality in a way that would have given me any answers even if they had seen something. It was clear, however, that they really had no answers.

One in particular seemed to think I was playing some prank on behalf of some guy named Beans. When I finally gave up and walked away he yelled at me, “Tell Beans he better watch himself next week at the bonfire or he might end up like ‘your wife,’” which he said complete with air quotes. He laughed and closed the door. I wanted to break the kid’s prominent cheekbones and, at the same time, I wanted to hold him close to my chest and tell him to never leave the world he was in right then because the real world was full of ugliness and people with names nowhere near as ridiculous as Beans.

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I called the police when I got home, something I swore I would try not to do unless they had called me first or I found out something pertinent. Hopkins, the lead detective, picked up and explained to me in his most affected sympathetic voice that they didn’t yet have any solid leads. Or maybe it was real sympathy, which would be even more demeaning, this man supposing he had any insight into my life just because he’s paid to deal with this shit all the time.

“Listen,” he said “we might never find who did this. And I hear you’ve been talking to some of the neighbors, asking questions and scaring people.”

I wondered which of the disaffected residents had bothered to call the police on me so quickly and why. Also, I considered the possibility that I was being followed, either by the police
or by someone else, that I was still a person of interest even though I had an alibi and nothing to gain from Julie’s death, not even a measly life insurance policy.

“I know you’re just trying to help, but you’ve got to leave it to us. You’re worrying those people and they just need to be able to, you know—”

“Move on?”

He cleared his throat. I had to interrupt him because the things he was saying sounded like they were written down for him in a script, just like the gas station manager. Only in this one I was just part of some cop show, the special guest whose story was ripped from the headlines and pieced back together on television sets around the country, but would be forgotten in the very next episode.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m being selfish wanting to find out why someone thought it would be okay to shoot the only person I loved in this world. Inexcusable.” If he could use a script, so could I.

“Sam, that’s not what I said.”

“Please stop calling me by my name. It’s weird and I know who I am,” I said and hung up. He was probably sitting there with the handset of his complicated desk phone still resting on his shoulders, rifling through papers and stroking his goatee, weighing the pros and cons of calling me back. I turned off my phone, but the next day there was no voicemail from him, so clearly the cons won out.

Fresh out of reasonable ideas, I decided that maybe that bookmark found near her body meant something after all and stayed up all night reading East library’s copy of The Crying of Lot 49. By the end my eyes were dried out and I was paranoid that there were meaningful symbols all around me that I couldn’t understand, but I didn’t have any new insight into what mattered and knew that nothing could be as easy as finding a killer because of a bookmark. Tired and vaguely skeptical of the U.S. Postal Service, I decided to drive to Riverwest in order to scour the neighborhood again and see if anything turned up.

Apparently gangs specifically avoid that block, or maybe the residents are so quick and thorough after any tagging occurs that all evidence is completely removed. Either way, there was nothing. I checked houses to see if there were any patches of fresh paint where graffiti might have been covered up, but no luck.
The only consistent symbol I saw were piles of dog shit along the curb lawns of the street. If that was some signal for an underground organization or conspiracy group, there would have been many more dead bodies.

Defeated, I returned home. It was becoming clear that this wasn’t leading anywhere and I certainly wasn’t amateur detective material. I figured I might as well go back to spending my waking hours sitting on my living room floor watching paternity test and lie detector specials on daytime talk shows. I assumed that’s what people expected of me because it was all I expected of myself.

It struck me, while watching the late night re-broadcast of the evening’s news that it was now past midnight on Thursday, the day of the funeral.

I dug around in my closet and got my suit out, still in the dry cleaning bag from the wedding of one of Julie’s cousins, a wedding where I refused to dance with Julie because I hate to dance and I’m a selfish stubborn prick. After that particular tantrum she withheld sex for the next two and a half weeks, wearing baggy t-shirts and pajama pants even though it was summer. In turn, I spent a few minutes longer in the shower each day masturbating, resenting her and myself, and thinking, “What an ass, what a royal fucking ass I can be.” I was considerate and more careful with her while she was still mad. Naturally, once she stopped being angry and decided to have sex with me again and we got back into our familiar rut, my good behavior ended.

I wished I had a different suit or a different set of memories associated with the one I had, but I also thought it might be morbid to buy a special suit for her funeral, the Bizarro World version of a wedding dress. I tried the suit on to make sure it still fit, though I wouldn’t have time to get a new one if it didn’t. It fit, but was looser than I remembered, probably from all the walking I’d done in the last few days, not to mention the fact that I kept forgetting to feed myself and had no appetite. There, I thought, You were always on me to get into better shape and now here I am. Loose suit to your funeral.

I didn’t yet have a eulogy prepared, which my sister Betsy, even more than my in-laws, was pretty explicit that I needed. I tried explaining to her that I’m one of those people who shoots from the hip or speaks from the heart or does something spontaneous from some body part. She said, “That stumbling metaphor is exactly why you need to prepare something. You can’t drop the ball on this.”
While looking at the notes I had made earlier for the eulogy, it hit me – a victim’s funeral was probably a time when a good detective would be on the lookout for a suspect. Maybe someone would show up to the funeral under the guise of being a concerned citizen who wanted to show his apologies after hearing my tragic story on the news, but really he was coming to admire his handiwork. I briefly considered that the spouse is often the prime suspect, but I knew no one would be looking at me because, despite the fact that I worked for an insurance company, neither Julie nor I had life insurance policies and we weren’t fighting and hadn’t been acting abnormally prior to the shooting. Plus, I was working when it happened and my employer had already given the police the swipe card records to prove it. But the real killer was out there and I held out the perverse hope that he would show up and accidentally reveal himself.

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I was so eager with anticipation and rage that I couldn’t sleep. I put the suit back on at 5:00 in the morning, though the funeral wasn’t until noon, then wandered through the house to pass the time. It was a humid day and when I sat down to a bowl of dry cereal at 7:30 I had fully sweated through my undershirt, white button-down and suit coat. Not a smart move, but I kept it on anyhow because the damage was already done and I had no other options.

At 11:00 I left the house and went to the church. Although I typically make it a point to be late to things, I had no desire to have my tardiness to my wife’s funeral be the topic of future hushed holiday conversations.

The drive to the church was depressing, which is probably to be expected given the circumstances. Maybe I should have let my sister Betsy drive me. I declined her offer because her four month old twin girls, Anna and Hannah, spent most of their time crying in a way that sounded like an occasionally convincing Yoko Ono impression. Betsy and I don’t talk much, so if the girls managed to stay quiet for the duration of the ride, we would sit in strained silence while her husband Zach yawned periodically, his habitual attempt at dispelling awkwardness between us.

When I got inside the church I wasn’t surprised to see that I was the first one to arrive. The service was at the Lutheran church that Julie attended as a child and had plush, deep red carpeting that ran down the center aisle and clashed with the pale yellow walls. The morning light that came through the cheap-looking stained glass windows depicting scenes from the Bible on the south wall of the church cast rainbows on the side aisle and nearby pews. Even tackier
were the windows on the north wall of the church, which were unevenly backlit by artificial lighting because that wall was connected to the elementary school. I pictured Julie as a child staring at that wall during weekly chapel and weekend services and felt an emptiness behind my sternum. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to cry or not, or if I was even capable of crying, but I felt disgusted with myself for not having cried once since I found out.

After making sure no one else was around, I began poking around the church a bit, both to pass the time and because empty churches creep me out. Plus, if I sat long enough I would realize how the past few days would have seemed impossible to me a week ago. I didn’t really want to get into it, in a church of all places.

The last funeral I had attended was the joint funeral for my parents and I had spent the better part of a decade not thinking about that day, but it threatened to come back and take over my thoughts now, the link between the parallel tragedies being unavoidable. I would have only time to think about that from now on, but today I wanted to think about Julie and give her the time she deserved.

At the front of the church there were two lecterns. I approached the one on the left, stood behind it and tapped the microphone which was already on. Half out of my mind with exhaustion, I began piecing together parts of speeches I knew. “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. Four score and seven years ago I had a dream that I would ask not what my country could do for me, but what I could do for my country that will live in infamy.” I pounded my fist down in a way that I thought Winston Churchill might, though I’m not sure I’ve ever seen Winston Churchill give a speech.

From the hallway at my right came the regular, plodding sound of footsteps. I turned and saw a man in dress pants and a light black sweater. He was completely bald, though looked to be only forty, and had the look of blank kindness on his face that is often seen on people who are paid to deal with people they can’t stand.

“Sorry,” I said before he could speak. “Are you the pastor? I just wanted to see what kind of sound equipment you’re working with. This is my wife’s funeral. I wanted to make sure there’s plenty of bass.”

The man didn’t even blink. Instead, he introduced himself as Pastor Hines and offered his apologies for my loss, as was his obligation.

“I guess I’ll just go find the bathroom,” I said.
“Down those stairs,” he said, gesturing to the back of the church, “and to the right.” He was smiling in a way that I’m sure he thought of as kindly, though there was a hint of condescension in the way he tilted his head at me. I gave him a nod of thanks and walked quickly down the center aisle.

The basement of the church was dark, but I managed to find a lightswitch on the wall. The fluorescent lights buzzed on to reveal walls covered with the artwork of children. There were easily two hundred construction paper hearts all along the walls, the work of students from pre-kindergarten all the way through eighth grade. Each one was decorated with stickers, glitter, crayons, and markers, and had the words “I Love Jesus Because…” typed in black letters. On the line beneath, in the unconfident penciling of young children, were sentiments like, “He died for our sins,” or “He gave me the best mommy,” or, “He loves me.” Near the bottom of the wall I noticed one that read, “I Love Jesus Because… My teacher says I have to or I’ll get my name on the board.” I removed this one from the wall, taking care not to tear it, then folded it in half and stuffed it in the breast pocket of my shirt.

I walked into the men’s room and found the light switch on the wall. There was a mirror over the urinal, which seemed odd. I didn’t like the idea of seeing my face while I pissed, but instead of looking away I looked into the mirror staring my reflection down and tried to be objective, to see what other people would see when they arrived. My eyes were darker than I remembered. The whites, if they could be called that anymore, seemed to have shrunk and been taken over by the walnut brown of my irises. My face as a whole had taken on the appearance of a slightly oblong ball of bread dough and I wondered how long I had looked like that. I couldn’t remember the last time I had really looked at myself.

“This face, ugly as it is, is a face I should remember,” I thought. “Get a nice close-up with the mental camera. This is the man I am now and I should remember that above all else. There’s no use in walking around with the attitude I had when I was seventeen or twenty years old and the world saw me differently. No point in acting otherwise.”

When I came upstairs, several people had already arrived, including Betsy and her husband Zach who were each holding a baby in a car seat and a diaper bag. Betsy put her baby and bag down and squeezed her hands into fists when she saw me. She walked over to where I was with a clumsy, shuffling step and held out her strange little balled up hands to me, arms out as if she wanted to hug me but hadn’t done it in so long that she couldn’t quite think of how it
went. I didn’t blame her. As a lawyer, she was usually very poised and methodical, plus our family was never one for physical affection, even when we were very young.

“Don’t,” I said and her arms stopped, nearly parallel with the floor like she was slow dancing for the first time in middle school with a partner no one else could see.

“I’m surprised Julie wanted, I mean, a church?‖

“It’s nothing we ever talked about,” I said. “This is all Jan and Phil. I don’t think Julie wanted any of this and I just wanted to cremate her, but they said that in their family people got ‘a good Christian burial.’”

“You remembered your eulogy, right?”

I nodded.

“Sam, don’t embarrass yourself.” I had no idea what she meant by that, besides everything. Betsy was the annoying type who was always thinking about how other people might make her look bad, “other people” most often meaning me.

Betsy lived in one of the old Frank Lloyd Wright two-family duplexes on Burnham which had been converted to a one-family sometime before she and Zach bought it a few years back. They had spent most of their money and spare time since then re-stuccoing the external walls after tearing down the siding that the previous owner had installed, designing and soldering windows in Wright’s style, and finding appropriate décor for the inside, right down to geometrical iron and glass tissue box holders for the bathrooms. Betsy was everything our parents had once hoped she would become and I was still the kid brother Betsy had to keep in line.

“I’ll be good,” I said, turning away from her a little. “I’ll be fine.”

“Whatever you need, I’ll be here for you. All day. Beyond just today, of course. Don’t think you’re alone.” At some level Betsy’s offer was meant to be reassuring, but it came out more like a warning, a threat that she would not let me be anti-social and weird like usual.

The funeral began shortly after. Julie’s parents sat in the front pew with me along with Betsy and her family. There were some hymns and Bible passages, some awkward eye contact with Pastor Hines whose bald head was shiny with sweat from wearing the warm clerical garments.

I knew it was bad behavior, but I kept turning around to stop the feeling of being watched, or at least to confirm that I wasn’t just being paranoid, that everyone really was looking
at me. Of the two hundred or so people there, I recognized most of them, but there were still a handful scattered throughout the church that I couldn’t place. Of the ones I didn’t know, none looked particularly like a killer. Nevertheless, I still had trouble focusing on the service knowing that there were these strangers here and I didn’t know what they wanted.

The third time I turned around I saw him. At the back of the church, sitting by himself in a well-fitting suit, hair stiffly spiked with gel, was Bradley Parker, the man who Julie dated in college when we were split up for two years. He must have come in intentionally late, knowing I wouldn’t want to see him. I felt my stomach turn over and wondered what he was doing there, how he had found out about the funeral and what right he thought he had showing up, even after all these years. To my knowledge, he and Julie hadn’t spoken since she told him we were getting married and she only kept in remote touch with one of the mutual friends they had from that time.

Either Bradley didn’t see me staring or he was good at pretending because he just kept looking straight ahead, his head turned toward the pastor, his eyes wide open. I turned back around to the front of the church when my in-laws went up to deliver their joint eulogy. I was too distracted to hear the words, but registered the flat tones of their voices punctuated by sobs that sounded almost like surprised laughter. All I could think about was Bradley Parker and what his presence meant. I had to find out if he was here because Julie had lied to me about not keeping in touch with him and if, more importantly, he knew anything about what she had done that last day. But I knew that he would never tell me anything.

Jan and Phil returned to the pew and the pastor said something I didn’t catch, then stood at the lectern expectantly and without blinking. Betsy elbowed me in the ribs, then pointed at the bulletin to indicate that it was my turn.

Feeling foolish, I made my way to the lectern. Pastor Hines stood there with the same friendly-pitying smile from earlier. When I got close enough he placed his left hand on my shoulder and whispered something I didn’t catch before sitting on the small pew against the wall, invisible to most everyone in the church but me. He folded his hands and leaned forward to demonstrate that he was paying attention to me, though he was bouncing his left leg up and down and his eyes looked vacant.
I looked back to the back of the church where I had seen Bradley, but he wasn’t there anymore. Quickly, I scanned the rest of the pews, wondering if he moved to be less conspicuous, but he was gone.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the construction paper heart that I had taken, hoping it would give me some inspiration or at least make it look like I had something prepared. I glanced down at it, smirked, cleared my throat and began. “The last time I was in front of a lot of you and had your full attention was eight years ago at our wedding. You all expect me to say vague things about how much I loved Julie, I guess. Maybe share some anecdotes that those of you who know us well have heard and probably tuned out several times before. The kind of stories that meant nothing to you then but would take on some kind of profound meaning hearing them now. Sorry I can’t do that for you. I can’t give you closure because I have no closure.”

“At our wedding we promised to love each other and to keep each other safe from the world. I lifted the veil before I kissed her and looking into her big green eyes, I was sure I could do it. I was sure we wouldn’t have to think about funeral arrangements for decades and when that time came we would see it coming and could make our peace with each other, or we would die like my parents, too young, but together and still in love. But now here I am and here is this closed casket and I can’t even look her in the eyes to tell her how I’m so very sorry that I lied to her. We tried to keep each other safe and I failed.”

“The only story I want to tell is the one where we find out who did this, but I can’t do that now, so…” I folded put the heart back into my pocket, shrugged at my silent audience, shook my head and walked down the three steps and back to my place in the front pew. Betsy and Jan, on either side of me, touched my shoulders, but both removed their hands when I tensed up from the unexpected feeling of it.

I followed behind the casket as the pallbearers took it out of the church on the cart and watched her leave me with the assistance of eight of her male relatives. It was the strange reversal of our wedding day when she insisted on walking down the grass aisle of our outdoor wedding by herself, not wanting to feel like a piece of property being handed off from her father to me.

After seeing that the casket got into the hearse, I excused myself and turned back to the church, scanning the groups of people gathering outside to see if Bradley was there. When I didn’t see him, I headed back inside in the off chance he was still there, but the place was
completely empty except for the organist in the balcony, a woman in her early twenties who I startled when I came to make sure Bradley wasn’t up there.

After apologizing to the organist, I left in a hurry through a side exit at the front of the church and walked the half block to my car by myself. When I got there, I unlocked it manually, laughing when I couldn’t steady my hand enough to get the key in on the first try, still laughing when I got in and closed the door, still laughing and laughing when I started hitting the wheel with the heels of both hands, pounding out the tempo of fear.

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My in-laws had opted against a funeral procession saying that they didn’t want to make a spectacle of a private event, so I was free to circle the streets around the church to check for Bradley before heading to the cemetery. When it was clear I wasn’t going to find him, I turned up the Bruce Springsteen cassette in the tape deck to try to forget my sad excuse for a eulogy and the repeating melody of “Amazing Grace” that played as the casket left the church. I wasn’t sure what kind of person would be good at this, but I knew it wasn’t me. I am such a shitstorm, I thought. I am Hurricane Shit and I am raining down on everyone around me.

Unclear if I was actually paranoid or simply affecting paranoia in hopes of becoming a better detective, I checked the rearview periodically to see if I was being followed, if Bradley was somewhere behind me in traffic. However, every time I noticed a car that seemed like it might be trailing me, it was gone the next time I checked for it. Of course it made no sense for Bradley to follow me because he would know that I was going to the cemetery and could easily find his way there by himself. Still, I couldn’t drive more than three blocks without checking my mirrors or I would get a constricting feeling in my chest, wonder if I had already missed something important.

I parked my car on one of the narrow roads in the cemetery and sat in it, looking at the fluffy mound of dirt piled next to the hole where the casket would go, where whatever was left of Julie, the woman I knew so well whom I probably wouldn’t be able to recognize anymore, would be dumped and covered over by day’s end. I made myself picture her like she looked when she would sleep in on Sunday mornings: brown hair splayed out around her head, pale pink lips in need of Vaseline forming a half-smile, her eyelashes fluttering from a dream, which had caused stray flecks of mascara to flake off and stick to the skin beneath her lower lids. Everything in its place and intact, not quite perfect, but damn close.
The hearse and a few other cars were already there and others trickled in slowly. Despite their claims of wanting to keep the event personal, my in-laws felt comfortable announcing an open funeral in the newspaper so people Julie knew from her life before me, people like Bradley Parker, could show up and pretend like they lost her just like I did, like our loss was somehow parallel, like we were part of the same community of loss now. After years of putting up with their obvious disapproval of me and their conviction that I wasn’t smart enough for their daughter, I wanted to tell them how wrong it was that Bradley was allowed to come. But I knew they loved Bradley. In fact, there was a fine chance they were the ones who told him about the funeral and that he hadn’t just happened to hear about it.

Angry as I was with them, I stood with Jan and Paul around the gravesite. The burial started a bit after 2:00. There were white roses on the casket. There was a crowd around the grave that again seemed focused squarely on me even though people looked off in any direction but where I stood. I made deliberate eye contact with everyone I could. They all looked away with the same childish aversion to confrontation that comes from the shame of knowing that the usual etiquette for human interaction is insufficient for the situation at hand.

More Bible passages were read. Some people said prayers and words I didn’t bother listening to. Trinkets meant to be signs of some inside joke or personal memory were placed on the casket. After everyone else took their turn, I reached into my pocket and dropped the construction paper heart into the hole knowing she would appreciate it as much as I did, certain that it would have inspired a slew of stories about her own students’ artwork which she would have told with an adoring fondness in her voice.

After the casket was lowered into the ground, people told me they were sorry, they were sorry, so sorry. They were so very sorry, they wished they could help. They knew it must be hard on me. They said it like they knew the situation, they knew how I must feel. I did nothing except try not to blink because I did not want any of these people to have to console me if I broke down, not even Betsy or my in-laws.

When everything was over, people again split off into groups just like they had outside the church. I walked up to a small cluster of people I had never seen before, hoping one of them might know what had happened to Bradley. All I wanted to say was, “Why are you here?” but when I got up to them they each introduced themselves as middle school friends of Julie’s who had heard about the funeral through some chain of gossip I couldn’t follow, and I realized they
weren’t going to be of any help to me, they were just people with a misplaced sense of kinship who had found out about Julie through the church gossip.

Recognizing that I was close to losing it and feeling certain that Bradley was not going to show, I left as quickly as I could, saying that I had to go to the Wallaces’ house to make sure everything was in order for the reception.

“You don’t have to do that alone, we can go with you,” Jan said.

“I know,” I said, “but I prefer to be alone. You and Phil should take your time at the grave. Pay your last respects and spend time with people who can’t come back to the house. Really, I don’t mind. You two have done enough, I’ll handle this.”

She started to say something, but stopped to get a handkerchief from her purse to dab at her eyes, smearing her navy blue eyeliner in the process. After replacing the handkerchief in her purse, she squeezed my hand and stood on her toes to kiss me on the cheek then went with her husband to talk to some relatives.

I invited Betsy and Zach to come right over to help me make sure everything was ready. Though I regretted the decision instantly, I knew Betsy wouldn’t listen to me if I asked them not to come, especially if I told her I needed to be alone for a little bit. She was going to keep good on the promise-threat to stay with me all day.

“If you wait a second I’ll follow you to your house. You can leave your car, and then I can drive you over,” she said, not having to say that she was aware I was probably going to get drunk at the Wallaces’ and she wasn’t going to let me drive if I did. Not wanting to fight with her and knowing I wouldn’t win, I agreed.

On the drive home I made the decision to figure out what it took to be a detective and look into Bradley, just to see what I could find out about him and if he was worth mentioning to the police. I chose not to go to them right away with his name because I didn’t want to look like the unstable person I felt I was becoming and that the detective already suspected I was. It would only help my case if they thought that I was still functional, if indeed I found out anything significant. Besides, even I recognized that as much as I wished they could arrest him for being there, there was nothing illegal about Julie’s ex-boyfriend showing up to her funeral.

I parked in my driveway and squeezed between the middle seats of Betsy’s minivan where Anna and Hannah were buckled in and sat in the back seat. When we got to Shorewood
five minutes later, I went inside first, leaving the door open for Zach and Betsy who had to get their kids and all their assorted baby accessories.

The house was as immaculate as ever, the combination of generic paintings of flowers, dark wood tables and stiff leather living room furniture giving the place a look more fitting for a hotel than a home. In the refrigerator I found plastic containers full of deli meat and cheese, fruit and vegetables with various dips. There was a map taped to the tray of crackers on the marble kitchen counter showing how everything would fit on the dining room table, a testament to Jan’s organization skills, present even on the day of her daughter’s funeral. She could have been the editor of *Martha Stewart Grieving*, showing people how to remain professional and put together in the midst of despair.

Betsy and Zach came in and set their daughters on the kitchen floor, turning to look at them frequently and cooing in their direction in between slicing rolls and setting out disposable utensils and plates.

When Zach stepped outside to take a phone call, I eased into telling Betsy about my plan. “Did you see the guy who was alone at the back of the church? The one with the ridiculous pompadour who looked like he was just there because he had nothing else to do?” She shook her head no, but didn’t seem to be paying much attention to me because she was trying to stay in sight of her daughters while going through the fridge and planning how much food to set out initially. “That was Julie’s ex, Bradley, the one from college. He came late and left before my eulogy, but I saw him.”

Although Betsy had been away in California at law school and then working for a small firm while I was in college, she knew who I meant. Those were the years when we were closest because our parents’ deaths were so fresh that we felt we had to check in on each other regularly, to make sure we were still some sort of family.

She set a plastic tray of cold cuts on the stove and looked at me. “Were they still talking?”

“No. At least she told me they weren’t. But I don’t know now. I guess it’s possible. Her parents always loved him, so maybe they told him. For all I know he and Phil go golfing every weekend and talk about what a loser I am. Last I heard he was working downtown and living somewhere nearby on the east side. I don’t know what it is, but I can’t shake this feeling that he
knows something. Why else would he show up late and leave without talking to anyone? Am I nuts?"

“It’s weird, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. The funeral wasn’t private. Maybe he just didn’t want to upset you.” One of the babies started crying, so she reached down to pick her up and gently bounced her up and down, making shooshing noises while checking to see if the other baby was going to start up. “Can you set this meat out on that dish by the toaster?”

I was frustrated that she wasn’t taking me seriously, but I tried to stay calm. “Sure, that sounds like him, always considering my feelings, the bastard. I don’t trust him. I think I’m going to do some digging around.”

“You don’t have to trust him, but to be fair, you’re a bit biased. There’s a big difference between not trusting somebody and thinking they have something to do with a murder. If you really think he knows something you should probably tell the cops and let them sort it out.” The baby in her arms had stopped crying, so she put her back in her car seat. The girl turned to her sister and they giggled at each other.

I knew she was probably right, but this was the first thing I thought I could do and the cops wouldn’t take it seriously. To them it would look like a grudge that I couldn’t let go of, nothing worth really pursuing. Maybe they would question him, but he was a smooth talker and without anything beyond appearing at her funeral, there was little they could do to get him to admit anything he knew.

I was about to respond when Zach came in the front door while making small talk with some of the Wallaces’ neighbors who came in behind him. Before they were within earshot Betsy said to me, “Please, Sam. Nothing stupid.”

The funeral reception went as well as possible, I suppose. Between forty and sixty people showed up throughout the afternoon and the room was filled with chatter, a noise I could tune out, but which I found comfort in nonetheless. People I barely knew or had never met offered their condolences, explained who they were, told me stories about Julie that I had never heard, small, insignificant anecdotes that made me miss the everydayness of her, made me wonder what more I had never known about her.

By 7:30 everyone was gone except Betsy and her family. We were all drunk except for Betsy who was still breastfeeding. Jan was still crying on and off, her eyeliner completely gone
by this point, and Phil kept dozing off then jerking awake during our conversation. Betty took the
initiative to excuse us all by saying that she preferred not to drive in the dark and had to get the
girls to bed soon.

Zach and Betsy said their goodbyes and said they would meet me outside. Jan expressed
hope that I would still come over for holiday meals and hugged me tightly. All Phil could
manage was a handshake and the strange remark, “This isn’t fun for anyone.” I didn’t know how
to respond so I just nodded and headed for the door.

“One last thing,” I said, before leaving. “Do you have any idea what Bradley was doing
at the funeral?”

Jan shook her head and was about to speak when Phil, more somber than I had ever seen
and swaying on his feet from the alcohol grabbed her hand, partially to steady himself, and said,
“He was like a son to us. I didn’t see him, but if he was there, he had as much of a right as
anyone.” From that remark I assumed Phil had invited him. Jan, who has never been one for
conflict, managed to keep a complacently blank look on her face, as if she had just gotten caught
up in a pleasant daydream.

“Good to know,” I said. The closest he had ever come to saying anything similar of me,
the person who actually was a part of his family, was the time, shortly after I first started seeing
Julie, when he introduced me at a family reunion as “the kid who made me glad I had a
daughter.” He clapped me on the shoulder, a bit too hard to be taken as friendly, but I had
laughed it off then because Julie assured me this was just his version of hazing, something he did
to all her boyfriends. But in the twelve years since, he still hadn’t warmed up to me.

Although Betsy promised she was just going to take me home, she drove all the way to
the southwest side to drop Zach and the girls off at their house, holding me hostage in her car.
“I’m sleeping at your house tonight. He’ll be fine with the girls.”

“I’ll be fine by myself,” I assured her. “You should be with your family.”

I expected her to say something cheesy like, “You are my family,” but instead she just
moved her mouth to the side her way of saying the conversation was over.

Back at my place I settled into a comfortable slouch on the loveseat. I realized I hadn’t
eaten at my in-laws’ house and wasn’t sure Betsy had either. “I guess I can offer you some
frozen broccoli. Or mustard. We—I haven’t gone shopping recently.”

“I’m not hungry, thanks.” Betsy said. “How are you?”
“Not in the mood for this,” I said.
“Clearly. What the hell was that eulogy?”
“The best I could do?” I meant it as a statement, but it came out as a question, an invitation for her to tell me exactly what she thought.
“Get your shit together.” I laughed and she raised an eyebrow. “What? Don’t give me that wounded puppy look. You can’t keep pushing everyone away like you did after Mom and Dad.”
“That was an accident. Yeah, it fucked me up, but there’s a big difference between a car crash and a bullet to the head.”
“Not the point,” she said, “and you know it. Are you planning on talking to anyone about this? Have you checked to see if your job has some sort of health service on site or something? At the very least, I’m sure they have really great in-network psychiatrists.”
I blinked at her. “Not interested.”
“So what’s your plan?” she asked, nodding at the empty vodka bottle by the couch.
“Drink yourself into a new misery?”
“That’s what I’ve come up with so far, yeah.”
“I’m not going to watch you do this. My therapist has been telling me forever that I can’t engage with toxic people. Maybe staying here isn’t the best idea after all.” She was usually short with me, often acting like my second mother when I was growing up and she still lived at home, but she’d had less and less patience ever since she gave birth. The stress of being together all day had obviously taken a toll on her. For the first time I saw how the crow’s feet around her eyes seemed deeper than I remembered them, how tired and old she looked already, and how much like our mother.
“Do what you want. Thanks for the ride and everything, I’ll talk to you later.”
I closed the door behind her, then went to the bookshelf in the living room where I found an old journal. It was an artifact from a few years ago when Julie mentioned to her mom that she was considering writing her memoir. After realizing she hadn’t done or experienced much that other people would find interesting, Julie had abandoned the idea quickly, but word had already spread through her extended family. For the next year her relatives would give her a journal or notebook for every occasion, and sometimes for no reason at all, as if to say, “We barely know
you, but we do know this one, really generic thing about you and we got you this really generic present to pretend to support your pipe dream.”

I thumbed past the sketches and pages of hurriedly written notes not wanting to see them at the moment. On the first clean page I came to, I made two lists:

**What I Know**

- Julie was shot
- Found by gas station employee who knows nothing
- Bradley Parker (???)
- Died in front of the house of a college student who knows nothing
- Police are worthless
  - I am worthless
  - I am alone in this

The second list looked like this:

**What I Don’t Know**

- How to figure out Bradley
- Why this happened
- Where to go from here
- Everything else

It was clear from these two lists, if it wasn’t clear already, that I was not cut out for this task. I thought about hiring a private detective or buying a book on investigating or finding a retired cop with detective experience who wanted some extra cash on the side, but the second option probably would probably be about as useful as *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Building Your Own Space Shuttle* and I didn’t think my application processor’s salary could realistically afford the first or the third.

Money always was a problem, but would be more so now, especially because Julie didn’t have a life insurance policy. We never gave it much thought. Not that we took extravagant vacations or ate gold dust on our hamburgers, but we went out for drinks frequently and didn’t worry when we could only make minimum payments on our credit cards. If only I had something comforting to fall back on now, something that Julie used to always say like, “There are more
important things than money,’’ or ‘‘The only number that matters is two: you and me,’’ but we just never really talked about it at all, and certainly not in clichés.

The easiest, cheapest thing to figure out how to become a real detective would be to search online. The various websites briefly outlined some of the main points: be inconspicuous and act naturally even if you’re spotted, pay attention to details (recording devices would help) and keep notes, and get good at finding information via questions or public record searches. What each one stressed, explicitly or not, was to always, always, always be suspicious and aware and not to jump to conclusions.

I told myself that it might be wise to take a step back and think objectively about Bradley, but still I figured it would be worth it to log onto Julie’s facebook account to see if they had corresponded.

A few years after we’d gotten married, Julie and I had wrote down our passwords for all online accounts and kept them in a small wooden box that her grandfather carved for her when she was a child. We trusted each other enough not to use the passwords, but thought it would be smart to write them down in case of some emergency; we were not, however, thinking of this kind of emergency. At least not anytime soon.

As far as I knew, she didn’t spend much time on the site and mainly used it as a way to keep in touch with some of her relatives from other states and a few friends from high school or college. I hadn’t been on my own page since long before Julie died, so I had no idea what to expect, but I was prepared to find a flood of sympathy on her wall and perhaps a few private messages of condolences from random people.

Bit by bit I was recognizing that she was gone, but her existence online was something entirely different. She was there in it, linked to my account through the relationship status, smiling in photographs. It was unnerving, but there was a strange comfort in logging in and seeing us there, still married in cyberspace for our friends to click from one to the other, to remember that we filed joint taxes, we shared a bed, we were in this together. If considered deactivating her account once I was finished, but if I did, she would no longer be tagged in any of the photos and my relationship status would still say Married, but to no one, to an entity that had disappeared.

I scrolled through the wall posts, borrowed phrases of sadness posted by people who were mostly unfamiliar to me, though I recognized some of her relatives from out of town who
couldn’t make it to the funeral. There was nothing really of interest on the wall, nothing worth noting, but I took screenshots and saved them on the computer just in case.

Next, I clicked on her private messages. There was one from Bradley Parker sent to her two days before she died. All it said was, “Okay, I wish you would tell me what this is about, but I’ll see you soon.” I checked the sent messages, but found none from her. Whatever she was doing, she didn’t want to risk me or anyone else finding out. I had never deleted a message because I had nothing to hide and never considered that she might be looking at my stuff and I was surprised that she had taken the time to conceal something from me. I took a screenshot and made a note of this in the journal.

I tried to think back to that week, but it was tough because everything before her death was swept up in a vortex in my mind, swirling in a timeless cloud of what my life used to be. According to the kitchen calendar she had met up with her friend Tara from work for lunch that Thursday, a thing they did from time to time when school was out of session over the summer, to get out of the house and keep themselves sane.

I turned on my phone to see if I had Tara’s number, but couldn’t find it. I saw I had a voicemail, but decided I would listen to it later. I found Julie’s phone in the top drawer of her dresser where I had put it along with her jewelry and driver’s license after the police returned them to me. I turned the phone on and called Tara even though it was almost eleven o’clock and I had no idea what her sleep schedule was like. I didn’t want to wait, especially if she knew something that would help me.

When she picked up she sounded tired and scared. Too late, I realized that I should have called her from my phone because she probably woke up and saw Julie’s name on her caller id, something she wouldn’t have anticipated.

“Hey, it’s Sam.”

“Sam. God. Sam. Okay. How are you holding up? I’m sorry I wasn’t there today, I had to—” Her voice was thick with sleep.

“That’s not why I’m calling. It’s okay. Do you remember getting lunch with Julie the Thursday before…” A proper detective would have been able to finish the question and say the thing out loud, but I couldn’t yet and knew I didn’t have to.

“No.”
“What do you mean no?” I didn’t mean to get angry, but I figured that she should be able to remember the last time she saw a person alive.

“We were supposed to, but she texted me that morning and said she thought she was coming down with a cold. I asked if she wanted me to bring her anything, but she said she’d be fine, she just needed to sleep it off. I told her I’d call in a few days to see how she was feeling and that we’d figure out some other time for lunch when she was better. That was it.”

Memory vortex aside, I knew Julie wasn’t sick that week. She hated being sick and it happened so rarely that whenever she felt even the hint of illness coming on she went out and bought a fist of garlic which she cut into pieces and swallowed like pills, washing them down with an obscene amount of orange juice. Sickness was a performance for her. The few times she called in sick during the schools year, she would stay in bed and expect me to take care of her when I got home from work. If it lasted through the weekend I had to spend all day in bed with her and get whatever she needed. This lasted until she determined that she was in the clear.

I apologized for waking Tara up and thanked her for her help.

“What help? I didn’t do anything.”

Not wanting to reveal to her what I was doing, I brushed off her question. “I just wanted to know what her last days were like. You know?” We said our goodbyes and she told me to call whenever and that she would help however she could.

I added to the “What I Know” list two entries:

- She lied to me
- She lied to Tara

Though I had learned something, like a real detective, I felt further from a solution. If they had gotten lunch there was a chance Tara would be able to tell me if Julie was acting strangely. At the very least I would know that she was living her life normally and had no indication of what was going to happen to her.

Of course it was possible that she just wasn’t feeling up for lunch and this was all just a coincidence. She often complained that Tara was too needy, even though they were best friends, and that sometimes she just couldn’t sit and listen to Tara’s rants of failed love and loneliness. I reminded myself not to jump to conclusions and instead closed my eyes, trying to jog my memory or figure out what Julie might have done that day.
Journal still on my lap, I dozed off for a while and woke up to the vibration of my phone in my pocket. It was Betsy, but I silenced the call, angry at myself for forgetting to turn it off and not wanting her to know that I was actively ignoring it, though of course she would figure it out.

I waited a minute until the phone buzzed to indicate a new voicemail, then listened to it right away. I frequently ignored phone calls, but always retrieved the messages right away, a habit that stemmed from a childhood of running to the answering machine as soon as I got home, even from very short absences, to find out if anyone had called for me.

The first voicemail was from Emily and only said, “Sam, it’s about six o’clock on Thursday and I just got your message. I wish I had known, I would have come. Please call me back when you can.” I deleted it though I knew she would keep calling until she got a hold of me.

Betsy’s message was longer and she was whispering, probably afraid to wake Hannah and Anna. “Hey, I wanted to apologize to you. I’ll just do it on your voicemail, I guess. I’m sorry. You’re not toxic. You have every right to feel however you feel and…” I tuned her out at that point, able to supply any of the standard lines he might use. I tuned back in at the words “amateur detective” which were followed with a sigh and the words, “I totally support you and am willing to help however I can, which, with the girls may be limited. But I think you’re right—you need to keep looking.”

It was then, when I heard that sigh of defeat and her unenthusiastic support, that I knew I would have to keep everything to myself. Not because of her support, mind you, but because she had that sound in her voice, the one that indicated her resignation (at least for the time being) of trying to keep me sane. Her only investment was keeping me happy and in her life, so he was willing to let me do whatever I wanted, like how she used to let me throw tantrums when she babysat me, watching silently until I tired myself out.

I texted Betsy, “Thanks for the offer. Giving up on detective thing. Sleep now.”

Despite everything I had to think about, I had been up for almost twenty-four hours and was genuinely ready for bed. I took off everything but my boxers and got into bed, keeping far to my own side.

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I fell asleep shortly after and my thoughts moved seamlessly into a dream in which a woman was writing. She sat in a poorly-lit room and I could see her back, her messy brown hair,
her poor posture as she handwrote page after page in a white legal pad. There were other legal pads full of writing in neat piles near the desk where she sat. Next to the desk lamp was a small bronze clock with hands that turned rapidly from 5:00 to 2:00 to 5:00 again. And even as the light coming through the small window in front of the desk got brighter, then dimmer, then disappeared completely, she continued writing.

I knew that I didn’t know this woman, knowing in that certain way you sometimes have in dreams about how you fit into the landscape of that unfamiliar world which is itself fit neatly into the usually inaccessible parts of your brain. But I felt, somehow, that she knew me, a disturbing sensation.

I kept waiting for something else to happen in the dream, or at least to will myself awake. The dream was so mundane that I thought her body would start spewing some strange liquid like a hose springing a leak, something bizarre to remind me that this was a dream. But she just kept writing page after page, flipping to the next one, never turning her head enough to allow me to see her face. The only notable movement she made, besides writing and turning pages, was the periodic stacking of a completed legal pad onto a nearby pile. After she put the pad of writing in its place, she reached for the next one, never stopping for a stretch or a coffee break. She never deviated from these few consistent and mechanical movements.

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When I woke up, I felt exhausted. It seemed less like I had dreamed and more like I had been watching a silent movie in real time, spending over twelve hours waiting for a change in the pattern of her movements that never came.

I spent the rest of the day pacing around the house, opening drawers, finding they had loose handles, looking for a screwdriver, discovering a shelf in need of new adhesive lining, going to the store, forgetting what I came for only to remember when I pulled back into my driveway. Due to the combination of the funeral, alcohol, the phone call with Tara, the lack of restful sleep, and even the dream, I felt off kilter.

The next few weeks were more of the same. I didn’t think about the dream and did my best not to think about my old life while I ate casserole dinners that people dropped off for me. I smoothed things over with my boss and returned to work a week after the funeral, barely able to do the most basic parts of my very basic job. Several times a day a senior processor would tell me, a “friendly reminder” always in the most passive-aggressive tone, that I hadn’t corrected a
misspelling of an insured’s name or missed an agent’s split commission or some other tedium that could be fixed at any point in the process, even after a policy was approved, if necessary.

Each time I was confronted with a minor mistake, I gave the same non-committal “Hmmm,” pulled up the policy as Janet or Karen or Tom or Jeff or whoever stood over my shoulder, and then, after spotting the mistake I never once doubted I made, said, “Well how do you like that?” And each time, no matter which shapeless-sweater-wearing cog was standing there, I got the same response: “We just want to make sure you’re on board.”

On board. Being “on board” was the department’s new Teamwork Initiative Focus and it made my mouth go dry just thinking about it. At each month’s team meeting they handed out O’s on various colors of construction paper, each color representing a specific aspect of teamwork, which we were supposed to affix to laminated certificates with our names on them. They only translated to a potential, all-but-inconsequential salary boost at the annual review. So occasionally my friends and I would refer each other for things like not deleting policies from worklists (Demonstrates Understanding of Key Aspects of Position) or washing hands after going to the bathroom (Supports Well-Being of the Team).

If ever there was the chance I would want to be on board before, that feeling had left. Everything there felt like a kindergarten classroom, and the construction paper false motivation didn’t help convince me otherwise. Each day my boss gave me the corporate version of the look that said, “Someone is going to get a frowny face next to Plays Well With Others on his report card this quarter.” I gave her the corporate version of the look that said, “I will eat paste just to make your day more frustrating.”

By September I had sunk back into the routinized depression of work which was a comforting escape from the Brown noise that had replaced my thoughts. It wasn’t so much that the days ran into each other as it was that they were the same day over and over again and I was Sisyphus being punished for offenses I didn’t know I had committed. I wore the same pair of pants to work for three weeks straight and none of my coworkers seemed to notice. I showered, at best, twice a week, but still managed to smell better than the office which constantly smelled like someone had dumped a chemical cleaning agent on a piss-soaked airplane seat. By the time the dark pouches arrived beneath my eyes, my boss seemed all but unaware that I was still alive; I was a lukewarm body in front of a computer, which was all that was really required of me.
Emily called every few days, always leaving short messages asking me to call her back or simply saying she loved me and was thinking about me, but I couldn’t muster up the courage to return the calls yet.

After the first week or so back at work people stopped asking about Julie, about any new leads in the case, about how I was doing. They either avoided me entirely or stuck strictly to work-related topics. If they accidentally allowed the conversation to stray from work topics, they would stop abruptly, check the wall clock over my head and say, “Oh, I really have to get back to…” and walk away without finishing the sentence, conscious that we both knew that, with business down, there was no pressing need ever to get back to work.

I considered sending out a mass email to the processing team group list informing them that I no longer cared for their small talk or patronizing human interaction and that, in fact, I would appreciate if they could be on board with leaving me the fuck alone for the rest of my tenure in this miserable position. Ultimately, I opted not to go through with that plan for fear that I would have to have an awkward one-on-one meeting with my boss about it.

Each work day passed more or less like this and each evening was spent trying to figure out what to do about Bradley. One night in September I found his address in a Word document that Julie kept for everyone she sent Christmas cards to, and some nights I drove straight from work to his apartment building on Prospect and circled around the block, sometimes for over an hour, until I could find street parking that allowed me to see the door. It wasn’t the most efficient way of staking out the place, but if I took the bus or walked there I would have to sit on the street in full view of the building, never knowing if he could see me. I would stay until I got tired, sometimes as late as midnight. On my way home I would turn my phone on to check if I had a voicemail and most nights there was one from either Emily or Betsy, though I never returned their calls and only occasionally texted my sister to tell her I was fine.

By mid-December I was losing my steam. I had sat outside the building dozens of times and only ever saw him come home from work, but he never left once he got home. Apparently he had no social life. Of course, there was a chance that some of the people I saw entering or leaving the building were visiting him, but I had no way of knowing. At first I tried taking pictures of them, but my crappy digital camera either didn’t focus well or didn’t work in time. A few times, when I was parked on the opposite side of the street, a vehicle got in the way of the shot. Anyhow, I came to recognize certain people: the slim blonde woman whose hair was
always in a bun, the middle-aged man who only wore black running pants and a matching black workout shirt, the elderly man with thin, wispy hair who walked his little dog to the end of the block and back at 9:30 each night.

Finally, one Wednesday in the middle of December, around 8:30 at night, Bradley left the building. When it happened I initially thought I was hallucinating, half-convinced that the man only existed for the thirty seconds it took to get inside the building a disappear from view each evening after work.

He headed south, but since Prospect is a one-way heading north, I knew I would either have to circle around the block in the heavy traffic and hope to find him or get out of my car and risk being seen. There were enough people walking around and the neighborhood is pretty safe, so I figured if I kept a fair distance I could follow him unnoticed.

He walked down to Brady Street, then turned right. He wasn’t walking quickly or slowly or in any way notably, but it looked like he was walking with a purpose, so I followed.

He entered the Walgreen’s on Brady and Oakland and I wondered if I hesitated to follow because he would be sure to see me, but realized that he might be buying something of interest that I would only know if I went after him.

When I got in the store I tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible, but still seemed to be walking with exaggerated care, tip-toeing like a cartoon detective. I spotted Bradley near the back of the store flipping through a men’s fashion magazine, the epitome of nonchalance.

I took a deep breath, then another, then walked straight down the aisle, picturing the opening scene from Reservoir Dogs. I stopped less than two feet from him, but he either didn’t notice, or, more likely, assumed I was a stranger who didn’t understand personal space and was willing to ignore me for as long as it took.

I cleared my throat.

“Well. Sam.” He closed the magazine and replaced it on the stand.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I asked, immediately wishing I had started things off a little less confrontationally.

“It’s Walgreen’s. What? That’s none of your business.”

“What happened to Julie?”

“Well there’s something. What are you really asking me?”

“Julie. You know. My wife? I know you saw her before she died. I want to know why.”
He cleared his throat. “Right.” He looked over my head and I turned around to see an old woman pretending not to overhear as she paged through a gardening magazine. “Can we take this outside?”

“I think here is fine. Unless you’re afraid of witnesses hearing what you did.”

He breathed out through his nose, blinked rapidly, then ran his hand through his hair.

“Well, no, I guess here is fine. You’re right, I did see Julie before she died. In fact, we had been seeing each other regularly for more than six months. She didn’t tell you because, well, she figured you’d react like this. That you wouldn’t understand.” He coughed into his hand. “She was depressed, Sam. She didn’t know how to tell you because she thought you were too. I mean, she didn’t tell me much about you, but she didn’t think you would be able to help.”

I felt the muscles in my face move to make a series of faces that, judging by Bradley’s expression, probably looked less like actual emotions and more like the result of a seizure.

“You’re not seriously giving me this load of shit, are you?”

“I’m sorry. It’s true. She came to me because, well, she knew I had a history of depression and wanted someone she could talk to who wasn’t part of her daily life. She didn’t want you or people from work knowing. She thought she could get through it by herself and just didn’t want anyone to worry.”

“What about that is supposed to make me think this isn’t a load of shit?”

“I swear to God, we weren’t having an affair.” His nostrils flared. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but I loved Julie. Of course I did, but that means that I loved her enough to want her to be happy and she was happy with you. Just not with her life in general.”

Part of me wanted to rip out his vocal cords and make him stop talking, but I knew that he was right. She hadn’t been really happy for years and I didn’t resemble anyone who could be of any help.

Unable to look at Bradley anymore, I looked down at myself, my body slack and paunchy from alcohol and inactivity. My looks, once approaching something like passably inoffensive, had gone entirely to shit in the last few years. My skin had taken on a strange ashy yellow and I suspected that the staples of my diet, assorted Frito-Lay brand seasoned products washed down with beer, had made me develop anemia, scurvy, or both. I slouched all the time, the result of working in an office chair, and looked several inches shorter than six feet, the height on my driver’s license. I had let my hair go long and I felt the ends brush the back of my neck every
time I turned my head and had begun tucking the uneven sides behind my ears out of necessity but also as a nervous habit.

The last time I was anywhere near this bad of condition were the years when Julie and I were apart in college, when I packed down all my anger, at her and myself, like a plot of dirt in my chest that I could water with liquor in hopes that something more beautiful and redemptive would grow, though I didn’t think forgiveness would ever come.

Yet when she called me crying two years later saying that she came home from her last final exam which she finished early to find Bradley fucking some girl he knew who was visiting from Loyola, I forgave her as easily as if she had simply borrowed a pencil from me without asking.

That being said, and I’m not proud of this, I made her ask me for help. I forgave her right away, but I wanted to know that she needed me. It was clear that the only reason she called was for a place to stay and someone with upper body strength to move her heavy belongings out of their apartment, but she called me out of everyone she knew in town, and I took that as a promising sign.

But still, I didn’t offer. I made her ask. Of course I said yes, probably too swiftly to sound anything but exactly as giddy as I felt, but I maintain that I had some dignity left in the matter. The truth is, I was excited that they had broken up, I was excited that she called, and I was excited that she would be staying with me, even if it was “just until a decent sublet comes along.”

We didn’t sleep together right away. I let her stay in my bed and took the couch. The first few days we walked around each other like we weren’t sure if one or both of us was a specter visible to no one else, though not necessarily unfriendly. We were beings independent of one another, things to be watched, but not touched. Things to be interacted with only when others weren’t around and only then to verify its existence and assure ourselves we weren’t yet, entirely, crazy.

By the second week, things had gotten more comfortable. We relaxed, we joked around, we decided to have some drinks on Friday, some drinks on Saturday, some strip poker after the drinks, some sex after the strip poker. And just like that, we were back.

She told her parents that she was staying with me after all her stuff was already in my place. By their nightly phone calls to my house I gleaned that while they ideally wanted her to
move back in with them so they could be distracted from each other again, the priority was that she moved out of my place.

Maybe they were right to be afraid. I hadn’t seriously dated anyone in the time we were apart and I was still crazy about Julie. In the years apart, she had gotten stronger—not only more muscular, but her mind seemed keener, more prepared for debates, less willing to back down. In the meantime, I had grown paunchier, physically and mentally, and couldn’t imagine what she might see in me anymore.

And yet, there we were that Saturday night, both of us naked but for the two knee-high socks she had managed not to lose in the game, drunkenly mashing our bodies together in some simulation of genuine passion that probably looked more like two naked people conjoined at the genitals doing the running man.

Once the initial encounter was out of the way, everything else came back like a smell you hadn’t experienced since you were a child, but which made you feel three feet tall again and only a few months out of potty training. But somehow, between then and now, everything had changed.

By the time I pulled myself out of this maze of memory and regret, Bradley was staring at me with what seemed to be real concern. My skin felt clammy and my mouth was dry.

“Are you okay? I have to go get my prescription. Do you need help?”

I shook my head, but he put a hand on the middle of my back anyhow and walked me to the prescription counter. The young woman behind the counter asked him if he had taken Zoloft before and everything suddenly made sense. Unable to speak, I waited for him to pay and followed him through the store and out onto the street. He stopped on the sidewalk just outside the automatic glass door and turned to me.

“You gave some to her?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Did she tell you she wanted to kill herself?”

Again, he nodded.

“And you didn’t think to tell the police or me or anyone?”

“I didn’t think it was relevant. It seemed like they were helping. I was trying to wean myself off of them because they were screwing with my sleep and I thought maybe I didn’t need them anymore. It was stupid, but I had extra, so I gave them to her so she could try them out
before she went to a doctor. She said she didn’t want you to find out through insurance claims before she was sure she needed them. I only a few at a time because I wanted to make sure I had enough in case I needed them. I told her they wouldn’t work right away, but she said she understood, but she still wanted to try. That’s why we got together, nothing more.”

“Did you see her two days before she died?”

He nodded again. “I gave her a couple more. She seemed okay. She told me she thought she had everything worked out, but when I asked what she meant by that, she wouldn’t say. So.” My first thought was that he was implying she wanted to divorce me. His eyes were murky and distant and I knew he thought she meant something else. “When I heard she died, I wondered if—well, she wouldn’t have done anything, would she?”

Instead of asking him to come out and say it or forcing myself to ask the question, “Are you asking me if she planned this?” I punched him. Several people on the street saw, but it was apparently not unusual enough for people to get into fights on Brady Street because everyone kept walking. Bradley stood there, stunned, as I jogged away from him, back toward the lake, toward his apartment, toward my car which I got into and drove around the east side, not yet ready to go home.

As I drove through the city street of the east side and downtown, past groups of young people heading to the bars who were underdressed for the frigid weather, I tried to recall the moment where everything had gone wrong. Even though I knew it wouldn’t change anything and would probably only make me feel angrier and more helpless, I couldn’t stop myself, so I dove directly into the muddied lake of our past.

For the first two months after Julie and I graduated from college we spent our nights drinking cheap microbrews at Landmark. If Julie had to bartend, I would drink alone and she would pass me free ones whenever she could. On her days off we typically went bowling and drank until we had to struggle to remember which direction was home, putting all of our laundry quarters into the red candy vending machine for handfuls of Mike and Ikes on our way out the door. Eventually we would end up at George Webb’s for hash browns and scrambled eggs, either after mistakenly walking South on Farwell instead of North after bar close, or to staunch our hangovers the next day. If we realized we were out of condoms when we got home, we would sometimes go to the 24-hour convenience store that was a twenty minute bus ride away, a ride
Julie usually spent apologizing for not being on birth control because she didn’t want to “get fat.”

But sometimes we didn’t go to the store. Sometimes we said, “Fuck it” to the forty minute travel time, the five minutes it took to get the box and wait in line with the other drunks, the unpredictable waiting period at the bus stop. After nearly an hour’s worth of effort and sobering up the moment would have passed and Christ knows that the moment will never come back for two 22 year olds and Christ knows that the bodies of two 22 year olds wouldn’t let them get pregnant, not when they’re having this much fun. Only sometimes the bodies of twenty-two year olds don’t know what Christ knows and things happen, fun be damned.

Given the situation, we decided with hardly any deliberation (maybe because the months of refamiliarizing ourselves with one another felt good or maybe because we had a “history” together [even if it was more like an extended civil war than an Enlightenment] or maybe because we finally sobered up for more than two consecutive days) we might as well get married. We both had our degrees, mine in English Literature, Culture and Media, hers in Education. I had just begun an entry-level position as a mailroom worker at Northwestern Mutual Life and my insurance would cover the unthinkable amounts of medical expenses throughout the pregnancy, which her bartending job couldn’t offer. We decided she would quit her job to get away from the smoke and the temptation of alcohol, she would look for work after the baby came and we would be happy together, all of us.

When we told her parents the plan I could see them suddenly wishing they hadn’t spent all of Julie’s formative years drilling into her mind that as a Catholic there is nothing worse than an abortion. The possibility struck them that a child with me was quite possibly worse, given that I didn’t even have the good sense to, in her father’s words, “wrap my package before putting it under the Christmas tree.”

We finally convinced them to side with us, specifically by inviting them to the shotgun wedding of the year to be held that weekend. A judge performed the ceremony at Veteran’s Park, Julie’s cousin’s jazz quartet provided the music, I wore my suit from graduation and because she wasn’t yet showing, Julie wore a form-fitting red dress from the Boston Store sales rack. Julie’s former coworker Theresa made virgin strawberry and raspberry margaritas and enough chili for the forty guests. Julie’s parents gave us three thousand dollars for the whole thing which was more than enough, plus another five thousand to tide us over until she could get a job.
After the wedding, her mother had started to come around more frequently which, while annoying, we took as a sign of her resentment of me subsiding. Every time we went over to her parents’ place for dinner she presented us with her latest project for the baby: a quilted stuffed animal, pale green baby booties, the beginnings of a multicolored pastel baby blanket which she was crocheting in the same pattern of Julie’s baby blanket.

Late in the first trimester, just as Jan was finishing the fringe on the blanket on Sunday afternoon after a late lunch of corned beef and cabbage, Julie started having cramps and spotting. We took her to the hospital, opting to drive the few blocks rather than wait for an ambulance. The doctor confirmed that she was miscarrying and recommended a D&C given how far along she was.

And so in a matter of less than four months I had gone from being single to being a married, expectant father to being a guy whose wife never quite seemed to emerge from the sedative she got when the remnants of another life were taken out of her.

After the miscarriage, Julie’s parents were colder than ever to me and more protective of her. The one blessing in this whole thing, from their perspective, was the idea of having a grandchild around to spoil and raise right, to atone for the mistakes they had made with Julie. And now there would be no grandchild, at least not for the foreseeable future, just a son-in-law whose “view” from his downtown office job was the uninspired painting of a window with a curtain parted halfway, a suggestion of an always-sunny day waiting just beyond the walls of the drab basement.

Although they blamed me for everything, I couldn’t really blame Jan and Phil for resenting me at first, but it never let up. I’m sure they were counting on the likelihood that our relationship would dissolve after the miscarriage, especially considering it was the catalyst for our marriage. Maybe they were right and we should have gotten a divorce, but I didn’t want to prove them and everyone else right and I still loved her even though I hardly recognized her some days. I wanted to show everyone, Julie included, that we had still done the right thing. Sure, maybe we wouldn’t have gotten married quite so soon if she wasn’t pregnant, but we would have done it sooner or later. I was sure.

Julie was planning to look for a non-bartending job after the baby, but now her unemployment meant her full time job was staring at the wall and walking around in a daze. She
finally contacted her favorite professor from undergrad who was able to help her find a position teaching first graders at Byron Kilbourn in Milwaukee.

I worried about her ability to handle being around so many kids so soon after, but she was elated. The day she found out that she got the job she said, “I think this will be good for me. Hell, I probably won’t want to have kids at all after dealing with twenty of them every day,” and laughed an unconvincing laugh meant to put me at ease.

Each day she left home no later than 6:30 am and headed west leaving Lake Michigan and our east side neighborhood behind her. She traveled past the student housing of UWM’s campus, through Riverwest where the houses were in worse condition and the rent was cheaper, where neighbors were more like neighbors and less like drunks who would piss on your car door handles while you slept, past the houses with an equal amount of litter and grass as a lawn, past the freeway that could lead you out of this city for good. She took Locust to 35th, watching how the gas prices rose in the poorer neighborhoods, then North to Fon Du Lac which got her to 68th through neighborhoods her father described as “not very good” meaning “not very white.”

The students she had at Kilbourn were so foreign to what she had known growing up, but she said they gave her perspective. Beyond their identical uniforms were eager eyes, mostly brown, searching eyes that looked at her like she was the love of their lives as if they knew she was still just a child herself. It seemed to make her happy, though. She brought home little present the children gave her, plastic apples filled with candy or drawings and notes saying how much they loved her. Nights were spent looking over their homework, preparing the next day’s lesson plan and sharing with me cute or frustrating anecdotes from her day.

In the meantime, I wasted the hours of 7:00am to 3:00pm opening and collating insurance policies, delivering interoffice mail for people who couldn’t be bothered to take the elevator or, God forbid, walk to one of the company’s two other buildings less than a block away to deliver the envelope themselves. I grew to resent anyone who wasn’t in the mailroom or the cafeteria, even those who were only one job level above me because they got to sit around all day, never having to leave the beige safety of their work group’s cubicles or spend hours at a time in the damp windowless basement.

I snuck out of work early whenever I could and usually got home slightly before Julie each day, always with the intention of cleaning or starting dinner right after I had one beer. One
beer usually became a half dozen and the good intentions resulted in watching daytime talk shows which convinced or deluded me into thinking my life wasn’t so bad.

When Julie got home we would make something quick like boxed jambalaya or, when we really had no energy, we would sit with a package of smoked chubs wrapped in last week’s newspaper. There on the couch, side by side, we twisted the heads off by placing our thumbs just behind the gills, then split the body open and pinched the slick meat from the toothpick-thin bones. When we finished, we would wipe our greasy fingers on the paper, smudging the ink, and if we weren’t too tired we would have sex there on the couch with a small hill of unseeing fish heads watching us.

Not a day could be differentiated from the rest, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it was bad. Our relatives would send us copies of photographs from family gatherings and we always looked happy enough. There was one from her parents’ anniversary picnic where Julie is sitting in a glow of sunlight, her curly brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail and a bit of eyeliner smudged beneath her eye. Anyone else would look frazzled or homely, but she looks haphazardly beautiful and alive.

Julie stayed at Kilbourn, I stayed at the insurance company, we stayed together. Gradually our friends got married or moved away or just stopped calling us. I took an open position as an application processor a couple years later, she got regular meager promotions, we supposed this was what adults did, and so we kept on.

Though we talked about it, we didn’t try to have kids after that. She got on the pill and took one each morning with a military-like awareness of the time and began going on regular walks to keep the weight off and to keep her energy up. Tacitly, we counted the miscarriage as a blessing. We couldn’t care for a child and we both knew it because we could barely care for ourselves.

But we stayed together because nothing is all good and this wasn’t all bad and at least we understood each other. We were veterans of different wars, maybe, but we had both at least seen battle and we had both survived, and who else could say the same?

In reality there wasn’t a single moment where things went wrong. Our life together was more like a series of events that compounded and made us realize that we weren’t a happy couple on a sitcom who could overcome their problems quickly, with guaranteed resolution at the end of each upsetting episode.
After driving around the city for the better part of an hour, I finally headed home wondering how I would keep myself busy now that my nights would no longer be occupied by my surveillance of Bradley.

I went to bed without bothering to change out of my clothes and stared at the ceiling of my bedroom, convinced I wouldn’t sleep ever again. The feeling of being betrayed by her meetings with Bradley and her secret anti-depressants would have been bad enough on its own, but the suggestion that her death was a suicide made me queasy. It didn’t make any sense. If she had shot herself, where was the gun? And if she had hired someone to do it for her, where would she have gotten the money? Our shared bank account didn’t have much in it, but I got out of bed and verified that the checkbook matched the online statement.

Back in bed I wondered if she could have borrowed the money from someone, but the only people we knew who could potentially access however much money it would take to hire a killer were her parents. They would have given her money if she really needed it, but never that much without asking what it was for and without sitting down with both of us to determine when he would be repaid. When she asked to borrow three thousand dollars for a down payment on a new car a few years back, Phil made us both sign an informal contract complete with a payment plan.

My thoughts circled all around this idea until I gave up at four in the morning. Whatever her cryptic comment to Bradley meant, whether she wanted a divorce or she wanted to back to school or something else entirely, I would never know. Nor would I ever know the exact circumstances around her death. The conversation with Bradley proved that I didn’t know everything about Julie, but I needed to believe she wouldn’t choose to die.

Sleep eventually came, and with it, the next dream. I seemed to have more control in this dream, or at least my subconscious was taking its time unraveling itself for me. She was there again, the writer, looking slightly different from the last time. Her hair was shorter, curly and a darker brown than in the first dream.

This new permutation of the writer was the kind of person who was not negative, exactly, but seemed at first glance to require being described only through negation. She was no longer sitting at the desk from the last dream, but was on the floor of a low-ceilinged closet beneath a
staircase. The cross-legged, hunched over posture did not seem comfortable and she did not seem to be warm in her lilac pajama pants and navy blue hooded sweatshirt. In short, she looked like she could have been Julie, at least until I saw her face.

But when she brushed the hair off the right side of her face, I got a clear look and I knew this woman wasn’t Julie and could never be mistaken for her no matter how badly I wanted or didn’t want her to be.

She did not have an absurdly small or large face; it was not squareish or tan or have hints of anything but western European features. This face would not stick out from a crowd of white faces in any Midwest city. Her nose was not anything to really speak of—a bit fat, maybe, but placed where any other nose would be, connected to a mouth that seemed less like a mouth and more like hardening cement setting into a permanent near-frown.

Her eyes were the only thing that did not seem regular. They were not well-seeing eyes, though the glasses she wore to correct her vision were nothing special or noteworthy, just simple half-framed things with thick lenses. The only vaguely remarkable feature about the eyes was their color: not a solid green, but slashed with gold and red, rimmed with black that was not-quite-black that suddenly bumped up against the bloodshot whites.

Though most everything about her was altered, at least slightly, she still had the concave posture and the stacks of legal pads with writing. But this time, just before I woke, I was able to see two things: the first sentence of the top legal pad which read, “Sam Mastin’s brief stint as a detective had come to an unsatisfying end, his first and only case being one that could never come with closure,” and her name, written in the upper righthand corner of this page, “Catherine Averill.”

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For the next week I tried to put everything out of my head. At work I listened to music and worked slowly, trying to fill my entire day so I wouldn’t get caught up thinking about Julie or the dreams or anything else but whatever work was directly in front of me in the moment. I was tempted to call the police about Bradley, but I didn’t want him to press charges against me for punching and, potentially, stalking him and the only thing he might get in trouble for would be giving her prescription medication, but I simply didn’t care anymore.

On Friday of the following week I stayed late at work to exercise in the gym, hoping that the mental effort required not to fall off the treadmill would distract me and I could tire myself
out enough to get sleep. It was just before Christmas so I was the only person in there besides a petite, muscular woman wearing black shorts and a neon pink tank top who was riding one of the bikes behind the treadmills. She looked up and smiled at me, pulling her shoulders back. I smiled back, found the remote control for the television mounted on the wall and turned it on for background noise, not caring what was on.

I got onto the treadmill closest to the door and a few minutes later the woman got onto the one next to mine, though there were three others she could have chosen, and said, “Hi.”

When I looked over at her, she glanced down at my left hand, smiled again and asked, “Do you like this show?”

I looked up at the screen. It was The Bachelor, a show I had seen commercials for, which was enough to make me loathe it. “I don’t know, I’ve never seen it. I’m not really into reality tv.”

“It’s my favorite,” she said, then launched into a description of what had happened so far in the season and pointing out who her favorites were, pausing to comment on their dresses and hair. I stayed silent the entire time, wondering if I should give up early.

After ten minutes she turned her machine off, wiped it down and said, “Do you want to get together some time? For dinner?”

Physically, she was my type and she seemed nice enough, but I doubted we could have had a conversation. There was no discernible reason why she would be attracted to me. I thought how our bodies would look from an outsider’s perspective if we were to have sex, mine pale and lumpy against her tan, toned limbs. As much as I wanted to have sex and thought I might have a chance with this woman, I still couldn’t think of enjoying sex with anyone but Julie, even if she had been seeing Bradley.

Rather than sound presumptuous by explaining that I was only a few months into a self-imposed year of celibacy or tell her I didn’t think we would have anything in common, I said I was in a relationship.

“That’s too bad,” she said. “My name’s Tracy, by the way. Maybe I’ll see you around.” She walked out of the gym, her hips moving a bit more than seemed natural and I wondered if I made a mistake.

I stayed on the treadmill for forty-five minutes to make sure she would be gone by the time I finished, took a quick shower, and headed home.
When I turned onto my street I saw a tall, slim man smoking a cigarette on my porch, his long legs straddling the railing. Exhausted from the conversation with Bradley and still angry and confused, I pulled my car into the driveway and prepared for another confrontation. Only when the man turned to face me did I recognize him, though the lazy, confident way he sat on my porch should have given it away instantly.

I first met Flipper on this very porch on the day he moved in next door and came over to introduce himself. We didn’t really know his roommates when he moved in next door as a replacement for one of the former tenants who had moved back home to Michigan. The situation worked out perfectly for Flipper who couldn’t get his parents to cosign, despite the fact that he made good money as a delivery driver. Almost immediately after he moved in next door he began coming by, usually a few times a week, with vegan food to share. He, Julie and I would sit on our living room floor (at his insistence), while he talked to us about everything he loved, which was, as far as we could tell, nearly everything he had encountered.

Over mounds of rice, fried vegetables and homemade seitan, we listened to his theories on matters such as contemporary epistemology, the (ideal) welfare state, the advantages of polygamy in a posthuman society. He lived next door to us for most of a year, but eventually worked his way into a history program in China after teaching himself an old form of Chinese that only a handful of people in the world knew anymore.

He was gone from our lives as abruptly as he had appeared, so I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised when he came back unannounced, standing on my front door late one night with a small satchel. He looked a little older, but had the same eager hunger in his eyes that once made us feel we might actually still be able to better ourselves, too.

Uncertain how to respond to his presence, I stood a couple feet away from him with my hands at my sides. He took one large step toward me there, on my porch, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, hugged me, and he asked if he could “couch it with you guys” until he figured out the next move.

“I’ve got this,” he said, laughing and pulling out a fistful of various foreign currency, “but not much else at the moment.”

“Well, it’s just me now, but yeah, you can stay here.” I stepped back from the door and let him in.
“Where’s Jules tonight?” he asked, his big mouth open to reveal all his large, crooked teeth. “She finally move on to someone better?” He mimed elbowing me though I was several feet away from him.

“No. I mean, it’s just me. Forever.” And with that I launched into the whole sad story: the phone call I got from the police, the conversation with Bill from the gas station, the funeral and all the ways I had fucked up before, during and after. But I left out my half-assed detective work and my conversation with Bradley, afraid that Flip would think I was crazy or, worse, encourage me to try again, to keep looking.

“The worst part of it is the morning, that last morning, she was pissed because I had eaten the last of the cereal. She went off on a rage which you and most people probably never suspected she was capable of. I told her to relax and she said, ‘How can I relax with someone like you always backing me up against a cliff?’ I accused her of overreacting and—I wish I could forget this—I said, ‘So you don’t have Grape Nuts this morning. I guess your life is over now, huh?’ and she looked at me all sad and quiet and said, so soft and pure like a child, ‘I guess so,’ and left. What a good joke it would be if it was funny at all, hey?” I hadn’t told anyone about this last conversation, the eerily prophetic hyperbole that was more unforgivable than anything else I had done.

Flip raised the right side of his mouth in a not-laugh, not-smirk. Maybe it was empathy or maybe it was holding back laughter because he got the punchline but didn’t think I would get it. All that counted was that he wasn’t laughing at me and he wasn’t bullshitting me. That was good enough.

“You two were great,” he said. “‘Sorry’ won’t cut it, so I won’t say it, even though I am. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not going to turn this into some revisionist history of your life or anything, but there were times where I’d catch you two looking at each other like you were the only two things left in the world and you could finally be yourselves and I remember wanting that more than anything. Still do.”

“I’m not so sure that was the case, but fair enough.”

“Remember that one Fourth of July when I came over with a bunch of beer and we sat around listening to the neighbors setting off fireworks on your roof?”

I shook my head. “Vaguely.”
“The two of you fell asleep out there, passed out to be precise, and as I was crawling back inside through the window to get you a blanket and let myself out, you both sighed at the same time, the same perfect pitch, and you were clinging to each other like your very existences depended on it. Whatever happened after or before, I guess I can’t say, but you had something real, if for no longer than the duration of a sigh. That’s more than most people can say.”

And without meaning to, I sighed. I knew he was right and I suddenly felt like I wanted it all back, though most of it wasn’t like that night—at least not the stuff I remembered. Still, I wanted the silent evenings of watching bad prime time, I wanted to hear her talk about having to reassure some kid that it was okay he had pissed his pants during the mid-day milk break, I wanted the sexless nights, and the greasy fish, and the woozy, muttered ‘I love yous’ before bed. I wanted to sit awkwardly at her parents’ house for Christmas while her cousins’ kids ran around sticking toy decals on one another and gorging themselves on sweets in between shrieks of joy so powerful and electric they could power the entire block’s Christmas lights.

I wanted to stop hating her for dying and for everything she did before she died and for everything I did before she died. And I wanted to stop thinking that maybe, sometimes, I wanted her dead, just so I could stop having to face everything I had ruined.

“She was cheating on me,” I said, deciding it wasn’t right to give him a false idea of what our lives were since he left. “I’m almost sure of it.”

“What? How? With who?”

“Piece of shit yuppie guy she fucked when we broke up for a couple years in college, before you knew us. Bradley. I looked through her facebook for some leads. It took me all of five seconds and I found some mysterious message from him, sent a few days before she died. I went to talk to him. Just last week, in fact. I’d been watching him for a while, thought maybe he knew something about it. He seemed to think she was depressed, maybe she did this to herself somehow.”

He rolled his eyes. “You don’t believe that, do you? There’s no way. Sounds like he’s been watching too much bad TV.”

“I thought about it. A lot. But it doesn’t add up. There was no gun, she didn’t have that kind of money, and it just wasn’t her. You know?” He nodded in agreement. “Anyhow, I guess Julie and this Bradley clown had been seeing each other for most of the last year. They weren’t even friends on facebook officially, they just sent private messages back and forth so I wouldn’t
know they were still in touch. Goddamn. Goddamn her and goddamn him and goddamn me for letting this happen.”

Flipper clapped his hands together, a sharp crack like a tree branch splitting, and said, “Now we’re getting somewhere!” This strange enthusiasm that would have earned anyone else a shiner.

“We’re getting to where I should have been years ago, divorce papers in hand. It would have been the best for both of us. I think that might have been what she wanted and I can’t really blame her.”

“I don’t mean to be a callous dick, you know, but maybe this is the way things are supposed to be. I know that sounds fucked, but you also have a way out now. How do we know what happens to us isn’t good? Chin up. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders and me here to provide you with your daily bowl of clichés, an important part of a healthy, balanced, meaningless existence. So let’s get to it.”

I should have been annoyed with how little he seemed to care about the whole thing, but it was a relief to be talking to someone who wasn’t spoonfeeding me pity and wiping from my bib the bits that dribbled out of my mouth.

“Sam, old boy, I think it’s bedtime for Bonzo, but we’ll talk about this more tomorrow and I can tell you what I’ve been up to. I can be your life coach. And I have a surprise for you, but all that can wait.” Even though I wanted to hear more about his life in China, in the interim since I had last seen him, I’d been yawning for the last forty-five minutes, so I said I would get some fresh sheets for him to sleep on.

He turned down the offer to sleep in my bed, assuring me that he could sleep anywhere and that he actually preferred couches or, when particularly restless, the floor. We said goodnight and as I was brushing my teeth I realized Julie’s old toothbrush was still in the holder on the bathroom sink. I threw the toothbrush away, gave Flip a bottle of mouthwash to use until he could get a toothbrush, then headed to bed.

Once under the covers I kicked my feet around for a while, a childhood habit of sleepless frustration, and bunched up the blankets next to me in the general shape of a person, clutching the pillow and burying my face in it, inhaling deeply through my nose, hoping to smell what was left of her.

\W/
Late in my sleep cycle, just before I woke, came the next dream.

Catherine Averill was there again, laying down on the floor of the same closet from the last dream wearing black exercise shorts and a neon pink tank top, her hair pulled back in a loose ponytail.

She propped herself up with her left elbow and massaged her neck with the same hand while she tapped the pen in her right hand against the legal pad on the floor. This went on for several minutes—at least several dream minutes—until she finally wrote “Notes for My Magnum Opus” at the top of the page.

Before I woke, she wrote, “If he won’t have sex, Sam at least needs a friend for human contact.”

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Every morning I wake up thinking that I want to be simple, good, normal. For those first few moments of emerging from sleep I think that if I could only tell people the truth about my past, about my parents and Julie, it would set me, as the saying goes, free. But I can never shake the feeling that the truth will make people stop talking to me, because the truth is that after so much tragedy, I feel untouchable.

The morning after that dream was no different. I woke late, excited about Flipper and feeling like I had made good progress by telling him about Julie and Bradley and everything else. I considered telling him about the dreams that day, but decided that if I did, I would leave out the fact that I woke up with an erection. Of course part of me wanted to have sex, not being used to going without it for so long. My unconscious was questioning whether or not I had made the right decision by blowing off Tracy, which is why the woman in the dream who resembled Julie would be wearing clothing identical to Tracy’s. And my brain had apparently decided that the coincidence of Flipper’s return would be a good enough substitute for sex, though I wasn’t convinced that was exactly right.

In any case, it was nice to have another person around again, and I felt better than I had since talking with Bradley. The sun was already up and the icicles on the gutter were marking an irregular beat outside my window. The absence of birds, while not unusual for the beginning of winter, made me feel uneasy, like watching behind-the-scenes footage of a movie shot in front of a green screen, the illusion stripped away to show the utter absurdity of human behavior without context.
As I got out of bed I heard something hiss and boil over on the stove followed by Flip yelling, “Sam! Food! Now!”

I slogged into the kitchen, prepared for a horrendous mess or, at the least, a small grease fire, but was happy to see two bowls of small brown grains.

“What is this? I hope this doesn’t put you off your breakfast, but they look like thousands and thousands of tiny condoms.”

“First, you’re welcome for buying groceries. Second, it’s quinoa, and it will keep you as regular as Big Ben. But wait, there’s more,” he said, mimicking an infomercial. He spooned a heap of softened apples from a pot of water and directly into my bowl, then put another spoonful in his. The steam from the apples veiled the kitchen in the warm smell of apple pie or at least an apple pie-scented candle.

“Now some raisins, brown sugar and a happy splash of vanilla almond milk. CoCo Wheats has nothing on this.”

As was my custom with Flip, I wasn’t convinced by his enthusiasm nor by the fact that it still looked like a cereal bowl full of prophylactics, but it was nice to have someone around to cook for me, so I took my bowl, cleared the stray pieces of junk mail and bags of stale bread heels from the table and sat down.

“So what’s this news you have?” I asked, taking a small bite of the food. The quinoa was soft and nearly flavorless, but was sweetened enough by the other ingredients to make it reasonably tasty. “Wait, let me guess. Someone’s pregnant and you’re going to have to lay low here for 18 years, give or take a trimester.”

“I wish,” he said, “The world needs a little more of me. But no, if you’re done being you, I’ll tell you.” He sat down on the floor near my feet, hunched over the bowl in his lap, and inhaled deeply through his nose. “Man, I make a crazy good breakfast.”

Mouth full, I nodded.

“Don’t doubt me, Mastin. Don’t ever doubt me. When will you learn?” He wiped his nose on the cuff of his flannel. “So it turns out I’m kind of rich.”

I laughed, not following. He stared at me, waiting for any sign of comprehension on my part.

“I mean, that’s the news. I didn’t just get back to the country yesterday. I was visiting some friends in New York City over the summer and I went to a thrift store and came across this
old vase. It looked a lot like some I had seen in museums, but I didn’t know enough about vases to be sure that I had anything. Plus, you don’t really expect to find anything more expensive than a Banana Republic shirt at a thrift store. It was only four bucks, so I bought it because it was nice enough to put flowers in, a souvenir of my visit if nothing else.

“So I called up a friend of a friend who works at Sotheby’s,”—he didn’t notice, but I laughed here because Flip always had a friend or a friend of a friend wherever he needed—“and described the thing to him. As a favor to our mutual friend he would waive protocol and meet me without making me fill out the estimate form since I wasn’t planning on sticking around the city for much longer. So I carried the vase in the same plastic bag they gave me at the thrift store, those ones that have THANK YOU written in red, through the streets of New York City. When I got to the guy’s office and pulled it out, he looked like he wanted to punch me. He told me it was ‘a superb example of famille rose ceramics’ some really rare kind of vase from the Qing Dynasty.”

“He agreed to keep the vase there, but made me fill out some form saying I was responsible if it got damaged and then the next day we did the whole thing with the reserve price and all that. They put it up for a week with all kinds of other really great stuff so people could check it out. They told me that if the vase sold I could expect to get something like five million dollars, which was nuts to me, but come the day of the auction some big time art collector came and bought the thing for a disgusting amount of money that I don’t want to think about. And I ended up getting sixteen million of that disgusting amount after commission. So, like I said, I’m kind of rich. The money comes through today.”

My food was completely cold and my stomach was turning over. He cocked his head at me because I was staring and I laughed then because whether or not the story was true, I felt like laughing was the only appropriate response.

“I’m not kidding. I know it sounds nuts, but,” he shrugged, “so does everything.” He had a point. If I was asked to name one person I knew who would be likely to stumble his way into a vase worth millions of dollars, it would be Flipper.

“You’re not kidding? Really not kidding? Because if you are—”

“I’m not. Here.” He pulled a seller’s contract out of his back pocket and handed it to me. “We can look online, if you want. I’m sure there’s something on the website.”
“No, I believe you. Jesus. Maybe we could trade luck for a while, Flip. I mean, just until I make my first million.”

“Sam, that’s just it. This isn’t just my lucky break, it’s yours too. We can do something together. Anything. Well, not anything, but a lot more than we could do before. I want you to be my partner in excess, that’s why I came here. You and Jules, I mean, I know you’re not much older than me, but you guys were sort of like my parents when I was here. Or like the parents I wanted—secure and full of problems and imperfect and in love. And you cared about me. Let’s call this compensation for the sanity you gave me.”

“So you’ve been sitting on this thing for months? Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Or at least come visit?”

“I wanted to make sure the thing went through first, figured it would be a nice surprise.”

He bit his bottom lip several times like he was trying to eat it, his large teeth raking the skin.

“I’m just sorry Julie isn’t around too.”

“I think I need to be alone. Go on a walk or something. Just to think.”

“Sam, all you do is think. It’s below freezing out, so sit your ass down next to me,” the linoleum squeaked as he patted a place to his left, “and let’s make some lists.”

“Lists? Oh, if you say ‘bucket list’ I’m going to kill you and take the money myself.”

“What the shit is a bucket list?”

“Nevermind, be glad you don’t know.”

“My idea is that we come up with some nonsense. And none of this travel to Europe crap or whatever it is people in montages do when they go on a spending spree. Some good stuff. Real stuff. Us stuff that no one else would think of because there’s got to be a reason this happened to us and not them.” He scrunches his face to indicate his distaste for this unnamed “them,” the group that would squander the money on sports cars and jade bathtubs.

While I sat on the floor, Flipper went into the living room, dug around in his satchel, and came back with a battered red notebook and two chewed-on pencils, their pink erasers still unused. He tore two pages out of the notebook, one for each of us, handed me a pencil and said, “Go,” then started writing.

Under pressure I had a hard time thinking about what he referred to as “us stuff.” I was distracted by the usual middle-class things: pay off the bills, quit my job, buy a nice house, find
an assistant to help me avoid interacting with people. In the meantime, Flipper was writing nonstop, filling the front and back of his page in a matter of ten minutes.

He spiked his pencil onto the kitchen floor. “What have you got?” he asked, smiling at me with his tongue between his teeth.

In that time all I had managed to get down on the page was *Buy a lesser Picasso with solid provenance*. And I don’t even like Picasso that much.

“You first. This is your thing.”

“Our thing, Sam. But okay. I’ve had some time to think about this, so maybe I have an unfair advantage. Here goes.” He then launched into a machine gun performance of the list which included entries like *Try to breed really tiny giraffes; Buy two hot air balloons, get lessons on how to fly them, then try to shoot each other’s balloon down while wearing parachutes* (noting that he would “have to look into the likelihood of the parachute opening in time to save us”); *Scam our way into being guests on Oprah* (“for the cultural icon thing, not because I watch her…”); and *Study codebreaking and figure out the Zodiac killer’s unsolved cryptograms*. Finally, as a toss-off, he said, “Or it might be cool to start a cult.”

“Wait. Yes. That’s it.”

“I really hope you mean the tiny giraffes,” he said, “because I can’t get them out of my mind. Imagine them wrapping their little necks around your fingers so they can give you tiny hugs.”

“Stop. No.” I wrinkled my forehead at him. “Sixteen million dollars probably won’t cover that kind of research. I mean the cult.”

“I wasn’t exactly serious about that. You can’t just sit down and decide over breakfast and,” he grabbed my mug and sniffed, “whiskey… that you’re going to start a cult. I’m pretty sure Jonestown was a long, crazy time coming. I don’t have that kind of passion and I don’t much care for powdered drink mixes.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Not a religious cult. Not even a cult, really. More like a community. A place for artists to go and be… artistic?”

Flipper nodded. “I remember. Back when I still lived here, Julie used to talk about how sometimes, even though she loved her job, she wished she could quit and start a place like that. A real sort of community in Milwaukee that would house everyone and let them just sort of exist outside of the academy or any kind of patronage or support from the government. I haven’t
thought about that in a long time, but it’s not a bad idea. I liked it even then, but now I think it’s what the city needs. I mean, people in this area? They’d dig it. We’ll get the UWM kids, the MIAD art hipsters and maybe even some of the Studio Art minors at Marquette.”

I was glad he remembered and knew where the inspiration came from. Even after he moved away, Julie would sometimes bring the idea up as a fantasy, the same way some people like to dream about retiring in the South of France or living in a cabin in the woods. We used to go to the art museum on Wednesdays when it was free, so I knew a bit about art. Plus, I always got along with the creative crowd in school and was drawn to the idea of being around people who had passion for what they were doing. “I think it’s a good compromise. It’s something Julie would have wanted and, in its own way, the result of combining an entry from each of our lists.”

“An urban artists’colony.” He shrugged. “Sure. And we can keep a tiny area for, you know,” he mimed petting a small animal in his hand, then bent down as if to nuzzle it, “just in case.”

I picked up my mug of whiskey, but set it down without taking a drink. “So we’re in agreement?”

“Yeah. Let’s go for it,” he said. “And I guess if we get desperate, there’s always the Kool-Aid.” He smiled and bit his bottom lip in mock seriousness.

“I still don’t get it though. Why me? I mean, isn’t there something else you’d rather do? You’re interested in everything.”

“Exactly, so I would have no idea how to pick something worthwhile. Money like this makes people do ugly things and it’s not like I earned it, so I don’t really care what happens to it. If I had to come up with something by myself I’d probably just blow it all trying to commission someone to build a house out of jelly beans. I’m done traveling for a while and it would be nice to have a real goal, something to work toward every day. And I really think it could be a good thing for the city. We can show people stuff is still being created here, that we’re not just another casualty of the Rust Belt.”

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First thing the next morning I called my boss’s cell phone, which she had given me “in case I needed anything after Julie’s death” and told her I was quitting. She asked me to reconsider and hinted that I may still be in shock and might want to take some time to think through the consequences of my actions. I apologized for putting her in a hard place (even
though everyone knew our department was overstaffed) and told her that I was quite sure of my decision and would be willing to go through the standard protocol of an exit interview and sign whatever forms were necessary to make my decision official.

With that out of the way, Flipper and I spent the next few days coming up with a plan, somewhat vague because we often gave up after a half dozen beers each, but solid enough to start enacting some of the early steps by the following weekend. He came up with a list of contacts in the art world as well as construction, city planning, and business that he began contacting.

Feeling like I wasn’t doing enough, I suggested getting some film equipment and recording the whole thing, volunteering to do some of the filming myself.

“You’re part of the project, Sam. You can’t be stuck behind the camera the whole time. But maybe it could work if we could find the right people to film. We can use it for posterity and as an example for other places that might want to try the same thing. Learn from our mistakes and such. Maybe in a few months.”

“Sure,” I said. “I was sort of thinking it could be the first project. An ongoing thing that we could screen before gallery nights. A sort of recording of the artistic process that led to the artwork the people came to see. Or we could sell them too, if people were interested.”

“We’ll talk about it,” was his only response, so I dropped it, a little annoyed that he was blowing me off but in no mood to fight.

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Flip went out of town for the holidays and I decided not to see anyone, so I sat in my house watching movies and drinking until he came back at the beginning of January.

Before the plan really got under way, Flipper wanted to do something frivolous with some of the money and asked me what I thought. After some consideration, I suggested we fly down to Chicago so I could buy a proper suit and say a proper goodbye to Julie.

Flip asked why not New York or Italy or somewhere more exotic. I told him that I didn’t have a passport, so going out of the country wasn’t an option. As for New York, I hated the crowds in Chicago enough and had no desire to see how New York City’s compared. In less than an hour Flip had booked us two seats on a flight to Chicago for the next morning. All return flights to Milwaukee were booked for the day and because I preferred to sleep in my own bed
and get out of Chicago as soon as possible, he got us two tickets on the Amtrak to return the same evening.

The following morning we woke up, showered and dressed. We agreed to wear shabby clothing that we could change out of and throw away, thinking it would be easier to wear the suits back than to bring luggage. I put on one of my old t-shirts, crusted and yellow beneath the arms and full of holes, and gave Flip a similar one which hung pathetically off his bony shoulders. We each put on our worst pair of jeans and shoes (Flipper had a pair of Chuck Taylors that he had worn all around China, I put on some worn brown dress shoes). Since we didn’t plan on being outside long enough to warrant jackets and neither of us had any in particularly bad condition, we opted to wear some sweatshirts I found from when the Packers were in the 1996 Super Bowl.

I drove us to the airport without incident, but once inside we were both “randomly” selected for a search, triggered by our one-way tickets, lack of luggage and shabby clothing. We still made it onto our flight in time and arrived at O’Hare before noon.

Once on the ground, we got a cab waiting at the airport and instructed him to drive to Michigan Avenue. The driver took one brief look at our clothing, made a face indicating his disapproval, then pulled into traffic and headed for downtown Chicago.

When we got to Michigan we had him make three trips up and down the street while we scoped out the various stores and decided which would be likely to have a suit expensive enough to make our ridiculous trip worthwhile. The cabbie managed to hit nearly every red light, and by the second pass he was clearly sick of us and began asking, “Here? Here is nice,” approximately every two blocks, despite not knowing the purpose of our trip.

We finally settled on Neiman Marcus, knowing only that it had a reputation of being expensive and figuring we could go across the street to Saks if we didn’t find anything we liked. After paying the fare with his credit card, Flip reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a single hundred dollar bill, handed it to the driver and said, “Thanks.” The man took the money, raised one unimpressed eyebrow at it, folded it in half and tucked it into the breastpocket of his shirt without comment. His faux indifference and unwillingness to be impressed or surprised by our unexpected wealth made me like him.

We made our way through the heavy crowd of post-holiday shoppers on the sidewalk, hoards of people wearing more or less identical styles of long, expensive wool coats and
fashionable patterned scarves who looked determined to spend in one shopping trip what some people consider a year’s salary. As we cut through a group of women in their mid-forties, each one gave us a quick once-over like the cab driver had, appraising our outfits with no attempt at hiding their opinion that we were likely escapees from a psych ward.

It wasn’t snowing, but the air was sharp and cold enough to make our breath visible, little clouds that floated from our mouths and nostrils, up in front of our eyes, reminding us that we were alive and so was everyone else, all of us puffing on the invisible joint of existence. In the short walk from the curb in front of the building where we got out of the cab and the large glass archway entrance of the store, my exposed hands and face had already begun to tingle with numbness.

Once inside, thick, warm air shot out through ceiling vents, exacerbating, then quickly removing the sting of cold from my body.

The people inside the store were like the ones outside, only they had their long coats and scarves unbuttoned or draped over their arms. They would stop unexpectedly at random items of clothing to pull at the sleeve or leg or waist of the garment. Then they frowned and briefly inspected the material, quality of stitching, and the price tag before moving on.

The men’s section was not as busy as the other departments we passed through, but we were still ignored by the spiky-haired blonde employee, a man in his late forties. I preferred this arrangement, but Flipper walked right up to the man, shook his hand and said, in a poor imitation of a British accent, “Hello, my good man. I would like to spend an exorbitant amount of money on a suit for myself and one for my friend over there. We don’t have much time, so it will have to be off the rack. I do hope you can accommodate us so we don’t have to take our staggering riches elsewhere.”

I was embarrassed and the worker was clearly annoyed, but also didn’t want to risk losing his job or our business, so he asked for our measurements and helped us find suits.

After trying on a few different styles, we settled on two Brioni pinstripe suits, mine in black and Flip’s in navy, along with striped shirts and skinny, patterned ties that the man assured us went “quite nicely” and would put us “at the height of fashion.”

He directed us to the shoe department where we found John Lobb lace-up dress shoes and matching socks which Flip bought without hesitation. All told we spent somewhere in the
neighborhood of fifteen thousand dollars on the two outfits, though we both opted not to replace our underwear.

When our outfits were complete we went into separate fitting rooms, removed all tags and packaging and put on our new clothes. We both looked good, convincingly like the businessmen we had seen walking outside, though perhaps a bit more awkward. We gathered up the clothes we wore from Milwaukee and stuffed them in the circular trash can on our way out, pushing them down like so much unwanted shame.

We walked out of the story empty-handed, just like we had entered, but we were now part of the shopping mass, no longer remarkable in the swarm of people. Flip spotted our cab driver still waiting in the spot where we got out and he was looking at the storefront waiting for us to come out, so he was apparently more impressed with his tip than he let on.

“Let’s get in and see if he recognizes us,” I suggested. Flip agreed and approached the vehicle, but when he opened the door the driver only twitched his head in our direction to say, “No. Waiting for someone,” and pointed to the roof to indicate that his light was not turned on. Flip closed the door without pointing out that we were the ones he was waiting for. Maybe he sat there for the rest of the day watching for two underdressed crazy men, curious to see how consistently crazy our tipping practices were, but it was likely he gave up shortly after, settling for a regular fare who gave him a regular tip after making a regular request for a specific destination.

We hailed another cab and asked him to take us to the Amtrak station which we arrived at by 3:00, with fifteen minutes to spare before our train left. The driver was a kind, talkative man who looked to be in his early thirties and he smiled and told us about the neighborhoods we drove through. At the end of our trip Flipper pulled out a twenty and handed it to the man who thanked him twice and waved at us after we closed the door.

As we boarded the train and took our seats Flip asked, “Are you satisfied?” which seemed to me like a loaded question, but I nodded because I assumed he meant about the suit.

“Sorry it wasn’t a hot air balloon gunfight,” I said. “I have to say though, it sort of felt like you were playing games with people’s lives.” He turned his head to me and tipped it a little to the left in confusion. “I mean, why tip the first driver a hundred dollars for being silent and judging us and then only giving the second one a twenty after he made conversation and seemed genuinely nice?”
He let out a short gasp of a laugh. “I didn’t mean to play games. I just grabbed the first bill I felt in my pocket and gave it to them. Life is random, dude, that’s all I know and that seemed like as good a system as any. Seems like today is all about embracing randomness and whims.”

All I could think was, Of course you would do something like this, not considering what people deserve, but I didn’t want to get into a big thing about it, so all I said was, “That second guy, he was really trying. Not only was he outgoing, he wasn’t driving like he wanted the whole carload of us dead. That should be worth something.”

“It’s worth plenty, but you’ve got to stop thinking like that. Seems to me you would have figured out by now that things just happen, whether or not we deserve them. To poorly summarize Nietzsche, we’re just clever animals who invented knowledge and we’re living, for nothing more than a minute in the grand stretch of time, on a little star destined to grow cold and die. I’m not sure we deserve that, but I’m also not sure we don’t.”

I shook my head because I didn’t want to get into an intellectual debate with him when all I was talking about was a living wage. And I knew the twenty dollar tip was perfectly fine, a great tip, really. Suddenly I felt the train lurch forward, slowly at first, then picking up speed accompanied by the metallic clatter of its movement.

“You don’t have to like it. Most people don’t, that’s why they’re unhappy. I’ve learned to get over it.”

I couldn’t hold my tongue any longer. “Sixteen million dollars can’t hurt.” He said nothing then and nothing for the next hour of the trip. We both knew he probably would have the same disposition even if he was sixteen million in the hole, but we also both knew I wasn’t going to apologize and I wasn’t going to change.

What he was thinking about during the silence I can’t say, but all I could think about was going to see Julie. The original plan was for us to buy her a bunch of flowers the next day, maybe clean out an entire florist or two, then go to the cemetery and talk like she could hear us, but I made up my mind to do it that night and get it done with.

When we got off at the airport exit I ran the idea past Flip and he agreed, a sign that what I had said back in Chicago was as good as forgotten, though of course intentional forgetting is never a complete process. We bought three dozen roses from an airport vending machine, the
only healthy looking bouquets, found my car in the parking structure and headed straight there, shivering until the car warmed up and the heat kicked in.

I drove through the cemetery gates and up the narrow, winding path. It was icy and I had to drive faster than I wanted in order to get enough traction to make it up the steep hills, picturing my car sliding off the road and into a nearby headstone.

We made it to her gravesite without incident. The grass everywhere was covered in an untouched inch of packed snow, glistening like cubic zirconia in the light coming from the streetlamps. I brushed the snow from her granite headstone, clearing its smooth, arched top and running my pinky finger in each letter of her name to make it visible again.

After removing as much snow as I could, I set down two bouquets of flowers, Flip set down the other one and ran the back of his hand under his nose a few times.

“Julie,” he said. “Hey, it’s me. I just wanted to come and let you know.” He stopped for a long time, maybe a minute. “What’s that joke you used to tell? ‘What did Buddha say to the hot dog vendor? Make me one with everything.’” He laughed, but not at the joke. “Something like that. Yeah. It feels like you’re one with everything now, like maybe I’m breathing you in. Or maybe you’re just gone. I don’t know how it works.” He stopped again, looked away from the headstone and from me, then turned back and shrugged at me. He looked down again. “Here’s Sam. I guess he’s got some private things to say to you. I’m going to take a walk now and look for funny names.”

I watched him walk away, taking small, cautious steps up the icy path, somehow managing not to slip despite his new dress shoes. When he was gone I crouched down on the snow that was on top of the grass and the dirt that was on top of the casket that contained her body. I leaned in close to her etched name.

“You’re so far away,” I whispered. “I bought this suit to show you I can do things right still. It just takes me longer than most.” I wiped some now from the tips of my shoes and wiggled my toes around to ward off numbness.

“I talked to Bradley Parker. What I mean is, I sort of watched him for awhile and then I talked to him. And punched him. It felt good even though I knew it would have upset you. It felt good because after I did it, I didn’t feel so distant anymore. I don’t know if you were cheating on me or not, but he says you weren’t and I’d like to believe him.” I covered my face with both hands, bright red from the bitter air.
“It should have been me, not him. I should have been the one you came to for help. But I know I couldn’t be, so it’s okay. I forgive you if that’s even called for. Even if you had sex with him. But I hope you didn’t. I don’t think you did. Did you?” I heard police sirens somewhere nearby and lost my train of thought.

“This is absurd. I’m talking to myself like in the movies. I never thought I’d be the kind of person who did this. Julie, you can’t hear me, but try. I do love you.” I touched the headstone, traced the J in her name with my finger again, rearranged the flowers so they would look purposefully placed, then headed back to the car. I sat in the driver’s seat with the heat on until Flip came back a few minutes later. He looked at me, uncertain what to say for once.

“Any luck with funny names?” I asked finally.

“The only decent one I found was Anthony Butz. Not even Harry.” He shook his head solemnly. “Some people’s parents.”

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The next day I felt better, lighter, like I had actually done something healthy, if not a little cliché. After breakfast we got back to work on the colony, wearing our regular clothes and not mentioning the previous day’s events.

While Flipper handled the business side of things, contacting various people who knew more than either of us about the financial and legal aspects, I launched into the marketing. I had no real idea what I was doing, but wrote up an ad for craigslist and sent a brief write-up of the project to a handful of local websites with creative slants that I thought might be interested in our idea.

Next, I made some fliers with little tabs at the bottom with basic contact information like the kind hanging on the walls of coffeeshops and college bulletin boards advertising an available shithole for rent, some sketchy employment opportunity, or seeking help in locating a missing dog, cat, or fixed gear bike.

After several wordy attempts outlining what our vision was, I decided to go the minimalist route, assuming that most people were like me and the more information a flier gave, the less chance they would actually read it. I finally settled on:

Have Colony, Need Artists
Visual, Verbal, Performance and More Are Welcome
I hoped that my understated, mysterious note—the homemade flier version of the handsomely simple guy at the end of the dark, swanky bar who catches the eye of the typically pretty female—would attract the right crowd.

The real key was to hang the fliers in places that favored a clientele who likely didn’t have much money to spend. I hit several coffeeshops: the Alterra on Prospect and the one on Humboldt, but not the one on the lake (due to its proximity to downtown); Rochambo (but only upstairs where all the trendy smoker kids hung out even though the smoking ban had been in effect for several months); and even Brewing Grounds For Change, the volunteer-run fair trade den of eccentrics that hosted a biweekly “writing group” called All Write Now.

The more I took in of the places and people I was seeing while distributing the fliers, the more I started to regret suggesting the idea in the first place and letting it get this far. Maybe there was a reason Milwaukee didn’t have a really popular art scene. Milwaukee certainly didn’t have the population of New York City, San Francisco or Philadelphia, and I was starting to suspect its residents didn’t have the right kind of culture-conscious interests needed to sustain this project.

Every time the city tried to add new public art there was an outcry of ignorance, the subtext of which was always, “If I must see art, I would prefer it to be a nice Thomas Kinkade.” There was *The Calling*, a large orange steel sculpture downtown, which, despite artist Mark di Suvero’s reasonable success throughout the United States and a handful of other countries, is still only known as “the Sunburst” three decades after its installation.

More recently, there was the *Blue Shirt* sculpture, a two-story piece intended for a parking structure at the airport, but which was never installed because residents and certain key politicians were offended by the perceived implication that Milwaukee is a blue-collar city.

The only piece of public art to receive much positive attention in the last fifty years was in 2008 when a tourism group commissioned the *Bronze Fonz*, a life-sized sculpture of Henry Winkler’s character from *Happy Days*, which was set in Milwaukee.

Given this history, I wasn’t sure the city would embrace a colony of creative types who would likely come up with much edgier art than an oversized piece of business clothing. Then again, I didn’t know if the creative types would go for a millionaire-backed center for art or if I really wanted them to. Still, trudged through the snowy streets of Milwaukee and hung every last flier.
Before coming home, I drove to Best Buy and bought a light, high-quality video camera so I could start taking early footage for the film. I figured once I showed up with the camera, Flipper would have no choice but to go along with the idea. It would be a shame to miss the early stages just because we hadn’t yet found people to film for us.

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When I got back I found Flipper smoking a bowl and smiling, his yellowed teeth showing.

“I think I found our location. You know that empty lot on Oakland and North where Pizza Man was before it burned down?”

I nodded.

“Sort of perfect, right? It’s near UWM and close enough to the other schools, plus North has enough foot traffic that the place will practically advertise itself once we get it going.”

“How long is that going to be?”

“I’ve got some people in real estate development and they’re going to help us get all the paperwork through quickly. Might take a little while and construction will be another few months—”

I cut in to tell him that “a few months” sounded like a bit of an underestimate, but he just shrugged it off and said, “Not the point. That will just give us time to find the right people so we can hit the ground running. I’m picturing a three-story building. The main floor will have a huge kitchen and an open workspace that can double as a gallery. Upstairs will be living quarters that will also function as individual studios that we can rent out to the artists for cheap. We’ll save space by only having common bathrooms on the main level with showers and everything that the public can use during exhibitions. Everything will be nice and communal, you know? I mean, there will be locks on the living spaces, but we’ll all cook together and be responsible for cleaning and making sure everyone’s producing new work. We can charge decent rent and we’ll also make money off of shows and sold artwork.”

He stopped, noticing my skeptical expression, then added, “The artists will get a cut, of course. And not too much rent, just enough to keep it going. Trust me, this is going to be big. Big big. Take a hit and celebrate with me.”

I waved off the piece. His excitement was clear and I wished I felt like celebrating too, but after spending the entire day getting a feel for what I figured our top prospects would be, I...
was physically and mentally worn out. The giddiness I had felt when I first suggested the idea had waned into punchiness over the last couple days of work and I was now running on fumes which were letting off the odor of minor annoyance.

There were papers strewn all across my living room floor with names, phone numbers and rudimentary sketches, the result of Flipper’s day of “pulling strings and making things happen.” I could barely remember why this had seemed like a good idea other than I thought it was something Julie might like. But hearing Flip talk and looking around the room it seemed far more like a money-making scheme than an investment in the city’s culture.

“By the way, I went out and bought a camera today.” He looked confused, so I added, “To start filming.”

He straightened his back, giving himself another four inches. “Why? I don’t think that’s what we need. I don’t want to pollute the atmosphere or make people feel like they’re performing or always being watched. Seems like it might put them on edge.” I had never heard him take such a combative tone before and was caught off guard by how tense he seemed.

“They’re not going to perform and it won’t be invasive. I was just thinking we could do a couple interviews with people from time to time, only if they wanted to, and take some general shots of the work spaces.”

“What do you know about making a movie anyhow?”

He had a point, but I wasn’t willing to concede. “Doesn’t matter, I can learn. We’ve got plenty of time and you’re doing most of the work. I just thought I could make myself useful.”

“Maybe if you were a little less antisocial you could help with this stuff.” He caught himself. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that. I’m just tired, you know?”

“Me too. Let’s talk more tomorrow when we’re both rested. Pretty sure I lost five pounds walking around today.”

“Night, dude. Tomorrow is another day and we,” he shook his mason jar of pot and relaxed, “will still be here.”

The voices of pedestrians seeking out parties and bars echoed in the streets as always, but that night it was a familiar comfort that eased me into the more familiar comfort of sleep.

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Again there was the woman, Catherine, still writing in that small closet space beneath a stairwell, but looking more relaxed than she had previously. She seemed more complete
somehow, more in focus. She sat in a floral chair with a 1960’s color scheme of mustard yellow, pine green and sky blue, and her black pen was moving so rapidly across the legal pad in her lap that she could have been simply mimicking the act of writing, merely drawing a series of scribbles and curlicues, a child’s idea of writing in cursive.

But when the pages became legible, there was my life again:

Sam’s day was, whether or not he realized or was willing to admit to himself, an exercise in futility. After a false sense of closure regarding his wife he imagined he was capable of anything, like a child who thinks he can fly if he ties a bedsheets around his neck like a Superman cape. Sure, Sam’s simple fliers might get some phone calls from desperate people looking for a small adventure that wouldn’t disrupt their daily lives, and maybe a few who would drop everything for this half-formed vision, but all it would be for anyone was a minor distraction. In particular, it would serve to distract Sam. He had only just begun to appreciate the circumstances of his life prior to Julie’s death, and this progress wasn’t likely to continue now that his friend Flipper, a man with enough presence for three people, had returned. With few exceptions, Sam’s motto in life seemed to be “Why confront a problem when you can just bury yourself with a new one?”

Worse still was his refusal to seek any kind of real help, a clear indication that he was afraid of the truth. In much the same way that he eschewed the police and all things reasonable when throwing himself into his one-man investigation of Julie’s murder, he scorned any form of professional mental health. This was due in part to a cousin of his who had nearly earned an MS in UW-Milwaukee’s Psychology program, working part time in her professor’s depression lab coding one-on-one therapy sessions. The result of her two years in the lab was that she became even more keenly aware of her own lifelong depression and the fact that she would never be able to study or research her way out of it through her work.

Sam and Jackie used to see each other at least once a week for dinner or drinks during his junior year of undergrad, but the deeper Jackie got into her work, the less she was available. At first it seemed normal, a graduate student dedicating herself to her work, but eventually Sam realized something was wrong. Whenever he tried to bring it up or ask how she was doing, she would blow him off.

The last time they saw each other, a month before they both were supposed to graduate, she said to him, “I don’t know what it’s all for. These people come back week after week and I
spend hours making transcripts of their sessions, typing out these conversations about how some
guy’s wife caught him literally balls deep in her pantyhose or how some college kid told his
mom he wanted to kill himself and she said, ‘I never wanted a son, anyway,’ then went into a
heroin nod. And I think about how I have to look at each turn in this conversation and determine
if the therapist’s response is either—oh, fuck, you don’t care.”

And when Sam had assured her that he did care, that he was interested, Jackie had said,
“I’m self-involved and letting all this out and you’re not my doctor, so I’m done. But God, this is
what’s wrong with this whole field. It’s pseudo-science and there are only two kinds of people
studying it: detached academics with a Jesus complex who assume they have everything figured
out and overly-introspective martyrs who want to figure themselves out. I guess we know where
I fall. And no one is ever cured.”

After that conversation, she stopped calling or responding to Sam’s efforts to contact her.
At his wedding a few weeks later, Jackie’s mother apologized for her daughter’s absence and
explained that she was “just a little down lately,” but sent her love and a gift card for Target.

Sam, ever the pessimist, decided that if more than a century’s worth of studying and
refining the way doctors and patients interacted had resulted in a zero percent success rate, he
would pass on that kind of help. And when the alcohol escalated from “just hanging out” to a
real problem, he didn’t even consider AA given that as far as he could tell it was just psychology
watered down with religion.

And so he spent his life sitting in one position, pulling up bootstraps without realizing he
was barefoot, unable to find the strength to raise even the figurative footwear off the ground,
empty as it was, hoping someone else would come by, put his feet in the boots, lift him up under
his arms and get him walking. He let Julie be that person because it seemed like she wanted to be
and because he needed her to be. And now Flipper had come back just in time to pick up more or
less where she left off.

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I woke, sitting up, my fingernails digging half-moon craters into my palms. Even though
she wasn’t real, all I could think was, “Fuck you for judging me.” With guilt, I remembered that I
thought she had resembled Julie. But Julie was nothing like this woman. Sure, she used to tell me
I needed to get out of the house for my health, but she would never place judgment on me like

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this. Of course that may have been in part because Julie actually existed and wasn’t just a person in my head.

Catherine had some of Julie’s physical characteristics and she naturally knew everything that had happened to me because she was nothing more than a freak product of my imagination.

I didn’t need a doctor to sort this one out for me. The physical resemblance had nothing to do with sex like I previously thought. Catherine Averill was the embodiment of my guilt at not trying hard enough, not really ever being there for Julie, particularly near the end. These dreams were simply my conscience expressing its guilt at not being a better person, which wasn’t strictly limited to my role as a husband.

I had let Julie down the day she died, many days before, and every day since. What I wanted was to get her justice or, more accurately, legal revenge so I could feel I had helped someone, even if it couldn’t bring her back. My guilt took the form of a woman not because it was meant to represent Julie, but to mask the truth that I was just judging myself. I guess it’s like how you never see yourself die in your own dreams—you never explicitly judge yourself, you just have other people do it for you.

Even after talking myself through it, I was still agitated by the dream and frustrated that despite all the work I had done the day before, perhaps even because of it, I couldn’t get a proper night of rest.

The dreams had loosened something in me, though. There was a little nagging part of me that always knew I was dead weight keeping Julie back and, worse, that she knew it too. If I hadn’t gotten her pregnant, if I hadn’t married her, if I hadn’t been all but devoid of any semblance of a work ethic, she would have been great.

She always wanted to be a writer and she still entertained the idea of going for a creative writing MFA somewhere, or at least taking a couple graduate night classes at UWM, even though our life here was set and settled. She read voraciously and walked around with a pen and miniature moleskine in case a good line or story idea came to her.

I don’t flatter myself to think that she would have written much about me, certainly not a novel like the woman in the dreams, but maybe I would have appeared in a short story as some oblivious, worthless husband who was too out of touch to realize his wife was having an affair. Or maybe I would just be some minor character in an office scene sitting at his too-tall metal
desk, swiveling round and round to pass the time while the other employees watched out of the corners of their eyes and hid their laughter when he spun back around to face them.

So maybe I really was the guy trying to pull himself up by worthless bootstraps. No use in getting mad at someone I made up in my dreams, better to explicitly beat myself up about it like a normal person.

In the early morning darkness I waited for the dream to fade, surprised it had even lasted that long. My dreams, like most other people’s, are usually difficult to remember upon waking and most often break apart immediately, though occasionally some object or event later in the day will bring back a notion of the previous night’s dreams, at least briefly.

When I heard Flip moving around in the living room a bit after sunrise, I convinced myself to tell him about the dream, not only because it was starting to worry me, but because I wanted to say to him, to hear myself say to him, “I don’t need you to pull me up.”

“Flip,” I called from my bedroom. “I’m going to put some pants on and then I have to talk to you about something.”

Only, when I got to the living room, I changed my mind because of a coincidence that was so ridiculous I couldn’t have dreamt it up.

Flip was at my computer typing on a spreadsheet and listening to music. The song that was playing was by Built to Spill and I talk-sang the words quietly along with the music before he realized I was in the room. No one cares what you dreamt about unless you dreamt about them.

Flipper turned around to face me. “So are you going to tell me or are you going to stand there holding up that doorframe?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I lost it. Some dream I had, but it’s gone now. I think it was something about you, um, swimming in a cave.” I blurted out the most obvious Freudian symbol I could manage, certain he would understand it and appreciate my subconscious’s belief in his vitality.

“Right on.”

The song distracted me because of something I hadn’t thought about since it happened. Julie and I had gone to see them in 2007 when they came to Summerfest. She was talking about it all week because they were one of her favorite bands and she made me promise we would
show up early to get a spot on the bleachers near the front of the stage, certain the show would be packed.

But when we got there, only the first twenty or so bleachers had any reasonable number of people on them, but even these weren’t filled to capacity. Nearly everyone in the audience, not just the stragglers in the back, was sitting for the opening band. Julie was visibly disappointed by the poor turnout, like it would somehow get back to the band that she was responsible for the small crowd and they would ban her from listening to their music ever again.

“It’s early yet. I’m sure more people will be here by ten.”

She shrugged. “It’s a Sunday. I don’t know, at least we have good seats.”

Either the band agreed with me that it was worth waiting for more people to show up, or they agreed with Julie that the concert was barely worth putting on. In any case, they finally went on at 10:30, half an hour late, in front of a sparse crowd of people mainly in their twenties and thirties. They came out and played their set straight through without once acknowledging anything or anyone past the edge of the stage.

The performance reminded me of a first grade class performing a song in a pageant; they knew their lives would be easier if they simply went through the motions, but there was no way they were going to put any feeling into it, and no one could make them.

Before the last song had ended midway through the final repetition of the chorus, the drummer began breaking down his kit as if to say, “You’re lucky you got anything, don’t think you’re getting an encore out of us.”

For the duration of the hour-long walk home, Julie was quiet and unresponsive to my admittedly lame questions about which song she thought they did best or which song she wished they would have played.

Dumbly, I imagined what she would do if roles were reversed and finally said, “Come on, it’s just a stupid band full of a bunch of guys with egos too large for a side stage. No sense in letting it ruin your night.” I wasn’t used to giving pep talks and she wasn’t used to getting them. She flipped me off, then walked faster so she was ahead of me and could pretend she was alone, though she stayed close enough to me so as not to appear alone to anyone else.

I let her sulk the remaining five blocks home, the rest of the night, and the following morning while we got ready for work. At some point during the day the mood passed on its own, or maybe with the help of someone who knew how to handle these things better than me. But
after that, I never heard her listen to the band again. I was surprised she hadn’t deleted them from
my computer.

I went back to my room to get my phone, but also to get away from the song. There was
another voicemail from Emily, easily the hundredth one she had left since the funeral and the
first one that was more than just a request for me to return her call. Her voice came out clear and
determined and she said, “I finally got enough money to get my car fixed, so if you don’t call me
back I’m going to drive to Milwaukee and sit outside your house until you let me in. Enough is
enough. I’m serious.” I texted her back right away and said, “Don’t come here. Will call soon, I
promise.”

I went back into the living room and told Flipper I remembered what I wanted to say
from a few minutes ago. I figured it would be best to give a bit more consideration before telling
him about the dreams. I had already quit my job, and there was no going back if he suddenly
decided I was too mentally unstable to be his partner, so even though I wanted to tell him about
the dreams, I would have to be careful about how I approached it. He’s a pretty open-minded
guy, but I noticed him watching me at times like a mother constantly pressing the back of her
hand to her feverish child’s forehead to see if the fever is breaking or getting worse.

“I know you said it’s our money and you’ve been great about it and all, and I’m still
really excited about this colony idea,” I hoped the look on my face was convincing, because my
voice didn’t sound it at all, “but I was wondering if I could use a bit of money to help a friend
out. She was there for me when no one else was. Back in high school, after my parents died.”
The words came out of my mouth before I could really consider them.

“Sure, if you want. How much do you think you will need? Fifty grand? A hundred?” He
agreed quickly which was surprising considering that we had promised not to spend the money
extravagantly, at least not until we had a more certain grasp on the cost of the colony. But I guess
this didn’t exactly count as an extravagance.

The amounts seemed ridiculous, even though they were a small percentage of the whole.
“I guess I don’t know. I was thinking I might go visit her and see what she needed. Take a few
days off to clear my head.”

“Anything you need, just let me know. I’d help anyone who helped you, you know that.”
These moments of sincerity always reminded me why I liked Flipper so much. He could be the
guy at the party that everyone wants to know, or the friend who knows everyone, but he was also one hell of a genuine person and would give whatever he had to help anyone.

I went into my room and called Emily who picked up on the second ring.

“Finally,” she said. “You knew I wouldn’t let you get away with this forever.” Her tone softened then and she said, “How have things been? Besides the obvious.”

“You have no idea. I’ll tell you, but I was thinking about driving to Minnesota so we could actually talk and see each other. Phone calls don’t seem right and I could stand to get away from here for a little bit. Could I stay with you?”

“Of course. When are you thinking of coming?”

I laughed and said, “Tonight?”

“Perfect. I’m going to hang up so you can pack and get here. Be safe, I’ll see you soon.”

I stuffed some clothes into a small suitcase, mostly casual clothes, but also took one pair of my old work pants and a dress shirt so I could take Emily out for a nice dinner somewhere. After I finished I told Flipper I was heading to the bank and asked if ten thousand would be okay to give to Emily.

“You could give her a hundred for all I care,” he said and seemed to mean it, but I told him I wasn’t sure I could even convince her to take the ten, so I would start with that.

“No problem. I’ll just be here doing whatever it is I do.” He saluted me, then turned back to the computer.

The bank was on North Avenue, a ten minute walk from my house, and because it was nearly forty degrees, an unusually warm day for January, I decided to walk there to use up some of my nervous energy about seeing Emily. Just as the teller was finishing drawing up the cashier’s check I got a text from Flipper: “Back here. Now.” I tried calling to see what was so urgent, but he let it go to voicemail, which could have meant the house was on fire or he was distracted by a kitten video he found online.

I walked home quickly, glad that there was nothing visibly wrong, at least from the outside. When I got inside I found Flipper standing in the middle of the living room, the early afternoon sun casting him in a messianic beam of sunlight.

He held his hand up for a high five. “We got our first call.”
“That’s it? That’s why you made me rush back here? I thought something was wrong.” I stopped, knowing my lecturing would do nothing and he wouldn’t understand why I was annoyed. “I mean, that’s good, or at least a good start”

“That’s it,” he said, mocking me. “You won’t be saying ‘That’s it’ when you find out who the call was from. Does the name Mark Winters mean anything to you?”

The name was familiar but it took me a moment to place it. “You mean of ‘Trust Mark Winters and Channel 4 to get you through Milwaukee winters and more’ fame?”

“Yes, sir. Our local news anchor is apparently quite the fan of Craigslist’s Missed Connections page. Good call putting our ad in that section, by the way, even if it’s not the right category. I’ve never met anyone who looks at anything else on that site. I guess it hasn’t been flagged for removal yet because Winters saw it and showed it to one of the producers who just called to make sure it was a legitimate thing. A reporter is coming over at 7:00 tonight to do a segment on us. Better go get showered.” He pushed me towards the bathroom. “Don’t forget to wash behind your ears. And your balls. Can never be too sure these days.”

I looked at him, unable to conceal my annoyance. “You remember where I just was, right? I’m supposed to go to Minnesota.”

“You’ve managed to get by this long without seeing her and this is really important. Can’t it wait?” He saw that I was about to say something, so he switched tactics. “But I guess if this isn’t your priority anymore I can just do it all myself and you can go back to the old nine to five.”

His response was manipulative and unfair, but we both knew that Flip was the reason I was able to go to Minnesota and, more importantly, give Emily the money. “You’re right, I should be here. I’ll go to Minnesota tomorrow.”

As I was getting ready I nearly broke down, unsure of how to handle being the beneficiary of Flipper’s lifelong streak of strange luck and also exhausted by his energy. He had barely returned and had, undoubtedly, improved my daily existence, but I was already starting to get sick of him and didn’t know when he was planning on finding a place of his own, if at all. The company was nice, but I often feel overwhelmed when I spend too much time with someone, Julie and Emily being the only exceptions. But there was no way to tell Flipper about it without him taking it personally and ruining everything, so I got dressed and kept my mouth shut. After I
got back from my trip and things had settled down we could discuss him finding somewhere else to live.

I called Emily and told her that something important had come up for the evening, but I could drive there the next day. She was clearly disappointed and said it was supposed to start snowing after midnight across both of our states. That, paired with the fact that she had plans with her girlfriend Lisa the next day (which she was going to cancel for me) made her suggest it would be just as well to push the trip off for a few days. She was unemployed for the winter, so she was available most days and assured me it could be a last minute trip if necessary. So we said goodbye and left it at that.

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An unnervingly attractive redhead reporter with enough makeup to either hide a decade’s worth of wrinkles or give her a decade’s worth of credibility was at the door at 6:59 along with a cameraman. She introduced herself, unnecessarily, as Colleen Korman.

“We’re just going to ask you a few questions, get some shots of your,” she paused, searching for the right word, “work area here, and be on our way. In and out.” She scanned the room as though walking into a hoarder’s house, uncertain which portion would be least offensive to set up the shot. It was strange to see a woman whose facial gestures were so calculated and precise on television reveal everything going on in her mind when the camera wasn’t on her.

Once the shot was set up and we had rearranged some furniture and cleared places for everyone to sit, the cameraman asked if we were ready. Colleen fluffed her hair with a series of confident pats, opened her eyes wider, and smiled her famous, tersely warm smile at us for the benefit of the camera lens.

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The following evening while the snow fell, Flipper and I relived the strange interview during the 6:00 broadcast. Our faces seemed a bit washed out and bloated, but we looked respectable enough and answered the questions coherently without committing ourselves too much to any one plan, trying to make clear that we were open to just about anything.

When our segment was over we smiled at each other, a silent celebration because there was nothing much to say, and turned the television off. He went back to work while I played around with some new ideas for fliers and advertising materials. By the time I was ready for bed,
I felt pretty satisfied with myself, realizing only as I was nearly asleep that I hadn’t had a drink all day.

To my surprise, I didn’t have a dream that night or for the rest of the week. I wanted to see Emily, but the snow kept falling and she forbade me from coming to see her until the roads were better.

After the interview, Flipper and I received dozens of phone calls from people who were interested in learning more about what we were doing and kept a list of their contact information and availability. Additionally, we received a handful of calls from artists who weren’t interested in being part of the colony, but were wondering if we would send them money or commission work. We explained to these callers, a little less politely with each successive request, that patronage and commissioned work wasn’t exactly part of our plan, but they were welcome to come to the meeting to learn what was.

We amassed a list of thirty names and decided to hold our first meeting for anyone interested at my house that Sunday evening. Most of the people on the list either worked regular weekday jobs or held positions in the service industry, but were able to find someone to cover their shifts.

Based on the conversations Flip and I had had so far, we brainstormed various ways of organizing the artists, knowing that whatever we came up with would be sketchy, somewhat arbitrary and imperfect.

The broadest categories we settled on were Embodied and Disembodied Art. Embodied Art would be everything that required a performer for the art to exist, temporary art that could be repeated and interpreted indefinitely. This of course included performance artists, but also covered everything from actors, singers, musicians, dancers, contortionists, spoken word poets and street performers.

Disembodied Art would cover work that existed outside of the artist’s presence such as painting, sculpture, drawing, collage, photography, film and graffiti.

The plan was to try, as best we could, to mix these groups so they could intermingle and learn from each other, to make this a very anti-academic pursuit; we created groupings in order to dismiss them, to keep people from limiting themselves to rigidly defined “interests.” We hoped that by doing this we would cultivate collaboration and blur the lines that seemed to separate different kinds of art as well as the lines that separated art from “real life.”
After taking notes on our discussion and settling on the meeting’s agenda, I went to bed early. I was tired from trying to formalize the plan and a bit worn out by Flipper and his seemingly bottomless well of manic energy. As I sank into sleep it occurred to me that I hadn’t had a drink since the day of the interview. Not only that, we were making good progress on the project and had even settled on the name Zagora, rumored to be the name that the Polish immigrants gave the Riverwest neighborhood in the late nineteenth century. I thought I was making steady progress, adjusting to my new life, but apparently my subconscious was not as impressed.

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Again, I dreamt of Catherine Averill. This time she was in an actual room, a small office with two bookshelves full of books and more piles of books around her. Gone were the stacks of legal pads and pen, the low chair in the cramped closet. In one hand she held a digital voice recorder and in the other a mug of coffee.

She walked back and forth in the room, holding the recorder up to her mouth, pausing, putting it back down. She repeated this several times, took a long drink of coffee, put down the mug and finally switched the recorder on.

The red light flashed, indicating it was recording, and she sighed.

When she finally spoke her voice had a nasal quality, common enough in Milwaukee, but not a voice I had heard before. “This is my attempt to get out of myself and out of my writing. I have been creating the life story of a man named Sam Mastin, doing terrible things to him just to see how much he can take. It is not like playing God because I am real, but my creation is not and neither is God. The things I write into Sam’s life only happen because I want to see what he will do next. In that way, he is closer to real because I don’t always know, but I know that he will get out of it. Not forever, mind you, but he won’t die from anything I give him.”

“So I am the creator, and like anyone else, I want my creation to grow, not fail. I want him to feel real and I want him to figure out how to succeed, but he won’t.” She turned off the recorder, sighed again, set it down on the desk and took a sip of coffee. She sat for some time looking out the window.

Suddenly she grabbed the recorder, turned it on again and said, “Of course, the solution is so obvious. He cannot be himself anymore.”

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At which point I woke up to Flipper softly punching my shoulder.

As often happens when my dreams are interrupted, I felt confused and more exhausted than I had before I went to sleep. It seemed odd that this dream didn’t mention anything that had happened the last few days, especially about the interview. This woman thought she was creating my life story, but either didn’t think the interview was worth mentioning or hadn’t thought of it yet. Whatever the case was, she thought I was still being tested without having been given the requirements for passing.

“Sam, up and at ‘em. It’s the big day. A couple people already called to say they couldn’t get off work after all, but we should still have around ten people. I think I’m going to make some guacamole for the meeting, show them we know how to have a good time.”

My eyes were still filmy with sleep and it didn’t immediately occur to me that I was thinking of Catherine Averill as a real person, an entity separate from myself. “Great,” I muttered. “Listen, I really don’t think I can stay for the meeting.” The dream made me question, or perhaps more accurately brought to the surface, the chance of Zagora succeeding with any influence from me. I was going along with the plan, but hadn’t found the initiative to put in as much work as Flip.

“What do you mean you can’t stay? Something come up at work?” He laughed at his own unfunny joke.

“Seriously. I think I need to get out of here. I know it’s poor timing, but you can handle this first meeting.”

“Did you forget Chicago? You just got out of the city and you didn’t seem like you had that much fun. It’s not going to look very good if one of the founding members isn’t at the first meeting. What am I supposed to tell everybody? You thought you’d rather putz around the city see what they’re like?”

“Be vague. Tell them some important business came up. You’re a creative guy, you’ll think of something. They don’t need to know and they probably won’t really care. I’m just starting to have doubts, that’s all.” I looked up at Flip and he looked uncharacteristically serious. He chewed on his left thumbnail for a few seconds then nodded slowly, his head rocking up and down like a bird’s, like it was a motion he understood I wanted him to do without understanding why.
“Okay, it’s cool. Whatever you have to do. I’ll take notes and let you know what happens.” As an afterthought he asked, “So where are you going?”

“I think I’ll see my friend Emily in Minnesota.” The name appeared to mean nothing to him, so I said, “The one I’ve been telling you about. Who I was supposed to visit the day of the interview? I’m going to give her money?”

“Right,” he nodded, still looking clueless.

“I can’t imagine I’ll stay very long.” I hated driving and as much as I cared for Emily, I hated seeing certain people from my past. But it was important for me to prove to myself or to Catherine or to whomever that I was capable of doing something spontaneous and uncharacteristic.

I packed a duffel bag with some clothes and food for the road, and was about to call Emily to make sure I could come. First I went online to check the weather report I saw that there was a westward moving storm that would mean four to six inches of snow with ice patches likely. I took this as a sign that it would be better for me to stay and see this thing through, uncharacteristic enough that I thought it would count as “not being myself anymore” and appease my unconscious so I could sleep again.

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Five people straggled in between 1:17 and 2:04 and the rest never showed at all. Before they came I brought out the camera, but Flip said, “Absolutely not. Put it away,” then left the room so there could be no further discussion.

Of the five, three were women and two were men and all were in the service industry. One man and woman, Drew and Becca, worked together at Rochambo, both had facial piercings (he a bull ring, she a Marilyn and a fake diamond nose stud), the beginnings of half-sleeve tattoos, and both dealt with sound: he played the Theremin and created instruments out of found objects while she was classically trained in violin, viola and upright bass. They held hands and smiled in a way that was, though I don’t think they intended it to be, menacing. The other three bartended at Linneman’s and had come across the flier that I posted there for the open mic crowd. Jenna was a photographer, Brandon was a spoken word performer, and Elsie was a performance artist who had done various things from a one-woman show at a small gallery in the Third Ward to flash mobs in Grand Avenue Mall. Of the whole group, Jenna seemed to be the
only one with a personality. She sat tall, even on my living room floor, and held eye contact with Flip or me the entire time, asking questions and taking notes.

Besides the service jobs, the thing they all had in common was their eagerness balanced with an affected ambivalence. When we asked each one, like we were eligible bachelors on The Dating Game, what they thought they could offer, they all said more or less the same thing: youth, energy and passion. None but Jenna spoke of artistic talent, which, in their presumption of its existence, made me uncertain to what extent it existed. She said, with a bit of embarrassment, “I’m not sure I’m any good, but I love photography and I want to get better. I feel like people don’t do enough to document life or notice the little beauty around them all the time.”

I liked her, but the rest didn’t impress me much. As usual, Flipper was more optimistic than I was. “What we need you to do is spread the word. Whatever friends you have, bring them to the next meeting. We’ll schedule it for a month from now on a Sunday so everyone can hopefully get out of work.”

The First Five, as we came to call them, left after giving us their contact information. Each promised to bring at least two more people to the next meeting.

“Flip, this sort of seems like a weird pyramid scheme, but without any clear goal. I mean, we’re going to get them to bring other people in and put all this money into it and for what? Artistic expression?”

“You’re losing the vision, friend-o. We’ll run it like a school, sort of like the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, except we won’t let ourselves get bought out by the art museum. Artists can come and learn from each other and we can get some offer a living wage to unemployed PhDs in the city to teach some classes in their fields. It will be great. It will be huge.”

“And what are these kids supposed to do after? I don’t know, maybe there’s something better we can do with this money. This just isn’t sitting right with me.”

“They’re not kids. They’re basically my age. And what are you talking about, something better? What’s better than this? Listen, we’re in on the ground floor of something phenomenal. You can back out if you want, but the wheels are turning and I’m going to see this thing through. Take a few days to think it over if you need to, come to the next meeting and let me know what you think after that.”

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Before the next meeting we continued canvassing the city, advertising the idea. Even though turnout for the initial meeting was lower than we expected, we wrote it off to short notice and anticipated that the numbers at subsequent meetings would increase.

Considering this, we decided that if we were going to get this thing moving we probably wouldn’t have time to mess around with creating a new structure, even if Flipper could get everything moving quickly. Instead, we changed plans and began scoping out existing locations, thinking it would be easier to buy a place and get approval from the Board of Zoning Appeals, if necessary, rather than start from scratch and lose time. After putting some feelers out with the First Five as well as some various friends, we got a tip on the perfect property for us, a former housing co-op on Clarke in Riverwest which we checked out.

The co-op consisted of four identical, two-story buildings that consisted of six side-by-side units each, and was surrounded by thick foliage which shielded it from the street and neighbors and gave the impression of a rural getaway. Each of the twenty-four units had its own kitchen and living room downstairs with two decent-sized bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs.

Flipper and I planned to continue living in my place, at least for the time being, so as not to take away from the purpose of the intentional community, insuring that each of the forty-eight rooms could be put to good use. Money was obviously not a concern anymore and we didn’t want the residents to see us as a distraction or to think they had to perform for our sake. We wanted to be as invisible as possible.

The reason the place was up for sale was due in part to the board struggling to fill its vacancies, despite the cheap rent and relative proximity to UWM’s campus. There was a mass exodus following the death of the founding member and backbone of the co-op as well as a series of armed robberies nearby, and the remaining residents weren’t able to agree on replacements, remaining choosy until it was too late.

Initially, the crime and location were my only, albeit considerable, objections to the place, but Flipper pointed out that at this point the universe had dealt me enough shitty hands and wasn’t likely to deal me another one for a very, very long time. Considering he was technically in charge of the money and we had no other promising options, I consented to buy the place.

Flip worked out a deal with each of the residents, paying for moving costs and the first year’s rent at their new places upfront and got them all cleared out in two weeks except a white-
bearded nature poet who said he was interested in joining the colony. I asked how much it was going to cost for all of that, but he said, “Don’t worry about it, I’ll handle it,” so I didn’t.

After the final person moved out, Flip said, “This changes everything,” but I couldn’t see how. All Riverwest meant to me anymore was the place where Julie died, a dead neighborhood in a dead city. It’s a neighborhood defined not by itself, but by everything around it, how it incorporates and reacts to the outside world, seen even in its name, taken from the Milwaukee River which provides a natural eastern and southern border. The 1.7 square mile neighborhood is pinched between the upper east side where all the students drank in poorly-insulated houses and the lower income neighborhoods where pay phones still stood outside of a business selling burners and where houses could catch fire and burn down to nearly nothing while a small crowd of people watched, not one calling for help. Of course, this strange residential purgatory is probably what he was drawn to.

Beyond that, he was excited that we were close to Locust Street, one of the only ways to get from the Riverwest neighborhood to the true east side of the city. On the surface it was a street that looked like any other in the city, but behind the crumbling facades and excessively bright shop doors was the throbbing forward of a restless group of people. There was Woodland Pattern with its extensive offering of poetry chapbooks and floor-to-ceiling shelves of books made more romantic by the wheeled ladder needed to access the loftier selections. There were laundromats where students would sleep, pretending to be homeless in order to get spare change to finish their laundry. There was Klinger’s with its weekly fish fry, a poorly lit, cramped seating sort of place that still made you want to come back despite the thick air, palpable with grease-and beer-sweat. There was Linneman’s, where they would never, never know your name or serve you a beer without first giving you a look that suggested you weren’t entirely welcome there, ever, even if you knew how to tip, even if you read at the open mic in the back room every Tuesday for a year. There was a lingering feeling of suspicion that at once made you suspicious of yourself and at ease knowing that whatever you were up to, you were in good company.

Walking down Locust to Gordon Park with the abstract stone statue, one slab of white rock placed perpendicularly on top of another, topped by a tree branch that looked like a dropped antler (which may or may not be part of the original artwork, but who would bother to check?), it seemed that the whole world was a strangely choreographed dance set to music that occasionally
made itself heard in the worn brakes of the 10 bus or the calls of the people playing volleyball in summer behind Tracks, the neighborhood’s consciously hip answer to the sports bar.

Flipper believed that the neighborhood and its residents would embrace the idea, and he was right. Once word spread that we had our location, nearly all of the people who contacted us lived in or near Riverwest.

We got in touch with the First Five and told them we would need their sweat equity to get the place in livable condition. In exchange, we would pay out the rest of their leases and foot the moving expenses so they could move in as soon as the place was ready.

We also waived their first month’s fee, three hundred dollars, which Flipper insisted was not to be called “rent,” though if it was rent, it would have been a deal for housing anywhere in the city. I didn’t feel right about charging this monthly fee considering the place was paid for and the idea was to allow artists to have as few distractions as possible while they focused on their work. When I brought this point up to Flipper he said that while he understood my concern, the money would eventually run out considering the cost of upkeep, materials, advertising, gallery nights (which for the time being would have to be at a secondary location), visiting artists, instructors and possible expansion opportunities including the acquisition of a permanent gallery space of our own. He assured me that he would be putting plenty of his own money into Zagora and if a certain month yielded a surplus of funds, he would simply put it aside for a future month when costs were higher.

Flipper did a bit of research on alternative living communities and we devised a way to help the residents balance art with the regular demands of life. As an alternative to paying the monthly fee, he suggested that each artist would be responsible for producing a certain amount of work each month. The precise quota would be voted on by members of the co-op and could be amended as needed, but would give everyone an idea of how much they should be doing each month and also serve as motivation to continue working and not use this as a way to slouch away a few years in the city. Artists who missed six consecutive months would be asked to leave unless there were extenuating circumstances that prevented them from working. In this way, we could be assured that the colony was constantly producing and that there would be work to exhibit regularly to aid in promoting our work as well as possibly generating funds.
If any piece sold, Zagora would retain a thirty-five percent commission, standard for most co-op art galleries and less than the average fifty percent that commercial galleries charge. This money would be put back into the community for materials, gallery space and promotions.

With help from the First Five, we got the twenty living units cleaned up in less than two weeks. Each person wasn’t able to make it every day, but someone was always there and usually brought in some other friends, people who were interested in learning more about what we were doing and hoping to make a good impression by pitching in early. On any given day we had between three and ten people, not counting Flipper and me. Some came only once, others were there consistently, but the First Five were the backbone of the project.

The work wasn’t too bad because most of the units were in pretty good condition, though some had the abandoned remnants of previous occupants: plates, plastic clothing hangers, and in some cases plastic bags or heaps of garbage filling the place with a rotting smell that we could mask, but not quite eliminate, with cleaning products. These units were marked off as the last to be filled, hoping we could air them out once the weather warmed up a bit.

I snuck the camera in with me a few times and took a total of about five hours of footage of the work, wanting to have proof of the transformation that we were all a part of, but not wanting to piss Flip off. I asked everyone to keep it secret from him and told them to let me know if they didn’t want to be filmed.

Over time we got to know some of the regulars who showed up to help. They were aberrant types ranging from college-age hipsters in secondhand clothing to people in their early forties working day jobs they hated, but introducing themselves to strangers as writers or musicians, as in, “I wait tables to pay the bills, but I’m actually a playwright.” These were people living in the margins of society who weren’t quite committed to being part of anything. The entire thing was ready to be occupied by the end of February. Not only was Zagora completely full and operational, but we had a waiting list of about a dozen more approved artists interested in future openings.

According to our plan, the first six months were set up as a trial period. The musician couple, Drew and Becca, lived in one unit. Jenna and Elsie, the photographer and the performance artist, lived in another, and the spoken word poet Brandon moved into one by himself pending a suitable roommate. Although we originally wanted to mix different types of
artists, we made an exception for Drew and Becca because they were dating and their aesthetics were so different.

After they were all settled, we held weekly meetings to make sure we were all on the same page. They were each granted one vote right away, the same as Flipper and me, though all new residents afterwards would only have a half-vote for the six-month provisional membership period until we knew they were committed. Everyone kept up with their work quotas initially, creating with vigor and excitement, but as they got more settled problems began to arise.

Initially there were typical roommate disputes, people complaining that their colleagues weren’t up to par or weren’t as serious of artists as they themselves were. I have hours of footage of interviews from this period. Performance poets were thought to be too theatrical by the more conservative, written poets and both were shunned by fiction writers who mocked their inability to fill an entire page with clear, coherent ideas. Photographers were said by other visual artists such as painters and sculptors to have it easy, simply pointing a lens and pressing a button at things, hoping for something beautiful to emerge on its own.

The strain of living together for the first time caused Drew and Becca to break up, using sexual terms to demonstrate their complaints with one another. He claimed that she was musically frigid, unemotional and dull in her performances while she responded that he was the musical equivalent of a rapist, distorting something beautiful into an emotionally painful experience that threatened to ruin sound for anyone who happened to hear him play. He switched rooms with Jess, a jewelry-maker, and began sleeping with his new roommate Corinne, a thirty-year-old abstract painter who drew inspiration for her pieces from regular trips to various dumpsters around the city.

What we once imagined would be a utopian intentional community became more like a college dorm full of petty politics, sex scandals and cliques. There was some intermingling between the Embodied and Disembodied artists, but overall most people kept to themselves and contacted us in hopes of being placed with a new roommate or, and they insisted they would be willing to pay extra, by themselves.

Our troubles only increased after the first show in June, a group effort that featured Jenna’s photos of broken household objects which was accompanied by Elsie’s performance of a series of imagined monologues from the perspective of prostitutes with a dissonant soundtrack.
provided by Drew, the latter two being last minute additions to the program. When some of Jenna’s pieces sold, Elsie and Drew felt that they should get a cut, insisting that their complementary work helped showcase the beauty of destruction.

We took a vote and as a group decided to compensate Elsie and Drew out of the communal funds, each of them receiving half of the six hundred dollars that Jenna made. This meant that the community made nothing from the first show, a fact that didn’t sit well with those who had helped with the behind-the-scenes efforts including setting up and breaking down, hanging the work, preparing the performance spaces and serving wine and hors d’oeuvres.

By then all the buildings had a constant smell of pot, though that was the least of the drug concerns. On two separate occasions people had to be rushed to the hospital for overdoses and were promptly voted out of the community, though only by a narrow margin; those who voted for them to stay were then under constant scrutiny by a small group of substance-free artists whose tenacity and often unfounded accusations would have made them heroes in the eyes of Joseph McCarthy. I had footage of these meetings, but not of the hospital visits themselves. In both cases I was asleep at home when the artists were taken to the hospital, but was glad for this because it meant I didn’t have to weigh the ethics of filming such incidents against the obvious drama it would add to my movie.

In the meantime, Flip and I were growing apart. He usually humored me and my video camera, though kept hinting that my energy could be better spent elsewhere. He spent a good deal of time going from house to house checking in on the progress, talking to residents and overseeing their work. There are at least a dozen hours of footage showing him flirting with the most attractive, alternative-looking women, ones with small, perky breasts, half-sleeve tattoos, vintage clothing and hair styled in a way that looks un-styled. They all respond positively to his attention, some because they seem genuinely interested in his advances and others because they think it will help them stick out from the rest.

When he wasn’t on site, he was at my house making phone calls and trying to arrange shows, casting a large net over the city and increasing his list of contacts. One day I decided to film him, just to have footage to possibly use showing some of the more practical work. He was already on the phone and didn’t realize I had started filming until he looked up from the chair he was sitting in. When he saw me with the camera, he shook his head and got up from the chair. Still on his phone, he squinted his eyes for the briefest, most intense display of rage I’ve ever
seen. I’ve paused this moment on my computer many times to absorb how fully and explicitly he hated me in that moment. Then I let the rest of the scene play out: he looks directly into the camera and pleasantly says to the person on the other end of the phone, “I’m going to have to call you back, something important just came up here,” then says to me, “Turn it the fuck off. Now.”

The picture goes black then, but I still remember what happened after, how he told me he didn’t appreciate being spied on because he was afraid I would use the footage against him some day. I asked him what he meant, but he wouldn’t elaborate, so I tried explaining that I wasn’t spying on him and that he was an important part of this project. He responded by saying he was just the snowflake that caused the avalanche and didn’t want the attention and if I invaded his privacy again, he wouldn’t be so understanding.

From then on, whenever I knew he would be spending the day at my place, I either visited Zagora, but rarely got any footage I considered usable, or went to my sister’s house. Helping her with the twins wasn’t just altruistic, it allowed me to keep busy and sober. Despite the blow-up, Flipper continued to provide me with a monthly stipend of three grand, nearly ten thousand more than my annual salary had been at Northwestern Mutual. By then it seemed less like a favor and more like a pay-off, though I was still willing to accept it under those terms having no other sources of income.

In all that time there were no dreams about Catherine Averill. I was relieved at their absence, unsure if my sobriety had played any part, but not particularly caring so long as they stayed away.

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At the end of June, two months shy of the one-year anniversary of Julie’s death, I decided it was finally time to go visit Emily. Although the idea had come back into my head in response to one of the dreams, the trip was something that I had meant to do for years. She was someone I owed a lot to, but we hadn’t been in regular communication for a few years. When we did talk or email, we both apologized for “life getting in the way” or some other trite excuse, but I was just scared that seeing her and remembering how much she felt like family to me would put my life into perspective and make me analyze all the problems with my marriage.

When I called, Emily said she had the next two days off of work, so it was fine for me to come. She warned me that the forecast called for rain, but I said it didn’t matter, that I would
drive slowly if I need to, but I was set on coming. I stuffed some clothes in my suitcase, loaded it into my car, grabbed the cashier’s check for Emily and left without telling Flipper I was going.

The drive on I-94 was an uneventful six hours. I had only been to the Twin Cities once before, years ago, for the wedding of one of Julie’s cousins, the one where we didn’t dance. We drove on that summer day with the windows down just to breathe the thick, humid air. By the time we arrived my left arm was sunburned from resting out the window the whole time and we were both tired from the drive and the heat, but happy.

The wedding was in a Catholic church. Everything about the ceremony was traditional and stifling, from the bride’s white dress and veil to the awkward priest and the lingering smell of incense from morning Mass.

We got a good buzz going at the reception. I mostly sulked with glasses of wine at our table while she mingled and talked with her relatives. We made love sloppily in the hotel room, falling asleep without hanging the Do Not Disturb sign, the last sex we had for some time because she later decided that I was rude and an embarrassment for keeping to myself at the reception.

But before that, before her annoyance had come fully into its own, we woke abruptly an hour before check-out as the cleaning woman opened the door. We apologized for not having heard her knock and for forgetting to place the Do Not Disturb sign on the door. She apologized for coming in, her face red with embarrassment. After apologizing again, she left, saying that she would come back after we checked out. Julie and I then pulled the noisy white comforter over our heads and laughed until we lost our breath because we were hungover and tired, then kept on laughing until it was time to go because everything seemed right for once.

That weekend wasn’t one of the times we looked back at fondly, not because it was bad, but because it wasn’t anything, really, just a familial obligation for a cousin Julie hardly knew. But the memory of the weekend seemed critical to me now because it hinted at an unknowable number of still-unvisited memories all knotted together, inaccessible but for a chance detail or spontaneous decision that might trigger a recollection and pull them, unwillingly, into the present. Moreover, it suggested that remembering may be all I have left, but even the previously mundane could be extraordinary now.

The crushing part was that I would never be able to go anywhere that we had visited together without always remembering her or hating myself for not being able to remember more.
Ghosts aren’t hovering specters in the night, they’re the parts of us that won’t die when we really need them to.

Yet as I drove, and for the first time since Flip returned, I felt like I could relax. Right after he returned to Milwaukee to stay with me he was a comforting presence, but now he just made me feel nervous and guilty, like I should be doing more.

The forecasted rain that normally would have made me drive with both hands, jaw locked, mostly held off for the duration of the drive. The bit that fell seemed romantic and distant, making pleasant plucking noises on my windshield. There were huddled circles of cows and horses dotting the hills in the farm communities lining the interstate. The people in those houses had probably long since been able to block out the noise of the traffic while each day thousands of people like me saw where they lived and considered, in the middle of a long commute or a day trip, if maybe it was time to trade in their day jobs for the dreamy, picturesque life of a farmer.

I got into Minneapolis in the early evening. When I pulled up to Emily’s house my neck was stiff and I was thirsty, but glad to be somewhere new. In front of the house was a row of pruned red twig dogwood shrubs, a testimony to Emily’s good taste. She collected unemployment during the winter months, but worked for a local nursery the rest of the year matching customers with plants which she helped to plant and care for like children. I had never met her girlfriend Lisa, but was told from phone calls and emails that she was patient and funny and had worked as an accountant downtown for the last four years, happy to chip in a little extra so Emily could keep the job she loved.

I rang the doorbell and saw a pair of feet hanging over the top of the couch disappear. Emily peeked over the couch, saw me and smiled.

“Sam, Sam, Sam. It’s you,” she said when she opened the door. She hugged me tightly like she was a child and I was the favorite toy, long since written off as lost. “This is the best thing that’s happened to me all year.” She let go of me and stepped out of the way so I could come inside.

“How are Julie’s parents doing? Have you been in touch recently?” Emily and the Wallaces had kept in touch over the years, ever since she got them a great deal on some lilac bushes which they bought for themselves as an anniversary gift. At least once per season they sent her photographs of the bushes and emails and would update me on her life whenever she
replied. As much as they would have been horrified if Julie were a lesbian, I’m sure they would have rather welcomed Emily into their family than me.

She was the kind of person parents loved, full of humor and generosity, easy to know. She had a certain motherly comfort, even back in high school when we first met. She was built solid with wide hips, breasts and shoulders, but had soft brown eyes that she kept behind glasses she didn’t need, but that looked good on her.

“Not exactly. Other than a few brief phone calls and a couple lunches, we’ve decided to deal with it separately. They sent me a Christmas card and a knit hat that Jan made and I sent them a bottle of champagne.” I was fidgeting with my hands. When Emily noticed she changed the subject.

“Well, I’m glad you came. Lisa had to go into work today. She’s had to go in on weekends more and more lately, so it’s great to have some company.” She paused. “Can I ask how you are?”

I scrunched up my nose and frowned. “If my emotional state were a graph it would be trending upward. I mean, it’s been rough, but I suppose I’m getting by.”

“Sammy, that’s what you do.” She was the only person I let call me Sammy because she was the only person who made it sounds right. “Whenever my parents get sick, and mind you they’re doing fine, but anytime they find any reason to go to the doctor I find myself not wanting to get out of bed. I mean, I’m crippled by it, it’s pathetic. I don’t know how you did it. And you were so young then.”

Not only did they let me live there, but Emily and her parents were the only people not related to me I saw the summer after my parents died. Betsy was away at school in California and I didn’t see the point in moving out there when she couldn’t take care of me and I would have to come back anyhow. So Emily’s family took me in, fed me without any questions or suggestion of keeping track of what I owed them. They even offered to help me find a therapist, but knew my feelings on talking through my emotional state, so they didn’t push it.

There are certain movies that I still can’t watch—mostly starring the Newmans’ favorite actor, Billy Murray—because it brings back that lost summer where the only way I knew a week had passed was when we all sat down on Saturday for family movie night. Emily and her parents and I would sit next to each other on the couch with the air conditioning on and bowls of popcorn in our lap like a real family, functional and happy and together.
When Emily left for school at the University of Minnesota and I moved into my dorm, we kept in touch as best we could. We got together over breaks when she came home the first two years, but gradually heard less and less from each other as we got more and more into our classes and what we thought were our adult lives.

But seeing her again, in her own house and her own life, made me miss that summer when she was the only person who knew me. But somehow it felt like we had only been apart for another hectic semester, not years.

“This weird thing was happening for the first couple months, Em. These dreams.” I hadn’t been able to tell Flipper about the dreams, but felt Emily might be able to help, or at least understand. If nothing else, she would admit when she was out of her league and couldn’t be any help, a thing Flipper would never admit to.

“Dreams about Julie?”

“No. Maybe. I’m not sure. They’re always about the same woman: Catherine Averill.”

“Someone you know?”

“The name means nothing to me. She has hair sort of like Julie’s and she’s a writer, but that’s it.”

“Wait, how do you spell that name?” I spelled it for her. “That’s close to avril, the month of April in French.” I gave her a confused look. “I know, I’m reaching here. Honestly, I don’t know. What do you think they’re about?”

I told her that it was maybe a possibility because Julie took a couple semesters of French in college and programmed her cell phone language to French and hung a French calendar in our kitchen as a reminder to keep up with her French reading. So it was possible, if not rather unlikely, that the information seeped into my brain and was misremembered in sleep or that I misremembered the name when I woke. And there are enough Catherines in the world that my brain may have just filled in a generic first name. Ultimately, I told her, I really had no idea what had caused them.

“So these are recurring dreams, or what?” Julie looked like it might be possible that I had driven all this way just to talk about my dreams.

“Not exactly. They’re more episodic. They keep changing, but it’s always her and she’s writing about me like I’m a character in a book. It looks like she’s been at it for a long time,
documenting my life.” I paused, then added, “It happened a little after Julie was killed. And I was drinking a lot. A lot more than usual, that is.”

I started from the first dream I could remember and told her everything.

“Sam, I admit it’s strange. Well, really strange, but you shouldn’t worry about it. You’re talking about her like she’s real, but you know that’s no possible, right? She’s in your head, so of course she knows your life. She knows what you know… because you know it.”

“That’s what I tell myself but, it’s weird. This doesn’t really happen to people. I mean, if roles were reversed and you were having these dreams, I’d tell you the same thing, but—”

“But you’d rather lose your mind thinking there is a real woman writing your life story?” She laughed, not with condescension or judgment, but because she didn’t know how else to respond. “Well, have you tried looking for her? I mean, if she is real and she’s a writer, there’s got to be something online.”

I shook my head. “I haven’t done it yet because I have a friend staying with me and didn’t want him to know. And I guess, like you said, I’m afraid if I do that it will mean I’ve really lost it.”

“You were probably in shock and just grieving in your own way. The drinking didn’t help, I’m sure. But I don’t think you’re going crazy.”

“It seems to have passed. I don’t even know why I brought it up.” I cracked the knuckles of my fingers, one at a time and looked up at the ceiling.

“Well, it’s clearly still bothering you. Why don’t you use my computer and do a quick search online?” Emily took the laptop from a nearby table and opened it up.

“Mind if I use the bathroom first?” She directed me down the hall and into the bathroom. There was a picture frame with six small photographs of her and Lisa, beautiful shots of them outdoors, smiling in the sun. It was nice to be back around a functional, stable person who led a functional, stable life and had a functional, stable relationship and a confident, firm grip on reality.

I washed my hands and wetted the front of my hair down which was sticking up wildly from my nervous habit of absentmindedly scratching my head while driving.

Emily was at the computer when I returned to the living room. “Here,” she said, holding the computer out to me, “have a look.”
The search engine result yielded a number of social networking profiles, including one for a California cabinetmaker, a New York schoolteacher, and an executive at some staffing company in Michigan. None of them made sense except the schoolteacher whose picture did not match the woman. Of course I knew without doing the search that none of them would make sense, that the woman wasn’t real and couldn’t be real.

“None of these are her,” I said, running my hand through my hair and no doubt messing it up again. “This is pointless. Really, it’s not a big deal. Just forget I mentioned it.”

“Well at least now you know you don’t have some stranger with Shining abilities writing your life story. Maybe you just need to relax. Is work getting to you?”

“That’s something else entirely that I’m not sure I want to get into.” I knew she wouldn’t approve of me leaving a secure, though tedious, job and doing something as crazy as Flipper and I had begun with Zagora. I wanted her to think that I was sort of okay and that I had been coping well enough.

“That’s fine, you can tell me whenever you feel comfortable. Or never at all.” Her stomach grumbled, a loud, drawn out sound that made her laugh. “Are you hungry? It’s almost my dinner time and I’m starving.”

We went into the kitchen and were preparing vegetables for stir fry when we heard a car pull into the driveway.

“I texted Lisa that you were here, but she didn’t respond so I’m not sure she got it. Either way, I’ve told her lots of things about you before and I’m sure she’s really excited to meet you.” She forced an unconvincing half-smile.

When Lisa came in the door I saw a different woman from the one from the pictures. Her hair was dyed a faded blonde color, and pulled back into a tight ponytail which emphasized the tired look in her eyes. She was dressed in what someone might call a “smart” business suit that was tailored to her slim body. Under her exhaustion she was pretty, reminding me of so many of my former coworkers at Northwestern Mutual.

She looked at Emily in a way that made clear she hadn’t seen the text. “This is Sam. My friend from high school who I’ve told you about. He just decided to come up for a visit.” Whatever Emily had told her about me didn’t make much of an impression because she looked confused, but said, “Oh, sure. Hi, Sam.” She then turned to Emily and gave her a perfunctory rundown of her day while I minced the garlic and Emily sliced chicken breast into strips. Lisa
either didn’t know or didn’t remember hearing about Julie, but I was thankful that I wouldn’t have to have that conversation with her.

Lisa avoided looking at me and continued talking about mundane work issues, but seemed a bit annoyed that Emily wasn’t paying enough attention to her. She kept sighing and rubbed her neck with both hands the entire time. Their conversation was so different from preparing dinners with Julie when Flipper stopped over. The two of us would play nice and pretend everything was fine for his sake and after a while we got so good at pretending that we almost believed everything was fine, for an hour or two at least.

Emily had mentioned that Lisa was usually friendly, but sometimes suspicious of people from Emily’s past. Emily thought Lisa was jealous of the knowledge they had of her life before the two of them met, a life that was unreachable except through anecdotes and photographs. It was clear that Lisa recognized our closeness and Emily’s affection for me, though I don’t think she would have been pleased to have any unannounced visitor.

When Lisa finished talking about her day, there was a long lull of conversation. Desperate to break the uneasy silence, I said, “So accounting, huh? I could have been an accountant if I… knew about numbers.” I thought it could have been an endearing joke. Maybe it was, because Emily laughed a little, but stopped as soon as Lisa stuck her bottom lip out slightly and lowered her eyebrows.

“Sure,” Lisa said. “Numbers. They’re important.” She turned back to Emily. “I’m going to go change, then I have to run. Ally’s dinner is tonight, but I guess you forgot.” She glanced at me, then back to Emily, obviously annoyed.

Emily bit the inside of her left cheek, a thing I had seen her do thousands of times in high school when she realized someone was mad at her. “Sorry, I forgot.” I tried to tell her to go to the dinner party, insisting that I could just see her later and that I didn’t want to be a nuisance, but she said, “I went to college with Ally and I can see her anytime. I’ll stay here. I want to stay.” She nodded for emphasis and apologized again to Lisa for forgetting. “Tell Ally I’ll make it up to her. We can have her over soon.”

“Great,” Lisa said. “I guess I’ll let her know when I get there.” She turned to me and made steady eye contact then, as if noticing me for the first time since she got home. “How long will you be staying, Sam? You are staying here tonight, right?” The question was fair, but her tone suggested that she already knew the answer and it wasn’t the one she would have preferred.
“I think I’ll be heading back to Milwaukee tomorrow. I have things to do there and I don’t want to overstay my welcome.” Of course there was nothing in Milwaukee that Flipper couldn’t handle himself. In fact he was probably better in my absence, if he even noticed I was gone, but from Lisa’s eyes it was clear that I was not entirely welcome.

She went into the bedroom to change and Emily and I sat at the kitchen table making small talk while the stir fry finished cooking. Emily seemed surprised when Lisa gave her a hurried kiss on the cheek, either restrained affection or an uncharacteristic display of affection, for my benefit. She gave a quick wave and a perfunctory and flat “nice to meet you” to me, then left.

Emily heaped rice and stir fry onto our plates and set them on the wooden table along with two glasses of water. “Sorry about that. She gets that way sometimes when work is stressful. It’s really nothing personal.”

“No, I know,” I said, sounding as unconvincing as she did. “She seemed nice. Yeah. I’d like to get to know her.” Emily smiled, grateful that I was trying to be nice, knowing that it wasn’t a thing I would do for most people I knew.

“I was thinking about your dreams. I guess we’ve been avoiding the most obvious answer.”

“Guilt. Sammy, you need to realize there’s nothing you could have done about Julie and nothing you can do now. I’m not going to get sappy on you, but it’s like you used to tell me in high school, you have to get your shit together. I know it’s ridiculous for someone like me who has had a pretty easy life, but that doesn’t mean I’m wrong. You have to admit that there was nothing more for you to do. You couldn’t have protected her. It was a freak thing and it could have happened to anyone, but it unfortunately happened to her. And you.”

“I could have done more. At first I tried to figure out who killed her and I thought I was on to something for a while, but there’s no way it was him.” I didn’t tell her about the possible affair with Bradley or his suggestion that her death might have been a suicide because I didn’t want Emily to think badly of Julie or make things awkward between her and the Wallaces. Besides, it really didn’t matter at this point. “But part of me thinks I should still be trying even though I know it’s hopeless. You’re right though, it was a freak thing and there’s no reason for it, no way to find who did it. Plus the police still don’t even have any leads and they’re the ones
with all the evidence and resources and experience. I guess by now they’ve basically given up hope of solving the case. What do I do?”

She put her fork down. “Maybe that’s it, Sam. What else can you do? I think it’s time to figure out what moving on is like. Maybe figure out how to be happy.”

“I was,” I said quietly.
“What?” She leaned closer to me.
“I said I was. Happy. Sometimes I was.” I bit my lip. “I had no reason not to be. Now I do.”

“Everyone can find a reason to be unhappy. Sometimes we—people, I mean—find reasons where there aren’t any. Or we don’t name unhappiness that is there, like that will make it go away. Sorry. Maybe you were happy. I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re probably right. It wasn’t perfect. But what do I do? I mean, I can do anything I want now. I can live anywhere, get a new job, find a new rut. But being pushed into changing isn’t the same as wanting to make a change.” I decided it was finally time to tell her about Flipper, but not the artists’ colony because it didn’t feel like an option anymore. Seeing Lisa made me realize that I was just like her: tired of my job and bored with my life, but unwilling to change because it was easier to stay in the rut. “A friend came into a lot of money. A whole lot. He’s been living with me for most of the year and sharing it with me. He said I could have however much I wanted, do whatever I wanted. But I don’t know. What would you do?”

“Honestly? I think I’d run. I’d go as far away as I possibly could. Somewhere that no one would look for me, and I’d start over. Maybe South America so I could brush up on my Spanish.”

“Sure,” I said. “That’s all I’ve been doing. I mean, I haven’t gone to Argentina, but I quit my job. Since the funeral I haven’t seen anyone but Betsy and this rich friend, and now I’m here because I’m running away from the fact that I have to tell him to leave. He was fun at first, but something changed. I feel stuck again. I can’t really afford to have him leave because he’s got all the money and the connections.”

She swallowed her food and nodded. “I get that. But the Sam I knew early on in high school weathered the storm. The Sam I knew pissed in the storm knowing it would blow back on him, but did it just to show he didn’t care about anything. Even after your parents, you just went right to undergrad like your summer was full of partying with friends and food service jobs, as if
you were just like everyone else. Obviously it was an act, but everything’s an act and it was working well enough. What happened?”

“People change? Guess I got scared. It seemed like things were settled. My life wasn’t great, but it was better than I expected. I thought I had gotten the really bad stuff out of the way early so I could enjoy the rest. You know, like I would recover while most people my age were just starting to understand what it means to lose.”

“Which is why running away can’t be the answer. We both know that. And we both know that you have to go back.” She took a long drink of water and then clarified, “Not that I wouldn’t love for you to stay.”

“Go back to what? There’s nothing to go back to. I have lousy memories, a sister who can occasionally be bothered to tolerate me when I force myself into her home, and a friend who is taking over my life because I’m letting him.”

“Besty loves you, you know that. In her own way. What I mean is you have to go back and figure out what you wanted before. What you thought was worth trying for. When you were seventeen what did you think your adult life would be like?” Of course we were both thinking about my parents, but wouldn’t say it.

“God, honestly? I assumed I’d drag college out for as long as my parents would let me, then work in a bar or some other crappy job until I died.” I smirked thinking back on myself in high school, the awkward kid who wore black t-shirts and slept through any class I could. “I was a real go-getter.”

“Yeah, you were brimming with optimism. What about guitar?”

“That was just something I did because I thought it would make me cool enough for a girlfriend. I kept at it until I got to college and realized all I could do were power chords, just like every other Kurt Cobain wannabe with a Fender start-up kit. Music isn’t really an option unless there’s a resurgence of bad pop punk. More importantly, it’s not really an option because I don’t care about it. I don’t have a desire for anything.”

“You can’t go through life settling for wanting to want things and thinking that’s good enough. You’ll find it.” She smiled at me reassuringly.

I wasn’t convinced and I’m not sure she was either, but we ended the conversation there because it was clear we had reached an impasse. We decided to watch Groundhog Day, for old time’s sake. She got out a large quilt that her mom made as a high school graduation present and
we sat under it. Emily leaned her head on my left shoulder and was asleep before her favorite part, when Bill Murray’s character lets the groundhog drive the truck off a cliff.

I was worried that Lisa would come home and see us like this and get the wrong idea, so I nudged Emily awake and helped her to her room. She kissed me on the forehead, like she did every night that summer when I stayed with her family, when we weren’t shy about anything and only had each other.

I turned off the movie and went to the guest room, but couldn’t sleep. Before Lisa got home I decided it would be best to leave and not make things here worse than they were. I left a note in Emily’s purse thanking her and folded it around the cashier’s check. Wishing I had taken more money, I took out my wallet and hid all the money I had on me, three hundred dollars worth of twenty dollar bills, in her wallet.

I put my shoes on quietly and went out to my car. It was raining pretty hard and the windshield was fogged from the rapid change in temperature. While I sat waiting for the windows to defrost, I thought about going back inside to wake her up or at least leave her another note, a better note that said she could come stay with me if she wanted, for as long as she wanted. But Emily sticks things out and I knew she would never come with me. Instead, she would insist that her life here was good and would get better soon or misread my offer as a plea to stay with her.

Still, I wished I could have done something, gotten her out of this somehow, because she didn’t seem happy like she used to. This was the best love I could give, the love that should have been reserved for my sister, the love I felt for Julie at first. Emily had never asked anything of me because she knew that I had so little to give and she never held it against me and I knew how to love someone like that.

I drove back through the dark night, ready to apologize to Flipper and explain to him in whatever terms I came up with on the six hour drive that he had to, absolutely had to, get the fuck out. Visiting Emily had confirmed the two things I already knew, but hadn’t yet admitted to myself: the dreams meant nothing more than any other dreams and I could not continue living with Flip without losing myself.

The freeway was empty but for a handful of semis and the occasional car. My gas light came on and though I had never tested it out, I figured I had somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty miles before I really ran out of gas. I turned the air conditioning off, but had to keep the
windows up on account of the rain, and began sweating almost instantly. None of the stations by
the freeway seemed to be open and I didn’t want to waste the gas or time getting off just to
confirm that they were closed. It was stupid of me to leave Minneapolis without filling up, but I
wasn’t really thinking ahead. Eau Claire wasn’t far and I hoped that it was my best best for
finding a twenty-four hour gas station since it was a college town.

Around Menomonie, I noticed a car coming up fast behind me in the left lane. I moved
all the way over to the right lane and maintained my speed. It was probably some drunk kid
leaving a party at Eau Claire and I thought it best to give him space to pass. I maintained my
speed, not wanting to slow down and freak him out or make him think I was a cop trying to make
him pass me so I could pull him over.

The car was a mid-90’s Corolla, a loud and reckless thing. As it was about to overtake
me, it veered sharply into the center lane. It didn’t look like the driver was making any move to
correct the vehicle. I didn’t see my life flash before my eyes, but I felt the way time slowed as a
result of adrenaline and fear and the survival instinct. My hands were at 10 and 2, a thing my
father insisted upon when I was learning to drive which had become a habit after years of
driving, and something I didn’t give up even when my friends made fun of me for driving like an
old lady.

To avoid being hit, I let off the gas pedal and pulled the wheel sharply to the right, my
forearms slapping together, then tried to mimic the motion in reverse to correct myself, but I
cought a slick patch of road. My car slid off the road and into the muddy shoulder.

I jammed the brake pedal and the car was slowed down even more by the mud, but not
enough to prevent me from hitting a sign near the freeway announcing the next exit. On impact I
heard the crunch of my bumper being forced in and my airbag deployed.

Naturally, the other driver didn’t pull over. I got out of my car to survey the damage. The
fender was partially crumpled fender and the passenger side headlight was smashed out, minor
cosmetic damage that could easily be fixed.

I was shaken, but had no injuries. As I dug my cell phone out of my pants pocket, I
noticed the deflated airbag, hanging limp and white and I thought well this, this is my version of
luck. I began to laugh. I laughed and laughed and bent over and put my hands on my knees and
laughed some more until I had to kneel down from exhaustion. And in the wet, muddy grass with
the rain all around me, I knelt and I cried and breathed in and out and in, and felt the tears down
the side of my nose, over the top of my lip and into my mouth, the first time I had cried since Julie was killed.

Over the months I had teared up, sniffled, been choked up, but hadn’t actually cried. And then I saw this airbag just laying there and then I was crying, not for the wreck and not for her or myself or my parents, but for everything in between, for the moments I forgot and the moments I knew I had wasted and for the likelihood that I would never change and keep wasting time and wasting away and for the fact that this is what it felt like to breathe out and in and out.

It felt like a spiritual epiphany and then it felt like the sick warm wave of blacking out. Sitting in the rain with my back against the driver’s door, I drifted under the fuzziness and into the first Catherine Averill dream in months.

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This time she was sitting with a computer on her lap, a white MacBook, and she was using the Text to Speech function, that stilted robotic voice coming out of the speakers, reading emotionlessly about my life. There were dark circles under her eyes and her hair was frizzy and appeared not to have been washed for days.

“Death had been close to Sam Mastin, but had never touched him. But this car crash, like a stranger’s elbow to the ribcage on a crowded bus, proved that he was not untouchable. Whatever he thought of during those lonely interior minutes of unconsciousness wouldn’t matter as much as the fact that when the car crossed into his lane and time slowed down, which is death’s only kindness to a percentage of people, Sam chose to jerk his wheel right instead of keeping it straight or jerking left. Perhaps it seemed like a reflex, an unconscious reaction, but it was a decision. Breathing is a reflex, but life is a choice that only feels like a reflex because it’s all anyone has ever done.”

“He had spent too many months pretending that the artists’ colony was a way for him to keep living, that it could substitute for a purpose to live. Only in getting out of Milwaukee on his own terms, getting out just to get out, did he realize that he was going to have to try something new, even if he was likely to fail, even if it scared him, even if there was little chance it would make him happy.

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I woke facedown, my hands and clothes thick with mud. I was wet and shaking and alive.
I called 911 to report the accident, but ended up pretending I was a passerby and reported seeing a drunk driver heading east on the freeway without mentioning that the vehicle caused me to drive off the road. I pretended to be someone else to avoid explaining that I had blacked out from hyperventilating, suspecting the operator would tell me to wait for the police to come and take an accident report. Besides, I had no desire to go to a hospital since I was more or less fine, and there was nothing that a hospital could do for me. The operator thanked me for calling and said she would send a squad out to see if he could catch the driver.

My car started fine and I figured I used the duct tape I always keep in my car to get the airbag out of the way, but I couldn’t get enough traction to make it move. For five minutes I attempted to get back onto the road by inching forward and backward. Finally I gave in and called for a tow truck then waited in my car with the heat on until it arrived.

With nothing else to do but think, I contemplated this dream. It was likely brought on by my conversation with Emily earlier in the evening, but still seemed to be odd timing. Despite what the dream said, I wasn’t sure I had really chosen life so much as I had chosen not to feel what 70 mph feels like when it made contact with my body, but maybe the point still stood. I hadn’t just let it happen. I had reacted, and even if all I had done for the months since Julie’s death was react, it was still acting.

Not knowing when the truck would arrive and thinking it best to conserve gas in case the driver got caught in the snow, I sat with the engine off.

While waiting for the tow truck, a semi driver who saw my four-way flashers pulled over and came up to my car. I explained to him what happened and told him I was keeping my engine off because I was low on gas.

“Listen, soldier,” he said. “I don’t have anything fancy, but I have a passenger seat and working A/C if you’d like to join me. I could use a break from the road and wouldn’t mind the company.”

“You could be Ed Gein and at this point I’m not sure I’d turn you down,” I said gratefully.

“Well, I have no intention of killing you or wearing your skin, so you’re in luck.” I smiled because of his joke, because of his kindness and because this was my version of luck. If Flipper would have been in this situation he probably would have found a treasure map by the
side of the road or at the very least a box full of sweet-faced kittens to cheer him up while he waited. Still, I was grateful to the man.

He waited around and made small talk with me until the tow truck showed up, sticking around to make sure my car got out. Because I had left most of my cash at Emily’s house, I only had five dollars which I had to save as a tip to give to the tow truck driver. I wished I had money to give to the semi driver for his kindness and told him so, but he waved off the suggestion and told me there was no point in worrying. I asked him how I could get in touch with him and he gave me the name of the company he worked for as well as his cell phone number which he said I could call anytime because “It gets to be long nights driving alone.”

After thanking him again, I told him I would call and that I’d send some money too, but he told me not to worry about it, that it wasn’t the point. He came down from his seat, shook my hand, got back in and drove off with a salute.

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I got back into Milwaukee worn out but feeling revived. Flipper was sleeping on the floor with a petite woman who had fire engine red hair with black streaks. They had a paint-splattered drop cloth that they were using as a blanket and their heads were resting on stacks of magazines. I had never seen the woman before, but she looked like she was barely old enough to buy cigarettes and I hoped I wouldn’t have to see her again.

Neither of them reacted to the sound of me coming home, so I nudged him with the top of my boot until he opened his eyes. “Who’s your friend?” I asked.

He waved me away, but I kept gently tapping his ribcage with my boot until he finally stood up, thankfully wearing boxers.

There was a whole speech in my mind, one that I had practiced multiple times on the drive back, but I was tired and still shaken from the accident, so I discarded eloquence in favor of directness. “Flip, you’ve got to go. I can’t use you as a crutch and I can’t keep bringing you down. It’s been a long time coming. You’ve been doing all the work, it’s rightfully your money, and all the credit for Zagora should go to you and you alone.”

He smiled at me, showing those large teeth, but his eyes were blank and he squinted to focus on me. “I figured this was coming. It’s cool. Instead of going home for the holidays, I bought a house. It’s all furnished and everything.” He told me the address and said it was nearby, but closer to the lake, the mansion neighborhood.
He stood by the front door and said, “I knew this was coming eventually. Maybe I should have left sooner, but that’s hindsight for you. No hard feelings, bud. You can come be my guy again if you want. And I know how you are, but you’re not going to pay me back on whatever you spent.” He gave me two quick pats on the shoulder. “I mean it. Some day you can tell me all about your vision quest or whatever happened to you since you left.” With that, he woke the sleeping girl, helped her find the rest of her clothes, and left.

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That morning was the last time I saw Flipper in person, almost three months ago. In that short time there have been articles about him and the colony in both the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and the Shepherd Express. They were positive write-ups of the work that was being done, supportive of the idea and I was happy for Flipper and everyone else, while knowing that I had made the right decision by taking myself out of the project.

On the one-year anniversary of Julie’s death, while walking to buy flowers to put on her grave, I ran into Jenna, the photographer from Zagora’s First Five. She was wearing a long, flowing summer dress and looked beautiful in an easy, natural way. I asked her about Zagora and she told me that she moved out shortly after I left, but didn’t really say why and I didn’t ask. She had kept in touch with a few people and said that according to them, the same problems were still there.

“It’s just wasn’t the right vibe for me. There’s too much fighting and drama and competitiveness to try to be the best or the most successful. I think a lot of us thought we would make it big quickly, become famous locally and go on to launch a career as a ‘real artist’ somewhere else. I guess it could still happen for someone, but Milwaukee is a city you get stuck in and I realized that quickly enough. I’m going to keep taking photos in my free time and honing my craft, but Zagora just wasn’t right for me. A few others left around the same time I did. We’re thinking about getting together weekly and sharing our work, just a few of us. So I guess it was good for something.”

Apparently since my departure, Flipper has allowed the artists who stayed and the new recruits to take more of an active role. He has chosen to fade into the background and rarely visits the residents, allegedly to keep from distracting them from the process of creating and promoting art. Jenna’s friends say that when he visits the colony he’s treated like a celebrity and is swarmed by the artists like the secular savior they so badly need to believe in.
“It’s like they think he’s the greatest and most revolutionary thing to happen to the art world since Andy Warhol.” She laughed and said, “That’s just proof that they really have no idea what they’re doing there.”

She brushed her bangs out of her eyes, which were effervescent and penetratingly green. “Anyhow, who cares? This is all really tedious and insignificant. What have you been up to?”

I told her that I had considered calling my old boss at Northwestern Mutual to see if I could get my job back. Fortunately, my sister helped me get a position at UW-Milwaukee working as a night janitor the week I left. She also said that if I could sell my house, she would let me move in with her, rent-free, if I agreed to watch Hannah and Anna while she and Zach were at work.

“I just started there and I guess things could change, but truthfully, it’s the best job I’ve ever had. As a janitor, you get left the fuck alone and at the end of the day there is actual, tangible progress. It may not be a huge difference, but I feel like I am actually making a difference, cliché as it sounds. It’s boring and unglamorous and disgusting at times, but I don’t care. It feels right for now and I’m pretty happy.”

“That’s perfect,” Jenna said. “You’re just like Mierle Laderman Ukeles.” When she realized I didn’t know what she was talking about she apologized and added, “Maintenance art. She had this really great manifesto decades ago that basically said the simple act of keeping things going is a really important kind of art that isn’t considered by The Art World. There’s this really great quote, ‘After the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?’” Jenna offered to take pictures of me working and said it would really help her out because she was thinking about going back to school and needed to put together a portfolio of work. I told her I would think about it.

Her eyes got wide suddenly and she asked, “Weren’t you talking about making some kind of movie about Zagora? Are you still doing that?”

I told her I had been going through the footage while I babysat Hannah and Anna, but I wasn’t really sure anything would come of it and I didn’t know how to start. So much of it was garbage and I didn’t know if I could salvage any parts of it to make a coherent narrative. “Maybe Flip was right. It’s a dumb idea.”

“Honestly,” she said, “he’s smart and all, but he doesn’t know everything. I still think the video could be something great.” She touched my shoulder and smiled. I couldn’t tell if it was
meant to be encouraging, flirtatious, or a combination of the two, but I smiled back. “And I know a little bit about video editing. Maybe I could help you.” She cleared her throat and looked down at the ground. “In fact, after you left, I shot some video of my own. It’s probably not any good, but maybe you could use it.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “I guess it couldn’t hurt to look through it with somebody else. Fresh set of eyes might see something I’ve missed.” She wrote her number on the back of an old ticket stub, crumpled with faded, illegible ink.

Though I hadn’t really given her much thought before, Jenna is a pretty, happy twenty-five year old who is vibrant and full of energy. It’s not like I was counting down the days until my sex exile was over, but I knew I couldn’t deny attractions to women forever. Still, I was cautious and didn’t want to rush into anything. The guilt from nearly sleeping with the girl from Landmark right after Julie died was still hovering in some side room of my brain. Now I was glad I hadn’t done anything with her, especially so soon after and because I couldn’t even remember her name. Not that I knew Jenna much, but I felt at ease with her and promised to call soon so we could go through the footage together.

After we parted ways, I made my way to the florist and bought three dozen roses. There were other bouquets near Julie’s headstone already, but the cemetery was empty. I sat down in front of her name and said, “I’m sorry I haven’t come to see you since Flip and I came. It’s been hard on me. I’m doing better now, though. I think you’d like me again.” I paused, and felt my eyes get watery. “I hope you know how sorry I am for everything else, but I’m trying to stop feeling sorry for myself.”

When I got home I searched for DVDs of holidays and celebrations that we had taken in our early years together, before the video camera broke and we never bothered to replace it, and watched them for the first time, just to see her again. I was never one for attention and so most were shot by me, which meant Julie was everywhere. We hadn’t bothered to label them, so I put each one into my computer not knowing what I would get. I watched her laugh and move, the way her body leaned forward when she sat listening to someone, needing to be closer to everyone.

Finally, I found the one I was looking for, from the day we got the camera we decided to test it out. She suggested improvising our own independent short film, so she put on a long cotton turquoise dress with a low neckline and I wore a white button-down, black tie and black
slacks. We set the camera on the kitchen counter and aimed it toward the kitchen table where we sat.

It begins with her almost inaudibly saying, “Follow my lead.” She proceeded to speak to me in French, making seductive expressions that barely masked her self-conscious smirking while I repeated, “I don’t understand you, I’m sorry,” in response to everything she said, changing the inflection in my voice to match hers. This carried on for three minutes until finally she said, “Mon chéri, je t’aime,” grabbed my face with both her hands and kissed me theatrically and passionately. When she finished she clapped, giddy and happy, then got up to turn off the camera.

I watched this for hours until I slept an uninterrupted and restful nine hours.

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It’s late September now and since I ran into her, Jenna and I have gotten together five times to look through the videos, take notes, organize, and try to unearth some sort of coherent story from the jumble of footage. After watching videos of everyone working, it’s bizarre to think that helping run the colony ever seemed like a good idea to me and I’m surprised I lasted that long. Watching Flipper on camera, it’s apparent that he’s a natural leader—everyone’s focus is fully on him whenever he’s speaking, whether he’s telling a joke or explaining some theoretical position on creativity. The footage seems so distant to me. Some of it I don’t even remember taking, though I must have because I was the only one who ever had access to the camera.

Three nights ago, after we wrapped up our work, I asked Jenna if she would like to get together next week for dinner, not work, and she said she was thinking about asking me the same thing.

Although I was sort of expecting another dream after beginning work on the film and especially after asking Jenna out, it never came. But the average life expectancy of me, an American male, is 75.6 years and the average person spends more than two hours dreaming each night, so I have time, if nothing else.

What will happen with Jenna, the movie, me, I can’t say, but she keeps telling me that what she took away from her art classes is to value process of product, the act of creation and documentation of inspiration more than its end result which never turns out how she expected, but sometimes turns out better. She says that might not make her a great artist and plenty of
people in the art world disagree with her, but making something to display for the world is exciting and terrifying and makes her want to keep going, trusting that some day she will make something that justifies the struggle.
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