

## ABSTRACT

### DOTTED LINES

by Elizabeth K. Weeks

*Dotted Lines* is a collection of short stories centered around commodification to reflect the ways systemic ideologies affect the individual psyche. By placing monetary value on abstractions like death and time, I comment on consumer culture and capitalist influence. Similarly, I inspect social constructs like gender, sexuality, and love to dissect the patriarchal/puritanical foundations from which westernized perspectives are derived, with emphasis given to queer relationships. I convey these stories with consideration for accessibility, prioritizing clarity and humor. Fabulism, realism, transgression, and absurdity are all present within the collection, with tonal influences of Mary Gaitskill, Lorrie Moore, and Flannery O'Connor.

DOTTED LINES

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## Lien

Lula started her job as an administrative assistant the day after her brother killed himself. She could have taken bereavement leave, but decided it was better to pretend it never happened, that she hadn't found his still-warm yet very dead body contorted in a kitchen cabinet just twenty-four hours prior, surrounded by empty bottles of generic brand clog remover and bleach.

The credit union was her first full-time job, having recently graduated from college with a degree in museum studies. The career services department at her school held a fair wherein a credit union was seeking applicants *from all majors*. She applied, knowing her mediocre GPA and unwillingness to move somewhere that needed entry-level museum curators limited her career options.

The starting pay was twelve dollars an hour with benefits that included three weeks of paid vacation, dental insurance, a matching six-percent 401(k), and two vending machines in the break room, which she was currently staring at beside a man named John, the earliest arriving coworker who let her in and offered to show her around. John wore an ill-fitting brown suit of a style she had only seen in a stack of catalogues collecting dust in her grandmother's attic. What hair remained on his patchy head was shaved, and he had the forlorn eyes and tumultuous jowls of a hound dog. Lula glanced at a bag of cheese crackers in the vending machine, the stamp on which boasted an expiration date of two months ago.

"Do people use the vending machines a lot?" Lula asked.

"No," John said. Then he led her to the room beside the break room, which was the copy room. It smelled like toner chemicals and plastic.

She approached the copy machine. It reminded her of a taxidermied but once-docile beast, light gray in color except for the buttons, which were pastel shades of teal, coral, and mauve, massive in its size and usefulness. She found it strangely beautiful. Some of the white numbers and letters had been rubbed off and left shiny from overuse. The screen asked her politely what she needed to accomplish today. She felt like she was in a museum, hands clasped in front of her, afraid to touch anything for fear of disturbing the habitat. She imagined a placard beside the exhibit:

*The copy room, despite its quiet atmosphere and calm appearance, is in a near-constant state of fluctuation. While many think the Xerox machine reigns over the office supply kingdom due to its monolithic presence and multitude of functions, in fact the confidential shred bin asserts the most authority. Its merciless hunger for unwanted paper—and the discarded secrets thereupon—elevate the confidential shred bin to a position of unspeakable power.*

John led her to the filing room, which was locked and required him to press a laminated ID card against a box on the door. She caught a glimpse of the picture on his badge; he was wearing the same brown suit but had a bit more hair. The light on the box turned green and the door clicked. Inside, the room was lined with filing cabinets taller than her, a shade of not-quite-any-color that matched the walls.

“They’re alphabetical by client,” John offered.

She had nothing to say to that.

“We’re trying to go digital,” he added.

“That’s good,” Lula said.

“I like paper.”

“Oh.”

He took a loud slurp of coffee from a mug that read *Exceptional Sales, Third Quarter 2012* with his name underneath it. Dried brown stains ran down the side.

They circled back around to her cubicle. It was empty except for a slightly dated computer, a phone, a pen with the credit union’s logo, and an empty piggy bank.

“I’ll leave you to get started,” John said.

“I don’t know what to start.”

John nodded toward the phone. “Call IT. They’ll get you set up on the system.”

“Then what?” A person in human resources had hired her, and her direct supervisor Franklin was located at headquarters twenty miles away. She thought she’d be near cash and customers, but found instead she’d been assigned to a business sales department, housed on half of the middle floor of a squat seven-story building. The other half was occupied by a collections agency for toll booth violations.

“Go around and introduce yourself,” John said. “People will give you stuff to do.”

\* \* \*

The office emptied out around noon. Lula watched as the salespeople grouped in the hallway with their wool overcoats in varying neutral shades, all covered in different kinds of pet hair. They were waiting for John to finish his phone call. His forced, rasping laughter could be heard over the sounds of polite telephone ringing and uneven typing. None of them looked at her or invited her to go with them. She hadn't packed a lunch since she had been avoiding the kitchen, and she was too unfamiliar with the area to know where she could get a meal within an hour. She might have to resort to the vending machine, she thought. Her stomach growled and she was reminded of middle school, having no one to eat with and nothing worth eating.

She occupied herself by picking and prodding at the scabs on her kneecaps. They matched the ones on her palms. She had forgotten about them until now, and grew suddenly self-conscious about having chosen a skirt that day. The bruises on her had purpled ferociously and there was a twinge in her wrist. She couldn't remember when she had fallen—

“Tallulah Whitmore,” a man said. He had sounded out the syllables: *tah-lu-lah wit-more*.

She glanced up from her knees. He had his index finger pressed against the nameplate she had printed and tacked to the outside of her cubicle.

“I go by Lula,” she said.

He held out his hand to her. “Jimmy Brown. Small business.”

She shook it. His skin was rough and cold. She met his eyes to find a shade of greyish blue like a shattered sheet of ice. She couldn't see through them, and he looked at her placidly as if he weren't looking at anything at all. He was middle-aged but trim and handsome with some salt in his pepper hair. He didn't smile, but he had an amused, confident bounciness to him which she found appealing.

He let go of her hand and slid it into the pocket of his black pinstripe pants. His tie was navy houndstooth, and she wondered if he knew it didn't match in color or pattern. “You're the new secretary, huh. We've been needing one of those.”

“Administrative assistant,” Lula corrected.

“Sure, sure,” he said with a nod. “Hey, let's grab lunch. There's a burger joint down the way. Total dive, great food.”

“Alright,” she replied.

\* \* \*



Lula was too nervous to eat a burger in front of him, or a salad, or any food that might lend itself to finding an unaware home on her face. She ordered a grilled cheese which she ate in dainty bites, putting it down after each one to wipe her mouth. If she could taste anything, it would have been good. Her senses felt soggy like they'd been swimming in abandoned dishwater.

Jimmy watched a football game on one of the televisions hung up in a corner. They had gone through each of their getting-to-know-you lists while they were waiting for their food. Jimmy had worked at the credit union for eleven years. He had started as an underwriter. He was married to a mechanical engineer who worked at the Air Force base. They had two daughters, ages twelve and fifteen, and a Husky named Suzanne who liked to squirm through a gap in the fence and trot around town every now and again. He and his wife had been married twenty years.

Lula told him she had just graduated from college with a degree in museum studies, and that was all she could think to say about herself.

"Did you enjoy it?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes," Lula replied. Then, after an awkward pause, he mentioned he had a perfect credit score for some reason. Everything he said sounded like he was bragging. She couldn't tell if she should praise him or counter with an equally self-aggrandizing comment, so she didn't say anything.

They ate in silence, until Lula couldn't eat for the sudden tense knot rising in her throat. She set her grilled cheese down and wept noisily into her greasy napkin.

"Whoa," Jimmy said. "What's, um. What's happening."

As abruptly as it began, it stopped, like a garbage disposal switch. She'd done this a few times yesterday too but thought she'd gotten over it. She took a deep breath and picked up her sandwich again. The people at the tables beside them were staring.

"My brother killed himself yesterday," Lula said.

When met with reasonably stunned silence from Jimmy, she added, "I found his body. I have to make arrangements after work."

"You're not kidding," Jimmy said.

"No," Lula replied.

"Did he leave a note or anything?"

She nodded. "It was appended to my grocery list. It said, *This is your fucking fault. Love, Aaron.*"

“Yikes,” Jimmy said flatly, as if he had nothing more comforting in his arsenal of scripted condolences. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

\* \* \*

Memorial arrangements were more expensive than Lula had anticipated. She sold her car, an old thing in ill-repair that could only get her from point A to B at a maximum of thirty-five miles an hour. The sale covered the cremation but not an urn, so she took Aaron home in a cardboard box that she held on her lap throughout the hour-long bus ride. She wondered if she could find his tooth fillings in the mound of dust, or if they had been incinerated too. The box was surprisingly heavy; the phrase “dead weight” popped into her head and she laughed more loudly than the thought warranted. No one noticed.

When the bus had cleared out and she was the last patron remaining, she took her phone out of her purse and called Jimmy. She had gotten his cell phone number from the employee directory. It was Friday now. They had worked together the whole week. He was the only one willing to show her the little things—how to program her email address in the copier, upload files to the share site, search for information on the client database. In turn she did all of his scanning and filing. They had lunch together every day, a different hole in the wall each time. She didn’t ask why he never went with the rest of the salespeople.

“Hello?” he asked when he picked up.

“Hi,” she said. “This is Lula.”

“Hey, Lula.” He didn’t sound happy to hear from her. The statement ended in an upward lilt to make it more of a question.

“I was calling because—” The knot in her throat again. She swallowed it down, as she had gotten better at doing. The few times it had happened at work, she’d managed to rush into the bathroom and sob in the handicap stall. It never lasted more than forty seconds. “I’m about to reach the city and I thought you might like to meet for a drink.” She wouldn’t get her first paycheck for another two weeks, but she had a little money left over from the sale of her car.

“I’m having dinner with my family,” he said.

“Oh. Sorry.”

A television blared in the background, or maybe it was his wife and children chattering while waiting for him to come back to the table. Then she heard footsteps and his voice returned a little quieter: “How long will you be out? I can meet you after.”

“A while,” she said. Until the buses stop running, she thought. “But I don’t know where the bars are.”

He laughed in that slightly condescending way he had whenever she didn’t know something basic. She secretly liked it because it meant he felt useful and knowledgeable around her. He gave her the name of a bar that was a little ways off the main drag of a bus stop coming up, and said he would meet her in an hour.

\* \* \*

She arrived thirty-two minutes early. It was another dive, and Lula felt out of place in her blouse and pencil skirt. It made sense at lunchtime, sitting across from a businessman in a mismatched suit who ate messy food with appalling grace. After business hours, surrounded by large bearded men in biker jackets and red-carpeted walls strung with offseason Christmas lights, she wondered how long it would take for someone to ask her if she was lost. A jukebox with real vinyl circled through classic rock hits. Her phone was dying, so she had nothing to look at. She sat alone at a small circular table that wobbled every time she nudged it. Aaron’s box occupied the chair beside her.

Jimmy showed up ten minutes late. He wore a t-shirt with a beer logo she only vaguely recognized, jeans, and a leather jacket. Not the cool kind like the bikers were wearing, but the expensive kind from department stores that she imagined his mother-in-law might have bought him for his birthday. As he slid onto the chair across from her, he said, “You’re still in your work clothes.”

“I haven’t gone home yet.”

“Why not?”

“I had to pick up Aaron.” She nodded to the box.

Jimmy’s eyes followed her gesture and he tilted his head to see the box on the chair. “Yikes,” he said again. Then he turned his attention to the bar, craning his neck to see what was on tap. When he looked back at her, he added, “What are you drinking?”

“I don’t know. No one came by.”

“You have to order at the bar. Have you never been to a bar?”

“Not like this one,” she said. “Only the restaurant kind.”

He gave her a look like she was dumb. These were becoming more frequent. They thrilled her. “What do you like?”

“I don’t know. I don’t drink much.”

“Are you twenty-one?”

“Twenty-two.”

“God, you’re young,” he said. He ran his hand through his hair. It stuck up near the cowlick at the crown of his head. She first noticed it yesterday when she stood beside him at his desk. He had been showing her something funny he’d found on the internet. She didn’t pay attention to it, too busy staring at the cowlick and breathing in his perpetual aura of stale tobacco smoke. He smoked Marlboro Golds, which allowed him to take a ten-minute smoke break every hour and a half on the dot. Sometimes she followed him and stood outside in the chill wind, hands shoved in her pockets thumbing over the ridges of keys until her skin chafed raw. He never offered her a cigarette or asked why she had joined him.

“You could pick something out for me,” she said. “I’m sure I’ll like it.”

He went to the bar and leaned on his elbows. Lula watched as the bartender—a severe brunette woman with a thin crooked mouth—noted him and smiled at something he said, not in a polite employee way, but a genuine one. Jimmy held up two fingers and she went to get their drinks. His gaze trailed down to her ass and then back up when she turned around again. The bartender slid the drinks over to him. He rifled through his wallet and left a bill on the bar, nodding his thanks before bringing the drinks back to the table.

“What is it?” Lula asked, picking up the proffered glass.

“Beer,” Jimmy said.

“I mean, what kind.”

“Local.”

She took a drink and tried not to pull a face. “Thanks.”

“You said you’d like it.”

“I thought I would.”

“You’ve never had beer before?” he asked, using the mildly disdainful expression he’d given her off and on all week, a combination of surprise and disgust. She loved it as much as his condescension.

“No one’s ever bought me one.”

Jimmy continued drinking, occupying his attention with a basketball game on the television above the bar. Lula simultaneously hoped and worried he would ask why she invited him out tonight. She would be forced to come up with something on the fly that seemed reasonable, other than, *I can’t stop thinking about you*. Then again, she reasoned, maybe he already knew.

She was staring at him. He never seemed to notice her staring at him—at his eyelashes long enough to curl back to his brow bone when he looked up, worried lips chapped and flaking, heavy upper lip that covered his teeth so that she could only see the crooked bottom ones when he talked, sandpapery stubble peppering his chin and the sound it made when he rubbed it with his dry fingers.

He continued looking at the television as he asked her, “So was it really your fault?”

“Maybe.” She took another sip and this time tried to swallow without tasting it.

“What did you do?”

“I don’t know. When we fought, he always told me I made him feel like an object.”

Jimmy had no discernible reaction to this. She wondered if he was even listening. Then he asked, “How are your parents holding up?”

“They’re dead too.”

He finally looked at her. “I’m sorry.”

She fidgeted and twisted her glass around. It tore the soggy cocktail napkin. “We inherited our parents’ house after they died. It was just us.”

“That’s a pretty good deal though, right? Free house.”

What a salesman thing to say, she thought. “The cost was much higher than money.”

“Good point,” he said, like they were having a friendly debate. He leaned back in his chair and added, “But things aren’t so bad, you know? You have a degree, a good job, a place to live. Some people have it much worse.”

“Definitely,” she agreed, and forced down another mouthful of beer.

\* \* \*

Jimmy ended up drinking four beers while Lula only managed the one, but she could still feel her face start to get warm. They talked about work between long bouts of nothingness. After a while he began to tell her stories of his life when he was her age. He’d belonged to a frat in college and

was known for partying. He went on a football scholarship and got injured, then changed his major to finance. His wife was his high school sweetheart. He kept their prom photo in his wallet, which he showed Lula proudly even though he had a mullet in it. He wore a dopey smile as he spoke about her, the first time Lula had seen him smile at all. He told her how much he loved his wife, how he woke up every morning grateful to be in her life and that he worked hard to be the best husband he could be.

“What’s her name?” Lula asked, heartened by this burst of warmth from such a cold man, even if it wasn’t toward her.

“Hannah,” he said as he tucked his wallet in his pocket.

Around midnight, Jimmy closed their tab and Lula thanked him for the drinks. They made their way out of the bar, Aaron’s box under her arm. She said goodbye and wandered toward the bus stop.

She had almost made it across the parking lot when Jimmy drove up beside her and slowed to her walking pace. “Where’s your car?”

“I sold it.”

“Why?”

She held up the box. “Incinerating a body was more expensive than I anticipated.”

“Let me drive you home.”

“You don’t have to.” She kept walking and forced her smile down. She’d always liked games like this, the no-maybe-yes push and pull of benign flirtation. It occurred to her that he might just be concerned for her, but then she wondered if concern alone was a kind of affection.

Jimmy followed her. “Come on, I insist.”

“You really don’t have to. I’m out of the way.”

“Where do you live?”

“Off Salem.”

“Jesus, that’s a crap part of town. It’s late.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Tallulah,” Jimmy said with a didactic edge, like he did when they were at the office and he wanted to get her attention. Like she imagined he spoke to his daughters. “Quit being stubborn and get in the damn car.”

She rounded to the passenger side and got in. Their coworkers all drove luxury sports vehicles and SUVs, but Jimmy's car was a modest sedan. The inside smelled falsely clean like a rental. The only item in it besides Jimmy was a black umbrella in the footwell. If someone broke in, they might be unsure it belonged to anyone at all. His office was the same way: personalized only by a hastily framed picture of his children facing toward the door instead of toward him. When she asked him about it, he told her that he hated the picture, and he'd been bullied into decorating his office by their coworkers.

He swerved a little as he drove, but the streets were empty anyway. They stayed silent for a good portion of the drive, until Lula said, "Thank you for coming out with me tonight."

"No problem," he replied. He spoke as if her remark had been an assertion of etiquette, but she got the impression he understood what it meant to her to have a friend right now. She'd never been very social; she had a couple acquaintances in high school and never quite got the hang of college friendships. Her grandmother called her on occasion and they'd chat for about an hour, but that was the extent of her interaction with others.

Jimmy pulled into the driveway and ducked his head to look at Lula's house, a large off-white colonial with a wrap-around porch and French doors. The lawn had overgrown with grass and weeds, ivy climbing up the siding. She imagined onlookers thought it was haunted.

"Looks like you need a mow," Jimmy said.

"I know." She wondered what Jimmy thought of the place—if he was impressed that she owned a nice house or affronted by the poor maintenance. Or perhaps he pitied her. She'd never liked being pitied, but for once she might deserve it. "I'll get to it this weekend."

"See you Monday, then."

That was her cue to leave, but she hesitated. The box on her lap weighed her down and kept her from moving. She imagined it being so heavy that it crushed her legs, so hot that it melted her flesh, so evil that it sprouted demonic limbs and ensnared her to the seat. Aaron's ashes could keep her as Jimmy's prisoner for eternity, and she wouldn't mind at all.

Jimmy tried again. "Have a good weekend."

"Do you think—" She twisted in her seat to look straight at him. "Would you like to come inside?"

"No," Jimmy said quickly. "I need to go home." The acerbic honesty in his tone was so refreshing she would have said anything to get him to talk to her like that again.

“Are you sure? I could...” She wasn’t certain how she would end the sentence, but perhaps the silence insinuated something more salient than anything she could come up with. All she needed him to know was her intention to offer something, her mind or heart or body, all three even, whatever he wanted.

“Absolutely not.”

She closed her eyes and took in the moment. He was drawing a line between them, one that she wanted to pluck, rattle until it loosened and broke. She wondered if he would ask her outright to leave, or if he would eventually drag her out of the car. He’d have to touch her, then. He’d have to have his hands on her arms or legs or whatever it took to pull her out, manhandle her to the curb and drive off. And they’d have to see each other on Monday too. What a wonderful thing it would be, to witness his scrunched, uncomfortable face as he ignored her while passing by her cubicle to get to his office. The tightening of his jaw when she’d drop off paperwork that needed his signature. Furtive eye contact to confirm that she was still—as she always would be—staring at him.

“Why don’t you ever go to lunch with the other salespeople?” she asked.

He turned toward her slightly, his arm draped over the steering wheel, looking stricken by the question. “I’ve never thought about it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t really like them.”

“But you’re one of them.” She knew he was different. The other salespeople were charming and polite, saying things they thought you wanted them to say and never what they really thought. They were always selling you something, even if it was just a smile, but you were never sure about the product you were getting. You only knew that you suddenly and desperately needed it.

“That doesn’t mean I want to have lunch with them,” he said.

“You like me, don’t you?” There was a desperate edge to her voice, but she didn’t care.

“Sure, you’re okay I guess.”

It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. Her eyes flooded with tears. She unbuckled her seatbelt and picked up her box, which felt lighter than it had a moment ago. Jimmy looked down to jiggle the stick shift while waiting for her to leave. Instead of opening the door, she leaned over the center console and kissed him on the cheek.



“Thank you,” she said again, and left.

\* \* \*

On Sunday, as she was gathering up the courage to enter the kitchen, she heard a beep come from Aaron’s bedroom. The beeping had been happening periodically since he died. She had convinced herself she was imagining it. The house had four bedrooms and two full baths, which meant she rarely left the comfort of her own bed, or occasionally sat in the cozy living room chair to read. She hadn’t been in Aaron’s room in years.

She pressed her ear to his door. A smell emanated from the room, a combination of sweat and mold that was worse than the kitchen. She wanted to flee back to the safety of her own bedroom, but imagined the face Jimmy would make in response to her cowardice, the disgust she loved so dearly.

The beep sounded again. She covered her nose with the crook of her arm and flung open the door.

The floor was covered in minutia: clothes, comic books, discarded computer parts, miniature statues from a game she’d never played. Dishes towered on Aaron’s desk, visible blue fuzz on the remaining food. The same spots floated in a half-finished glass of orange juice. An open pizza box with three slices of dry, curling pizza sat on the bed, which was covered in rumpled dirty blankets and piles of unwashed clothes.

The only clean surface was the desk chair and the space immediately in front of it. A large desktop made the dark room glow red with its various pulsing parts, and the fan inside it whirled loudly. The room was several degrees hotter than the rest of the house. It reminded her of another exhibit, the habitat of a forlorn gamer:

*The gamer nests using various fabrics which it drapes over itself for day-to-day wear. It will often grow lethargic and refuse to leave the nest, summoning food via telecommunication devices, subsisting mostly on carbohydrates and fatty proteins. The gamer enjoys tinkering with electronic gadgets and collecting small tokens of achievement such as trading cards. Performative aggression and isolation are common concerns for gamers; they have trouble garnering empathy for anyone other than their own species, and as a result find themselves lacking meaningful bonds with others. They become emotionally bereft and depressive, oftentimes at the sacrifice of their livelihood.*

She heard another beep, and a white light shone from the other side of the desk. She sat down in the chair, careful not to topple the dish tower, and found Aaron's cell phone connected to a charger. He had fifty-seven unread text messages. When she tried to read them, the phone prompted a PIN. She tried his birthday. It didn't work. She tried her birthday. Nothing.

She jiggled the computer mouse and Aaron's monitors glowed to life. They wanted a password, too, but the default username in the field above it read *Xeno*. She typed 9366 into his phone, which spelled Xeno on the keypad. It unlocked.

The first text messages were casual. They were from a handful of people with ridiculous pseudonyms: Twizted, MasterChurro89, Kodosan, FinnRot. She only read a few from Twizted. The most recent said, *missed another raid. Where u at?*

There was a group text between all of them, and she scrolled through it. They all talked about a game, only briefly mentioning Xeno's absence here and there without concern. Eventually she got to the last message Aaron had sent, hours before she suspected he killed himself: *lmao*.

She read the messages preceding it, where he talked about his *fucken sister* and how she apparently treated him like shit. She suddenly remembered the night before Aaron's death, not having realized she'd forgotten it. Repression, maybe. They'd fought. Rather, Aaron had a fight and Lula calmly listened. They were coming home from a thrift store shopping trip where Lula had purchased new work clothes. Lula was trying to find her house key among her bags and purse while Aaron stood on the porch holding nothing but a gas station soda and yelling at her.

He told her he wanted to sell the house, split the funds, and never speak to her again. Lula nodded along in passive agreement, knowing she wouldn't sell the house and Aaron had no income to help him move out anyway. He had graduated high school with a C-average, didn't go to college, and couldn't keep a job. Every time he tried, he would continuously show up late, or not at all, until eventually they would quit scheduling him. The two of them survived on their parents' life insurance funds and savings, the account for which required two signatures to draw from, so Aaron had no individual access to the money. It had dwindled to nothing by the time Lula had graduated.

When she had finally located her keys, she smiled at him and said, "No."

He called her a parasite and pushed her. She fell and scraped her knees and hands, then he crumpled beside her and began to weep. He had no money, no car, no prospects. No way to leave her. That was how she liked it.

Lula wiggled the mouse and a black desktop appeared, littered with shortcut icons. There was only one window open, so she maximized it to find the entry screen of the video game he'd been playing for years. It asked for an authorization code instead of a password, like the VPN at her work, so she rooted around the desk looking for a token. When she located it under the keyboard, she typed in the code.

As soon as she was logged in, a message window popped up from Twizted: *WHERE U BEEN?? churro cant tank for shit lol*

She hesitated. Considering her brother's death was, according to him, Lula's fault, it seemed cruel to leave his friends with the poor tanking skills of MasterChurro89. She was sure she could learn them just as well as Aaron.

Her hands hovered over the keyboard, staring at the blinking cursor and deciding what to do. She finally replied, *My sister took away my phone.*

*what a fuckin bitch*, Twizted said.

Before she could think of a way to respond, a window popped up inviting her to join a group called FLICK MONKEYS, and Twizted added, *cmon were bout to cap citadel.*

She accepted the request.

\* \* \*

Weeks passed. Lula cleaned Aaron's bedroom one item at a time whenever she entered to play his video game. She had memorized their raid schedule, and the members of FLICK MONKEYS frequently commended Xeno on his suddenly improved tanking skills. She found the process simple and validating, and understood why Aaron had chosen the role of tank: all you had to do was run into the enemy and take all the damage so the rest of the team stayed safe. The trick was that you had to be willing to die.

The orange juice glass was the first to go, then the pizza box. Then a plate, and another plate, but she couldn't go into the kitchen so she stacked them on the porch. She ate foods that could be assembled and didn't require refrigeration, or ordered take-out. Mostly she just stopped eating, except for going to lunch with Jimmy, which she did every day unless he had a call to go on or a deal to close. His sales were doing very well.

“I have good news,” she told him one Friday morning. She set his coffee on a coaster and sat across from him with a steno pad in her lap. She didn’t know shorthand but she thought it made her look official. They never spoke about the night they got drinks together, or that he had rejected her proposition.

He side-eyed the coffee and said, “You know secretaries don’t do that.”

“Administrative assistant—” she corrected.

“That’s too many syllables.”

“—and they do when they’ve been promoted to your designated support.”

It wasn’t actually a promotion. Lula had spoken to her boss Franklin, who called to see how she was faring in the land of business sales operations. She said she was doing fine, but had some interest in small business, and that was where most of her time went anyway. He looked at Jimmy’s sales and asked if she’d be interested in focusing more of her efforts on growing their small business book, and she said absolutely. It was more responsibility for no additional pay, but it meant she only had to work with Jimmy and not the rest of the sales team. In turn it meant that she and Jimmy could inhabit their own little island together and ignore everyone else.

“You’re kidding,” Jimmy said.

“Franklin put the approval request into HR to change my job description. You’ll have to get me up to speed on SBA, but I’ll catch on quick. I can even do your closings for you. Express first, I imagine, then moving on to 7(a)s and 504s.”

Jimmy’s expression was indecipherable. He looked somewhere between incredulous and thrilled. Finally he said, “I get my own secretary?”

She opened her mouth to correct him, then settled on “Yes.”

\* \* \*

The day had gone so well and Jimmy had seemed so pleased by her work that she finally decided to face the kitchen at home. She remembered the days before Aaron’s death, watching the dishes and food pile up in the sink, but had been so busy preparing for her new job that she had asked Aaron several times to deal with it and he refused. She couldn’t imagine the damage now that it had been almost two months.

She paced in front of the kitchen for nearly an hour, imagining Jimmy beside her as she spoke to him about her thought process.

*It doesn't make sense why I'm afraid to go in there*, she thought toward imaginary Jimmy.

*It really doesn't*, he replied. He was smoking, even though she would never allow him to smoke in her house, but it was all in her head so it didn't matter anyway. *It's just a room.*

*The note is still on the refrigerator.*

*Still just a room.*

*I don't want to wash all those dishes.*

*You gotta. It smells like shit in here.*

*I won't do it.*

Imaginary Jimmy gave her a stern glare as he breathed smoke out of his nostrils. *Tallulah*, he said. Even though it was just in her mind, he heard his voice so distinctly it sent a pleasant shiver through her. *Go in the damn kitchen.*

"Alright," she said aloud.

She stepped into the kitchen. It looked exactly as she left it except the bleach and clog remover bottles had been pushed away by the paramedics. The sink was full of cold, murky grey water with dishes jutting out of it like glaciers. Two clean plates stood in the drying rack. Aaron must have attempted the dishes before deciding to kill himself.

She glanced at the refrigerator, a yellow Frigidaire older than her, full of food that needed to be thrown away. The grocery list was magnetized to the freezer, slightly crooked, on a lined pad topped with pansies. A red felt pen dangled from a piece of twine. She didn't read the words, but noted for the first time that his hand had been trembling—the letters were warped like a lightning strike underneath her tidy handwriting reminding her future self to buy margarine, rice, and pudding cups.

*C'mon*, Jimmy said, now sitting on the kitchen counter, knocking his heels against the cabinetry. *Get to work.*

She wanted him to reach out to her, put his hand on her shoulder in comfort. Then she realized the real Jimmy would never do such a thing. He'd probably insinuate that she was a coward and tell her a story about how he once faced some falsely daunting obstacle without fear or concern, conquered it without challenge, and was immediately lauded for his efforts. He made everything look easy, which led Lula to believe not that he was exceptional, but that he'd never been confronted with a genuine problem.

Imaginary Jimmy pointed his cigarette toward the pantry, his heavy eyebrows raised in command.

“Fine,” Lula said, and went to the pantry to get a trash bag.

\* \* \*

When Lula finished cleaning, she called Jimmy and asked to meet him again for drinks. “To celebrate,” she had said. She implied it was because of the position change, but she meant conquering the kitchen. They went to the same carpet-walled biker bar as last time. She was still wearing her cleaning clothes. Jimmy didn’t seem to notice. He ordered her a cider instead of a beer, and she liked it much better. They talked as they always did, disjointedly, as if having two different conversations. Whatever Lula replied had no bearing on Jimmy’s response, so she often said whatever words were floating around in her head, knowing it wouldn’t make a difference. Despite this, they stayed until the employees started lifting chairs on top of tables.

Jimmy wavered on his feet as he put on his leather jacket. They made it to the parking lot and Lula headed toward the bus stop, but Jimmy shook his head and pointed at his car. “Don’t even try it.”

She smiled to herself and got in. He turned the engine and switched on the heat but didn’t put on his seatbelt. Instead he reached down and pulled the lever to lower the back of his seat. “Gotta give me a few minutes.”

“I’m not in a hurry.” Lula pulled her seat’s lever too until they were both lying down, staring at the ceiling of the car.

*The salesman often escapes his bureaucratic habitat to indulge in the company of other species. Despite his diurnal inclinations and familial attachments, he may at times operate nocturnally for the sake of recreation, during which he imbibes intoxicants that can alter or impair his behavior. While mated for life, the salesman may nevertheless entertain thoughts of adultery during these outings. If provoked, he may act.*

After a few minutes of silence, Jimmy said, “You don’t really think it’s your fault, do you?”

She imagined the shaking red letters. The feeling of Aaron pushing her down after he called her a parasite. The thrill she had felt, telling him he couldn’t leave her.

“No,” she said. “He was very depressed. There was nothing I could do.”

“Good,” Jimmy said with a self-satisfied nod.

Lula asked, “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

He thought about it. Then, as nonchalantly as he said everything else, he said, “Every day I wake up hoping for—I don’t know. Something awful. An accident, maybe. Minding my own business, get a phone call, find out my kids are dead. It’s all I want. Can’t go back in time and not have them, so this is the only way out. I daydream about it a lot. You ever see me staring into space, it’s probably because I’m imagining it. Life without them.”

The confession made her love him even more. Out of moral obligation, she replied, “That’s horrible,” but the excitement in her voice belied her feigned offense.

“You asked.”

“I thought you loved them.”

“I love Hannah. Hannah wanted kids, I didn’t. She said she’d leave me if we didn’t have them. So now all I can do is hope they die, get incarcerated, or run away.”

“You don’t care about them at all?”

“Nope. Cutting them both off the day they turn eighteen. That was the deal.”

“That’s awful.”

Jimmy turned his head to look at her. “You don’t actually care. Nothing I do or tell you will change your opinion of me. You’ve put me on a pedestal and there’s no way down.”

“You’re right,” she said.

\* \* \*

The clock on Jimmy’s dash read four in the morning when he pulled into her driveway. Tonight was the night, she thought. This would finally happen and she could quit feeling so alone all the time. She’d never had sex before, but she’d do whatever he asked of her like she did at work, and then she could show him all the progress she made in the kitchen and maybe a bit of Aaron’s game, too. They could be close, intimate even, and he would grow to need her and feel needed by her, like she and Aaron had been. She asked, “Would you like to—”

He cut her off: “Don’t bother asking.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not attracted to you.”

The answer was not *I'm married*, or *We work together*, or *I'm old enough to be your father*, but *I'm not attracted to you*. Lula was certain that a young, decent-looking woman had never twice been rejected by a straight older man in the entire history of the world. Once was fine, part of the game, but twice was downright offensive.

"You seem to like my attention well enough," she said.

"I'm only human. No one's looked at me the way you look at me in a long time."

"I just want to show you something. We don't have to do anything else."

"Nope." The line again, the one he drew between them that she wanted to rip apart with her teeth. "I see your trap, kid. People like you get in these fucked-up cycles. Like closing a loan. They need our money, we need their interest. Bleed them dry one day at a time. But I'm not signing on what you're selling."

She felt the bubble rise in her throat again, but this time she was convinced it would come out as a scream. Instead she said, "I'll call HR. I'll tell them..." She trailed off, letting the threat dwindle.

"Look. The entire office sees your little crush, okay? You can tell HR I bent you over my desk and fucked you sideways, but I have over a decade at this company and I make a lot of money for them. Even if it were true, they wouldn't do a damn thing about it."

"Why are you doing this then?" she demanded. "The lunches? The drinks? What's the point?"

"You may be a shit salesman but you're a good secretary. I'd like to keep you around." He said this as if it were obvious, even though he had never once directly commended her work.

"I am an *administrative assistant*."

He made a vague motion with his hand. "Whatever. Flight attendant, stewardess. Server, waitress. It doesn't matter."

"It *does* matter."

"You sound like my kids."

"Does that mean you want me dead?"

"Of course not. I just want you out of my fucking car."

The tips of her ears started to burn. Her hands were shaking. "What would you do if I quit?"



“Guess I’d have to get my own coffee.” He shifted in reverse but kept his foot on the brake.

“You’re a parasite,” she said, and stormed out of the car.

\* \* \*

Inside, she fell into Aaron’s desk chair without taking off her coat, logged on to the game, and typed in the group chat, *Guys I got a job.*

*gratz bro*, Churro said.

*GG*, Kodosan echoed.

*It’s an administrative position but my boss calls me his secretary. It’s demeaning and annoying and he thinks it’s funny.*

*what a fuckin asshole*, Twizted said.

*Fuck that guy*, FinnRot added. An invitation to queue for a dungeon followed. *Gonna gank Ronin. Tank plz.*

*Ok*, Lula typed, and accepted the invite.

\* \* \*

On Monday, Lula dropped Jimmy’s coffee off without speaking to him. He kept his door closed all morning but she could see him through the window in front of his desk. The glass was patterned with tight vertical waves so that his body was fuzzy and distorted, but she could still make out his mismatched forest green tie and light blue shirt. He wasn’t moving except for the occasional click of a mouse.

Her computer chimed. She glanced at it to find a flashing instant message from Jimmy: *Cmere I want to show you something.*

She opened the door to his office far enough to poke her head in. She trained her features to polite complacency.

Jimmy pushed his chair back and gestured for her to come inside. She did, and rounded his desk to look at his monitor. On it was a six-second video with the overall views counter tracking over a million loops. A small boy was bouncing on a mattress while the person holding the camera was saying, “Be careful, don’t hit the—” and then the boy bounced high enough to shatter the ceiling fan light with his head. The bedroom went dark. Jimmy cackled. As soon as the video ended, it started again.

## A Wet Man

The munch wasn't anything like Cody had expected. For one, he didn't think a casual gathering of BDSM enthusiasts would take place at an Olive Garden. Two, everyone seemed to be over forty, except for a young woman around his age wearing a pastel pink dress and a matching headband with fuzzy cat ears. There were two men who might have been in their fifties: one of them wore a black cowboy hat, and the other looked a bit like a paunchy Pat Sajak, if Pat Sajak wore threadbare Hawaiian shirts and constantly breathed through his mouth. The rest of the attendees sat tightly in their chairs staring at their menus, unspeaking. The breadsticks were getting cold on the center of a line of tables that had been shoved together. Cody counted a dozen people, not including himself.

He felt like an outlier, in part because the seat across from him was empty and menu-less, the chair piled with coats and handbags, and also because he still wasn't sure what the S in BDSM stood for, whether it was submission or sadism, or the implication of both put together. The same with D: dominance or discipline? It seemed like an ineffective acronym. He guessed the two men, Cowboy Hat and Pat Sajak, were the only two dominants at the table, and the rest were varying shades of submissive. A long woman with a pallid complexion was wearing a tastefully rhinestoned collar and hadn't touched her menu. Cody guessed she and Cat Ears, who sat on either side of him, belonged to Pat Sajak. The simple fact the three of them were here together told Cody that Pat Sajak probably had a harem, and if so, did he recruit men?

The woman beside Cody tried to make small talk. She had silver hair cut into a dramatic bob and wore a blouse that looked like it came from a junior girl's section of a Walmart circa 2002, all neon flowers and a wide, unflattering neckline. Some of her burgundy lipstick had made its way to her teeth. Her hands trembled as she pierced her breadstick with gelled, French-tip fingernails.

"Let me guess," she said, bumping shoulders with him. "Sugar baby?"

Cody felt a flush rise to his neck. He scooted oily iceberg lettuce around his plate. "No," he admitted. He held his mouth open to offer the truth, but nothing came out.

She squeezed his knee in a way that he might have considered lascivious if he had a better understanding of munches. "I do shibari."

"Shibari?" Cody asked.

“Being tied up, but fancy. I like suspension too.” She took a bite of breadstick and set it down again to wipe her shaking fingers on the napkin in her lap. “It’s a spiritual practice.”

“Oh,” Cody said. He imagined this woman naked, tied in artful knots and hung from a loft-style ceiling in front of a white background: the shapes and shadows of her matured body, silken red rope pressing divots into her skin, joints contorted into painful stillness. It was not an arousing or even erotic thought, rather one that resonated with him on a profound level he had never before encountered during the appetizer portion of a chain restaurant meal.

“I’m a masochist,” he said.

He hadn’t admitted this aloud yet, partially because he didn’t quite believe it about himself, given that he received no sexual gratification from pain. S&M pornography made him cringe and cover his eyes when anything harsher than nipple clamps were being applied. On the frequent occasions he cut himself, burned himself, or purposefully flung himself down flights of stairs, he felt only an immense wave of existential relief. He had considered a career as a stuntman, but thought it required too much athleticism and coordination. As such, his day job consisted of troubleshooting password resets at a call center for a major car insurance provider. He often leaned back in his squeaking ergonomic desk chair and made his fingertips go purple with rubber bands. On bad days, he jammed the ends of unfolded paperclips into his nail beds, or stapled the webbing of his fingers.

Shibari smiled at him in a fond, slightly condescending way, as if he needed to be more specific, so he added, “I’m not into it for, like, fucked-up reasons. I don’t hate myself or want to die or anything. I just want someone to beat me.”

She nodded wisely and said, “Unless you could settle for a light spanking, I don’t think you’ll find what you’re looking for here.”

Cody glanced at their table fellows, who sat silently listening to Cowboy Hat laugh at a joke he’d just made, though none responded in kind. Cat Ears kept both feet tucked under her on the chair and was typing something on her phone. Pat Sajak had his hand balled at the back of her neck, the way people pick up cats.

“I know someone you might like,” Shibari said, and pulled her enormous purse into her lap. She fished around in it and took out a crumpled receipt and pen, then wrote down a phone number. Her hand shook so much that the numbers were barely legible. Cody wondered if she

had Parkinson's, and that was why she liked being tied up. When she handed it to him, she added, "He's expensive, but he does good work. Text, don't call. Tell him Rosa referred you."

\* \* \*

Once at home, having skipped the post-meal kink party, Cody opened his laptop to google the social norm for initiating conversation with a sex worker recommended to him by a stranger at a munch, but the results were disappointing. He did a reverse phone lookup, but received only confirmation that the owner of the number lived nearby.

Cody wondered if he'd be able to invite the man to his place or if they'd have to rent a hotel room. His apartment was embarrassing—he lived above an empty space rented out by an improv theater troupe that met three times a week. All of his possessions came from estate sales that he frequented out of boredom, except for his decor, which consisted of shadow boxes filled with bloodied gauze pinned like an entomologist pins butterfly wings, and the date of the wound written neatly underneath. He'd always considered these pieces creative, but looking at them for once from an outside perspective, he thought they might be off-putting. He just couldn't imagine a high-priced sadist would want to work surrounded by moth-eaten furniture and knock-off tiffany lamps.

He clicked around aimlessly on his phone until it notified him that his battery was almost dead, which he took as a sign he needed to act. He pulled up a new message and input the number from the piece of paper, double checked it, and typed, *I received your number from a woman into shibari named Rosa. Would it be possible to set up an appointment with you?*

He ground his teeth as he sent it, and went through all the normal stages of cold texting someone: disbelief that he'd managed to send the text in the first place; an overwhelming desire to retract it just as the word *Delivered* appeared under the message; fear that it went to the wrong person and some fourteen year old staying up past her bedtime was now confusedly googling *shibari*; furious disdain that his life had come to this, needing to re-budget the next few months of expenses to figure out how he might afford to be consensually beaten; and finally, acceptance. This *was* his life now. He was an asexual masochist, and it was nothing to be ashamed of.

He received a text back within minutes. It read, *Name? Looking for what?*

Cody wavered between taking some time to reply so as not to seem over-eager, and wanting to be a good consumer. He prided himself on things like the stillness with which he sat

while getting his hair cut, the width he could open his mouth at the dentist, and the speed he managed to organize change into his wallet in busy cashier lines.

So he replied, *Cody. May I have yours?*

He typed and retyped the next part of the message, not sure how to put it, whether he should be clinical or raunchy, specific or vague, and settled on, *I would like you to hurt me.*

The man responded right away: *You can call me Todd. Blunt, sharp, burn? Or mental?*

Todd the professional sadist, Cody thought. The absurdity of it was captivating, that it was probably not his real name, and out of all the names he could have picked for himself, he chose Todd.

Cody thought about it as he pulled at a hangnail on his pinky, until a thin line of blood formed around the cuticle. He had never considered psychological pain as a service he could pay for when the world seemed to serve suffering for free, but he was curious as to how a person might go about mentally yet consensually torturing someone. He wondered if the only difference between a traumatic and nontraumatic event was the level of consent provided and subsequently acted upon. Perhaps suffering was only the inevitable result of overstepped boundaries. He wondered too what it said about him that he didn't know what his limits were, and if so, in what way could he ever truly suffer?

His options suddenly and happily overwhelmed him. He pictured, not the process of pain itself, but the aftermath: putting a caller on hold at work the next morning to lovingly trace whatever wounds had been left on him, picking or pushing at them, forcing them to hurt worse. He unlocked his phone again and replied, *I'd like you to choose.*

Todd came back with an address, time to meet, and simple instructions to rent a room. The fee was to be left in cash on the bedside table. Cody googled the address. It was a Red Roof Inn.

\* \* \*

Cody arrived for his appointment nearly an hour early. In any other situation he would have felt self-conscious, but he supposed someone like Todd wouldn't be too critical of enthusiasm in his line of work. Maybe he even appreciated it.

The room's king-sized bedspread looked like an abstracted bisexual pride flag, and the carpet consisted of a disorienting pattern of circles. The highway could be heard a few dozen feet from the building; the rush-hour traffic was deafening. He supposed it was a good choice

because he didn't know if he would scream. The thought thrilled him: to hurt enough that it had to be vented via a wordless shout. He wondered if he would cry, or beg, or if he'd finally find a line he didn't want to cross. If Todd wanted to sever his pinky finger, would he really say no? Would the no be the result of convenience, knowing his life would probably become somehow more difficult in lacking a pinky? Or would he only fear the spectacle of it, spending his entire life noticing the quickly averting gazes of people thinking, *That man is missing a finger*.

Cody didn't think those kinds of boundaries really counted. He wanted to find a limit as proof he cared about something enough to protect it, not for fear of inconvenience at its loss. Then again, maybe that was what it meant to care about something.

Todd arrived three minutes late. He knocked on the door. It occurred to Cody that he should have prepared somehow, or at least googled it beforehand. Maybe he should be naked. Maybe he should have been wearing something nicer than a button-down and slacks. Maybe a button-down and slacks was too nice.

He opened the door. Todd was staring at his phone, jaw working a piece of gum, a backpack slung over one shoulder. He was wearing dozens of beaded bracelets on each wrist, and most of his fingers had rings on them. His olive-colored t-shirt complemented his tanned complexion. He had one of those modern haircuts: black hair long on top and shaved on the sides. His stubble looked like the result of forgetting to shave rather than being intentionally groomed. He was a couple inches shorter than Cody but broader in his chest and shoulders. A generous guess put him in his late thirties.

His most remarkable characteristic, however, was the scarring. It had taken over half of one eyebrow and marred his cheekbones. The deepest cut ran from his temple to his jaw on the left side of his face.

He looked Cody up and down in assessment, and said, "You're young." Then he pushed past him and shut the door, twisting the bolt and attaching the chain.

"Am I supposed to be older?" Cody asked.

Todd didn't answer him. Instead he tossed his backpack on the table by the door and said, "You somebody's sugar baby?"

"Why do people keep asking me that?"

"Because you're pretty and like getting hurt. Lot of money in that combination. Take off your shoes and socks."

Cody sat on the edge of the bed and untied his shoes. He slipped off his socks and balled them inside, then set them beside the door. The gaudy carpet scratched the soles of his feet pleasantly.

“Anything else?” Cody asked.

Todd gestured with a nod toward the bed. “Lie down. On your back.”

Cody did. The bi pride duvet felt like unyielding plastic underneath him. He clasped his hands over his stomach, and looked toward the ceiling, which was plastered with gold specks of glitter.

Todd’s face hovered into his view. “This isn’t sexual for you.”

“How can you tell?”

“You’re not...” He made a vague gesture over Cody’s body, “You know, acting.”

“Am I supposed to?”

“That’s part of it, yeah. I mean, you don’t have to.”

“Maybe I’m just new.”

“Nah, you got different needs is all.” He walked to the end of the bed. Cody lifted his head to see that Todd was holding something which looked like a thin reed of bamboo.

“What’s that?”

“Cane,” Todd said, looking at Cody’s bare feet. It occurred to him they hadn’t once made eye contact. Todd managed to look all around his eyes but not into them, as if Cody were an abandoned building that needed careful demolishing. “You a screamer? Need a gag or anything?”

Cody thought a gag might jinx it, so he replied, “No, I should be fine.”

“Safeword?”

“Can I just ask you to stop if I need you to?”

“Sure. Ready?” Todd put his hand on Cody’s shin and lifted the cane.

“Yeah,” Cody said, and Todd struck the soles of his feet.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, Cody found himself floating above his own body, watching Todd deliver one final blow. His face was covered in dried tears. Beads of sweat had accumulated across his brow. He grunted and grimaced but didn’t scream, and his feet felt like he’d trekked across a

desert of LEGOs. Away from himself like this, it was hard to tell if he found the sensation pleasurable.

Todd let go of Cody's leg and returned the reed to his backpack. He came back with a bottle of purple lotion, then knelt at the end of the bed.

"What are you doing?" Cody asked. His voice sounded like it was echoing in his own head. He wondered if his skull had emptied, his brain having leaked out with all the tears and sweat.

"Stay still," Todd instructed. His tone had softened to a quiet murmur. The instruction filled Cody's cavernous skull.

Todd dug his lotioned thumbs into the underside of Cody's left foot, which went from numb to a warm throb. It bordered on painful without quite making it there.

After a few minutes of this—a foot massage, Cody finally figured out, though why it was happening, he had no idea—he dwindled back into himself, but not enough to censor the statement that found its way to his mouth: "This isn't sexual for you either."

"Nope."

"What is?"

Todd made a thoughtful sound and said, "My wife."

Cody felt a cold drop of disappointment, followed by pleased surprise that he could feel anything at all. "Does she know about the sex work?"

"Yep."

"And she's cool with it?"

"Yep."

Cody forced himself to realign his perspective of Todd. He didn't realize he held so many assumptions about professional sadists. "Any kids?"

"Three."

"Do you mind me asking personal questions?"

"Nah." Todd let go of Cody's foot for a moment, presumably to put more lotion in his hands, then returned to massage the right foot. "Most people don't give a shit."

Cody could no longer feel pain in his feet, but he was acutely aware of every rattling pulse in his body, blood traipsing through his limbs, neurons cycling their transmitters, hair follicles at the back of his head crushed against the now-sodden pillow.



Once Todd finished, he stood and touched Cody's ankle gently. "Sit up. Slow. There you go."

The room tilted as Cody sat upright. He wiggled his toes and looked at them. They were burgundy like Rosa's lipstick.

"Need anything else?" Todd asked. "Praise or anything?"

Cody turned his attention from his toes to Todd's face. The room continued spinning in the edges of his perception, as if Todd were the centrifugal force of the universe. "Why would I want praise? I didn't do anything."

"People like to know they handled it well."

"Did I?"

Todd lifted Cody's chin and pressed his thumb in its divot. Their eyes finally met, and Cody felt vulnerable and exposed in a good way, as if someone had entered his apartment and found his bloody shadow boxes artful instead of discomfiting.

"You did," Todd said.

\* \* \*

Cody lasted about twelve hours before texting Todd again. It was early at the call center, and he had no calls in his queue. His cube-mate Virginia was downstairs getting coffee. He pressed his feet into the soles of his shoes and reveled in the sting that shot up his legs. Then he took his phone out and texted, *I'd like to make another appointment.*

They met again on Tuesday at the same Red Roof Inn but in a different room. While waiting for Todd, Cody took his shoes and socks off in preparation. He put his ankle on its opposite thigh and twisted his foot to look at the underside of it. The sole was a bluish purple in some spots, yellow in others. He was pushing into the darkest bit with his thumbs when Todd knocked on the door.

Today he was wearing a white t-shirt but otherwise looked the same as the first time, down to the texting and lack of eye contact. He ordered Cody to take off whatever articles of clothing he was willing to remove. Here Cody hesitated, being uncomfortable naked in front of people, but managed to shed his shirt and pants. He kept his boxers on.

Todd's implement of choice was a leather paddle, which at first seemed uninspired. Afterward, Cody was so overwhelmed with pain that he retracted his judgment, especially when the resulting massage involved Todd's hands over nearly his entire body. Cody felt like he was

floating again, tethered to earth by Todd's scratchy calloused fingers digging into the welts he had created.

To his surprise, after the massage, Todd climbed into bed and rolled Cody into his embrace, lethargically spooning him.

"What are you doing?" Cody asked. Todd's arm was draped over his middle, knee between his legs.

"Part of the process," Todd muttered. His lips were pressed against the back of Cody's neck. He sounded tired. "Make you feel bad, then good."

"I don't like feeling good."

"Yeah you do."

\* \* \*

They began to meet weekly after that, every Tuesday evening. Cody had to dip into his savings, which he had been accumulating for years in hopes to put a down payment on a house so he would no longer have to live above an improv theater. Their sessions lasted an hour and consisted of twenty minutes of pain, twenty minutes of massage, and twenty minutes of cuddling wherein they also had deep, emotionally validating conversations. Cody learned that Todd originally started his career in high school, where he built a reputation for picking up odd jobs. At first, this involved beating people up for money, and later in life, selling drugs, but he found a happy medium in professional domination, which he considered the most morally sound outcome of his potential career trajectory.

Two months into their arrangement, during the snuggle portion of the evening, Cody asked, "Would you cut off my pinky if I asked you to?"

"Sure," Todd said. "But I'm not driving you to the hospital. You want that next time?"

"No, it was just a thought."

Todd's resulting *mm* noise vibrated against Cody's skin. After the first twenty minutes of each session, they had begun touching each other with an unprecedented amount of affection—a swiped lock of hair, the trail of fingertips down an arm, occasional hand-holding. Cody wondered if he was special, or if these acts of fondness were part of the package.

"Would you have sex with me if I asked you to?" Cody asked.

"Sure. You want to?"

"No, it was just another thought."

“Got a lot of thoughts for a guy who just took a beating.”

“Guess you’ll have to try harder next time.”

Todd let out a rasped laugh that made Cody’s chest feel tight. He turned over in Todd’s embrace and pressed their foreheads together.

\* \* \*

At the start of their next session, Todd shut himself in the bathroom and began running the tap in the tub. Cody had no idea what was ahead, but he took the opportunity to root around in Todd’s backpack for a wallet or family picture or anything that would give him some insight. He found only a membership ID for a gym about ten minutes away. It had Todd’s unsmiling picture in the corner, and the name beside it read *Francis Rowan*.

Cody put the ID back in the pocket he had found it at the same time Todd—or Francis, or Frank, or Frankie—opened the bathroom door. Thankfully, he didn’t seem to notice Cody’s small trespass. He gestured into the bathroom, and said, “Come on.”

In the bathroom, the floor was covered in towels and the tub was filled with water, sans bubbles.

“Get in,” Todd said.

He didn’t specify for Cody to take off his clothes, and Cody had already divested himself of his shoes, socks, wallet, and keys, so he stepped in the tub and lowered himself into the water, fully clothed.

“Scoot forward so you can lie down,” Todd instructed.

For the first time since they’d started seeing each other, Cody asked, “What are you going to do?”

“Drown you.”

“Oh.” He thought about it. “Are you going to kill me or something?”

“Do you want me to?”

“No.”

“Then I won’t.”

Cody thought that might have been a joke, but he made a mental note to research if assisted suicide were some kind of kink he’d never considered. It didn’t seem worth it, since you could only do it once.

“Okay,” he said, and moved forward so that his knees bent to his chest. “No brain damage either, please.”

“Wouldn’t think of it.” Todd pushed the sleeve of his henley to his elbow and wrapped his hand around Cody’s neck. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” Cody said without hesitation, and realized it was true.

He took a deep breath as Todd lowered him into the water. Once submerged, he opened his eyes and saw Todd smiling down at him with the glazed, happy expression he got when he knew he was doing good work. His hand was firm against Cody’s throat.

Cody exhaled bubbles slowly, hands gripping either side of the tub. He lost track of the seconds, and felt only the pressure on his lungs begging him to breathe. It was a polite plea at first, and as a minute or so passed, the plea turned into insistence, and insistence into begging. But Cody had faith, so he lay still.

Eventually his instincts got the best of him: he grasped at Todd’s arm, writhing until his legs began to thrash. Blackness crept to the edges of his vision, and his chest was screaming—

Todd lifted him out of the water. Cody gasped for air. He trembled with a chill that had nothing to do with temperature.

When he had finally caught his breath, Todd asked, “Again?”

Cody nodded and said, “Please.”

They did it twice more, until the twenty minutes were up and Cody’s brain felt like it had been stuffed with cotton balls. Water clung to his eyelashes and everything looked soft in his peripheral vision.

Todd ran his fingers through Cody’s wet hair, other hand on his chest, urging him to breathe.

“There you go,” he was saying in his easy afterglow voice. “Slow and steady.”

Todd was still looking at him the way he had while Cody was underwater, loving and open. Cody stared at him, into him, feeling his heart pounding its way out of his chest and into Todd’s hands. He couldn’t feel anything but wholeness, a consummate fulfillment he didn’t know he was capable of, and which he thought Todd was directing toward him in kind.

Todd leaned forward and kissed him. They hadn’t kissed before; Cody somehow neglected it as an option, but now it was all he wanted. The kiss made him forget about the stack of money just feet away, and the clock beside it counting down their remaining minutes together.

Cody found his hands gripping Todd's shirt, soaking it in his wet fists as he hung over the side of the bathtub. He pulled away an inch to breathe again, and allowed himself an indulgent look at Todd's scar. Then he reached up and ran his finger down the wide crevice of it.

"Someone fought back," Cody said.

"Lot of people fight back."

"I don't."

"No," Todd said. He pulled Cody's hand away and brought it to his lips "You're good like that."

\* \* \*

That night, Cody googled the name Francis Rowan. Predictably, he found a few mugshots from the early nineties. Todd was roughed up in all of them, black eyes and butterfly-bandaged noses and swollen jaws. Cody saved them to his hard drive to look at in more detail later.

Then he found Francis' Facebook, which appeared mostly unused. He went by Frankie. His profile picture was a cropped photo of himself smiling with a terrible case of red-eye. Cody preferred the mugshots. A woman named Kaitlin Schuster-Rowan tagged him frequently in photos with no apparent regard for privacy settings. She had curly red hair and a round face full of freckles. Their children were pictured in poses involving spaghetti catastrophes and unwrapped presents and wide baby-teeth gaps. Cody didn't get far in his search before he had to close his laptop.

He went to bed early but couldn't sleep. It was the improv class, he told himself. Poorly edited music clips and strained laughter found its way into his room from the floor below. For the first time in the three years he had lived there, he decided to join them.

Downstairs, he sat on a chair in the back of the room and watched. The theater looked like a gutted Taco Bell, which was exactly what it was. A couple dozen people packed the place: a handful of actors sitting near the front, switching off onstage, and the family and friends they had dragged along. Most of them were on their phones. The actors' antics made Cody laugh occasionally, not because it was funny, but out of politeness and a disdain for awkward silence. At one point, an obese man wearing a comically large cowboy hat was whipping a younger man with a purple foam pool noodle. The younger man moaned and said, "Harder, Daddy." Everyone laughed. Cody was mildly offended.

He was surprised to find that the woman leading the class had been one he had seen at the munch, Cat Ears. But she wasn't wearing cat ears or a babydoll dress now, just black leggings and a t-shirt.

Cody stayed after while everyone folded up chairs and said their goodbyes. He was eyeing the pastries on the craft table, of which there were only crumbs and a quarter of a cheese danish remaining. Cat Ears came by to sweep it into the trash with the rest of the debris, and did a double-take when she noticed him.

He didn't know what he was expecting, but it was not a happy, "Hey, I know you!" She leaned in and lowered her voice: "From the munch?" It felt like they were part of some secret club, and not a publicly organized outing for people who appreciated negotiated power dynamics.

"Yeah."

"I don't think I caught your name."

"Cody."

"I'm Maybelline. Like the makeup."

Despite the late hour, she invited him for a cup of coffee.

They walked to a diner a block away which Cody had passed every day going to work yet never entered. He thought it would have been a better place for a munch than Olive Garden, given its small customer base and dim yellow lighting. The decor and wood-paneled walls were reminiscent of a 1970s trailer park, and the coffee tasted like it hadn't been freshened since noon.

"We haven't seen you around in a while," Maybelline said. She opened the fourth half-and-half to pour into her coffee. Her hair had a ripple in it where her cat ears normally sat. She perched in the booth with her feet underneath her like she had at the munch, and chewed her lower lip whenever she wasn't speaking. Her wingtip eyeliner stretched longer on one side than the other.

"I started seeing someone," Cody explained.

Maybelline moved onto the sugar and poured a significant amount into her cup. "Aw, good for you."

"How's your...dom?" Cody asked. "The guy who looks like Pat Sajak."

She made a disgusted noise in her throat. "I left him." Her spoon clattered against her porcelain mug as she stirred. "Turns out I'm monogamous. Like, what year is it?"

“Right, yeah.” Cody took a gulp of coffee and tried not to taste it. He wondered if Todd-slash-Frankie had any commitments after their standing Tuesday appointment. The thought was unpleasant in a way he usually enjoyed, but this time didn’t. “Jealousy issues?”

“Combination of things. He wanted slaves, not subs, and I’m not into that blanket-consent life. Harems squick me out, but I thought I’d try it because there are like, twenty subs for every dom, and most doms are shitty.”

“Mine is married,” Cody admitted. “I’m not happy about it.”

She gave him a sympathetic pout. “That sucks, I’m sorry. It’s like, impossible not to fall in love no matter how unavailable they make themselves.”

“It’s almost like the unavailability is part of the allure.”

“Right? Like, we should know better.”

“Yeah,” Cody replied. “We really should.”

\* \* \*

The next session involved a cigar. Cody lay on the bed with his legs apart. Todd repeatedly lit the cigar, took a long drag so that it glowed bright red, and then put it out on Cody’s inner thigh. Cody needed to be restrained halfway through, but it was worth it for the loving, methodical way Todd burned him.

After, Todd untied him and tended to his burns, sitting cross-legged between Cody’s legs. A first aid kit lay open beside them with a pile of bloody cotton swabs and band-aid wrappers.

“You did good today,” Todd said.

Cody normally would have preened at the praise, but he couldn’t manage it. All he could think about was Maybelline’s reluctant acceptance of monogamy, her holistic selfhood that kept her from being someone’s slave. He gripped the sheets in time with the sting of iodine—it suddenly occurred to him, with horror, that maybe he was monogamous and full of selfhood too. That one day he would no longer be able to afford Todd’s company, and he would have to live the rest of his life without these small kindnesses which validated him so deeply. That for the first time in his life he cared about something—*someone*—and just the thought of losing him sent Cody into a panic in a way the thought of cutting off his own pinky never had.

“Is this real?” Cody asked.

Todd was shuffling around in the first aid kit for another band-aid. “Course it’s real.”

“No, I mean—” Cody sat up so he could see Todd. “I have...feelings for you. Inappropriate ones. I want you to feel the same way about me.”

Todd froze for only a second, expression unwavering. Cody felt like he was being held underwater again, helpless. He took a breath, then caught Cody’s hand between both of his, and said, “I do.”

The brands on Cody’s thighs burned, bolts to his brain that made everything sharper, including his tone. “Then why do I have to pay for it?”

“Guy’s gotta make a living,” Todd replied. It sounded more like a plea than a defense.

Cody pulled his hand away. “You make a living beating people.”

“I make a living loving them.”

“So you do this with everyone else, too. This—” He made a gesture from his chest to Todd’s. “Affection.”

Todd’s face was stern but his words were soft: “I love people the way they need to be loved.”

“Aren’t you afraid of getting hurt?”

“Funny question coming from a masochist.” They sat in silence, Todd gently putting a bandage over the last brand, the one closest to the knee, Cody watching his weathered hands, unblinking.

“You know,” Todd said quietly, “a while back I was thinking about moving on to ‘real’ work.” He stared at Cody’s thigh and ran a finger across a bandage. It felt like a lap of fire over Cody’s skin. “The thing that happened with you kept happening with other people. Affection, you called it. Thought there was something wrong with me. You see who people are behind the curtain, the difference between what they ask for and what they’re saying. And you can’t keep it cold anymore.”

He closed the first aid kit and set it on the floor, then shifted up in bed. Cody lay down beside him. Their bodies molded together with practiced ease.

“What changed?” Cody asked.

They settled in for the final twenty minutes, Todd’s stubbled chin scratching against Cody’s shoulder. His voice was a quiet drag by Cody’s ear: “My oldest, Becca, used to cry all the time. One day there was this dog—a mutt, barely a year old, half-starved. Darts right in front



of my car. I swerve but don't hit her. She runs into the woods. No collar, but I thought, she's gotta belong to somebody.

"Few minutes later, Becca starts crying in the back seat. I ask her what's wrong. She says I'd only make fun of her for being a baby. I let it drop. All through dinner she's staring into space, eyes all red. She goes to bed, and I hear her crying again. So I go into her room and ask her what's wrong. She says, it's the dog. The dog has a family somewhere and it's lost and it needs to go home.

"And my gut instinct is to tell her it'll be fine. Dogs are smart. They'll make their way home. But I hate lying. Hate lying to my kids especially. Distorts their perception of reality. And the reality is, I don't fucking know if that dog'll be okay.

"So I get her out of bed and we go look for the fucking dog. We find her by the freeway. Stick her in the basement for a few days and try to look for her owners. No go. Anyway, that was years ago and we still got her."

Cody rolled over so he was facing Todd. He pooled his fists under the overstuffed, sterile-smelling pillows and said, "I don't think I understand."

Todd smiled and his scar twitched with the gesture. "There was a time I was just gonna let that stupid dog die. If I'd been alone in the car that day, I may not have hit her, but I wouldn't have saved her either. Wouldn't have thought about it for longer than it took to swerve back into my lane. And that's the day I decided I wasn't gonna get on my girls for being too sensitive. I wasn't gonna tell them they had to toughen up. It's not a weakness at all, to be able to feel the way Becca does, to love without holding back."

Cody imagined himself crossing the road and getting hit by Todd's car. He could see his feet being swept out from under him, body rolling over the hood and roof, bouncing on the trunk and then spinning to a stop on the pavement below—skin scraped off, skull cracked, bones shattered. His entire life, these kinds of daydreams had brought him relief from a kind of suffering he could never articulate. Now he only despaired that Todd would never stop for him. He wondered if this was the mental torture Todd had mentioned when they first spoke, this agony of homeless devotion.

"I don't know how to love like you love yet," Cody said. He inched forward and pressed his lips against Todd's, appreciating the small space he occupied in his infinite embrace, even if he wasn't ready for it yet.

Todd kissed him back, too gently, in a way that hurt worse than anything else.

“I think we need to stop seeing each other. Until I figure things out.”

“You’ll get there,” Todd replied. He thumbed away the wetness under Cody’s eye. “And when you do, you have my number.”

\* \* \*

Cody stopped at the improv class instead of going home. Maybelline looked at him and seemed to know immediately what was wrong. After class was over, she boxed up the remaining pizza from the craft table. They bought a four-pack of Seagram’s and some bags of sour gummy worms from the convenience store next door.

When he let her into his apartment, she picked up the newest shadow box that Cody had yet to hang up. Her eyes widened as she tilted the box side to side under the orange lamplight, inspecting the row of Medline pads covered in dark splotches of blood. At the bottom of the box, Cody had written, *Todd*.

“This is so fucking cool,” she said.

Cody didn’t know what to say. He swallowed the knot that had suddenly tangled in his throat.

She set the box down and asked, “Have you ever built a blanket fort in here?”

He hadn’t, but it was a good use for his stack of secondhand afghans that other people’s grandmothers probably crocheted. When complete, the blankets spanned the entire living room and engulfed the TV. They ate pizza while lying on removed sofa cushions and binge-watching reality television.

“I lied,” Cody said while waiting for the next episode to load. “Todd wasn’t really my dom. I mean, he was, but he was a pro-dom. I hired him to beat me.”

Maybelline ripped open the bag of gummy worms with her teeth. She held them out to him. “Only thing as old as sex work is people falling in love with their sex workers.”

They were silent until the next episode ended, and Maybelline said, “You should come to the munch next week. I want to introduce you to someone.”

\* \* \*

The munch was held at an Outback Steakhouse this time. Cody looked around at the lines of hardbacked booths as he was led to the table, imagining seeing Frankie there with his family, Kaitlin and Becca opposite him, his two other kids beside him. They’d be sharing a bloomin’

onion maybe, and Becca would say she doesn't like onions, and tear at the loaf of rye bread instead. She would text her friends under the table, complaining about being dragged to a stupid restaurant. Kaitlin might talk about work, and Frankie wouldn't be able to talk about his in kind, but he'd be used to it. Maybe they discussed it before bed. Maybe they didn't talk about it at all. Maybe Frankie's phone vibrated in his pocket with clients asking to schedule, and he'd excuse himself to the restroom to reply to them. Or maybe he had a separate phone for work purposes that he kept in a drawer at home.

Cody imagined going up to their table and saying to his family, "I love him, too."

Here the daydream diverged: Frankie, upset, would tell Cody to get lost. Cody would make a scene until Frankie dragged him out of the restaurant, threaten him, hit him. And Cody would be grateful for it, the familiar misery, the easy fear. Or they'd pretend they didn't know each other at all. Their eyes would lock and they would glide past one another as if Cody had never known the hardness of Frankie's hands or the softness of his heart.

It didn't matter. He wasn't there anyway.

This munch was smaller than the last, only seven people. Pat Sajak and his harem weren't in attendance, but Cowboy Hat looked at home at the head of the table. At the other end sat Maybelline beside an empty chair, and across from her was Rosa. They were both talking to a man roughly the size of an industrial refrigerator. He was wearing the end-of-day remnants of a suit: just the white shirt, sleeves rolled up; charcoal gray tie loosened around his neck; a gold watch that probably cost more than Cody's car.

Cody sat down across from him. The man had a beaked nose and leaned back in his chair with his arm around the back of Rosa's, legs crossed lazily with the menu open in his lap. His excessive casualness made it seem as if he were overcompensating for something. Cody could feel the man's attention on him and could tell somehow that he was nervous too. It made the annoying upper-class businessman vibe bearable.

"Cody, this is Michael," Maybelline said. She was wearing her cat ears again and another babydoll dress despite lacking a dom or daddy or whatever she was looking for.

Rosa was smiling at him. He preferred to look at her rather than Michael. His palms were sweating and he wiped them on his jeans. Maybelline didn't have to qualify the introduction with, *Michael is a sadist*. Cody could tell, could see behind the curtain now. There was a darkness hanging about him that Cody imagined he held too, the same kind that Frankie dragged

behind him door to door. A different kind than Maybelline and Rosa and Pat Sajak and Cowboy Hat carried, all of them loving in their own patterns.

“Good to meet you,” Cody said.

“I hear you’re a masochist,” Michael replied.

Before he could answer, the server came by to take their orders. She landed on Cody, who looked at Michael and said, “I’d like you to order for me.”

Michael hesitated only briefly before he told the server, “He’ll have the porterhouse. Six ounce, medium rare. Steak fries. Side salad, house dressing is fine.” When he passed over his menu, he glanced at Cody and added, “Do you smoke?”

“I do if you want me to,” Cody replied.

\* \* \*

Outside, Michael pulled a pristine pack of Reds and a silver Zippo out of his pocket. He perched a cigarette between his lips and lit it. After a couple drags and a few minutes of small talk, he asked Cody, “So. Hard limits?”

Now that they were alone, Michael’s nervousness was apparent under his feigned calm. He fidgeted and ended all his sentences with a baritone half-laugh that got annoying quickly. Whenever Cody looked at him, he’d look away and flick his cigarette. He didn’t have any visible scars, and Cody wondered what that said about him.

“Body modification,” Cody said. “I don’t want you to sever my pinky or anything.”

Michael took Cody’s hand and lifted it to inspect. “It’s a fine pinky. Would be a shame to take it away from its owner. Anything else?” He lowered Cody’s hand but continued to hold it. They were standing too close and Cody found it thrilling.

“I like good aftercare,” he added.

Michael nodded and flicked the ash from his cigarette. “Aftercare’s the best part.”

“And cuddling. And massages.”

“You sound like a terrible masochist,” Michael said. He continued looking at Cody with a curious fondness that didn’t seem like part of the act.

Cody let go of Michael’s hand to push up his sleeve and offer his forearm. Michael smiled, took a final drag from his cigarette, and snubbed it out on Cody’s arm.

## The Night-Night Palace

A week ago, Julie had scheduled her death at the Night-Night Palace. It wasn't the classiest service around—a cheesy franchise really, the TJ Maxx of assisted suicide. She figured it didn't matter much. The Night-Night Palace was the cheapest option and, no matter where she went, the result would be the same.

The sun rose on the morning of Julie's death and cast a murky dimness through the blinds of her dorm room. She lived alone this semester because her roommate Melinda had killed herself the old-fashioned way, the violent way, involving pills and booze, and had left a message scrawled on her side of their room in teal nail polish: *WE ARE ALL FUCKED*.

Julie couldn't say she disagreed, and in fact the sentiment had sown its seed so deeply in her mind, she couldn't escape the blossom of doubt that invaded her every waking thought and led to her appointment at the Night-Night Palace. She had never gotten along with Melinda in the four months they lived together—no reason really, just bad chemistry—but Julie nevertheless admired her for using her death to make such a profound statement. They *were* all fucked.

Julie's phone vibrated on her nightstand, spinning slightly and bumping against an open neurology textbook. The night had been a sleepless one, so she instead lay curled up in her bed, staring at nothing and thinking about nothing, completely dissociated from her body which was how she had preferred to spend her existence ever since Melinda died. Julie had been the one to find her; she had passed out lying face-up and subsequently choked to death on her own vomit, and all Julie could remember thinking was, *I still need to study*.

After the third buzz, she picked up her phone and glanced at the number, which she recognized as her local Night-Night Palace even though she hadn't programmed it into her phone, knowing she would only need to use the service once. She pressed the answer button and brought the phone to her ear without saying hello.

"Hi! This is Maureen from the Night-Night Palace. I'm calling to confirm an appointment for—" Here the recording changed from a pleasant-sounding woman to a series of robotic syllables. "Julie Kris-tee-ahn-son—" Back to Maureen. "Today at—" Robot. "Four pee-ehm." Maureen again. "If you would like to confirm this appointment, please press one. Para escuchar este mensaje en Español, por favor presione cinco."

Julie took the phone away from her ear and pressed one. Maureen replied, “Thank you for confirming your appointment with the Night-Night Palace, the first choice for your last resort. We look forward to seeing you!”

When she hung up the phone, she held it above her face to check the time, nine-thirteen in the morning. She only had to be alive for seven more hours.

\* \* \*

Julie’s ten a.m. English class was useless, but she liked her professor, Rhonda, a woman less than a decade older than her who had no idea what she was doing as a teacher, but she did it with unparalleled enthusiasm. “Call me Rhonda!” she had said on the first day, and wrote her name in bubble letters on the dry erase board so that they looked like precarious rolls of fat folded onto each other, ironically reminiscent of Rhonda’s own chubby form. Julie had begun referring to her in her head as Call Me Rhonda. Her papers received ambiguous, near-illegible notes in the margins that said things like, *Keep up the good work!* and the occasional doodle of a small rodent or cupcake. She started each class by having everyone chant a line from Ginsberg’s “Howl” in unison. Today’s was: *...with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls...*

They were encouraged to shout the words as loudly as they could, and Julie reveled in the ability to yell words like “cock” and “endless balls” in public. Most of the other couple dozen students shied away from it, but Julie and a handful of others took joy in the rapid expulsion of emotion prior to the morning’s lesson. As Call Me Rhonda congratulated all of them on a shouting well done, Julie for the first time felt remorse toward her decision. She would never get to read the rest of “Howl” now, not that she particularly liked it or understood any of it, but she had enjoyed being given the opportunity to scream random words in the comfort of Call Me Rhonda’s classroom. She wondered if she would want to die less if she had just allowed herself the ability to yell crude names of genitalia without fear of consequence.

Call Me Rhonda had permanent divots below her eyes where her cheeks pressed into the rims of her enormous glasses. Her red hair was often pinned into a beehive, and with it she dressed like she walked out of a 1940s Sears catalogue, conical brassieres and all. Today’s lesson was about the power and importance of vulnerability, though why they were learning it in the context of English, Julie had no idea. She also couldn’t figure out why she was paying so many

thousands of dollars to get in touch with her emotions. Learning how to use a semicolon seemed much more practical.

“Is it better to get knocked down a hundred times and stand back up? Or is it better to be so strong you never fall down at all?” Call Me Rhonda asked, staring into space as if she were considering her own question while asking it, her well-manicured index finger touching her thumb as she enunciated her words. “Or is it best yet to evade conflict altogether so you always remain standing?” Here she offered the question with palms up and a self-aggrandized smile, as if she had posed a philosophical concept so complex and profound, they should all be stumped.

Julie found herself replying from the back of the classroom, without raising her hand, “Maybe if we lived in a world where people didn’t try to knock you down, and where there weren’t systems in place to keep you down, you wouldn’t have to think about it.”

Call Me Rhonda blinked rapidly in thought, heavy-mascara eyelashes fluttering, and said, “Well, that’s certainly a way to look at it.”

After class, Julie approached Call Me Rhonda, whose pale skin had gone pink at the tops of her cheeks and around her neck, as it often did after class, having put forth so much physical exertion while teaching. She was shoving papers into a folder and maneuvering the folder into a canvas tote bag that read, *THICK THIGHS SAVE LIVES*, with a crudely drawn picture of two diverging tree trunks below it. Julie couldn’t tell if the bag was meant to make a statement about environmental sustainability or body positivity, or if it was part of some initiative aimed at both.

Given that she now only had a bit over four hours left to live, Julie didn’t bother wasting time on pleasantries: “So, I’m dying later today.”

Call Me Rhonda’s eyebrows dove toward her petite nose, which then wrinkled in disgust. “You mean...”

“The Night-Night Palace, yeah,” Julie clarified.

“That place has terrible reviews.”

Julie shrugged. “I’m not picky.”

Assisted suicide franchises were still a new thing. Despite their scant age difference, Julie wondered if Call Me Rhonda was too old to understand it. Her expression shifted from distaste, to pity, confusion, concern, and landed on acceptance.

Just a week ago, Julie had read an article that lauded the booming industry that was assisted suicide. Commercials and advertisements had cropped up on television and billboards

covered in phrases like, *Choose your own next chapter. End your suffering now!* Rebuttals in the form of PSAs were developed by nonprofit organizations trying to save lives. They harped on counseling, community, and self-acceptance, but they were no match for the glossy, multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns of places like the Night-Night Palace. In a recent press conference, the CEO cited prospective statistics about how the sudden decrease in population was improving the economy and environment. Thinkpieces speculated that their success was due in part to a widespread chain of mourning—as more people opted for death, their loved ones too would follow. Suicide was a more affordable means of dealing with grief than therapy or medication. Given the chainlike occurrence of this phenomenon, epidemiologists were now referring to it as a pandemic. Grassroots organizations tried to get legislation passed to ban them from operation, or at the very least regulate them more thoroughly, but the major corporations helped fund political campaigns on both sides of the partisan divide, and no amount of protesting or petitioning could sway the allure of such prominent financial support.

A moral quandary grew apparent on Call Me Rhonda's overly expressive face: on one hand, that death was now a commodity seemed morally bankrupt on a universal level. On the other, it had become a social faux pas to question a person's bodily autonomy, or to imply that the right to die was any less valuable than the right to live.

"I just wanted to let you know I enjoyed your class a lot," Julie said, breaking the immorality cycle that Call Me Rhonda was torturing herself with. "If I had decided to live, I would have wanted to take the next one as an elective."

Call Me Rhonda, relieved of the burden of a polite response to Julie's admission of intended suicide, offered a small smile. "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

With a nod, Julie headed toward the door, backpack slung over her shoulder, and Call Me Rhonda called after her, "Have you decided which package you're taking yet?"

This was something of a shortcut of etiquette, in the same way *goodbye* is often too final as a parting phrase, but *see you later* seems more upbeat. If a person chose any one of several more positive-sounding suicide packages, it would open the opportunity to find the dead person's soul on a social networking site called Seance. The original packages offered in the early days, the ones that were torn apart by mobs on the internet for being too "morbid" and "depressing" had no such recourse. They were now the cheapest options, with no opportunity for the Night-



Night Palace to upload your soul to the internet so your loved ones could continue speaking to you after death.

Many people thought Seance was a hoax, that a person's soul could never be uploaded to the internet. In Julie's research, she believed this to be true, and so planned to take the cheapest, most minimal package available. She didn't say this to Call Me Rhonda, though. Instead she said, "I don't know, I'm still thinking about it."

"Okay, well, I'll add you," Rhonda said, pulling her phone out of its permanent place in her bra.

"Sure," Julie replied, even though she didn't have a life profile, nor had any plans to make a death profile.

\* \* \*

Julie made it to Tristan's dorm a little after noon. His roommate Ricky was out, and Tristan was face-down on his bed and snoring. The curtains were shut but enough light filtered through that Julie could see to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from the stale package of bread Tristan kept on his desk. This would be her second to last meal, and it was too heavy on the peanut butter. She had to scrape the bottom of the jelly jar with a dirty plastic spoon to get any out.

She watched Tristan as she ate. He was naked except for a pair of planet-themed boxer shorts, of which he would often point to Saturn and say, "Look, it's Uranus." Julie never corrected him. Inflamed acne covered his wide shoulders, and his blonde-ish long hair was greasily matted to his neck. The only decor in the dorm was a thumbtacked vintage Pizza Hut poster featuring all four Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles drooling over a glistening pepperoni pan pizza.

Julie finished her sandwich and dusted the crumbs off her jeans. She stood from her chair and crawled into bed with Tristan, who made room for her while simultaneously devouring her in his embrace.

"Morning," he mumbled to the nape of her neck. She could feel his erection pushing against her back.

She unbuttoned her pants and slid them down to her thighs along with her underwear. Tristan had the decency to reach under her shirt and play with her nipples for a little bit before fucking her. Three minutes later, he pulled out and came in his hand. She plucked a tissue from

the box on his bedside table and passed it behind her. He wiped his hand off and threw the crumpled mass across the room, but missed the trash can by a foot.

“What are you doing later?” he asked, fully awake now and climbing out of bed to put on a pair of shorts.

Julie rolled onto her back and looked at the Ninja Turtles poster. The bed was uncomfortably hot where Tristan had been lying and the sheets were damp with sweat. She was still soaked between her legs but didn’t bother pulling up her underwear or pants. At the end of the mattress, her feet hit a stack of textbooks with jagged edges of torn-out notebook paper shoved into the pages. Tristan was an electrical engineering major going to school on a basketball scholarship. Last summer, Vogue flew him to Paris to model for a couple months under the guise of an internship, and while that would have been an accomplishment for most people, his parents were furious that the gig didn’t pay. When Julie asked him what he thought, he said he just liked his body being admired, that it made him feel real. Julie wondered in what ways he felt unreal, but never asked.

He went to Mass on campus every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. His biggest secret was that he loved getting drunk and flirting with frat boys, and his ultimate fantasy was to be in the center of a gangbang of obese men wearing masks. Julie had once accidentally looked at his internet history and found more male-on-male bukkake and creampie videos than she thought existed in the world. He had mentioned his proclivities to Julie when they first started dating a year ago, stone-cold sober, and spoke all of it as if confessing his deepest sins.

“But I’m straight,” he had assured her.

Julie didn’t care. She fucking hated him, and hated fucking him, but she’d been dating him long enough that breaking up would be a massive inconvenience to her self-perspective, which had built around his presence so thoroughly that she didn’t know who she was without him.

Tristan didn’t give her time to answer. “I’ve got a game later, then I told Ricky we’d meet him at Kramer’s for a beer. You in?”

“I’ll be dead by then,” Julie said to Donatello, the only Ninja Turtle successfully eating a slice of pizza that was melting over his faded green hand.

Tristan laughed his stupid laugh that he did whenever he didn’t understand something, which was often. It went, *huh-huh-HUH-uhh*, like three machine gun shots followed by a

jammed barrel. “You PMSing?” he asked. He had taken enough gender studies general electives to know this was a stupid question. The fact his greater understanding of feminism didn’t stop him from asking things like this exposed his true colors more effectively than a year’s worth of their stilted companionship.

“No,” Julie replied. “I have an appointment at the Night-Night Palace this afternoon.”

She allowed herself the thrill of his tense response, the grinding she could feel in his brain as he shifted the pieces together. Tristan was so deep in his own world, she was sure he only had a cursory knowledge of assisted suicide franchises, that these companies existed and were a topic of controversy. He may have known enough that if someone were to bring it up in polite conversation, he might be able to comment benignly on it, something like, *What an age to live in*, or, *It’s a damn shame*, which, depending on his company, could either indicate contempt that such an industry even existed, or that autonomous rights were hanging in the balance.

“Does this mean you’re breaking up with me?” he asked.

“Well, I’ll be dead, so...yes.”

He pulled a t-shirt out of a hamper and said, “That sucks.” He put the shirt to his nose and smelled it, gave it a *good enough* glance, then unbundled it and yanked it over his head. “You at least going on Seance?”

“Why?” Julie asked. She finally pulled up her underwear and jeans. “You’re not on there anyway.”

“I was thinking about making one. Ricky has one now.”

“You might as well. This time next year, most of the people you know will be dead anyway.”

Tristan groaned in the same way he did when he had to tackle a particularly difficult homework assignment. “What a fucking bummer, man.” He glared at her as he smoothed the wrinkles of his dirty shirt with his palms. “I was having such a good day. Why you come into my dorm and fuck shit up with your depression or whatever?”

“Sorry to inconvenience you,” Julie said.

“You’re only doing this because it’s the popular thing to do.”

“I’ve been suicidal since I was a kid.”

He stared blankly at her. “Did you just say that? Did you seriously just say, ‘I was suicidal before it was cool’?”

“No, I said—”

“Like, you know suicide is a mortal sin, right? You’re going to hell. Is your life really worse than hell?”

She replied with the only thing that would deter him from further Catholic vitriol: “Think of it this way, you’re free to date Ricky now.”

Tristan froze where his hand was gripping a textbook at Julie’s feet. She thought he might get mad, that she had finally crossed a line, but he only turned a deep shade of red and asked, “You think he likes me like that?”

“Oh, definitely.” She climbed out of bed and put her shoes back on. She was due to meet Libby across campus in ten minutes.

Tristan shoved two textbooks into his backpack, growing redder as he seemingly imagined what his life might be like no longer tied down by a girlfriend. Now that her death was hanging over their heads, it was absurd she hadn’t thought to let him go sooner, and that perhaps he had only dated her this long out of habit and a toxically masculine-bound disdain toward introspection.

Julie grabbed her bag and headed toward the door. Tristan was suitably in his own headspace now, and probably so far gone in his daydreams about Ricky and/or being marathon fucked by obese men in masks that he may have forgotten entirely about Julie’s impending suicide.

“Wait,” Tristan said. Julie paused at the door. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

She waited for a confession of love, remorse over their increasingly tattered affections, advice on what to say to God if she met Him, well wishes for the procedure, or perhaps a forlorn *I’ll miss you, babe*. But instead, he said, “I’m really not gay,” as if she had at some point implied he was.

“Oh,” she replied. “Sure, I believe you.”

“I’m bi.”

“Okay.” She didn’t know what to say, but he continued staring like he expected her to grant him permission to be bisexual. “Congrats.”

He let out a relieved half-laugh, only one machine gun shot and a jammed barrel, and continued packing his bag for his day of classes. “Alright, well, see you around.”

“Yeah,” Julie said. “See you.”

\* \* \*

Libby was halfway through a package of Twizzlers, sitting under a tree on the quad. Julie dropped her bag and sat beside her. Libby held out the Twizzlers, and Julie tugged one out.

Out of everyone she had to say goodbye to, Libby was the easiest to tell. “I’m killing myself later today.”

“Cool,” Libby said around a mouthful of candy. “I have an appointment next week.”

“The Night-Night Palace?” Julie asked.

“Death Den.”

Death Dens were the counterculture indie version of an assisted suicide facility and five times the cost of the Night-Night Palace. They weren’t top of the line, but they had good reviews, and their Seance services were renowned—so technologically advanced, that out of all franchises, the Westboro Baptist Church targeted them specifically. Death Dens were located in cabins in remote wooded areas, and all their packages were secular. Julie would have chosen them if she could afford it. They had a cremation service wherein travel bloggers would spread your ashes in whatever countries you wanted and send high-res photos to your family.

“What time?” Libby asked.

“Four,” Julie said.

Julie had met Libby in a geology class her freshman year. Libby came to class wasted and high every day, and drank straight Kahlúa from her thermos. They sat beside each other and developed a system of taking turns elbowing the other awake every few minutes. Libby had short pink hair and never wore a bra. Three rings were pierced into her left eyebrow and she had a wide gap in her front teeth between which she would slide the bar of her tongue stud. A *Space Jam*-themed tattoo ran down the entire length of her shoulder and forearm. She was famous on the internet for an amateur porn video in which she shoved a lubricated lightbulb up her ass and it shattered. Someone had clipped the video down to six seconds so that you could only see her shocked expression, which became its own meme. People called her Lib-bulb behind her back, but she wasn’t as easily recognized now with pink hair. Out of solidarity, Julie had never watched the video, but Tristan had assured her it was worthy of its viral fame.

“You want company?” Libby asked. “They say it’s easier if you go with someone.”

“No thanks.”

“Are you visiting your dad first?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

Libby leaned against the tree and pulled a blunt from behind her ear. She lit it and took a hit, then offered it to Julie. Breath held, she said, “You should.”

“Why?” Julie asked, taking the blunt and lighter.

“I don’t know, it’s kind of a big deal,” Libby replied, then exhaled. Smoke billowed out of her nostrils and lips and dissipated in the warm February air. Growing up, winters had been full of blizzards and snow days. Now the trees on the quad were bright pink and blooming, and Julie hadn’t needed a jacket since Christmas. “Or at least it would be to him.”

Julie took a quick hit and handed it back. Stoned, she often fell in love with life, and feared if she got too high, she would talk herself out of dying. To change the subject and since it had been so effective in jarring her mind out of its stupor during Call Me Rhonda’s class, she told Libby, “Scream the most offensive word you can think of as loud as you can.”

So Libby shouted, “CUMDUMPSTER.”

A girl walking past stopped and pointed to herself in question. She wore a navy blue sleeveless dress with a boat neck and an a-line skirt.

“Not you,” Libby told her. She looked the girl up and down. “Oh, cute dress.”

The girl happily shoved her hands in her pockets and flared the skirt out. “It’s got pockets!”

“Nice,” Julie said, and the girl continued walking, seemingly content with her pocket dress. Maybe Julie could have been happier in life if only her clothes had more pockets in them. The tragedy of missing pockets—or tiny pockets, or sewn-shut pockets, or useless pockets—in women’s clothes just proved life wasn’t as easy as those antique store tchotchkes would have you believe, *Live every day like it’s your last!* hand-painted onto repurposed pallet wood and hung in the foyers of retired elementary school teachers. This was the last day of Julie’s life, and it felt a lot like all the others, except happier because today she wasn’t carrying around the immense burden of future anymore.

“Still,” Libby said. She reached out and held Julie’s hand, interlacing their fingers together with surprising ease, the first gesture of physical affection expressed between them, and probably the last. In Julie’s memory, they’d never even hugged. It surprised Julie as much as it didn’t. She supposed Libby had just been waiting for the right opportunity: breaking up with

Tristan maybe, or Julie's last day alive, to express her feelings in her confrontationally avoidant way. "You should say goodbye to your dad."

"Okay," Julie replied. She leaned against the tree, her shoulder brushing Libby's, hands held together as they enjoyed the sunny winter afternoon.

\* \* \*

"What about your student loans?" Julie's dad demanded. "Those don't just go away, you know. They get transferred to your next of kin now, which is me. I'm going to be paying for your death for the next twenty years. Shit's up to ten percent nowadays. I'm fucked. I'm royally fucked."

Julie looked at her phone. It was well past three now. She had stopped by her dad's work to say goodbye, which happened to be on the way to her favorite restaurant so she could eat her favorite meal in peace before her appointment. Her dad was a shift leader at a shoe store called Boots Made 4 Walkin. The store was packed with customers, given that it was having its bi-annual buy-one-get-one sale, and her father's skin was blotchy with the stress of keeping the store clean amid the chaos. Boxes were upturned on the floor alongside balled-up tissue paper that had been shoved into the toes of shoes to retain their shape. Tenor sax muzak played on the speakers at an uncomfortably high volume. Her father was on his knees, sliding a box of tiny, purple glittering Chuck Taylors onto the bottom shelf.

"Sorry," Julie said. She was sitting on the little bench between aisles, stretching a tube of hosiery.

"God, what a mess. I just—who's gonna take care of all that crap in your dorm?"

"People from the Night-Night Palace take care of everything, Dad. It's included in the fee."

"Christ, you're *paying* for this?"

"It's an expensive procedure. There's a lot that goes into it."

Her dad maneuvered himself with a heavy thunk on the ground, so his back rested against the shelves, elbows on his knees, balding head in his hands. His mustache was a lighter shade of grey than in Julie's mental picture of him, and it occurred to her that he'd had facial hair her entire life; she had no idea what his face looked like without it. He was a Navy veteran who had never seen combat, a weatherman through two tours, but couldn't extend those skills anywhere beyond the military and so became a shoe salesman. He had once told Julie that he got the job because his coke dealer's wife was the store manager, and in those early days, he said, he had

genuinely enjoyed the work. Julie often speculated that he was in love with his dealer's wife for several years, and when he provided so few details about his quick transfer to a store across town, she assumed it was because he'd been having an affair with her. That was years ago, and he'd been miserable ever since.

"I wanted to give you a good life," he said to the floor. "I worked so hard to give you a good life."

"This isn't about you," Julie replied.

Her dad looked up at her. "Isn't it?"

When Julie didn't reply, he began weeping into his hands. A little girl at the end of the aisle, around eight years old, looked at him with sympathy, or maybe pity. Her mother came over with a shoebox in hand and said, "Excuse me, do you work here?"

He looked up at her, face glistening with tears, chest heaving. "Yes, ma'am," he replied, but his voice cracked.

"Do you have these in a four-and-a-half?" she asked, holding out the box.

Julie exchanged a glance with the woman's daughter, both of them embarrassed on behalf of their parents for different reasons.

"I'll have to look in the back to check," Julie's dad said.

The woman handed him the box. "That would be great, thank you."

He took it and used the shelves to climb back to standing. Julie stood from the bench and said, "I better get going."

"Please don't do this," he said. "I'll do anything. I'll—"

"There's nothing to be done, Dad." Julie stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you for everything. I'm sorry it turned out this way."

The woman who had handed him the shoebox sighed loudly. He looked back at her and held up a finger with an overly polite, strained laugh. When he returned to Julie, he lowered his voice and said, "You just—you can't do this."

"Death was a big deal in your generation but it's just not anymore. Everybody dies. I'd rather be able to choose when and how it happens than have it chosen for me."

"But you're all I got left. Without you..." He trailed off, eyes glazing over.

"Family and friends of Night-Night Palace clients get ten percent off future services," Julie offered with a small smile.



His face fell and he once more tumbled into a fit of tears.

“Please,” the shoe woman said harshly. “I have a dentist appointment in twenty minutes.”

“Alright,” he said to her. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and told Julie, “Stay here just a minute, okay? I won’t be long.”

“Sure,” Julie said. She knew if she let her father cry long enough in her general direction, she would at best postpone her appointment, or at worst cancel it. As soon as he lumbered into the backroom, she snuck out the door.

\* \* \*

Cheesesteak subs were Julie’s favorite thing about being alive. She limited herself to only eating them on Sundays, but had recently begun coming to Sub House off-campus two or three times a week, in hopes the mounds of flank steak coagulated with melted provolone and grilled onions and peppers might ignite in her a will to live.

It didn’t.

Barbara was manning the register today. “Hey, kid,” she said in her low, barely audible rasp of a voice. A smear of black lipstick coated her wrinkled lips, and she wore head-to-toe denim every day. Her white-blonde hair was permed into a frizz. A permanent cloud of secondhand smoke emanated off of her so strongly that Julie could smell it across the counter. She wondered if this added to the flavor and mildly addictive quality of the cheesesteak.

“Hey,” Julie said, and handed over a twenty. Barbara had already begun punching in her order when Julie walked through the door. Some days, the worst days, Julie wouldn’t say anything at all, just handed over cash soundlessly and took a seat at her favorite booth.

“Keep the change,” she added, even though her only income was in the form of excess student loan disbursements, which she realized would soon no longer be hers, but her father’s, and she had just made the decision on his behalf to offer Barbara a nearly fifty-percent tip.

Julie took a seat in her booth beside the window, where college kids in yoga pants and massive backpacks were trudging exhaustedly between coffeeshops and campus. She pulled out her phone and did the math. If her father was right, and the interest rate of her student loans were at ten percent, compounded daily, that meant in twenty years, the twenty dollars she just spent on a cheesesteak would end up costing nearly a hundred and fifty dollars. It was an oversimplification of the repayment process—there was no telling when the cheesesteak would be paid on principal—but it nevertheless left her feeling simultaneously sorry for her father, and

more certain of her choice to die sometime in the next half-hour. For fun, she calculated the cost of Call Me Rhonda's emotional vulnerability lecture today, of which she learned nothing about herself or English, by dividing the cost of a three-credit-hour class by the number of class sessions in a semester, then did the same math she had done with the cheesesteak. Call Me Rhonda's emotional vulnerability lecture would cost, in twenty years, at ten percent interest compounded daily, about six-hundred dollars, which was around the fee Julie was paying to commit suicide.

Barbara delivered Julie's cheesesteak to her booth, and Julie thought, *At least I'm getting something from the cheesesteak*. Barbara slid into the booth across from her with a stained coffee cup full of flat Coca-Cola. Three half-melted ice cubes sloshed around in it, plus what smelled like a significant amount of bourbon. She didn't often invite herself to sit with Julie, but on the few occasions it happened, Julie found she didn't mind the company.

She picked up her sandwich, and before taking her first bite, said, "This is my last meal. I'm dying in half an hour."

Barbara lifted her coffee cup toward Julie and said, "Congratulations," then took a loud slurp followed by an even louder swallow. She stared out the window and held two fingers up as if holding a cigarette, even though nothing was there.

Julie washed the bite down with a gulp of Mountain Dew, and Barbara asked, "Anything you never got a chance to do?"

Julie chewed her next bite thoughtfully. "Just stuff I never would have done anyway. Finding something important to say, making my mark on the world—like, that's never going to happen, you know?"

"Might have," Barbara offered, and fractionally brought her empty fingers to her lips before realizing she wasn't holding a cigarette.

"No, I think I would have gotten a shitty underpaid desk job I didn't care about, that would take up too much energy so that I never felt like doing things I *did* care about. I would've spent my evenings drinking alone and watching TV, my weekends doing all the chores I didn't have time to do during the week, and by the time I finally felt like I could relax, I'd have to go back to work again."

She took another bite and Barbara took another slurp of her whiskey and Coke.

“And I would have married Tristan,” Julie continued, more to her sandwich than Barbara, “so at least we’d have some shared income, but he would have left me within ten years or so—either by cheating on me or straight-up leaving in the middle of the night, and literally no one would be surprised by either of these things, so it would be seen as my fault, like, you should have known, Julie! And we’d already have a kid, maybe two, and Tristan would have the freedom and luxury to pursue whatever he wanted while I was stuck raising our children, dating fruitlessly to help fill the void of his absence, and then after my kids were grown, they’d go to college and get trapped in the same cycle. But I wouldn’t care, because it was what I did, and didn’t I turn out okay? And I’d go off to my same shitty desk job that I would pretend to be grateful for because at least I’d get an annual bonus and an inflation raise every year, and it would be enough to live on but never *live on*, you know? And my kids would be gone and my husband would be gone and I’d still have another twenty years of work left in me because retirement just isn’t a fucking option anymore. I’d die there, in my little cubicle surrounded by dollar-store framed photos of my kids, piles of unfinished paperwork, a dusty twenty-five-year loyalty trophy in the corner, and honestly, I’d rather skip all that and just die already.”

“That’s no life,” Barbara agreed with a slow nod. “It’s a survival factory.”

Julie looked at the delicious, dripping sandwich making a mess of her hands, thought about the real cost of it, that not even cheesesteak was immune to moral impurity, that Barbara had made it while earning a fraction of the cost of the sandwich itself; and how that was no different than Call Me Rhonda’s graduate stipend earnings in comparison to the tuition cost of her students, and how college gave Julie the insight to be able to see the shittiness of the world but didn’t teach her how to do anything about it; and Tristan’s unpaid internship in Paris, and how despite the latent homoeroticism of all of his masculine-aligned activities, it still took him until today to come out to her, to really be himself to her; and how Libby would never be able to google her own name without seeing a lightbulb scarring her rectum, and how she would never be able to meet anyone who didn’t already know this about her, and how she was still paying off the medical bills two years later despite having health insurance, and the hundreds of thousands of image results and comments about how this was her fault, what a dumb cunt, they said, who would do this to themselves, and the irony was that it had been a request from a viewer anyway, and she had been so strapped for cash she had to start a webcam feed because it paid more to take off her clothes in front of a camera and shove random objects inside herself than work at

Arby's across the street from her apartment; and how dresses never had pockets even though girls *need pockets*, to the point where Julie was genuinely delighted this girl had pockets in her dress, followed by immediate envy that she too wanted the pockets; and how her father had been working in a shoe store for as long as she could remember, and never complained about it once, not once, because, he said, Julie was worth it, Julie was worth the physical aches and menial labor and customer service of a shoe store, but Julie, Julie would never love someone as much as her father loved her, would never find a single person she was willing to work in a shoe store for, wanted a desk job for, wanted to endure this nightmare of modern-day, power-hungry, greed-filled existence for, and she wouldn't *want* to love someone that much, because that was too much love, too much pressure to be worth loving, that kind of love was innately, definitively unhealthy; and most of all she thought about how Melinda was right, all of them—Call Me Rhonda, Tristan, Libby, pocket dress girl, her father, Barbara—all of them were so fucking *fucked*.

Julie had no response for Barbara, and instead took another bite.

\* \* \*

Julie didn't hit any red lights during the drive from Sub House to her appointment, so it only took five minutes. She parked at 3:51 in the wide, half-abandoned strip mall that housed the Night-Night Palace. The asphalt was cracked and the highway rushed by directly behind it. Only a handful of other cars sat in the lot, one of which, given that it had four flat tires, looked like someone had left it there months ago and walked home, or maybe died. The sun beat down through Julie's windshield and onto her legs as she clicked off her ignition and sat back in her seat. She was suddenly self-conscious of the mess of her car, littered with empty water bottles, last semester's textbooks, receipts, and fast food bags. Someone would have to drive her car to her father's house, she thought. She wondered who they were, how much they got paid for delivering dead people's cars to wherever they had arranged to be dropped off or sold or impounded. What they thought of the interiors. If they tried to piece together the person's life or situation while they were driving based on the contents of the car, the music playing, the smell. Or maybe they didn't give a shit.

Julie shoved open the squeaking door, climbed out, and slammed it shut. She didn't bother locking it, or cleaning it, or getting her bookbag from the back seat. Each step she took away from her car, she felt lighter, like all the possessions inside of it—and her car itself, her

student loans, her apartment, her relationships, her doomed future—were no longer tied to her in any way. The things remaining were now her father’s problem, and when her father finally decided to make an appointment, they would be someone else’s.

A protester was sitting in a wheelchair beside the front door with signs leaning on either side of her legs. One read, *Death is God’s choice*, and the other said, *LIFE IS SUFFERING. GET OVER IT*. She wore a gray wool hat, a thick sweater, and gloves even though it was eighty degrees outside. Her jowls quivered and she had scraggly patches of white hair on her chin. She was either blind or habitually stared into the distance.

When Julie tried to pass her, the protester said, “This place isn’t right for you.” Her voice sounded surprisingly young, like bells ringing, nothing at all like Barbara’s smoke-addled rasp, even though the protester was easily a decade older.

“It’s none of your business,” Julie replied, hand hovering over the door handle. She shouldn’t have said anything, she thought. She should have just gone inside.

“You’ve got desperation on you,” the woman added. “It’ll get better, you know. Life.”

“How do you know?” Julie asked. “You spend all your time parked in front of this place, encouraging people to live their terrible lives instead of putting them out of their goddamn misery.”

“Life isn’t miserable if you’re patient with it,” the protester said with a slow nod. “A crying child does not need a raised hand, but a gentle one.”

Frustrated tears sprung to Julie’s eyes and she didn’t understand why. “You’re fucking ancient. You lived in a time when people had hope. There’s no winning anymore.”

The woman smiled and her gaze shifted to Julie, eyes locking together. Not blind, then. She raised her hands, palms up, and asked, “Does it look like I’m trying to win anything?”

Julie wiped her wet cheeks with the flat of her hands and said, “Well some of us are. Some of us are drowning, and we need help.”

“What you need is perspective.”

“I *have* perspective. I’m miserable, okay. Today was the first good day I’ve been had in years, fucking *years*.”

“Why is that?”

Tears were streaming down her face now. She was worse than her father. Her jaw hurt from grinding her teeth. She should have walked away, entered the Night-Night Palace, ignored

this stupid woman, but she found herself saying, “Because it’s my last.” And then louder, as if she were screaming about genitalia: “Because I learned about emotional vulnerability! Because I broke up with my boyfriend! Because I held hands with a girl I like! Because I didn’t have to worry about debt or my future! Because I ate a good sandwich! Because I’m about to die!”

She sounded a bit like the lines of “Howl” she had shouted in Call Me Rhonda’s class, and finally understood it. Understood every word of it they had read so far. Understood why they needed to scream it. Understood the need to stand back up, again and again. To hurt, always, unceasingly, and let that pain fuel righteousness and goodness and honor. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t being held down by greater forces, that she would never be strong enough to stand back up, that she wasn’t tormented, crushed under the weight of existence every minute of every day.

Julie swallowed over and over as she tried to compose herself. She held her hand to her chest and couldn’t catch her breath.

“And what was stopping you from doing any of that before today?” the woman asked, leaning forward and clasping her hands between her knees.

A sob fell out of Julie’s throat as she said, “I couldn’t. I just—I couldn’t.”

“So you’re letting fear murder you.” The woman’s words were cruel but she spoke them with kindness. “They have a word for that. It’s called cowardice.”

Julie’s breath came out in gasps as she tried to steady herself. She wiped her nose with the flat of her palm and spat, “Go fuck yourself.”

The woman offered one more nod and said, “May God have mercy on you.”

\* \* \*

A glowing tablet gazed up at Julie from a small lap desk, attached to the egg-like pod in which she was sitting. She had trouble focusing on the words on the screen, a list of sentences beside little checkboxes that she was supposed to click if they were true. The top of the form read in bold letters: SUICIDALITY INVENTORY.

She was stuck on the third item, which read, *Thinking about death makes me happy.*

The Night-Night Palace looked like a cross between an urgent care and a retro nightclub. The walls, tables, and chairs were bright white with matte finish, and the floor was covered in grey shag carpeting. Track lighting circumferenced the ceiling, the lights slowly cycling through all the colors in the visual spectrum. Music that sounded like some kind of ritualistic chanting

came through speakers in the floor. The room felt like it was vibrating, an effect Julie thought was meant to be comforting somehow, like a womb maybe, but gave her a headache.

A white sphere hung from the ceiling with an angular chunk taken out of it like a Pacman, and rotated constantly. It housed the receptionist desk, where Maureen sat, the woman from the confirmation call earlier. Julie wondered how she climbed in and out of it, since there were no stairs, and if she got motion sick sitting up there all day.

The waiting area beside Maureen's floating receptionist station housed a series of similarly egg-shaped pods, lined with fuzzy white padding. Julie sat in the one closest to the door. They each faced the wall, which was itself a giant television playing a looped advertisement for the Night-Night Palace, and which Julie thought was ridiculous given that she had already been sold. Now the commercial was talking about the Night-Night Palace's dedication to philanthropy, and how it had mercifully euthanized millions of terminally ill and elderly patients, offering them a painless, affordable transition to Seance, as opposed to lengthy, expensive, agonizing palliative care leading to the enigmatic void of the afterlife.

"Death can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time," the narrator said. "Take control of your destiny. Choose your moment. Plan ahead." The video showed a presumably terminally ill woman, lying in her own bed, surrounded by her smiling loved ones. The woman closed her eyes, and the screen faded to black.

Julie forced her attention back to the inventory. Did thinking about death make her happy? She had thought about death all day today, she reasoned, and she'd been very happy, so she clicked the box and it turned green.

*In the past six months, I have experienced a traumatic event.*

The image of Melinda's dead eyes came to mind. She hadn't considered Melinda's death traumatic since they had barely known each other, but checked the box anyway, just in case. This time it turned red.

She checked the next three—

*I am generally unhappy.*

*When I think about my future, I feel hopeless.*

*I am dissatisfied and bored with everything.*

—which all turned red, but the next three weren't true:

*When I think about death, I feel at peace.*

*I am an active user of Seance.*

*My friends and family support my decision to move on.*

Halfway through the inventory, she started crying again—maybe she had never stopped, she thought, maybe she had been crying this whole time and didn’t notice—and was grateful to be facing a wall. It didn’t make sense, she couldn’t feel anything, she was empty, yet tears were streaming down her face, her chin, her neck, soaking her t-shirt. She couldn’t see the tablet anymore, and became aware that she was weeping, loudly, and suddenly her egg pod was spinning of its own accord, back toward Maureen, but a man was sitting in a normal chair in front of her, smiling with his entire face.

“Hello, Julie, I’m Brent. I’ll be assisting you today. Get it? *Assisting*? That’s a little suicide humor for you.” He held out his hand to her and she shook it. He had a French tip manicure and dainty, soft hands. Julie couldn’t tell how old he was, either middle-aged with a number of facelifts, or young with the burden of his profession weighing down his spirit. He had a coif of bright orange hair, false eyelashes, and a set of veneers with floating opal glitter in them that Julie had seen in fashion magazines. He wore a white button-down under a coral pink cardigan and a pair of neon yellow pants. A tablet rested atop his crossed legs, like the one Julie was holding but bigger, and he maintained unblinking eye contact as he spoke to her. “I couldn’t help but notice your inventory scores.”

Julie lifted the hem of her shirt and used it to wipe her eyes and nose. She felt stupid for being so sad about dying. Given Brent hadn’t mentioned the sobbing, she assumed this was normal.

She didn’t respond, but he continued as if she had. “It looks like you’re on the cusp between dissuicidal and eusuicidal ideation, and I’m afraid we can’t perform the procedure if your dissuicidality score is too high,” he said, as if he were admonishing her.

“What does that even mean?” Julie asked.

“Eusuicidality is *good* ideation,” Brent explained. “It’s healthy. The DSM refers to it as *a thorough understanding and acceptance of the consequences of voluntary death*. In the seventh edition of the DSM, eusuicidality was reserved only for the elderly or terminally ill, but after significant debate and overwhelming empirical evidence, the eighth edition allowed for eusuicidality to be applied to anyone who fit the diagnostic criteria. Dissuicidality is *unhealthy*. It



indicates a despairing desire for death that might be mitigated by therapy or medication. Perhaps something in your life isn't going smoothly?"

Julie opened her mouth to reply this time, but Brent ignored her. "We can offer you a discounted referral to our sister organization, Happy Helping Hands, where well-trained Mental Service Technicians are standing by to provide recommendations for affordable over-the-counter sedatives. I promise you'll forget all about your sadness. How does that sound?"

"Can I just change my answers on the inventory?" Julie asked. "I'd really like to die."

Brent looked around, then leaned in and said, "I won't tell if you don't," followed by a wink. His gaudy eyelashes sparkled and fell nearly all the way down to his cheekbone.

So Julie picked up the tablet again and unclicked all the red box answers, then re-clicked the ones she thought might turn green, the positive-sounding ones, until the entire inventory was green without any red. When she was done, she hit submit, and confetti rained down across the screen. She looked back up at Brent and said, "Better?"

He glanced at his tablet. "Perfect. It says here also that you've chosen the basic bundle. Have you considered any of our other packages? Our silver Seance service is very popular, and currently fifty percent off. Your Seance use will taper slowly over twenty years, not ten like our bronze package, so by the time the contract ends, the grieving of your loved ones will be complete, and you'll be..." He made an explosion gesture with his hand while grinning maniacally. "Gone. At peace. Think of it as twenty years of extended life without the burden of having to live it. And, if you name a beneficiary—free of charge, of course—they can purchase extension packages on your behalf."

Julie imagined her father instant messaging her every year on her birthday, typing on his phone in the backroom at work, crying among the teetering stacks of shoeboxes. "No thank you. Basic is fine."

"Well then," Brent replied, still smiling but now strained slightly, as if he had just been deprived of potential commission. "You just have to sign the liability waiver and we'll head back to the Night-Night Room."

The next screen loaded on her tablet, thousands of words of six-point font. She scrolled and scrolled to get to the bottom, where she had to check a box that read, *I accept the above terms and conditions*, and below, drew her signature with her finger. This time when she hit submit, the screen went dark.

“Are you ready?” Brent asked, his expression growing solemn and warm, even though she could tell it was just a well-practiced act.

Julie glanced at the door, expecting Libby or her father or even Tristan to rush in, begging her not to go through with it. She wondered if Melinda had thought the same thing, if she had expected Julie to come find her at just the right moment and call an ambulance. She didn’t realize until now that she believed some cosmic force would impede her death in lieu of survivalist instinct. That was it, she thought, she was lacking agency, the most baseline will to live. She had been taught that life was only worth living if enough people wanted her to live it. Despite this, in the face of her final moments, she felt nothing but resignation.

“Yeah,” Julie said. “I’m ready.”

## An Informed Purchase

It's just a dildo. A black dildo the circumference of Colleen's wrist, wrapped in cellophane and placed in the kind of thick plastic packaging her sons' toys came in prior to being wrenched open with a pair of kitchen shears. The kind of plastic that could cut you worse than the shears if you weren't careful. She shouldn't buy it, she thinks. It would be too dangerous.

And where would she put it when not in use? She imagines it in various parts of her house: standing proudly on the foyer table beside the antique vase of flowers she fills every week from Abdul the florist at the farmer's market. Gathering dust in the china cabinet beside Tom's collection of vintage *Star Trek* plates and Burger King *Lord of the Rings* goblets that light up at the bottom. Tied at the end of the fairy lights cord strung up corner to corner in Peter's bedroom. Lined up beside the cleaning bottles under the kitchen sink. In her briefcase underneath her client files, should a dildo-related emergency one day arise at the office. She could use it in lieu of a fly swatter, maybe. Wade could have played tee-ball with it when he was younger.

She slides it back on the thin metal bar protruding from a peg board, one among dozens in the floor-to-ceiling dildo display of varying sizes and lengths and speeds and functions she cannot comprehend. One of them, hanging caddy-corner to the one she just put away, is silver with points on the end like a mace and she wonders what kind of person enjoys silicone spikes jammed against their vaginal or anal walls. Colleen sometimes enjoys the raw burn pinch of her glasses on the bridge of her nose and above her ears, so really, she's not one to judge.

She steps back and inspects the display in the same way she browses for books at the library, index finger tapping the tip of her nose in idle thought. Unlike the library, however, she cannot open a dildo package, sample its contents, and then return it for continued use by the public, paid for in part by her tax dollars so the entire community may benefit from the penetration of manufactured phalluses.

The sex shop occupies a neon-glowing hole in the wall between two bars, one biker and one hipster, both blaring different Journey songs, which creates a cacophony of noise that doesn't quite manage to drown out the buzzing of the blinking pink XXX sign in the window, the display boasting three mannequins clad in varying arrangements of BDSM gear and feathered lingerie.

The carpet looks like something you'd find in a Las Vegas convention center, all concentric orange circles and teal stripes meant to distract and disorient, as if the designer of the carpet felt jilted at not receiving more recognition for their work and so demanded the attention of all who walked upon it. The aisles are labeled with friendly drug store style signs hovering above them and say things like *Lubricants* and *Gags/Blindfolds/Edible Underwear*. Then of course there's a black curtain in the furthest corner beside the rotating display of butt plugs glinting beneath the ceiling track lights, behind which Colleen imagines are peep shows, perhaps, if that kind of thing still exists, either for committed connoisseurs of old school obscenity, or Luddites.

"Can I help you find anything?" a man asks.

Colleen glances at him. He's young, maybe around Wade's age, can't be older than twenty-five. He's nothing like her son, though, who played banker with the penny jar at the age of six, got suspended for launching an underground blackjack ring at twelve, declared a finance major at eighteen, and now lives in suits the cost of Colleen's mortgage payment. Wade comes to family dinner using jargon that makes him sound like he's perpetually in midst of a TED Talk. No, this young man has a stainless steel ball perched below his plump lower lip, a ring in his eyebrow, colorful sleeve tattoos down both arms obscured by a button-up denim shirt (X-Men themed, she notes, Scarlet Witch taking up the length of his left forearm, the Phoenix down the right). His hair is pulled into a knot at the crown of his head, and he's tall, almost too tall, vaguely androgynous, and smiling at her with a little more intensity than she expects these interactions generally warrant. The look reminds her of the handful of times in her life men bought her drinks at bars before she politely informed them she was married. She imagines stripping away the man's piercings and tattoos, trimming the hair, and putting him in a sharp suit, a bowtie maybe, and he could be Tom, she thinks, the spitting image of her Tom on their wedding day.

She primes herself to give a boilerplate no-thank-you, but she hesitates. *No* is the word that reaches her lips, but what comes out is:

"I've never had an orgasm, and I'm in the market for one."

She braces for laughter. How silly, the boy must think, a middle-aged woman who has never had an orgasm. Or worse, how sad. Instead he says, "You'll probably want something that vibrates." He goes behind the counter and pulls out a vibrator from the glass display box, exactly

the way the jeweler removed the velvet plane of rings from which she picked out her wedding ring, except this one is full of things people put inside themselves for fun and pleasure.

He hands it to her. A piece of label maker tape circles the bottom and reads, MODEL ONLY—DO NOT USE. This one is purple and smaller than the black dildo she had been inspecting. Silver ball bearings are lined up in three neat rows near the middle, and something like a tree branch with two rabbit ears splits apart from the base. She twists the bottom and jolts in surprise—the curved top starts to circle rapidly, the ball bearings rotate, and the whole device buzzes loudly like a lawnmower. She twists it back to the off position and plays with some of the other settings. While she does this, the young man leans his elbows on the glass case and says, “Most women can’t orgasm from penetration alone. They need clitoral stimulation.”

“Ah,” Colleen replies, even though she knows that, head tilted as she watches the little rabbit ears go blurry with the maxed-out vibration speed. She thinks of Tom’s prior attempts, his impatience, their years of unspoken celibacy, and her ignorance of it all that doesn’t seem like her fault now that she thinks about it. She talked to doctors but they never cared much about anything that wasn’t cancer- or fertility-related. She worried for a long time she was broken in some way. Like having a cold sort of, something that everyone struggles with and manages from time to time, and it’s irritating, one of the inevitable consequences of existence, but there’s no cure. She just has a different kind of cold, she thinks, but for a long time it seemed permanent and there was no use digging for answers because there have always been more important things to worry about.

But after the embarrassing events of Wade’s wedding last week, she realized: this cold is getting tiresome, and she needs to find a cure.

“This one seems like a little much,” she says, handing it back bottom first, like a knife.

“Sure, sure,” he says, and circles back around behind the case to the wall of toys, where he pulls one down from higher than she would have thought to look. He hands the box to her, this one tastefully decorated, no naked smiling women on the packaging like the others, no bubble-letter exclamations like, *Waterproof! Enjoy it in the shower!* The box is navy blue with silver stars dotting it, opens like the kind of boxes lipstick tubes come in, and a little window shows a plain, baby pink vibrator, long and thin, as discrete as one of these things can probably be.

“Alright,” she says, “I’ll try this one.”

He manages to upsell her special soap and a cleaning cloth, and gives her some sample packages of water-soluble lubricant he tosses in with the receipt. As he passes the bag to her, she asks, “What’s your name?” And quickly clarifies, “In case I have any questions.”

“Adrian,” he says with the same laden smile as before. “I work weeknights.”

“Okay, well,” Colleen begins, inching toward the door, “if I decide to get any additional, you know, purchases, I’ll be sure to come on a weeknight.”

Adrian lets out a breath of a laugh like it was a pun, and Colleen pushes out the front door before she thinks of more incriminating things to say.

\* \* \*

When Colleen arrives home, she plugs in her phone at the charger by the couch and sees sixteen text messages from Peter and three missed calls. She skims through the texts, which detail a dramatic saga of Peter locking his keys in the car at a Circle K in Tennessee, insisting that the whole road trip is ruined, ruined, he says, all because of a rookie mistake, he hasn’t done this since he was sixteen (he’s only eighteen), how mad he is at himself, then a timestamp, four-thirty-ish, a breakthrough! A kindly stranger with a wire coat hanger comes to bail Peter and his friends out, and then a string of cry-laugh emojis, and then a string of car and sweat-related emojis she thinks signifies his relief they’re finally back on the road now.

She replies, *Glad you’re having fun.*

There’s also a notification saying Wade posted something on her Facebook wall, probably a panda video—she made the mistake of telling him she likes pandas; it’s a lie, she’s actually ambivalent toward them—but she swipes it away and puts her phone facedown on the side table.

She lets the dog out and feeds him, puts the dishes away, turns the laundry around, eats a salad with cold chicken on it, and watches an episode of a sitcom she DVR’d and doesn’t actually like, but it’s mindless and simple and she finds the laugh track soothing which is all she can really ask for in a prime time television show nowadays.

A character on the show asks bluntly, “What’s the best sex you’ve ever had?”

The responding character does a spit take, and it’s funny because they’re in public, a bombastic girl and her shy friend, some modernized, overly derivative version of *The Odd Couple*. It isn’t nearly as well-written as the original, they just don’t make sitcoms like they used to, but it does make Colleen wonder: what *is* the best sex she’s ever had?

Definitely not the night she lost her virginity. It was to a man named Jeremy, who was thirty-two when she was nineteen, and it wasn't one of those things where she was trying to make her parents mad or anything, she just genuinely enjoyed Jeremy's company and how he always made decisions for her and could buy her alcohol and she finally felt like an adult. Except for all those times he treated her like a child, talking down to her while she moped and begged for his attention. Secretly she enjoyed those too, possibly more than feeling like an adult, and she's always known that said something about her but she never liked to think about what.

Then there was the first time with Tom, about a year before they got married, when they were both twenty-three. She had dropped out of college a few years before and started working as a medical transcriptionist and she was off-again-on-again with Jeremy but not serious because she grew up and he just stayed the same, which she supposes in retrospect is the tragedy of May-December relationships. Tom worked at a comic book store she went to after work on Wednesdays to pick up the newest issues of *Sin City* and *The Sandman*. She liked to keep her head down so as to avoid getting into discussions with men who tried to explain things to her, and Tom was the only one who never bothered her, didn't even ask her if she needed help looking for anything, which spoke more to his poor work ethic than any possible egalitarian conceit, but which she found refreshing nonetheless.

After a handful of failed attempts at getting his attention by talking about Marvel comics she used to pick up before getting into smaller presses, she finally started talking about all the things *she* liked, namely DC's new imprint Vertigo that released comics with more adult-oriented themes.

That worked because apparently Tom had grown up with superhero comics and had an immense respect for them, but wished the genre would get out of its slump (the nineties were considered the dark age of comics, she found out much later) and do something new. An hour later, they were at the ice cream shop next door, and he was enrapt in her explanation of fanzines and how they were doing cool things that comics weren't. An hour after that, they were fucking in Tom's third-floor apartment looking out over the airport.

That might have been the best sex, or their wedding night, or the days and nights consecutive to that one during their honeymoon in Riverside, Iowa where Captain Kirk was born. They stayed in a two-star hotel with a perfectly decent continental breakfast and didn't do much but watch movies, read comics, and have sex. Tom had been trying diligently over the course of

their courtship to make her come, to no avail. She apologized repeatedly, and learned to distract him from his sense of failure by offering to blow him. But really she was all nerves: she could never get into the right headspace because she couldn't push away the nagging feeling that she was boring him, which was her biggest fear, even after they were married.

She had worked so hard to catch his interest in the first place, and he never seemed to particularly *enjoy* going down on her; she could always feel his mind wandering, so the whole thing felt like a major inconvenience.

Then there was the last time, the very last time nearly a year ago now, which was just like all the other times, except Tom rolled over after and asked, "Can't you even fake it?"

"Would you want me to now that you've asked?" Colleen said.

Now the episode is over and she puts her dishes away and thinks about drinking a glass of wine but remembers what a hard time Tom had getting an erection once he was a few drinks in, which was a nearly permanent state when Peter and Wade were younger, and which convinced Colleen for years, almost a decade, that it was her fault, that she just wasn't attractive or interesting anymore. Some nights she would whisper to his back, "Maybe you should find someone...younger."

"We're not getting a divorce," he would say.

"I'm not suggesting one."

She let the implication hang in the air until he fell asleep.

In retrospect, she can pinpoint the exact moment everything fell apart, when Tom's honest attempts at getting her off turned into ignoring the prospect completely, a big ugly elephant parked in their bedroom. They'd been married two years or so, and Colleen had gotten over a bad bug that she'd been taking antibiotics for, forgetting that they messed with her birth control. And so a month later she held a pregnancy test in her shaking hand, a pretty pink plus sign in the window, and started crying.

Tom heard her and came rushing in, saw the pregnancy test, and, stunned and suddenly deflated, slouched on the bed beside her. They had talked about having kids in a vague, far-off way, maybe someday when they were more financially stable. Colleen had just gotten promoted to a position as a health insurance claims advocate, and the comic book store had fallen on hard times, so Tom had to get a second job as a clerk at a Costco, where he later became the general manager.



After some discussion, they decided to go through with the pregnancy. Wade Wilson McCormick was born eight pounds, eleven ounces, sometime near two in the morning.

She was glad he wasn't a girl, not because she had a gender preference, but because she and Tom couldn't agree whether to name her Natasha or Natalia after two different iterations of the Black Widow. They had high hopes for their little Deadpool, though, that he would one day grow up to be just like his namesake.

While she managed to drop the weight from the first pregnancy, she couldn't manage it again four years later, after the birth of Peter Parker McCormick, their amazing baby Spider-Man, and while she wasn't fat, the distortion of her breasts, stretch marks like parentheses giving the illusion of engorging her belly, plus the development of both wrinkles *and* acne made her uncomfortable in her own skin. Every day she looked in the mirror and didn't recognize the person staring back at her: faded homekit dye job on limp hair, graying at the roots; grocery bags filled with rotten produce hanging under her eyes; pockmarked pale skin, thinning ashen lips, little hairs growing on her upper lip and chin; rounded shoulders underneath poorly fitted department store suits, blouses with the afternoon remains of mustard stains from lonely cubicle lunches.

Tom gave no outright indication he found her any less attractive than he used to. Neither did he compliment her or do anything to make her feel beautiful. She hated to admit that she could barely look at him, the near-hundred pounds he'd gained from Costco food court pizza. He refused to change his eating habits from when he was a teenager and admit his metabolism wasn't what it used to be. He brought home bulk supplies of candy and sodium-laden snacks. He cooked steaks on the grill while she drizzled a tablespoon of olive oil over a sensible quinoa salad.

The thought of leaving him only crossed her mind during nights when his apneatic snoring kept her awake. She made painstaking lists of what it would take to begin the divorce process, but when she started to calculate the cost, and figuring out how to divide their possessions—the shared comic book collection alone took up their entire basement—her heart raced and the room began to spin. Not to mention Peter and Wade. She didn't want to put them through the messiness of a divorce when she wasn't *that* unhappy. It seemed shallow to break up with a man for putting on a little weight and not drowning her in affection like some romance novel. So she climbed out of bed with a pillow tucked under her arm, and slept on the couch.

The evening passes at an unbearable pace, her daily chores done and house clean all except for the sex shop bag lying on the couch, unmoved since she arrived home. She tries to watch some more television but her eyes keep shifting over to the little blue bag and its contents, and something is stirring in her gut that feels like indigestion but isn't, the feeling you get when you climb into the seat of a roller coaster you've never been on before, and the bar clacks onto your lap and you grip it tightly not knowing what's ahead.

She climbs the stairs to her bedroom with the bag hanging from her index finger like a toxic substance. She tosses it on the bed and slips into her pajamas which consist of one of Tom's old DragonCon t-shirts she never got rid of and which swallows her like a circus tent. Her phone says it's only ten p.m. Over the course of the evening, she received a handful of artful pics from Peter but no word from Wade, thank god, and clicks her phone to silent anyway just in case he gets a few drinks in and accuses her of "falling out of touch" or her personal favorite, "severe emotional abandonment," which he says with such frequency that he refers to it as an acronym, SEA.

"My therapist says most of my issues can be traced to your SEA," Wade told her while helping rinse off dishes after Sunday dinner last week. And when she refused to reply, he added, "You're like a goddamn brick wall. You didn't used to be like this. You were different before Dad—"

It took too much effort to bite her tongue from saying, "Why don't you read a book for once, you boring capitalist fuck."

Now it's just her and the vibrator. She stands in front of the bed and grips the hem of her t-shirt, staring at the outline of the thin box inside the bag, remembering Adrian's lithe hands slipping it inside, and that roller coaster feeling is building in her, but now it's like moving up the first big hill, where all you can see are the tracks and the chain pulling you up and a huge expanse of sky.

She finally pulls the box from the bag, opens the box, and pulls out the vibrator. A little instruction booklet falls out and lands on the bed. She picks it up, unfolds it, and reads it. The instructions come in three different languages—English, Spanish, and French—and she thinks about how orgasming is an international pastime, and how vagina-owning people of all races and classes and genders across the entire world may be suffering from the same libidinal issues she is.

The instructions only detail how to use and clean the vibrator (which is referred to as a “massage wand” as if people would use it on their sore shoulders after a workout) and not how to orgasm, which makes sense but she resents the manufacturer anyway. She ambles into Peter’s room which is adorned in tacky *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* posters from the nineties he got at a neighbor’s yard sale, which are falling down in the corners from strips of masking tape that have dried out. The women are tan and sand-covered and wearing neon bikinis that come up to the tips of their pelvic bones, all tousled hair and open mouths like they can’t breathe through their noses for some reason. The blinds on his windows are shut and the slats are yellowed from his pretentious hand-rolled cigarettes.

His Xbox controller is under the pillow of his unmade bed like a big lost tooth, and she pulls it out like she did when he was seven, but instead of putting a Sacagawea dollar coin under his pillow in return, she presses the button on the back of the controller and steals the double-A batteries.

When she gets back into her own room, they pop easily into the dildo, and she twists the bottom again. The thing starts buzzing like the other one did in the store, but it’s quiet like the engine of a sports car, and nothing is visibly rotating. The silicone feels eerily like skin but not at all like an actual penis, more like an idealized vibrating penis without the ridges, veins, or seminal fluids. She puts the tip of the vibrator against the center of her forehead and feels the reverberation all the way in her teeth.

She tosses the bag and its remaining contents on the side table and then climbs under the covers with the vibrator in hand. She lies on her back and continues inspecting it, twisting the bottom so that it vibrates more strongly and less. She presses it to each finger, her nose, puts it in her mouth and takes it out and makes a face, lifts her shirt and rests it on her stomach.

She should get wet first, she thinks, and reaches over to the side table to open the drawer. The family New Testament is in the back corner and she takes it out and opens it. A decade or so ago she glued all the pages together and sawed out the innards to make a box where she keeps her secret things: a pipe, some weed, a lighter, her wedding ring, an emergency hundred-dollar bill, and a Tijuana bible she would read before she knew Tom was about to mount her without so much as a kiss of foreplay.

“You’re dry as sandpaper,” he’d tell her if she didn’t have time to prepare herself, as if she just walked around all day with a dripping cunt just waiting for him, and she’d grit her teeth

and hope for the best. Tom would sometimes ask if she was alright, and she'd say yes, because the thought of saying no and having a talk and introspect about it was just too exhausting to bear that time of night. So she got into the habit of reading a dirty little vintage comic she found in a shop when she was a teenager and stole by shoving it in the front pocket of her acid wash overalls, an eight-pager called "Endorsed" with Etta Kett. She's read the thing probably a thousand times by now, has it memorized, and to this day it still gets her going better than anything else she's found, which admittedly isn't much.

She reads the tattered booklet cover to cover, Etta getting blackmailed by a man named Bob into having dubious and poorly rendered sex with her. The thin worn spine has been re-stapled a dozen times now, the cardstock edges frayed and the pages bent and wrinkled. Porn just doesn't cut it like cartoons can. She knows manga and hentai exist, but like orgasms, sex toys, abortions, and divorces, until recently she thought it was a thing for other people: something ominous and out of reach, hovering in her peripheral vision that she never had time or motivation or willpower to look at head-on. Maybe if she can get up the guts to finally buy a dildo, she can do a google search for hentai. But it'll have to wait until Peter comes home from his road trip and goes to a party or something so she can use his laptop.

The comic doesn't do as much for her as she would like so she puts it away back in the box, shuts the drawer, and turns out the light. She pats her hand on the bed until she finds the vibrator again, then feels to the bottom and switches it on and shoves it under the blankets and presses it gently to her pubic bone over her underwear, not quite where it needs to go but close.

A burst of pleasure follows, unexpected like going over a rumble strip on the highway. She gasps and twists it off. Her heart is thrumming in her chest in a bad way, and a memory of Tom hits her, heaving and thrusting above her, her hips stretched wider than they should go, his breath smelling like garlic from dinner, her biting the inside of her cheek and mentally balancing her checkbook, doing some kegels on the downswing so he'll come faster and she can go to sleep.

Fuck it, she thinks. Fuck Tom. Fuck Tom and his lazy outlook and his bad heart. This time she throws the covers off of her body, spreads her legs, and presses the vibrator to her clit while it's still off—over her underwear still, she's not there yet—and *then* turns it on. The lowest setting, buzzing muffled.

Oh, she thinks. *Oh.*

It's fun for about a minute, feels great even, and she ratchets up the speed, but soon feels the symptoms of hyperventilation—a narrowing of her mind, a vague fuzziness—so she forces herself to slow down her breathing, one two three, one two three, like a waltz.

And then there's Tom again, Tom and his oniony sweat, his closed eyes and concentrated face like he takes himself somewhere else when they fuck, the Enterprise or Middle Earth or Gotham. Makes himself someone else, Kirk or Aragorn or Bruce fucking Wayne. Which means Colleen has always been a stand-in for a scantily clad alien from the final frontier, or Arwen, or Catwoman. She never imagined him as anyone other than himself, and maybe that was the problem.

And now there's Wade looming over her. Wade with his beautiful husband and their six-figure wedding with the open bar that Colleen over-utilized to the point of puking in the men's restroom last week when this whole thing started, where Wade found her and said, "You're untethered. Dad would have never let you do this."

And she said, "You're nothing like your namesake."

A Neil Diamond song throbbed from the reception hall. Wade squatted down to her level in the handicap stall and handed her a paper towel and a bottle of water. He'd taken off his tuxedo jacket and rolled the sleeves of his dress shirt to his shapely biceps.

"Grow up, Mom. People aren't comic book characters. My therapist says it's not fair of you to hold me to that standard."

"You're a fucking conformist," she rasped, temple perched on the toilet lid.

"Says the woman with a thirty-year mortgage, a full-time job, and two kids. When was the last time you went to a convention? A comic book store? When was the last time you did anything for yourself, anything you used to love?"

She swallowed down a rising lump of bile.

"None of us have stopped you from pursuing your hobbies, your interests, your happiness," Wade continued. "It's all you. You're your own damn roadblock and you refuse to see it."

So she spit out the only thing left for her to say: "Your father hated the man you became."

Wade stood and glowered down at her. "Good thing he's dead then," he said, and left, left her there sobbing and puking and untethering, until Peter found her half an hour later and helped

her to the car and strapped her in. They were silent except for her crying, and he didn't ask what happened.

Once she calmed down and he merged onto the highway toward home, she told him, "I don't do anything for myself, do I?"

Peter glanced over at her with wide, sympathetic eyes.

"Why am I like this?" she said. "I'm just a big ball of resentment. Your father for being a big, mediocre doofus. Wade for being so fucking boring, and obedient, and—"

"Happy and successful," Peter supplied.

She fell silent as she watched the street lights float past in a dizzying blur, and when Peter pulled off the highway, she said, "I've never even had an orgasm."

Peter gripped the steering wheel and his jaw twitched. If she were sober, she would have acknowledged the tension she caused, but she wasn't so she didn't. Then she added, "When you find somebody, you gotta get them off, alright? Promise me you'll give as many orgasms as you get. Twice as many as you get. Give 'em away like candy on Halloween, okay. Because one day you'll be dead, and you won't wish you'd donated more money to charity or spent more time with your family, you'll wish you'd come a lot more than you had, with a lot more people. You'll wish you'd put yourself and your pleasure and your happiness first. That's the truth of it, Peter. That's the goddamn truth."

And then there's Adrian the sex shop worker with all his piercings and X-Men tattoos like he climbed right out of her id, and he's kissing her like she's more beautiful and talented than Wanda Maximoff or Jean Grey or whoever else he's got tattooed on his body, the way Tom only kissed her those first few years, before he got bored with reality and children and responsibility and dove back into his fandoms, back into his mind where everything had brighter colors and only two dimensions: a place they once shared but, while she was forced to climb out and be the responsible one, the mature one, the strong one, he let it saturate him until he died of it, his entire out-of-body lifestyle, a drop-dead heart attack on a Tuesday afternoon in May. But now Adrian is reaching under her skirt, and she says, just like Etta Kett in her bluesie, "What do you think I—"

And then he presses two fingers into her and pulls them out to circle against her clit and kisses her neck and she says things like, "You're half my age," and, "But I'm married—"

He doesn't say anything at all, he's fine being the other man, the younger man, the better man. He thinks older women are hot. He's ten pounds of mommy issues in a five pound bag. He needs this as much as she does. He wants to be told what to do, wants to please, so she tells him to get on his knees, and there he goes, pressing her by the hips into the display case of the sex store and lifting her skirt—

The vibrator is at the highest setting, and she's got it at just the right spot, sending a rolling current of tension from her toes to the crown of her head, and it's the rollercoaster again—the final hill, the quiet acceptance that this is life now, being on this ride and nothing can be done about it anymore, any of it, blissful acceptance: she's got a character from a Bret Easton Ellis novel for one son, a wannabe Sal Paradise for the other, and a dead manchild husband who probably never loved her. But she's got this, pleasure at her fingertips, toes curling in the sheets, shifting and writhing all over like a seizure, and the mental image of Adrian bending her over the butt plug display, fucking her stupid in front of a growing crowd of sex shop patrons.

The chain is slowing down, clacking to a halt at the highest peak, and she stops breathing, body taut, suddenly aware of the impending drop—

She crests over the hill and falls, shuddering and making sounds that feel far away even though they're coming from her own throat. They sound like sobs. Tom wasn't even fifty. She curls in on herself and rolls on her side, the vibrator slipping from her grasp as she opts to grip the sheets instead and ride out the remaining waves.

The sobs come closer until they become part of her again, ripped from her chest until she can't breathe, she can't breathe, she sucks in air that never makes it to her lungs, her throat aches like she's been screaming. Fuck you, Tom, she thinks, and presses her face into his pillow that she pretends still smells like him.

## Asset Recovery

**9:00 AM**

The train rushed past the east wing of Aevus Life Lending headquarters and rendered the elevator inside useless while it shook. Peggy gripped a manila folder in her arms as she willed the rattling elevator to move again. The card stock had turned soggy in her sweaty grip, the pages of her new employment contract digging into her arm. Her laptop bag dragged her shoulder down with a familiar pain; she wouldn't be caught dead with one of those wheely doodads that made everyone look like they were trying to catch a plane. If you really have that much to take home every night, she thought, then you aren't working hard enough in the office.

Such was the no-nonsense mentality that got her the promotion from Business Services to ARG, the Asset Recovery Group. That, and the process of "coaching out" she had endured from her old boss, Rich, a baby-faced thirty-year-old with an online MBA and an employment history of being the general manager at a grocery store, with no life-lending experience whatsoever.

He openly disliked employees like Peggy who had been at the company twenty or more years. "You grow complacent," he'd once told her in their monthly one-on-one. "Wake up, give every day fifty percent of your actual capacity, and you expect stability, security. Takes blood, sweat, and tears to survive this world, Peg. You lifers got no gut for risk. Disgusting."

Her loyalty to Aevus made it difficult for Rich to fire her. He wanted to replace her with two part-time twentysomethings so he wouldn't have to pay benefits. When his efforts to terminate her employment proved ineffective, he forwarded her an email one afternoon about a new branch of ARG opening up in their building, and the immediate need to fill a dozen spots on the team. While the language was sparse, she read between the lines: the recession had uncovered a sudden deficit of Recovery Officers to handle cases of unpaid life loans that had gone into default.

She didn't actually meet the qualifications for the position, namely "proven constitution to handle difficult interactions." A couple years back she had cried when a client described her customer service skills as "worse than talking to one of those automated phone systems." Nevertheless she applied, not because Rich wanted her off his team, not for its fifty-two thousand a year compared to her forty-five, but because it offered a double year-to-year match.



For every year on the team, Aevus granted her two years of life, compared to her old position's standard single-year match.

Another twenty years at the company, and she could afford to live a full life, free and clear.

Despite her lackluster credentials, Rich wrote a hyperbolic letter of recommendation she didn't ask for and made several high-level phone calls. She had an interview with her new boss Mikayla a week after she applied, and a job offer two days after that. On her last day in Business Services, Rich sent the team an email explaining that Peggy was moving on and that he was already interviewing for her twentysomething part-time replacements. No one wished her luck.

The lights blinked on and the elevator lurched upward. Peggy steadied her balance on the rail behind her and in doing so, caught her reflection in the mirrored walls. She thought the unflattering floral pattern of her dress coupled with her rolls of back fat made her look like a mistreated couch, but she had already worn her pantsuit for the interview, and this was the next-nicest garment she owned. The wind and rain from the amusement-park-sized parking lot had left her pin curls frazzled. Her lipstick had faded from her nervously licking at it. Her eyes itched with the weight of her mascara, but she didn't dare rub at them, so as not to disturb her eyeliner.

The doors slid open and she was met with marble-tiled floors and soft track lighting, a large glowing sign that read, *27: Training*, on the wall in front of her. A piece of copy paper hung taped beside it—*New Recovery Officers, this way!*—with an arrow pointing right. She followed it down the silent hall, allowing the pleasant clacking of her heels to lift her spirits despite the uncomfortable places on her feet that were quickly chafing raw.

At the end of the hallway, Peggy found an open door. Another piece of paper was taped to the glass beside it confirming this was the training room, which was obvious once she stepped inside and saw three rows of four computers, the chairs in front of them facing a projector screen, and a podium to the side. A window looking out on the massive parking lot spanned the far wall, spittle-esque rain pattering against it. A folding table at the side of the room housed two cardboard containers of coffee and a box of a dozen glazed doughnuts. The small, hot room was packed with a dozen mingling new Recovery Officers, and Peggy had to mutter, "Excuse me, sorry," six times just to make it to the one empty computer at the back. She dropped her laptop bag on the floor and finally pried her fingers off the manila folder to set it by the mouse. A tall brown-haired boy with a distinct slouch and a smattering of acne on his chin took up the seat

beside her. He was repeatedly typing his password into the computer, then blowing a forlorn hiss between his teeth every time he got it wrong. Peggy abandoned him to attend to the snack table, where she unsheathed a cup from the stack and filled it with coffee, glancing around self-consciously as she did so, until overfilling the cup. The excess streamed down the side onto her thumb. Even though it smarted, she didn't make a noise or jerk her hand away, so as not to attract additional attention to herself, but instead brought the cup to her lips and slurped a couple gulps, which burned all the way down and made a spot on her tongue go numb. She then took a cocktail napkin and dabbed at the puddle of coffee she had left in the wake of her spill.

Behind her, two women were speaking more loudly than everyone else in the room. She thought she recognized one of them from a handful of years ago when she was working with a project management team to pilot a new software system. Janet, she thought. Peggy had submitted so much negative feedback that it escalated into a passive-aggressive shouting match in a Monday morning huddle. Janet had an orange clown perm, teeth the color of hard-boiled egg yolks, and always wore blouses that could have doubled as hospital scrubs. The woman she was speaking with had long silver hair and teal dreamcatcher earrings. She asked Janet, "Oh, heard about your leave. You doing better?"

Peggy glanced up as she threw the sodden cocktail napkin in the trash. Janet wheezed a short laugh and said, "Ah, just a case of the gloomies, you know how it is," then mimed slicing her wrist. Both women cackled.

A woman with dreads spun into a beehive on top of her head went to the front of the room and said, "Go ahead and log in to your computers. We'll be getting started momentarily."

"My stars and garters, it's Peggy Brenner."

Janet was suddenly standing a handful of inches too close, with her hand gripping Peggy's elbow. Coffee smell reeked out of her mouth.

"Janet," Peggy muttered in case she had the wrong name, baring her teeth instead of smiling. "So good to see you. It's been, what? Five years now?"

"Six since nCinerate rolled out. Never thought I'd see you in ARG." She pronounced it like *argh* instead of A-R-G, which was what Peggy had been saying in her head. "Guess I'm just glad they hired internally." She took a slurp of her coffee, which was in a mug decorated with the lime green nCinerate logo. "You ask me, though, ain't the best gig from what I hear. But the benefits! Can't say no to a double-match, not this day in age, even if the job's got some...quirks."

“Quirks?” Peggy asked.

“Ladies,” the trainer said with an open-palmed gesture toward the rows of desks, “please take your seats.”

Peggy offered Janet one of those wide-eyed exasperated looks that said, *Gosh, guess we’ll have to cut this short, what a shame*, and maneuvered behind the swivel chairs of the seated employees who were all dutifully logging in to their computers. When she sat down, the boy next to her had finally successfully logged in and was typing an email with two index fingers and his face bent down close to the keyboard, even though he was wearing glasses. His cell phone was clipped to his faux-leather belt, and he wore khakis instead of dress pants. His shoes were black non-slip sneakers with white socks bunched about the ankle. Peggy thought he must have come from retail, an unheard-of jump to ARG. Her pride at having received this promotion dwindled, if people like Janet and the boy next to her were able to make the leap so easily.

The trainer clicked a button on the remote in her hand and the projector changed slides from, *WELCOME TO ASSET RECOVERY TRAINING* in fuchsia Comic Sans, to a more professional-looking introductory slide with a flowchart overview of the day’s lesson.

“My name is Rita and I’ll be training you in the asset recovery process.” Rita spoke hard and clear without smiling, fingertips pressed together and spine as straight as a yardstick. Peggy appreciated her severity and confidence. “Normally this is a three-day training, but we’ve recently hired over a hundred Recovery Officers throughout the country who will all be flying in over the next couple weeks.”

As she spoke she handed a stack of plastic envelopes to the frontmost desk inhabitant so he could take one and pass it on. Peggy craned her neck to see what it was but couldn’t make it out.

“We’re going to start with a speed-round icebreaker. Say your name, where you’re coming from, and if applicable, how many years with the company.”

The man who had passed along the stack of envelopes went first. His name was Steve and he wore a sweater vest. He came from Fraud and had been with the company eight years. The line went quickly. The silver-haired woman with the dreamcatcher earrings was named Sade, “like the singer,” she said. Janet went next and spoke the longest because she went through every department she’d worked in over the last eighteen years. She tacked on at the end, “Never

stay anywhere longer than three years, that's what I always say. That's how you get complacent."

The group consisted of five new hires and seven internal hires, ranging from one year to Janet's eighteen, from shift leaders at Dick's Sporting Goods to executive administrative assistants of employees who reported directly to Aevus' CEO. Peggy wrote down all of their information as they spoke so she would have something to ask about over breaks and lunch, and on the off-chance they would be cubicle mates in the near future. The icebreaker finally got to her row, and everyone had spun their chairs around to follow the chain of discussion. When it got to the boy next to her, he said, "I'm Cliff. I'm from retail, but before that I was in school. I have an art history degree, and, you know, I'm—I'm working off my loans. I've been here going on three years. And, uh, I'm just—I'm really excited to get started." Several people smiled at him like he was an infant who had just shoved his fist in his mouth. Even Peggy found herself biting the inside of her cheek. He had to have been at least twenty-five but he looked like a teenager, and she imagined he was grateful to find a double-match job so early in his career, after what was probably a terrifying brush with running out of time. The bottlecap lenses of his glasses made his eyes take up most of his face, and he blinked them slightly out of sync. Peggy hoped they would get to work closely together so she could be his work mother.

It was Peggy's turn. She cleared her throat, sat up straight, and said, "My name is Margaret Brenner, but you can call me Peggy. Some of you already know me from Business Services, where I've had several roles, including officer, risk manager, underwriter, doc prep specialist, and closer. Most recently I supported an entire business sales team that received a Signature Award for highest annual sales. I've been with the company going on twenty-one years."

"Thank you," Rita said, still unsmiling, "it's good to meet all of you, and congratulations on accepting your new role." She turned her attention to the slideshow and gestured to the first box of the flowchart, which read, *Overview of Life Lending Practices*. "Since some of you are new to the industry, we're going to start with a brief overview."

Rita went on to describe the process of securing years of life, a secondary form of currency which changed the economy into something called a duplex market. The government publicly funded the first twenty-five years of every natural-born citizen's life, but thereafter, years had to be purchased. People like Cliff who were young, well-educated, and motivated had

the lowest-priced years. The algorithm factored in age, intelligence, sociability, productivity, voting practices, consistency in staying aware of current events, genetic disposition, and happiness: all the facets of determining a person's weight on the economy.

Rita concluded her short lecture with, "Remember, life is a privilege."

Cliff raised his hand. When Rita acknowledged him, he said, "But it's actually a right? It's an inalienable right in the—the Declaration of—"

"Exactly," Rita replied. "You have a *right* to purchase it. No one can take that away."

## **11:00 AM**

Peggy's cold coffee warbled in its cup as the train ran by. The microphone on Rita's podium teetered and fell over. The fluorescent lights flickered. Only the newcomers glanced up and around furtively; the employees who were used to it kept on with their task.

The plastic envelopes that had been passed out included a live case of loan default. Rita had left the projector on a slide that said, *STEP ONE: CLIENT REVIEW*, followed by several bullet points as to how one might go about reviewing a client file. It seemed like an ambiguous process compared to Business Services, where Peggy never had to make a decision for herself other than what to have for lunch. All of her tasks were defined step-by-step in a three-inch binder she kept in the corner of her cube.

Peggy read the overview page of her case file. In the top left in bold read the name CHAD BUCHANAN. He was an adjunct classics professor at two colleges, received his undergraduate from Michigan State, his master's from UPenn, and his PhD from UCLA. He was married to a woman named Brittany and they had three children. They lived in a townhouse in Cleveland Heights. Peggy was surprised to see someone like Chad in the ARG pile. She had assumed she'd be looking at criminals or compulsive gamblers, not professors. She had lived her entire adult life covered by Aevus—she never thought about the people who had to borrow from Aevus itself, and who couldn't pay back the funds.

As she flipped to the next page, she glanced at Cliff, who had his nose so close to the page it was nearly touching. Then she looked to Janet, who was counting on her fingers for some reason. Rita was sitting at a stool behind her podium, where a clock facing the room gave them twenty minutes to get through step one. She had explained that Recovery Officers worked on

commission based on productivity; the speed they zipped through cases determined their monthly bonuses.

Page two showed a series of Chad's accounts with Aevus. It took up the entire page. The oldest was a closed account where he had taken out a loan for five years back in 2003, presumably when he turned twenty-five, for a principal amount of two thousand dollars. With interest and annual fees, he had paid it back in five years for nearly twice as much, but at least it was paid. Following this, he had purchased only a single year at a time for increasing amounts of money at increasing interest rates. From 2012 to 2013, his cost jumped all the way up to eight grand. His most recent transaction occurred two years ago for over seventeen thousand—the highest Peggy had ever seen a single year of life cost. She wondered what he could possibly be doing with himself to get those kind of numbers.

At the bottom of the page sat the total amount Chad Buchanan owed Aevus: \$252,832.98, as of the first of this month. His last payment came in nearly a year ago, and the minimum required to take his loans out of default was twenty-five thousand dollars, not including late fees and interest, which had amassed exponentially.

The third page included a summary of Chad's accounts at other financial institutions. He had a savings account with a hundred dollars in it, an overdrawn checking account and a six-figure mortgage that was also in default. The last pages were photocopies of pay stubs from his employers. The last two he received amounted to less than a couple thousand dollars. Here was a man who owed over six figures in minimum payments per month in debt, and his paychecks were less than one percent of that.

Peggy almost felt sorry for him, but no one's years could cost that much without reason. She reserved her judgment for step two.

## **1:00 PM**

The voices of the cafeteria rose over the cacophony of the train passing by. At the ground level of the building, Peggy could see it out of the east-facing row of windows, so close to the building she could have reached out and touched it. She was walking her lunch tray to the trash cans and her empty coffee cup fell onto her half-eaten salad.

As she shuffled the contents of her tray into the trash and recycling, she glanced at a group of salespeople with their red counters proudly displayed on their lapels. The highest she'd

seen that day was over fourteen thousand, belonging to a woman maybe four and a half feet tall with golden hair feathered around her head like a lion. She wore a blazer on top of another blazer, and instead of heels she had on a pair of stark white Reeboks. Peggy wanted to buy her a drink.

She made her way to the elevators, walking slowly in hopes the train would pass by the time she got there, but it was a lose-lose: Sweatervest Steve caught up with her, winded as if he'd speed-treked the great span of cafeteria, and every time he breathed out of his mouth, his moustache fluttered. He said, "So how's your case going?"

She twitched a smile at him. "Not sure what to make of it, really." She'd learned this tactic in Business Services: when someone asks you a question, reply in such a way that you're not saying anything at all, which keeps you from forming attachments, and thus more professional.

"I got a doozy."

They reached the elevators and Peggy didn't move to press the button, so Sweatervest Steve made an "oop" sound and leaned across her to call the elevator down, lightly brushing her shoulder as he did so.

He continued: "Guy's not even thirty, okay. Name's Jeffrey. Expectancy of like, ninety-five. Life paid for *in its entirety* at birth. Family must be loaded, right. So he uses his paid time as collateral, takes out a loan on sixty years—that's six figures, mind you—and blows through it in fifteen months."

The elevator arrived a handful of seconds after the train passed. Steve made a gesture for Peggy to enter first.

Peggy did, and pressed 27. "On what?"

"That's the thing. I started working ahead, you know, looking through the paper trail. You'd expect him to buy a yacht or something. And at first, yeah, he's got a couple big-ticket items, but after a couple months, just goes back to the usual. Groceries, utilities, rent, booze, movies. Guy goes to the movies *a lot*."

Peggy watches the numbers climb as the elevator rises. Around sixteen she has to work her jaw so her ears pop.

"He's even making his payments on time at this point, see, but hasn't got any income. I think he's kiting. You know, floating funds from one credit account to another."

She wanted to say, *That isn't what kiting means*, but bit her tongue.

“And around the one-year mark, spending goes up again. Almost all of it gone in just a few-week span. Looks like he paid off somebody's mortgage, but doesn't have any property to his name. Somebody else's student loans. And the rest—charity. Guy takes a loan out on his whole life and donates it to *charity*, Christ. It's like—”

“He's suicidal,” Peggy interrupted.

“Pardon?”

The doors opened and they followed the helpful copy-paper signs back to the training room.

“Look at it from Jeffrey's point of view,” she explained. “You're chronically depressive. You don't have anything to gamble with but your life, so you take out a loan on it. You'd rather live in heaven for a few months than hell until you're ninety-five. You cut a check for some bucket list items, but then realize: oh, you're still depressed. You go back to the grind—movies to make you feel, booze to make you numb. You wait it out. On your good days, you think you can get out of this mess somehow. On your bad ones, you don't want to. You finally come to terms with your decision. You don't have anything to do with the money except give it back to Aevus and negotiate for your life, or give your life to someone who might use it better.”

They stopped just outside the threshold of the training room, and Peggy added, “Your client needs serious help.”

Sweatervest Steve looked at her with a combination of awe and incredulity. Then he whistled through his teeth. “Dang, you're good.”

She pursed her lips to hide her self-congratulatory smile. “So what are you going to do?”

He stared into the distance and ran the flat of his hand over his moustache. “Still got some research, but when you put it like that, doesn't seem right to—”

Rita popped her head out the door, pencil-thin eyebrows raised, and said, “We're starting.”

Peggy made her way back to her seat. The slide had changed to read, *STEP TWO: ASSESSMENT*. Cliff was looking forlornly at his hands in his lap instead of at his monitor, where he had already begun populating his client's information. In the hour prior to lunch, they'd been trained on their underwriting program, nCinerate. Janet and Peggy had competed in hand-raising



for the most amount of expository information added to Rita's lecture, and subsequently caused a seven-minute pushback of their lunch break.

Peggy had gotten slightly behind—she spent an inordinate amount of time researching Chad Buchanan, knowing she'd zip through nCinerate faster than anyone else, since the business version was hardly different than the ARG version, but the interface was the same.

Keys clacked about the room as trainees entered data into nCinerate. Beside her, Cliff had begun the data entry process, still with two fingers, still with his face inappropriately close to the keyboard. Peggy opened the program and began.

### **3:00 PM**

The printer in the back corner of the training room shook as the train passed the building. It spit out a page of copy paper and sucked it back in to loop around and continue printing on the opposite side. Peggy stood beside it, waiting, watching the train with her hand poised on the snack table for balance. The slide on the projector read, *STEP THREE: DECISIONING*.

Her pages finished printing and she stuffed them in a new manila folder which she had labeled with Chad's name on the tab. She had been the last to print because Chad Buchanan's debt was still a mystery, not a single reason his life balance had gotten so high. But now she was out of time, and a decision had to be made.

The rest of the trainees were already on the fifth floor where the current ARG team was housed, and Peggy rushed to the elevator. It shook while she descended, as it had earlier that day, but this time she was nervous for a whole new reason. Now, she wore a black badge on her chest with a counter that read 0.

By the time she reached the fifth floor, the train had passed. The department consisted of dozens of rows of cubicles, like crops on a farm, except instead of the gentle rustling of swaying wheat, phones rang and fingers typed and voices spoke placidly in hushed tones. Peggy followed the labyrinth of cubicles all the way to the back where Rita had instructed her to go, a room called the Decision Chamber.

When she reached it, she saw first her new boss, Mikayla, standing with the rest of the team. Peggy hadn't seen her since the interview. Mikayla's forearm rested on her seven-month pregnant belly and her straw-like hair was tamed into a tight ballerina bun. Cliff was weeping and Janet was rubbing consoling circles onto his back as they all watched Sweatervest Steve

through a two-way mirror. The Decision Chamber lay behind it, like an interrogation room with a pane of glass bisecting it, the kind you see in teller windows. Sweatervest Steve sat on one end of the table, in front of him a monitor from which he read his script. Peggy couldn't hear him, but she could see the firm set of his shoulders and the unwavering curve of his smile, and admired him for his professionalism.

Across from him, on the other side of the glass, sat Jeffrey. A stainless-steel machine was welded to the table in front of him with a rounded nozzle tilted upward, and in front of that, a kind of chin harness like in optometrist chairs. Jeffrey wore a plain t-shirt and jeans. Upon a cursory glance, he looked young and healthy, the kind of man you could see in any scenario, in any profession—firefighter, fishmonger, CFO of a Fortune 500—but if you kept looking, if you really attended to him, you could see the fragility of him, like a dried-out rubber band stretched to its capacity. It was in the way he darted his eyes around uselessly, scratched at his beard, popped his knuckles and shifted in his seat. He wiped his palms on his jeans and nodded as Sweatervest Steve finished reading the script.

Neither of them spoke. Sweatervest Steve's professional demeanor wavered as he waited for Jeffrey to respond to some question; the air around him had suddenly saturated with doubt. With a small nod to himself, Jeffrey leaned forward in his chair and hooked his chin in the harness. The nozzle was pressed against the center of his forehead. Peggy reached up and placed her hand on the glass, her face as close to it as Cliff's had been to his keyboard, circles of fog accumulating from her shallow breath. Distantly she had known this was the final step but no one ever spoke of it, and until now she had never allowed herself to consider the practical application of the Recovery process.

Sweatervest Steve spoke the final lines of the script and pressed a button on the monitor.

A sound like a shotgun blast emitted from the nozzle. Peggy jumped. Blood splattered against the mirror. Cliff let out a wail that tumbled into sobs. Sweatervest Steve, protected by the glass, stood and exited the Decision Chamber with his client file in hand, as casually as if he were leaving the bathroom. The counter pinned to his sweater vest climbed rapidly from zero to a bright, pulsating 67.

Mikayla held her out her spindly hand to him, a serene smile stretched across her face. "Excellent work."

As Sweatervest Steve took her hand and shook it firmly, he said, "That wasn't bad at all."

## 5:00 PM

The door to the Decision Chamber rattled loudly as the building shook. Peggy couldn't hear her own thoughts over the sound of the train. Chad Buchanan didn't seem to notice or care.

She was up second to last. Cliff would have to go tomorrow, if he made it out of the hospital. After the third decision they witnessed, he had what she assumed was an asthma attack. Sweatervest Steve offered to drive him to the ER. Between decisions, a cleaning crew came and took the body out of the chamber and squeegeed the walls. The entire process took under twenty minutes.

Before her stood the monitor with nCinerate's final screen, a lengthy script that had been generated based on the data populated in the program. Chad was surprisingly handsome—slightly curly black hair, a dash of stubble, teeth that had probably seen years of orthodontic work. She read the script directly into the microphone, having to shout over the sound of the train. The words didn't reach him; Chad wasn't listening. Even meeting him, her questions about him were still unanswered. Chad Buchanan was educated, loved, healthy. Based on all the data available, he shouldn't be here, yet there was no place in nCinerate for words, only numbers. On the screen in front of her, the program had helpfully crunched all the data and determined his fate.

*Recommendation: recover assets*, it said, followed by a large green button that read, *Execute*.

In smaller print below it read, *Debt consolidation: offer 0.25% decrease in APR for consolidating all debt with one of our affiliates*.

Peggy could feel Mikayla's cold stare from behind the mirror. Despite this, she lifted the pane of glass high enough to squeeze her hand through. Palm up, she wiggled her fingers. Chad looked her in the eye, then down at her hand and took it. His skin felt soft and warm in her grip.

"Mr. Buchanan," she said into the microphone, going off-script. "You don't have to do this. There are other options."

"No, there aren't," he said. "There's no way out."

He looked her in the eye as he leaned down to put his chin in the harness, but didn't let go of her hand. "Just do it."

She hesitated. Every second on the clock meant commission in the balance, meant potential termination, meant begging Rich for her old job back, meant losing her double-year match. A single misstep, and she'd end up on the other side of the glass.

She swallowed hard and read the final line of the script. The words drowned in the train's repeating whistle. "Thank you for your loyalty to Aevus Life Lending, Mr. Buchanan. It has been a pleasure serving you."

She squeezed Chad's hand more tightly, and with her other, pressed *Execute*.

## The Skin of Other Men

*“You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men.”*

—Barbara Kruger, “Untitled (You Construct Intricate Rituals)”, 1981

A redheaded woman stood from her metal folding chair, which skidded over two inches of linoleum and echoed in the wide basement of Bellview Baptist Church. She clasped her hands tightly in front of her because, Henry noticed, they were shaking. The blue sticker on the left side of her chest read Bea. Last week she had written the full Beatrice, but the name had narrowed and drooped across the badge. She hadn’t joined them in over a month, and Henry thought—too optimistically, obviously—that she had gone fully independent. Cold turkey: the ideal recovery.

“Last night, I—” Here her mouth trembled like a wobbling glass of water and she looked down. “I touched my son again.”

No one discernibly reacted, yet the air clotted into an unbearable thickness.

“It’s only been a year since his liberation,” Bea continued, glancing pleadingly around the room, the other six attendees remaining silent. “He’s only eight. He’s just a boy. And—he has nightmares, you know? He crawls into bed with me, and I—I let him. I put my arms around him and let him fall asleep with me.”

Behind her and to the left, a dry erase board was propped on an easel. It read in the counselor’s wilted script, WELCOME TO TUESDAY TOUCH GROUP. Said counselor, Rick, sat on the other side of it, clipboard on his lap, bald head glinting the reflection of the fluorescent lights. A drop of mustard stained the breast his seafoam green button-down. He clicked his pen absently as he listened.

Henry had come to enough touch group sessions that his initial (and hypocritical) disgust had turned into head-nodding empathy. Admittance was a powerful thing. It took courage to verbalize weakness, though he would never confess to anyone what he thought of Bea. She wore dresses that conformed tightly to her body, her attire itself a deviation, a trespass, a clue to others like himself that she might be interested in things other than polite discussion. She had wide shoulders and hips. Whenever she stood, he imagined how his hands might fit on either side of the inward curves of her waist. The warmth of her skin through the fabric of her dress. Squeezing lightly underneath her ribcage. Feeling her soft belly, running his palms down to her thighs. He

imagined, too, that she would reciprocate, maybe drag her fingers through his hair, pinch his earlobes, trace the muscles of his shoulders with one of her pink-manicured fingernails.

His face turned red with shame, and he leaned forward, forearms to knees, looking down to avoid suspicion.

“I’m unfit to be a mother,” Bea said, attempting vainly to dam the flood of tears. A woman beside her, Melinda, a young school teacher who had been coming to group for three weeks now but had not shared a single detail about herself, tapped Bea’s shoulder with a box of tissues. Bea pulled one out and crinkled it into a ball before dabbing at her eyes. “I keep telling myself, you know, what would my father think? He didn’t touch me once after my liberation. Not once. No matter how much I begged. No matter how insistently I reached for him. He was so good to me. He was strong. But I guess—it was a clue, wasn’t it? Everyone else embraces their independence, but I was the only one I knew distraught by it. I wanted my father to hold me, all the time, even when I—god—even now. I dream of it. I dream of him holding me. And I can’t do that to my baby. I can’t say no to him.”

“Thank you for sharing, Bea,” Rick said. Bea sat down and wiped her nose with the tissue. “Does anyone have any feedback?”

In the corner of Henry’s vision, a scuffed-up Chuck Taylor bounced rapidly. The wearer of the shoe was new to the group, as evidenced by the folder of paperwork clutched in his grip. He fidgeted and slid around in his seat like everyone did at their first meeting. He had a thin, awkward frame, and a ratty black t-shirt over a pair of tattered jeans. Couldn’t be older than twenty, Henry thought. Better off in a youth group or a touch camp. His long black hair was tied into a bun, and thin wisps of facial hair smattered his angular jaw. He had stuck his name badge to the top of his thigh: Mason.

“Have you tried talking to him?” Mason asked. His voice was louder than Henry had expected.

“I have, but I can try again,” Bea replied in a measured tone that said she thought his suggestion was stupid.

“I just mean, like,” he continued, “liberation is tough for some people, right, you said yourself, and some of us adapt faster than others. Maybe he’s just slow to get used to it. And maybe—sorry, I know this is counterintuitive—instead of throwing him in the water, you could wade in with him, you know? Ween him off touch instead of pulling the plug.”

Bea, visibly startled, looked to Rick.

“Well,” Rick began in his slow monotone, “it’s a fine line. Studies show that touch after the age of seven can lead to some severe trauma later in life. The body isn’t built to be coddled.”

“I don’t believe that,” Mason said.

No one responded. The tension of Bea’s confession grew tighter with Mason’s offending statement. Henry shoved down his gut-instinct condemnation, and shoved further his desire to reach out and grip Mason’s knee to stop the bouncing.

“Well,” Rick replied, “that’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

Mason stared directly at Rick across the circle of chairs. “I’m here on court order.”

Henry sat up straight. It had been a long time since anyone had come to touch group on court order.

“Alright,” Rick said, “so why don’t you go next?”

Mason stood. “My name is Mason and I was busted for public indecency. Caught embracing a friend. First offense, sentenced to twenty hours of group therapy.” He sat back down and immediately resumed his knee-shaking.

“And how do you feel about that?” Rick asked.

“Pretty great. I hug my friends all the time.” He looked to Bea and added, “My mom, too. Never stopped. My liberation ceremony was a total farce.”

Nausea roiled in Henry’s gut. He had no empathy for people like Mason, people who didn’t come here to recover but to excuse their indulgences. Around him, chairs squeaked with slight, discomfited movements. Laminated posters on the walls listed the detrimental effects of touch: the spread of influenza and deadly disease, emotional dependence, violation of personal boundaries, poor etiquette, distractions from productivity. And the benefits of solitude: freedom, discipline, control, a long and healthy life. It had been shown in study after study that individualism and self-actualization were correlated—the more independent a person was, the more focused on their duties; the more focused, the more successful; the more successful, the happier.

Rick blinked like he was ready to fall asleep, unfazed by Mason’s aggressive tone. “What feedback do we have for Mason?”

Before he could stop himself, Henry said, “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Well,” Rick interjected, “let’s keep it positive.”

Henry ignored him. “We’re working hard, trying to get better. You walk in here flaunting your rebel cause, but you’re just as sick as the rest of us.”

Mason turned and smiled at Henry, a fiery curiosity as he tilted his head to the left and said, “Why don’t you go next—” He glanced down at the curling sticker on Henry’s lapel. “—Henry.”

“Fine.” Henry stood and buttoned his suit jacket out of habit. “I’m Henry, and I’ve been independent for ten weeks as of today.” Everyone clapped for him.

Nearly three months ago, he found himself at his lowest point. He had been going to a contact house every night after work for almost a year. On weekends he would go on benders at a casino boat with a lower-level devoted to the profane. Touch workers in masks would drape their arms across your shoulders while you played blackjack, hold your hand for luck, even press their lips to your neck if you got one daring enough. It was fine, Henry thought. It was all fine. He was managing. It wasn’t as bad as it could be. He could always be (it sickened him to think) a fornicator.

The casino had sent him an invitation to a private party. He went, of course, and had a few drinks, a few good hands, and a touch worker—tall, androgynous, the kind of luscious mouth he’d always dreamed might press against his own—going beyond the line of duty. They kept their arms wrapped around his middle, chin hooked over his shoulder, whispering affirmations to him while he bet on sixteens, seventeens; he couldn’t lose, lips grazing the shell of his ear, breath ghosting the side of his face.

The worker (“Call me Ali,” they had said) led him to their private quarters and stripped down in front of him. Six feet of skin like onyx, bulge tucked neatly into a red lace thong. Ali pushed Henry’s jacket off, loosened his tie, and it took only a minute for his will to break, to silence the voice telling him how wrong this was, how ashamed he should be, how he could still leave now and redeem himself. Instead, he unbuttoned his shirt and took off his pants, and let Ali lead him to bed, where they held him, skin to skin from toes to chest. Henry traced the sweet bow of their upper lip with his fingers. He let his hands rove down Ali’s back and ass and hips. He pressed his mouth against theirs, unmoving, an alien sensation. Ali let him do all of it, everything he could think of, even rut against him mindlessly, like an animal, like he had no control over himself anymore, like at the very root of him, he was capable of being a fornicator. And he could have done it, right then; he was aroused, he was willing, but Ali pulled back and



shook their head, smiling in a maternal way as if clients often tried to break the singular rule of the boat: no fornication. So Henry settled into Ali's embrace, breathed in the warmth of their skin while willing his body to calmness, and closed his eyes.

The next day he went to his first touch group meeting and wept when he admitted what he'd done.

Now, he sat back down and glared at Mason, who asked, "And how do you feel about that?"

The question was sarcastic but he answered with sincerity: "Addiction is a disease. I struggle, of course, like we all do, but I'm making progress and that's all I can ask for."

Mason pursed his lips (thick, reddened from how often he bit them) and leaned back in his chair. He resumed his foot-bouncing and remained silent for the rest of the meeting.

\* \* \*

Henry paced across the alleyway, a five-foot gap between a bar and a disc golf shop. He'd been so frazzled by his interaction at touch group that he'd spaced out and driven to the contact house instead of home—his drab little apartment—some blind instinct taking the wheel. By the time he realized it, he had parked on the street a block away and said, "Shit. Fuck. *Fuck.*" But then his resolve had disintegrated, and now he was trying to build it back up by thinking about next Tuesday when he would have to explain his relapse in group. He could handle the shame of the contact house, but the humiliation he would face later surely wasn't worth it. He imagined Mason's smug face, lips turning to an amused frown like he was trying not to laugh. Or maybe he would laugh at him, full-out. Maybe he would say something like, "Knew you were one of us," and *accidentally* brush his knee—annoying, constantly wriggling knee—against Henry's.

Just ten minutes, he told himself. Ten minutes, and he wouldn't have to tell anyone. Touch group wouldn't have to know.

He looked around to make sure no one was watching him, and walked down the alley. Behind the bar was a door half a floor below ground which took three steps to reach. He opened it to the dim, musty smell of the contact house, an unnamed place with no address that patrons found only by referral. It looked like an enormous bathroom of dozens of wooden stalls lined wall to wall. A desk sat to the left of the entrance, manned by a woman named Brick whose name accurately reflected both her body and overall disposition. She looked up from her phone, a white glow cast across her chins.

“I’ll be damned,” she said.

“Been a while,” Henry replied. He glanced under the stall doors; most of them were empty tonight. No line, no wait. He had been hoping for a crowd as an excuse to about-face and walk back out.

Brick pulled her feet down from the desk and asked, “How long?”

Ten, he thought. Just ten. “Fifteen.”

“Headed to the back?”

“Staying up front tonight, thanks.” He hated how well she knew him, knew he wanted to go to the back room, the VIP lounge, an area whose floor had an enormous inset mattress covered in pillows, and rainbow lights cycled through colors. Touch workers and clients alike lounged together, limbs entangled, arms embracing, some so comfortable they had fallen asleep. He had spent hundreds of hours in that room, had held and been held by anyone who reached out to him, indiscriminate, greedy, wanting.

She raised her eyebrows and half of her mouth stretched into a condescending smile. “For you, that’ll be twenty.”

He pulled his wallet out of his pocket, took a bill out, and dropped it on the desk.

“Stall four,” she said.

“Thanks.”

He rushed down the first line of stalls, skin itching for it now that he was so close. A pair of feet in Birkenstocks were crossed at the ankle under the stall labeled 4 and he pumped the hand sanitizer between the doors before entering the other side, like a confessional. He sat on the bench and inspected his fingernails in the dim yellow light shining from above. Recently trimmed, not as clean as he would like, but at least his palms weren’t sweating. Small miracles. He pressed the red button beside him.

A small square-ish hole had been cut out of the wall of the booth, a few inches above his thigh. At the same time a little door lifted, the timer above the hole had begun counting down from fifteen minutes. Through the hole, he could see only a pair of denim-clad thighs. He heard muted musical notes, tinny in the touch worker’s headphones. Go back, he told himself. Leave. It’s not too late.

Trembling, he shot his hand through the hole, palm up. Immediately the touch worker grabbed it, their fingers interlacing. And, god, their other hand grasped the back of his, double

the touch. Their hands were dry, soft, delicate, firm pressure while being neither limp nor crushing. An agonized shudder ran through him that gathered into a ball lodged in his throat; he could barely breathe around it. He leaned against the back of the booth, wet eyes fluttering shut. The touch worker stroked his thumb and Henry gripped their hand more tightly.

What he wouldn't give for it to be Mason on the other side.

\* \* \*

Henry arrived early to touch group the following Tuesday. Rick wasn't there yet, so Henry went about unfolding chairs from the stack and setting them in a circle. He pushed his usual seat closer to the one Mason had occupied the week before, then took a step back and inspected the distance of the chairs in relation to all the others. He moved his again, this time a bit further apart.

Rick showed up with a dozen glazed donuts in one hand and his dry erase board tucked under his arm. He tried to make small talk but Henry was too busy sitting down, then standing back up, then wandering to the snack table, then pacing in front of the snack table, then sitting back down. Each of these actions warranted another glance toward the door. Bea arrived with Melinda in tow, followed by a veteran named William whom Henry didn't think had an actual addiction, rather nothing to do Tuesday nights. When asked to share, William often spoke of the days when men and women bore children together, *the natural way*, he said, though Henry couldn't see why being "natural" (see: fornicating) was intrinsically better than the clean and safe birthing practices of today: one parent, an application process with a minor fee, a DNA sample paired with synthetically altered DNA to maintain genetic diversity, a nine-month incubation period, and finally, a child to call your own.

At seven on the dot, Mason entered. He made a beeline for the snack table, not acknowledging Henry who was also at the snack table sipping water from a Dixie cup. Today he wore some kind of hideous crop top, skin of his midriff and the small of his back exposed for anyone to see. Obscene. Henry ground his teeth together and crushed the cup in his fist before throwing it away.

"Well," Rick said, perched on his chair beside the easel again, clad in the same seafoam green shirt as last week sans mustard stain, "small group today. I guess we'll get started."

Before Henry took his seat, he shifted his chair subtly another inch closer to Mason's. Mason had a donut in each hand. He slouched down so that his stomach bunched into a small roll from which Henry had to forcibly remove his gaze.

“Who wants to go first?” Rick asked.

William volunteered like he usually did. He leaned forward instead of standing, his scraggly chin resting on his hands which in turn rested on the cane that stood between his legs. He was wearing a hot pink ballcap that said Bellview Teeball.

“Used to be,” he began, “you meet a guy, you extend a hand. Could tell a lot about a man from his handshake. Fifty years since I shook a man’s hand.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Rick asked.

William gripped his cane tighter and dispelled a wheezing breath. “Sad, I guess. Lonely. We ain’t meant to live like this, you know. Man is a social beast.”

He continued, and occasionally Rick would ask one of his open-ended questions, which elongated the discussion uselessly. No one else spoke, not even Mason, who finished his donuts and wiped his hands on a napkin and tossed the napkin across the room into a trash can. He sat up straight and fidgeted in such a way that he was fractionally closer to Henry.

William was mid-rant about having only one grandchild when he grew up expecting “a handful of kids and a downright litter of grandkids” when Rick cut him off.

“Who would like to go next?”

“I would,” Melinda said. She stood and tucked her hands in the pockets of her jeans. “My name is Melinda and I’m a fornicator.”

Henry watched Mason’s lips twitch, as if stifling a smile.

“I have a girlfriend. Well, had one,” Melinda continued. “She taught in the classroom next to mine. We worked together for years. And we had these—these grading sessions. She’d come over to my house and bring a bottle of wine. We’d grade papers and get drunk and laugh at our students.”

Mason gripped the side of his chair, casually, a seemingly thoughtless yet odd movement, but then followed it with a brief side-eye to Henry before turning his attention back to Melinda. His hand was just an inch from Henry’s thigh.

“I didn’t know what I was getting into. Started out small. She’d hold out her arms for a hug before going home, and I just—I couldn’t say no. And it felt good. So good to hold her, brief as it was.”

Henry moved his hand to the side of his chair as well, crossing his legs so it seemed natural. He could feel the warmth of Mason’s hand beside his.

“She started coming over more often, uninvited, even when we didn’t have anything to grade. We had dinner and talked and...well, one night she told me. She told me she liked me in an inappropriate way, and she felt guilty about that but needed me to know. And I didn’t know how to react. Then she said she was a fornicator. She said it wasn’t as bad as everyone said, that she could show me what it was like and that it felt good and real and normal. So—so we—”

“Well,” Rick interrupted, “we don’t need details.”

Mason reached his pinky out and brushed his knuckle against Henry’s, the slightest feeling, so light Henry thought he imagined it. His stomach dropped. Before he could think better of it, he met it with just a fraction of movement.

“And, well, afterward, she told me she had three kids with a man. Said they all lived in a house in the country, made them go to three different school districts so no one would know. I didn’t know what to do. I loved her, I think, but it didn’t seem right. I was sick about it for weeks. But then I decided—I’d turn her in. I told the school board what I knew. She got fired right away. Won’t speak to me anymore, of course. But it’s worth it, having a clean conscience. Being independent.”

When Melinda sat down, Bea looked over at them. Henry jerked his hand away and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Thank you for sharing,” Rick said. “Does anyone have any feedback for Melinda?”

\* \* \*

Henry stayed after as he usually did to help Rick put away the chairs. He got caught up in a one-sided conversation with William about Ken Burns’ documentary oeuvre, and by the time he finally escaped, it was dark outside.

Mason was leaning against his car.

“Come home with me,” he said as Henry approached.

Henry glanced over his shoulder at William hobbling to his car, Rick behind him with the dry erase board under his arm, finally out of earshot. After a moment’s hesitation, Henry found himself saying, distantly as if the words weren’t his own, “Get in the car.”

The drive was silent and awkward but Mason didn’t seem to notice. He plugged his phone into the aux cable and started up some music that sounded like someone had chopped up a Clark Gable movie into unintelligible sound bites and set it to a background of Tuvan throat singing. Meanwhile he spouted off directions.

He turned them onto a gravel road between cornfields, and in response to Henry's expression, said, "Knee-high at Fourth of July."

They bounced down the lane until they reached a paved square in front of a garage attached to a large farmhouse. Floodlights on a sensor popped on. A Jeep and a dirty four-wheeler were already parked. Mason directed him to an empty spot.

"Come inside," he said. It wasn't a request, which should have bothered Henry but instead he was glad to be relieved of choice. If it were posed as an option, he wouldn't be able to say no anyway, and then he'd have to feel guilty about it.

The back door led to a kitchen. Daisy-painted dishes were drying in a rack by the sink. Kitschy magnets covered the fridge. Afghans were draped over floral couches in the living room. It was the kind of place Henry had only seen in old sitcoms.

"Who all lives here?" Henry asked.

"Just me and my mom," Mason said. "I have a brother and dad too but they live in an apartment across town."

"You have a mother and a father?"

"And they're *married*," he said scandalously. He opened the fridge and pulled out a can of beer. "Want one?"

"No, thank you."

Mason popped the tab open and led him into the basement. Every shred of self-preservation screamed at Henry to back out now, but he descended the steps anyway. At the bottom he was met with an unfinished basement. A trio of monitors sat atop a desk covered in tchotchkes and empty beer cans. In a corner two full-sized beds were pressed together to make one large one covered in a nest of blankets and pillows. Henry took a seat on the edge of the bed.

"Want to see my work?" Mason asked.

"Alright," Henry said.

From his position, he could see the computer desk, where Mason sat down and started clicking around. The two outer screens darkened and the middle went full-screen to a video, paused on a blurry frame of a woman's face. She looked like she was in pain.

"Is that—Are they..." Henry trailed off.

“Yep,” Mason said as he hit the spacebar. The video began to play. The woman in the frame was on all fours, a man on his knees behind her, thrusting into her. Her hair was bunched in his fist and he was pulling it so hard the woman’s spine bent like a bow.

“They send me the complete footage,” Mason said. “I edit it together. It’s kind of an art, you know? The actors, the director, they do a lot of work, sure, but I’m the one who turns it into a story. A compelling narrative from foreplay to money shot. Not too long to get boring, not too short to blow your load early.”

White noise filled Henry’s head. The ocean, the cry of a seagull, a foghorn. The corners of his vision crackled into whiteness and all he could see was the video; all he could feel was a thickening tension in his groin, the kind he felt with Ali, the kind he allowed himself in the dead of night knowing the next morning he would awaken ashamed at all the things he imagined as he brought himself off. The things he was now seeing in this video. It had felt for so long like an affliction, a disease, these imaginings. To know he was not alone at once thrilled him and sickened him.

These actors were fornicators. Mason was a fornicator. Henry was not a fornicator.

“Turn it off,” Henry said, but barely recognized his own ragged voice.

Mason hit the spacebar again and exited out of the window. “Almost thirty seconds. Longer than I expected, not as long as I hoped.”

“I should go.”

Mason slid from the chair to the bed, next to Henry. “I don’t think you really want to go.”

“I’m leaving,” Henry said again, though he stayed frozen to the spot.

Mason was sitting so close their knees and shoulders were almost touching. He was staring at Henry’s mouth and then flicked his gaze back up to his eyes. Henry fought the urge to close the scant space between them, to touch Mason’s lips to his own and ease the ache of his nearness.

“Tell me, Henry,” Mason said. “Do you know how it feels to be wanted?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Wanted. As in, you’ve always wanted to touch others, but who has ever wanted to touch you?”

“No one,” Henry said truthfully. And again, to himself: “No one.”

“I do.”

Henry's heart pounded so roughly in his ribs he thought they might shatter.

Mason inched closer, almost nose to nose now. Henry could feel the heat from his body, could smell him, the salt-sweetness of skin. It made him drunk, dizzy, reckless.

"Do you know how it feels to be kissed?" Mason asked.

"No." Here Henry's will crumbled—he pushed forward; Mason pulled back.

"What if I told you," Mason began, "you could do anything you wanted to me?"

"Anything?"

"Anything. You could hold me, if you wanted. Or hold me down and fuck me. You could hit me, stab me, slit my throat, castrate me. Whatever you wanted."

"Why?"

"That's what you do when you want someone. You offer yourself for the taking. Tell me you know how it feels to want someone so badly you would let them kill you. Choke the life out of you just to feel their hands—" Here he tilted his head and his lips hovered by Henry's pulse. "—on your throat."

"I know," Henry said. He gulped down air that that never made it to his lungs. "I know how it feels."

"Then you're like me," Mason said, and pitched his voice lower as he whispered in Henry's ear: "A fornicator."

No, Henry thought. No, he wasn't a fornicator. He'd never—he couldn't. He *wouldn't*.

Henry stood so quickly he nearly tripped over a dumbbell on the floor. "I can't—I can't do this," he said, and bolted up the steps.

Mason called after him, "You're welcome back any time."

\* \* \*

Mason haunted Henry through the rest of the week. He couldn't look at himself in the mirror. He didn't go to the gym. At work he was startled when anyone broke him out of his haze. He was a life insurance salesman and hadn't made a single call in days. Mason hovered in the corners of his vision, laughed at him whenever his eyes would trail down a person's body, catcalled him as he walked down the sidewalk. Mason stripped naked in Henry's dreams and climbed on top of him. He lay there motionless, a crushing weight on his lungs, only for Henry to wake up gasping.

Thursday evening as Henry struggled through rush-hour traffic, he skipped his exit and headed instead toward the casino boat. There, familiar faces greeted him and welcomed him back



warmly. He splurged on blackjack and scotch and three touch workers at once—one on either side of him (Marcus, Donovan) and another in his lap for luck (Stacy), his arm hooked around her waist, his lips pressed under her ear. He lost and lost; he was down two grand. He didn't care. He bought a bottle of tequila and took them all to the lower deck. He told Stacy and Donovan to strip naked and have sex exactly like he'd seen in Mason's video. When they hesitated, he threw them each another few bills. He laid his head in Marcus' lap and had him stroke his hair while he watched and drank and directed.

Having broken the no-fornication rule, a couple of bouncers threw Henry out shortly after. They didn't tell him he wasn't welcome back, but the slew of fists to his face and kicks to his stomach said it for them. Henry laughed delightedly while they beat him, relished in the skin-to-skin contact, knuckles colliding with cheekbone, blood stinging his eyes and clogging his throat. He toppled over his own feet into the back of his car, the black of unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

The next morning, he found himself turning into the gravel drive of Mason's house. He parked in front of the garage and stumbled out of his car, up the steps to the front door, and rang the doorbell.

Minutes passed. Just as he was about to turn back, Mason opened the door wearing only a pair of boxers, messy hair and squinty eyes. He had a wiry body with knobby limbs. Henry wanted to eat him alive.

"The hell happened to you?" Mason asked.

"I—" Henry began. The words bubbled out of his mouth like vomit. "I can't live like this anymore."

Mason paused only to smile as if in victory and ushered him inside, where he offered Henry a cold compress and some aspirin and—god bless him—didn't ask a single question.

In the basement, Mason tugged off Henry's suit jacket, slipped off his tie, unbuttoned his bloodied shirt, snaked his belt from its loops. Henry let him, watched as steady fingers undressed him, so careful not to touch. At the button of Henry's slacks, he took Mason's wrist, nearly crushing it in his grip, and said, "Please."

Mason offered an appraising look. Henry had never been scrutinized to such a degree, as if Mason were seeking the whole of him, all of his prurient imaginings, his cancerous shame. To

be wanted not just in spite of these things but because of them nearly brought Henry to his knees, but instead he threaded his fingers into Mason's hair and kissed him.

He realized then he would never recover—not because he lacked the willpower, not because he was filthy and disgusting and worthless, but because he didn't want to.

Mason pulled him toward the bed, where they fell together in a tangle of limbs, a gnashing of teeth, echoed moans and panting breaths. Mason showed him all the things that had been trapped in Henry's mind for years, the accompanying words spouted in streams of filthy phrases that alone could have brought Henry to release. And it was Mason's mouth that did it, though not with words, his hair gripped in Henry's fist and name on his lips.

\* \* \*

They rested, slept, woke up, and did it all again. Midday they ate sandwiches and Mason talked so much barely a breath could fit between his words. He laughed often and easily and Henry stared at the single dimple in his cheek as he threw out quips and jokes in hopes to see it again. Back in the basement, Mason showed him more of his work, which spiraled into another round of sex followed by an afterglow filled with dozens of questions Henry had always wanted to ask.

"I think we should celebrate," Mason said, sometime early evening. He was the big spoon to Henry's little one, nosed the nape of Henry's neck, playfully bit the crook of his shoulder. Henry's body ached just as much from the sex as the casino boat beating.

"Celebrate what?" He shifted to his back and looked up at Mason, who was smiling so widely that his cheeks nearly eclipsed his eyes.

"Your un-liberation."

Henry snorted a laugh and rolled back onto his stomach. Mason climbed over top of him and started kneading his shoulders with his thumbs. Henry moaned. There wasn't a contact house in the state that offered this kind of touch.

"What do you have in mind?" Henry asked, muffled against the pillow.

"You, me, a few other un-liberated individuals, and my dear friend Molly."

\* \* \*

People started showing up an hour later, a dozen, about. Henry forgot their names as quickly as he heard them, in part because he was delirious from the day's events, and also because every single one of them hugged him hello. No one mentioned the scrapes and bruises on Henry's face

and arms, either because they didn't care or they understood. A girl named Natasha slipped him a pill, and shortly after, Henry realized why Mason had two giant beds pushed together.

He had managed to put on some of Mason's clothes before the guests arrived, but it only took a couple hours for them to come back off again. He was the center of the attention, as far as he could tell, but reality had begun to slip so he also felt like he may have been the center of the entire universe, a fixed point everything revolved around, and that was why he had always felt so immobile, so unable to reach out and touch what he wanted.

Someone turned on a black light and brought out a tarp and neon body paint. It was a game: everyone got a different color smeared over them, and the goal was to get as many colors as possible. Henry was orange, and from one blink to the next, he was covered in pink and green and blue.

He kissed every mouth that came near his, every scrap of flesh. He sucked fingers, cocks, cunts. Every brush of skin against his felt like its own orgasm. He lost track of Mason for a blink, but then found him again, underneath him, legs wrapped around Henry's waist while Henry pushed inside of him. Mason was yellow like the sun, and when Henry closed his eyes, he could still feel the heat of him.

\* \* \*

A cup of coffee rattled in Henry's shaking hand. He limped over to an empty metal folding chair, sat, and winced. He had woken up in a nest of limbs, spiraling down from the molly, and drove straight to Bellview Baptist. The dry erase board across the room said, WELCOME TO SATURDAY TOUCH GROUP.

His hand had been trembling too much to write his full name on the badge, so he gave up midway through. He stuck it to the left side of his bare chest anyway. He hadn't been able to find his clothes, only his suit jacket and a pair of Mason's basketball shorts. Flecks of neon paint still covered him. Splotches of hickeys peppered his neck. A darkened bruise covered his jaw. His bottom lip was swollen, from being split open by the bouncers or bitten too hard, he wasn't sure. The aftertastes of blood and semen coated his tongue. On his chest were more bite marks, bruises across his ribs, clawed lines down his back.

The three other attendees were staring at him. He took a sip of coffee.

Rick was wearing mustard yellow today with a raspberry stain on his breast pocket. He had initially paled at the sight of Henry but seemed to recover quickly. Now, he fidgeted in his chair, which squeaked loudly across the floor.

“Well,” he said to Henry, “would you like to begin?”

Henry stood.

“My name is Henry,” he said, “and I’m a fornicator.”

## Bedtime Storytellers: The secret identities of fanfiction authors

In meatspace, I'm Beth Weeks, a cringeworthy millennial stereotype: I graduated college with a degree I don't use and a mound of debt I still haven't paid off, then spent a decade selling my soul to commercial finance before giving it all up to Follow My Dream of Being a Writer. But here's the rub: on the internet, I go by Betty Days, and I've written a metric fuckton of fanfiction. I'm not talking tasteful homages to my favorite movies, or even thoughtful interpretations of mass media. I'm talking filthy porn filled with romantic tropes and tacky prose. Think Kylo Ren begging to be dominated by General Hux, or Captain America gangbanged by HYDRA agents, or Harry Potter post-coitally tracing Draco Malfoy's *Sectumsempra* scars after a decade of mutual pining. My most recent fic involves *Game of Thrones*' Brienne of Tarth and Jaime Lannister as unwitting modern-day roommates who figure out they're in love via Tinder.

You can see why I kept these two identities separate. There is a certain kind of shame in taking mass media often written by overpaid white dudes and contorting it to fit the bullshit whims of my id. Being a fangirl warrants a separation of selves. If you google my real name you don't find much. Google my pseudonym, and you get my fanfic, my social media presence, interviews I've done, viral posts I've written, and a myriad of other fannish pursuits. Identity in fandom is complicated: Beth may have the birth certificate, but Betty has a following.

In the spring of 2014, I was on a conference call in my cubicle listening to the bureaucratic banter of my coworkers and writing a list of variations of my name: Elizabeth, Liz, Libby, Betsy, Betty. Weeks, Months, Years, Hours, Days. I circled Betty. I circled Days. I thought, "God that's dumb. I'm keeping it." It sounded like 'better days' which was ironic because of my crippling depression. I assumed my newfound interest in writing would pass in a couple weeks and Betty would disappear as quickly as she had been conceived. I'd been reading fanfic for almost two years, completely consumed by the breadth of content and depth of emotional connection. In 2013 I had gone to Peru to do some volunteer work, and at the end of every long day, I would curl up with my cheap broken tablet and—dirt and wind blowing into the volunteers' open-air shared bedroom—pick out a fic to read to help abate my homesickness. Earlier in 2014, I'd spent some time hitchhiking around New Zealand, and as my friend and I sat on our packs at the side of dusty roads waiting for cars to pass, I would pull out my notebook and write fanfic by hand to later transcribe onto a hostel computer when, or if, we found a ride.

Fanfiction was all I could think about, all I wanted to do. I drove to work every day scream-singing Taylor Swift songs and applying the lyrics to the ride-or-die love of John Watson and Sherlock Holmes. When I decided to start writing and posting it myself, it never occurred to me to use my legal name. In fact I couldn't even use my own perception of myself. Beth had the self-worth of a forgotten grape under the fridge. Beth would never have the *audacity*—nay, the *narcissism*—of believing she had a story worth telling. Yet I knew self-worth was a thing other people had, and I knew how people who possessed this magical trait of “valuing your own life” acted. I developed the persona of Betty to be a version of myself that didn't have a gaping void where a personality should be. The virtual realm of fandom offered me the freedom to experiment with selfhood in a way I couldn't achieve in reality. If Beth failed, I was boned. If Betty failed, I could just delete her.

Pseudonymity preserves anonymity. Your best friend might be CumGuzzler2 but that doesn't mean you know his tax bracket, and if you don't, do you really know him? Or do you only know the virtual facade he offers you? In fandom, on one end of the pseudonymous spectrum, you have the handful of fanpeople who do use their legal names to write under. These are often journalists or fan scholars, people who devote their careers to fandom. On the other, you have the lurkers, the fanpeople who exist not by name, but as increments on a hit counter. The spectrum is a bell curve—most writers have one or multiple pseudonyms that may or may not be connected, however loosely, to each other or to their real name. Accounts that are intentionally disconnected from a person's primary pseud are called “sock accounts,” (aptly named after sock puppetry), held by fanauthors who maintain secondary or even tertiary pseudonyms, layering their identities to differentiate between—or intentionally separate—audiences. In her work on pseudonymity and internet communication, Emily van der Nagel asserts that pseudonyms are “a conscious engagement with platforms that seeks to compartmentalise aspects of the self in order to communicate with particular audiences in an environment.” In other words, CumGuzzler2 might function in reality as a paralegal named Cheryl, but online, he goes by his preferred pronouns and becomes famous for writing fluffy teen-rated *Yuri!!! On Ice* Tumblr ficlets. He might also be well-known with a different name for making Darth Vader fanvids set to Lana Del Rey club remixes. And the deepest layer might be one in which he writes grimdark One Direction fic featuring underage dubious consent. In essence, the average fanauthor adopts and maintains multiple personas as a means of protecting their real identity from their virtual

ones. Stanley Lieber, for example, wrote comic books under the pseudonym Stan Lee so he could save his legal name for what he deemed more literary work. The pseudonymous writer is one often indulging in the frivolity of pleasure, or in Lee's case, the homoerotic id-fulfillment of Captain America. In 1941, his fantastical stories were consumed by young boys looking for blind hope in a broken country. He eventually adopted Stan Lee as his legal name, and the stories he once deemed not important enough for his birth name have, decades later, transformed into big budget films which make millions of dollars at the box office. As it turned out, having hope in your country wasn't a frivolous thing to write about at all.

By 2015, like Stan Lee, I still did not question why I found pleasure-writing too disgraceful for my real name, but I was beginning to waver under the burden of my split identity. My fanfic exploits became a weird success I was not prepared for—I'd never considered myself a writer, and certainly had never written anything anyone actually wanted to read. I had amassed a larger following than I could handle, and was constantly wavering between what felt like John Mayer's egomaniacal 2008 unitard phase and Britney Spears' 2007 head-shaving meltdown. Online I kept a full inbox of polite but insistent pleas to write more, but in person I consistently got dumped by mediocre dudebros who pretended to like me, only to get me in bed and never speak to me again, a trope I thought died in 90s sitcoms but which I still fell for repeatedly. Whenever I met anyone new, I felt I could only share the blandest pieces of myself: I work at a bank, I own a house, I have a degree in psychology. Lists of meaningless facts that didn't make a person, but some kind of robot programmed only to survive late-stage capitalism. I hid in plain sight; at work I may have been wearing a suit and sitting around a conference table at the top of a skyscraper, but under the table I was checking comments on my fics, scrolling past fandom drama wishing I could dive in and give my two cents, jotting down dialogue for a future chapter of whatever fic I was working on. Betty was beginning to take up all my emotional bandwidth and it became increasingly difficult to function as Beth. I could no longer converse with coworkers without wanting to go on a rant about why Bucky Barnes of *Captain America* is not, as he is often perceived, a villain, but a victim. I bit my tongue when my family would ask how I was doing, and I could not turn my phone to them and show them all the nice things people had said, tell them I'd written novels that were well-loved by thousands of people, and that behind the curtain, I felt heard and valued. Instead I gave them a strained smile and said, "Keeping busy."

I was ashamed at how much pleasure I took in writing, and it is that pleasure which makes fanfiction the condemned genre it is. We could dance around theories as to why fanfic is so stigmatized, but allow me to bottom-line it for you: homophobia, sexism, and capitalism. People really hate things that 1) are gay, 2) get women off, and 3) infringe on the farce that is “intellectual property.” These social and legal trespasses are the cornerstone of fanfiction and so have splintered the genre throughout its digital history, causing mass exoduses from platform to platform. Conversely, internet entrepreneurs have attempted to monopolize fanfiction by building manipulative for-profit archival platforms. In 2007, a major event known as Strikethrough occurred: the blogging site LiveJournal, a central hub of fanfiction at the time, decided to dump a large portion of its fan-created content based on users’ interests lists—blacklisting lists that included terms like child pornography, incest, pedophilia, and rape. The process, however, was ill-conceived. LiveJournal deleted many journals that used these terms as discussion points, or fics that employed these elements for critical discourse. To understand the severity of the purge, imagine it in physical terms: a community of writers rent a building and shove it full of hundreds of thousands of their favorite books. The landlord deems the content of a few of the books too prurient to exist on their property and burns the whole building to the ground. Near the same time, FanLib was launched, a site intended to house content by fan creators. It announced competitions wherein fanuathors could submit fics, but in doing so, forfeited rights to the content. Now, fanfiction could be stolen and exploited for commercial purposes without compensating the creator.

Fanfiction authors, under these conditions, had two options: stay on the run and utilize complex bookmarking systems to organize and standardize fic, or resign themselves to being exploited for profit. The situation prompted fanauthor Astolat to propose “a central archive of our own...that would NOT hide from google or any public mention, and would clearly state our case for the legality of our hobby upfront, while not trying to make a profit off other people's [intellectual property] and instead only making it easier for us to celebrate it, together, and create a welcoming space for new fans that has a sense of our history and our community behind it.” She went on to develop the Archive of Our Own (AO3), a non-profit platform launched in 2008 run by the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW). AO3 was created by fans, for fans, both to house new fanworks as they’re written and archive old ones from prior platforms. Its Terms of Service take into account that fanfic exists in part to indulge the taboo, with the only



caveat being that you must tag your fic appropriately. The OTW protects fanauthors by fielding corporate take-down notifications and ensuring that all content is written without intention of profit.

Since they can't legally make money and have no editorial gatekeepers, fanauthors are free to write whatever they want, however they want, without the same obstacles of traditionally published fiction. Forms neglected by publishing are uplifted in fandom: here, the novella reigns, and epic-length sagas become beloved classics. Despite the freedom of the form, like any other genre, it possesses constraints. Fanfiction is a sphere of work wherein marginalized voices transform existing media (known as canon) to suit a specific community audience, with emphasis on shipping, or pairing characters together in scenarios not provided by said canon. Despite popular belief that fanfiction is mostly pornographic, statistics show that is not the case. A recent study by DestinationToast found that on AO3, nearly 60% of fic is rated for general audiences or teen and up. That said, the spine of the genre is emotional sublimation: a denouement in which two (or more) characters bring the tension of their relationship to some kind of fruition that may or may not be romantic or sexual. For example, unless Joyce's frustration with queer representation in *The Odyssey* leads to Stephen Dedalus banging it out with Leopold Bloom, *Ulysses* may be derivative, but it isn't fanfiction proper. Because of these genre constraints, your lay fanfic reader can be found scrolling on their phone at three in the morning, huddled under blankets, reading just one more chapter so they can go to sleep happy (and potentially, *ahem*, satisfied). Fanfic authors thus serve a vast community as, more or less, bedtime storytellers.

In late 2015, Beth's daytime career as a banker and Betty's nighttime career as a bedtime storyteller grew into a battle for dominance in my increasingly warped self-perspective. Through fandom, I had made close and lasting friendships of a kind I'd never experienced—for the first time in my life, I felt truly known, accepted, and loved. In writing, I found a sense of community and purpose. Earlier in the year, a dozen fanauthors arrived at my house from all over North America for a week-long event they'd dubbed Bettycon, and it was shocking but relieving to be acknowledged in person as Betty. We made a blanket fort through the entire first floor of my house, and spent our evenings writing outlandish fic in a group document where our goal was to use the word "cocksure" as many times as we could. My closest friends, the few people who understood how imbalanced my life was, had begun encouraging me to apply to graduate school for writing. I couldn't acknowledge it as a real career option, and I certainly couldn't imagine

quitting my amazingly fun and fulfilling career in finance (Closing commercial mortgages! What a blast!). To me, my writing was frivolous, meaningless nonsense, but it was still the only thing I cared about. Secretly, more than anything, I wanted my writing to be really good meaningless nonsense. Maybe even meaningful nonsense. I wanted to write stories Beth would write, serious things, tragedies and intricate explorations of the Midwest, mental health, abusive relationships, capitalism, class warfare. Stories that were wholly original, but reflected all the concepts I now valued in storytelling, the building blocks of fanfiction—character over conflict, happy endings over sad or bittersweet or ambiguous ones, a sprinkle of melodrama and well-worn tropes. I saw promise in the kinds of risks writers took when not constrained by the desire for profit or prestige. The shame I carried grew heavier and more complicated: I was ashamed that I took pleasure in what I wrote, but more ashamed that I thought I might have a valuable perspective to offer, to take all I had learned and bring it to an audience that existed outside my fandom sphere.

I started to see the literary value in fanfiction as a genre, and the ways it deviated from my perspective of traditionally published writing. I realized its reliance on community, coupled with pleasure-writing indulgence and lack of profit, had the potential to alter, or perhaps shatter, the patriarchal foundation upon which all our social norms are placed. By taking ownership and pride in pleasure, by supporting each other in arousal, fanauthors are able to help overturn the lurid shame that haunts women, the same double-standard that deems sexually promiscuous women sluts but men prolific masterminds of the prurient. Fan scholars Lothian, Busse, and Reid suggest that “slash [male/male] fandom has become a place where a young urban dyke shares erotic space with a straight married mom in the American heartland, and where women whose identity markers suggest they would find few points of agreement have forged erotic, emotional, and political alliances.” In effect, actions considered predatory or intimate in reality are simply all in a day’s work in fandom. I once received an anonymous ask that went something like, “How do you feel knowing people jerk off to your fic?” to which I replied, “Well if they aren’t, I’m not doing it right.” Arousal is thus not only accepted, but encouraged. As bedtime storytellers, fanfic authors gift their friends masturbatory fodder. It’s your birthday? Here’s some PWP (porn without plot) of your very specific sexual preferences. I love you, have an orgasm. This gifset of a blonde man pissing on a brunette man looks a lot like your OTP (one true pairing), enjoy! While these deeds are innocuous in the relative safety of our virtual fan space, when taken out of context they become decidedly creepier. If I started talking to a guy on Tinder

and got to know him to the degree that I know my fandom friends, and he sent me porn he thought I would like, I would block him. Or vice versa, if I sent him porn I thought he would like, he might misconstrue it as an indication of my sexual and/or romantic interest as opposed to what it is in fandom: an expression of friendly affection. Conversely, fandom friendships tend to occur in reverse order of IRL (in real life) friendships: friends learn one another's darkest kinks first, and then, after gaining trust in one another, finally offer their names.

To further emphasize the up-ending of patriarchal values, studies have shown that fandom is a space made up of predominantly cis female, non-binary, and trans individuals who identify mostly as queer. In 2016, the Three Patch Podcast conducted a survey in which 2200 fanfiction readers participated. Of them, nearly 85% identified as female and 15% as trans or non-gender-conforming. Only 24% reported identifying as heterosexual, with 48% attracted to more than one gender. The median age of participants was 28, which puts me, a queer cis 28-year-old female, firmly in the majority. Because we live in a patriarchal hellscape, the presence of even the most woke and best-intentioned of cis men alters the behavior of everyone else. On the bad end of the spectrum is the fear of being raped, beaten, or murdered, and on the less-bad end is irritation and invalidation—being disrespected, misunderstood, explained-to, a basic lack of empathy and insight that occurs significantly less in spaces of female-identifying and non-binary people.

When writers exist in a community where cis men are an extremely small minority, and in which they are encouraged to explore and express their sexual interests, the defensive fear that saturates their interactions with men dissipates. As a result, fanauthors eroticize the traditionally un-sexy which allows them to develop our own understanding of beauty absent of the standards women are taught by the predominance of the male gaze. Characters with canonically eight-pack abs whose actors labored for months to achieve are written with a spare tire and subsequently worshipped by their partner. Blemishes, body hair, and crooked teeth all become markers of individuality. A perceived ugly character may have a face only a mother could love, but he also has a few thousand fans writing stories and making art highlighting how beautiful he is. When you read something that repels or even disgusts you in an erotic context enough times, when you witness it from the lens of desire, that trait becomes neutralized. Scars born of trauma and limbs lost in wars are met with tenderness offered to them by their partner. Characters may be self-conscious of their physicality, their past, and their failures, but they are told, “No, I don’t love

you in spite of this, I love you because of it.” It’s the ultimate fantasy fulfillment. In a world where women are held to unreasonable standards of beauty, where non-binary and trans individuals are brought up to perform a gender they are not, where trauma victims battle the ability to trust, fanfiction tells them: You deserve to be loved the way you are.

In fanfic, the lines between romantic and platonic love fade, and the relationship dynamics presented often defy categorical restraints. The essence of fanfiction is transformation, so not only do fic writers break apart commercial fiction to rebuild it, they also twist and distort the default social mechanics that constrain these stories. Love triangles end in happy polyamorous triads. Trigger warnings and preferred pronouns are respected. The pasts of pop culture icons grow more dynamic when the audience knows via fic tags that they are a transgender interpretation of the character. And I would be remiss not to mention the alpha/beta/omega subgenre in which every character has a secondary sex based on wolf reproduction, originally an anonymous prompt turned widespread communal exploration—through porn, obviously—of the ways in which childbearing determines social power. By appropriating stories not intended to represent the fanauthor experience, they gain authorial agency, which in turn empowers them to explore not only themselves but their society to a degree no other genre fosters.

When you combine pseudonymity and agency in a community of marginalized storytellers, you get fanfiction. You get uninhibited creatives with a devout understanding of their audience and the material they transform. You get work that exists ten steps ahead of the most progressive stories in the mainstream. The complexity of the medium therefore requires a time-capital investment. In this way it is both inclusive to anyone with the motivation to participate, but exclusive of the casual curious reader, who might stumble upon a fic without knowing the myriad of intricacies, acronyms, and contexts that large fandoms generate. For example, in the *Harry Potter* fandom exists a sub-fandom of Marauders, fics about Harry’s father James, and James’ three best friends Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew. The canon series offers little by way of pre-canon characterization. In their time, the four friends were renowned troublemakers at Hogwarts, and that’s about all we know. Fanauthors have taken it upon themselves to fill these gaps, and so created a cohesive universe of the Marauders, with agreed-upon and consistent characterization across the board, sometimes referred to as fanon. I’ve always marveled at the bravery, gall, and skill it takes to widely and confidently mine small,

overlooked pieces of information from canon, and extrapolate, complicate, and accept them into a community. The aptitude required to derivate and transform often gets taken for granted when you consider AO3 has, at the moment, about 4 million works, and other platforms like FanFic.Net and LiveJournal house even more (but the statistics are less readily available).

Story expansion is often widely condemned, as evidenced by *Star Wars*, whose fill-in-the-gaps prequels and tie-ins are lamented by fanboys across the board. Of the recent *Solo*, Joshua Rothman of *The New Yorker* says “[the film] feels unnecessary and anticipatory of the real action, filling in the blanks without pushing the story forward. We already know what will happen—Han will meet Chewbacca, make the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs, win the Millenium Falcon in a card game, and end up a rakish bachelor—and this puts any genuine suspense out of reach.” As if stories exist solely to move forward and suspend, like a car with a broken transmission on a road with no turns or stops. Rothman, probably without knowing, essentially belittled nearly all fanfiction. I, for one, have *always* wanted to know how the Falcon made the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs, because I didn’t know what the Kessel Run even was, or what parsecs were, or if Han had just been lying for the sake of a good story. On that front, the film, like fanfiction, delvers. I take solace in the fact I can read nearly any book, watch any movie or TV show, and when it’s done, if I’m not ready to say goodbye, or if I have questions, or want to know how other people saw it, I can go to AO3 and see that story continued, explored, explained, or recreated. Transformation is a talent often overlooked: the ability to intuit stories on a profound level, adapt them to a different worldview, remediate them to the constraints of the genre, and share them for anyone to read, completely for free. Your average fanauthor might walk out of a DC movie plotting a story about Starbucks barista Clark Kent falling in love with regular customer/sugar daddy Bruce Wayne, only to get home, write the first chapter, and post week by week for a rapidly amassing audience who saw the same movie and noticed too the homoerotic tension therein.

Men tend to get paid for their transformative work. Andy Weir, for example, wrote *The Martian*, a novel in which astronaut Mark Watney gets stranded alone on Mars and attempts, with the help of NASA, to return to Earth. The book is essentially space fanfiction; he originally posted it for free on his blog as an experiment in answering the question of how a person would reasonably survive alone on Mars. *The Martian* is a phenomenally successful novel born of innocent curiosity and a writer’s desire to answer a question using narrative—not so different at

all from fanfiction, which often starts with an exploration of overlooked moments between characters, mere seconds of interaction brushed to the side for the sake of advancing the larger plot. Space, though, is not intellectual property, so perhaps *The Martian*'s commercial success makes sense. However, Weir also wrote actual, intentional fanfiction of Ernest Cline's similarly successful novel *Ready Player One*, a story called "Lacero." Cline read it, enjoyed it, and incorporated it into canon. The story was published in a signed, limited edition of the book. Comic books, which include massive universes of many authors all deriving longform stories using the same characters and worlds, is a male-dominated genre, in which the pay is notoriously poor, yes, but it's still pay. Novelizations of films and universe expansions, additional examples of glorified commissioned fanfiction, are mostly written by men. It's an egregious double-standard: men are lauded and paid and praised for their derivative works; women are patted on the head for their fanfiction. So I developed a thought experiment: What would happen to the world if no abled cis straight white man was allowed to receive profit for storytelling ever again? I speculate many would become discouraged and stop writing, and in subsequent generations, their sons wouldn't feel compelled to write either, because they would think their voices were worthless, their stories and perspectives fundamentally meaningless. I think some would still be compelled to write, in the way most writers discover writing, as if it is part of their very nature, and possess an unyielding drive to share their writing with others. They might scoff at the media they consume and think, "I could do it better," and write stories of their own, for their friends and the audiences they cultivate, and they would carve spaces where they felt supported and understood. Maybe they'd even make an archive of their own.

In early 2016, I applied to grad school and received an acceptance into Miami University's MFA program. So began the nightmarish terror of impostor syndrome well before I even arrived. I attended the open house, where a friendly second-year student congratulated me on my acceptance and asked, reasonably, what I wrote. "Garbage! Flaming garbage!" I wanted to scream, and then run away. What came out of my mouth was the word "novels," sounded out slowly as if I'd never said it aloud before. I introduced myself as Beth, but without my ties to commercial finance to make me seem important, and without invoking Betty's bizarre fandom context to make me seem interesting, I felt adrift, blank. Beth had come to feel more like a pseudonym than Betty. My fandom friends assured me that I was well ahead of the game, that unlike my peers, I'd written a million words read nearly a million times. "Fanfic doesn't count,"

I kept saying. It became clear at the beginning of my first semester that I wouldn't be able to pretend I was merely a container of organs. When asked what projects I was working on, I wanted to say, "I've never written anything, ever, in my life," but in fact began to mumble a complete lie about a YA novel in the works. I persevered despite lacking a coherent identity, and rather than intentionally crafting a new one to perform as I had with Betty, I tried to be my authentic self, whoever that was, even if it meant talking too much about *Star Wars* to people who did not care about *Star Wars*. I found to my immense joy that, like Bettycon, I felt valued and accepted.

The idea of an authentic self began to interest me as an antithesis to pseudonymity. I asked my peers if they believed you could ever truly be your authentic self, or if all selfhood was a performance, behavior altered by tiny fractions depending on present company, a concept in psychology we call having a high or low self-monitor, but which intrigued me when applied to writing. I wondered if a writer could have a truly authentic voice, or if all writing was performative. I brought this question to my new students by showing them an episode of *Black Mirror*, a television show like the *Twilight Zone* in which each episode is its own contained story revolving around the potential disasters of speculated technology. In the episode "Be Right Back," Martha (Hayley Atwell) loses her husband Ash (Domhnall Gleeson) in a car accident. Grieving, she signs up for a program which curates all of Ash's online data and uses an algorithm to recreate his texting patterns. Finding solace in being able to message with him, she purchases an upgrade to hear his voice over the phone, and finally, a physical robot version of him, identical in appearance and behavior to her late husband. She quickly begins to find fault in the AI, minor differences between the public persona Ash had created online versus the man she knew in private—always quick to joke and make light of negative events, having no concept of the traumas Ash's life had held, and in a particularly memorable scene, being a much better lover than Ash, because his bedroom preferences had not been readily available for download. Tiring of the robot's inability to *be* human, to be Ash himself, Martha sequesters him to the attic, where their young daughter visits the simulacrum of her father only on her birthday. After the episode, I asked my students to consider what would happen if they took all their communications—emails, Tweets, Facebook updates, Instagram stories, Snapchat messages, all of it—then built an algorithm, and put that algorithm into a robot. I asked, "How would that robot be different from

you?” and, once they assessed their differences, “Is there a way to write that would make the robot a more accurate version of yourself?”

The most business- and science-minded students answered a resounding no, that all writing is dependent on audience, and people are more complex than computer programs. Other students, mostly girls, answered that they felt pressured to be their happiest and prettiest selves all the time online, and how exhausting that was for them. And one frazzled student answered, “This made me realize I’m not very good at writing, and I have no idea who I am.” I’ve continued teaching the *Black Mirror* lesson plan in subsequent classes, always at the beginning of the semester, the first or second week, and though we never come to a conclusion, it lays the foundation for how I want them to see all forms of writing: an inquiry into the self, a shared experience of empathy and insight to a broader audience—a notion I myself would not have discovered had I not developed a pseudonymous identity to serve as my robotic ghost, following me around and exposing the glaring differences between the person I wanted to be and the person I really was.

In the summer of 2017 between my first and second year of grad school, I had a mental breakdown. Many factors led up to it, but the irking divide between Beth and Betty was definitely one of them. I told my many counselors I had an existential crisis, to which they offered me the diagnosis of PTSD. It turns out it’s not “healthy” to think everything you make is trash, walk around with a cloud of perpetual shame over your head, or make a completely new identity in order to justify why you want to feel seen. Yet I didn’t feel my behavior was particularly deviant from what I understood of other fanauthors. To me it seemed more likely that fanauthors, generally speaking, in addition to being a populace of marginalized people, were also trauma victims, likely in part *because* of that marginalization, and that fanfiction itself is mostly a lexicon of fantasy ideation in which we can heal from our myriad of wounds. Take, for example, certain subgenres within specific fandoms. In *Captain America*, there exist what are called Recovery Bucky fics, in which Bucky Barnes, Steve Rogers’ childhood best friend who died in the first film, *The First Avenger*, heals from the aftermath of the sequel. In *The Winter Soldier*, we find out Bucky did not in fact die, but has been brainwashed by the villainous organization HYDRA and given a fancy metal arm, and who order him to kill Cap. While no fanauthor has probably gone through the process of being brainwashed into the assassination trade for eighty years, Bucky’s experience is a profoundly understood one among the



traumatized: his bodily autonomy is stripped away and he is forced to do horrible things without his consent over the span of many years. The franchise does little with his character arc in subsequent films. Sebastian Stan, who plays Bucky, offers the audience the occasional sad smile and wistful glance into the distance, breadcrumb indicators of trauma. In the third movie, *Civil War*, we learn that while brainwashed, the Winter Soldier killed Iron Man's parents, and rather than inspect the emotional fallout of Bucky's guilt, the film focuses instead on Iron Man's anger and desire for vengeance. For years fanauthors have been coming into the Marvel franchise like dedicated house cleaners, tidying the messy and confusing massacres of these characters. Recovery Bucky fics are dedicated to the exploration of Bucky's trauma; in each, he begins in a dark place, barely coping, often untethered to reality, and through the love of best friend/potential lover Steve Rogers, and sometimes the rest of the Avengers, he slowly regains his agency over the course of the story. Recovery is a narrative particularly relieving to those unfortunate enough to experience rape or abuse—situations where, like Bucky, a complete loss of bodily autonomy has occurred at the hands of violence—but also relatable to those who have been objectified and silenced and commanded simply for existing as they are in our aforementioned patriarchal hellscape. Trauma and its subsequent healing is a theme seen across multiple fandoms: Draco Malfoy's redemption in EWE (epilogue what epilogue) *Harry Potter* fics, where Harry et al return to Hogwarts for an eighth year to finish their education, and find Draco lamenting his former familial obligation to the Death Eaters; or Dean Winchester alternate season 5 *Supernatural* fics, where he returns topside after forty years tortured in hell. Characters whose conflicts expose the experience of victimhood, of lacking agency and autonomy, are easily adopted by fandom. In mainstream media where vulnerability is often exploited for the sake of tragedy, or the trauma of the experience mishandled or misunderstood, fanauthors donate their metaphorical experiences to offer necessary closure: Yes, bad things have happened to you, and yes, you can heal from them.

I came to understand why I was so drawn to recovery fics, why I saw so much of myself in them. But I also learned recovery in reality does not happen as neatly, completely, and happily as it often does in fanfiction. I had no Steve Rogers to fall in love with me despite my dark and troubled past, but I did have a good support network of family and friends, and twelve weeks of intensive outpatient therapy, and I was able to return to school the following semester with a stronger-albeit-shaky sense of self. As an independent study that semester, I decided to take what

I'd learned about ofic (original fiction) in my first year and bring it back to the community that had so consistently and sometimes insistently lifted me up. I ran a thirteen-week free telecommute course called the Fanauthor Workshop. I opened applications worldwide and fandom-wide and had about fifty applicants. Of them, I accepted ten. I took a big risk in the way I chose to run the workshop: one cycle of fanfiction, and one of original fiction, which I knew many people would not want to do, because some fanauthors are not at all interested in reading or writing traditionally published fiction. After all, why would you, if everything you wanted to read was available near-infinitely and completely for free, and you could contribute meaningfully to the pile whenever you wanted? Post-workshop discussions focused on the differences between ofic and fanfic, and in what ways we could bring our perspectives as fanfic writers to the realm of traditional publishing. Overtly my goal by the end of the course was to make sure each participant had a solid piece of work to submit to MFA programs or publications. Slightly less overtly, I wanted to blur the lines between fanfic and ofic, and empower fanfiction writers to invade the world of publication, a push which has already begun on a larger scale with authors like Cassandra Clare, former Harry Potter fanauthor who wrote the bestselling *The Mortal Instruments*, originally a Ron/Ginny fic on LiveJournal back in 2004. And I would be remiss not to mention E.L. James, who turned her *Twilight* fanfiction *Master of the Universe* into the immensely popular *Fifty Shades of Grey*. That said, my interest in gently encouraging fanauthors is less about publishing fanfic *as* ofic, but to translate the elements of fanfiction that make it magical and bring it to another space, to make loud the often-quiet voices I spend so much time reading, and, of course, to elevate the labor of fanauthors to places where they can receive pay and prestige. The Fanauthor Workshop, against the odds of its failed predecessors, was a huge success. Each participant is now one step closer to publication and potential careers in writing. Ironically, when the final class ended and we said our goodbyes, I made a Facebook group for us, our real identities finally made known, and one participant said, "Make sure to label it a secret group. My IRL friends don't know I write fanfic."

Beth and Betty eventually met in the middle: I go by Betts now, the name my fandom friends started calling me when they figured out my real name wasn't Betty but still wanted to honor my writer-self. I completed my MFA but I haven't stopped writing fanfiction. In the two years I was enrolled in grad school, I wrote about 250,000 words of fanfic compared to 100,000 of ofic, all of it in conversation with each other. Though I don't believe fanfiction is necessarily

“practice” writing, I found when I wanted to try something new, take a risk with a new structure or voice, I would write some fanfic to try it out before attempting it in ofic, like practicing a painting on a smaller canvas before moving to a larger one. I don’t see myself as two barely coping halves of a shitty whole anymore, and on my good days I do value my work—all of it, fanfiction included. I tell people, even well-regarded authors, editors, and publishers, that I write fanfic, and dare them to look down on me. It’s a mixed bag of results. For the most part, I see an eagerness to learn about fanfiction from someone who can speak the languages of both worlds. In turn, I enjoy explaining that the work of fanauthors is more complex than many give it credit for. We write for pleasure. We write to educate, communicate, sublimate, and empower. We exist as a tribe of faceless pseudonyms, telling stories at virtual bedsides, and offering comfort to one another in a world that silences us.