

The Narrator Who Wouldn't Shut Up

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Abstract

The Narrator Who Wouldn't Shut Up

Alden Chorush

The title of the collection refers to mental noise, the chatter in the mind that never stops. It also refers self-reflexively to the act of fictional narration from which the collection was created. The opening tale establishes the meta-fictional terms of the collection's creative process, and stories thereafter explore the interpersonal conflicts and ethical dilemmas that arise from the contradictions, often between social conscience and personal appetite, inherent in mental chatter. In these stories, brief moments of inner silence offer a measure of hope, or a reprieve perhaps from the more nightmarish aspects of consciousness. Although "the narrator who wouldn't shut up" is essentially gender-neutral, the vehicle for its exploration in each story is the "marginalized" white male in his various guises: henpecked husband, guilty boyfriend, inadequate father, talentless son, indifferent brother and, finally, impotent narrator. My hope is that a reader might get the "we're all in this together" feeling from reading these stories, and perhaps be reminded of the therapeutic value of silence.

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What's Wrong With Nothing?

I toyed with the night mask, then squished the little earplugs together and watched them resume their shape.

Tired of doing that, I looked down at the cloud kingdom below. A moated castle built into the hills, surrounded by a lush forest, rivers, brooks and streams, pastures and fields, rocks and bluffs. All of it made of the finest cloud porcelain. “No one can appreciate the scenery like you can,” came a voice. It was my own voice. *Shut up*, I growled and turned to look at my seatmate, Amy.

Amy Hempel. I stared at her. She was reading. Sensing my gaze, she looked up. I flashed her a grin. She went back to her reading.

I looked out the window again. Once, I had almost converted to the Islamic faith in order to marry the beautiful daughter of an ailing Egyptian man. He'd come to love me like a son after I bought his worthless television set out of pity. Another time, at the fence of a pasture, a horse saw me and galloped straight for me. It threw its head around in a panic, pointing its chin towards its backside, where a black cloud of mosquitoes hovered in pitiless, methodical feeding. The horse swung its head back and forth, begging me with its wild brown eyes to do something. I stroked its cheek, wished it luck, moved on.

All those dramatic moments filed away. But how to make fictional use of them? What made a story? I didn't know. I had no idea.

Was *that* story-worthy?

The flight attendant asked what I wanted to drink. “Coffee, please,” I said. Her blue polyester airline skirt caught my eye as she sauntered off to get my coffee, reminding me of the

crash victim in that Lenny Bruce sketch who's lost a leg but still makes a play for the nurse. The comparison seemed apt somehow, as I marveled at the flight attendant's splendid backside.

Again, I looked through the window at the clouds below. They now glowed pink underneath, as if being fired in a kiln. Again the voice: "Ah, yes, no one can appreciate the scenery like you can." I felt like wringing my own neck. Vincent Price-like like laughter filled my inner ear.

The flight attendant came back, handed me the coffee and sauntered off again.

Amy stopped reading and sat back in her chair. Then she stretched her arms upward, careful not to brush the sleeping person on the other side of her.

Here it was. The verdict.

"So what did you think of my story?" I asked finally.

"I'm thinking about it."

"About the story?"

Her eyes were closed. "About how to put it," she said.

How to put it? That didn't sound good. That's what a mechanic says when you brought your car in for an oil change and he's noticed the transmission is shot.

She opened her eyes and flipped through the pages, scanning the print with a fingernail, mumbling as she read.

"Here it is," she said. "'She sauntered off to get my coffee.' How does that line grab you?"

I shrugged. "How should it grab me?"

"I'm asking you. Your answer will tell me all I need to know."

"I don't know how it grabs me."

“Why did you write it?”

“I don’t know. To add a detail. A convincing detail. One that makes the reader think that we’re really on a plane here.”

“Great. Except that’s not how it works on a plane. The flight attendant takes everyone’s order, row by row.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Hauling a drink cart.”

“Right.”

“Yours only took your order, sauntered off to get it, and brought it to you, as if you’re in a restaurant. As if this is first class.”

“Right.”

“Are we in first class here?”

“Nope,” I admitted. “But that’s easily fixed. Let’s say she didn’t saunter off right away, she went row by row. We don’t even need to keep this detail. Let’s get rid of it. I hate it.”

“Not so fast,” Amy said. “You did write it, and so it is a big deal. Think about what’s behind that phrase. She sauntered.” Amy wrinkled her nose at the word. “Why use that word? What’s wrong with walked?”

“Walked is fine.”

“Do you even know what the word saunter means?”

“To walk leisurely?”

“Exactly the way flight attendants don’t walk. To me, saying a flight attendant sauntered is like saying, ‘The bear danced up to the campground.’ Or, ‘The prisoner curtsied to the hangman on the gallows.’ You see what I mean?”

“So you’re saying the story could be about a sauntering flight attendant? She’s just sauntering all over the plane? Even when there’s an emergency, she just keeps on sauntering up and down the aisle?”

“That might make for a better story. But there’s another problem with ‘she sauntered off to get my coffee.’ This one is more ominous I’m afraid. What worries me is what it says about you. Not as a writer, but as a person.”

“As a person?”

“Yes, that’s what I said,” she said. “As a person.”

The fasten seatbelt sign dinged on.

“What could it say about me as a person?” I gulped.

I was eight years old, waiting at the window for my parents, who’d taken our sick cat to the vet to have her checked. My father was wearing his special tinted eyeglasses when they returned. Judges in ancient China first wore smoke-blackened spectacles to hide their thoughts when announcing the verdict.

The cat was dead, in other words.

“The stewardess goes right off to get you the coffee,” said Amy. “Right? She forgets all about the other passengers. Which is really *you* forgetting about all the other passengers. See?”

Of course I did. I saw immediately. But I could not admit it. “It was just a joke,” I said. “Seriously, why get hung up on that line?”

She was already shaking her head before I finished. “Don’t jive me. Even if it was meant to be a joke, which I don’t believe, it would still be all about you.” She waved her hands and did a little jig in her seat. “Look at me. Look how clever I am.”

Clever. The dreaded word. So true. That was me.

“Resorting to cleverness means you’re unwilling to let a story happen on its own terms. It shows how stuck on yourself you are. Now, if you mean to show that, there might be some value to it. But you didn’t see it, even after I gave you the hint. I had to point it out to you. That is what worries me the most, not only about your writing, but about your *personhood*.”

All I had wanted was some feedback on a piece of fiction from a writer I admired and here she was telling me that not only one, but two major problems were festering. It was like evaluators coming to check on a mold problem and finding a great sprawling termite civilization to boot.

Just then, the plane was smacked with an air pocket, dropping what felt like the length of a football field. The flight attendant appeared on shaky legs, with a garbage bag, to take my Styrofoam coffee cup. I tossed it into her bag, and she sauntered to the back of the plane with it.

“What else is wrong with the story?” I said.

Amy flipped through it again. Then she gave a plaintive sigh. “Do they have to kiss?”

“It’s unconvincing?”

“Not so much that,” she said, “as totally idiotic.”

“In what way?”

“In the way that only an idiot would write.”

Her sincerity made me want to kiss her. But I knew it was the wrong time to try. I knew that, but the impulse was too strong, her lips too red –

“The part where he’s thinking about kissing her is alright,” Amy said. “And when he loses control and does it, that’s okay too. But no, her lips do not go slack and melt in his strong embrace.”

“But I wanted to leave it open to interpretation whether or not it really happened.”

She gave me a dubious look, placed the story on her tray table and thumbed through it. With her index finger she found the line: “Melting in his embrace, she realized that this was what she had been waiting for all along.” She looked me in the eye. “It’s the last thing she’d been waiting for.”

“Last?”

“The very last.”

I cut it out.

Dinner orders were taken. This time, the flight attendant went from row to row taking orders.

“She’s really out cold,” I said about Amy’s left-hand neighbor.

“Do you think we ought to wake her?” said Amy.

“She looks like she could miss a meal or two,” I said.

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s the first thing that occurred to me?”

“Another cliché.”

“It is?”

“The fat, sleeping person in the aisle seat, snoring and drooling. It’s the oldest trick in the book. Try harder.”

“To do what?”

“To put someone there who feels like a real, flesh and blood person.” She squeezed her own arm as she said this, showing me how her fingers left pale imprints that melted back to her natural skin color.

“It could be anybody,” I said.

“Be patient. Let it come to you.”

“But why put anyone there next to you?” I asked. “How is it part of the story?”

“You started it. See it through. Anyway, it’s an exercise. Come on. Who’s there next to me?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea. A travelling salesman? A footballer? A mechanic with grease on his hands? A dentist on his way to a symposium? I’m overwhelmed with the possibilities. Help me.”

“Relax. First, do you see how stuck you are on what people do for a living?”

I did. Goddamn it. “How else to conjure a person?”

“There’s no formula. But consider the setting here. Think about what creates action. On a plane, it’s not what someone does for a living. A travelling salesman is not going to try to sell me something. But he might...”

“Want to sleep with you?” I said.

Amy shook her head. “Please.”

“Nothing else is coming to me.”

“That’s because *you* want to sleep with me,” she said. “Get unstuck. The action should develop naturally. What happens on a plane?”

All the while the flight attendant had been standing there, listening to us, her head cocked in puzzlement. “Would you all like something to eat?” she said.

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “What are the choices?”

“Chicken, fish and vegetarian.”

“That speaks to me,” I said to Amy, “because I’m vegetarian.”

“So am I,” said Amy. “But this isn’t about you or me. It’s about my seatmate here.”

“So how about we order the fish and the chicken?”

“Keep going.”

“And our seatmate here is an intolerant animal rights activist who judges us for eating meat.”

“How old is he?”

“I don’t know. Thirty-five?”

“What would make his judgmental attitude more interesting?”

“He wears leather pants?”

“The old, ‘everyone’s a hypocrite’ ploy. Strictly to avoid.”

“He’s five years old.”

“Would a five year old be travelling alone?”

“Eight years old?”

“Why eight?”

“That’s how old I was when my cat died.”

“Get over yourself.”

“An eight year old girl then.”

“Let’s see what happens.”

“Sorry for the delay,” I told the flight attendant. “I’ll take the chicken, and my wife here will have the fish.” I winked at Amy. She actually smiled. I held her hand. She took it away.

When the dinner was served, the aroma awoke Amy’s neighbor. She covered her face immediately with her arm.

“Something wrong?” said Amy, flaking off a bite of salmon.

“I hate the smell of fish,” said the girl.

“Are you travelling by yourself?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Who is meeting you at the airport in London?” said Amy. She turned back to me. “Why London?” she whispered.

“My real father and my half-sister,” said the girl, straining her neck away from the smell, as if gasping for fresh air.

“A friend of my daughter travels alone to London to see her father and half-sister,” I whispered back to Amy with a shrug.

“Sorry about the smell,” said Amy, turning back to the girl.

“That’s alright.”

“Don’t you want to eat something?” I said. “The chicken à la king is not bad.”

“I’m vegetarian,” said the girl. “I’m vegan, I mean.”

“How old are you?” said Amy, moving her fish as far away as possible on the tray table.

“Eight,” said the girl.

“How come you went vegan?” I said.

“It’s *vay-gan*,” said the girl. Amy turned and gave me the thumbs up. I guess she liked that detail.

I smiled. “How come you went *vay-gan* then?”

“I love animals. I’m going to be a veterinarian.”

“That’s great,” I said, feeding myself a spoonful. “Did you ask for a vegan meal?”

The girl shook her head, holding her nose. “I couldn’t eat it anyway if I did.” She looked at our food. “Just looking at that spoils my appetite.”

“Are your parents vegan too?” Amy asked, having hurried to finish her meal and cover it in its wrapping. The girl stopped holding her nose and let out her breath.

“Not at all,” she said. “They’re barbarians like you two.”

Amy and I laughed.

“You’ll make a great animal rights activist some day,” I said.

“I am an activist already. Nobody who eats animals likes to be around me because I never let them forget it. In the future, people will think that eating animals is like how we think about slavery today.”

“Wow,” I said. “Who said that?”

“I just did,” said the girl. I noticed that her beret was made of leather.

“Is this your first time travelling alone?” said Amy.

“Yes.”

“Are you scared?”

The girl shook her head.

“You are a very brave and intelligent little girl,” I said to her. Then I turned to Amy.

“How was that?”

“How was it for you?”

“I enjoyed putting words in my own mouth that I would never say.”

“Not to mention food that you would never eat.”

“So is there anything else wrong with the story?”

“The crash at the end.”

“What about it?”

“It’s telegraphed.”

“It is?”

“With that line about the Lenny Bruce sketch.”

“I can take that out.”

“Why make it happen at all though? Nothing needs to happen to have a good story. A plane doesn’t need to crash, and two strangers don’t need to kiss. What’s wrong with just a typical plane flight where nothing really happens? What’s wrong with nothing?”

“The crash I think I can justify.”

“How?”

The pilot came on the intercom and told the passengers to brace for an emergency landing. Crying and screaming erupted throughout the cabin. I looked out the window and saw the ground approaching at alarming speed. The flight attendant sauntered over on shaky legs with a garbage bag to take away our dinner trays.

“The crash is a metaphor,” I said.

The screams on the plane made it hard to talk. We were descending way too fast. I looked out the window again. The plane was pointed downward at the steepest angle imaginable without being upside down. The wings flailed and flapped in the wind and looked as if they could snap off like twigs. Black smoke trailed from both engines like long hair in the wind.

People were sobbing, pressed against their loved ones, begging and praying. Strangers were holding hands, exchanging words of love.

“A metaphor for what?” she said, her face blurry with the shaking of the plane.

“For why I write.”

“Let me guess. You write to find that same level of emotional honesty and intensity that people have when death is imminent. Right?”

“How did you know I was going to say that?”

I’d gone pale, not because the cold hard ground was coming towards us at a thousand miles and hour, but because Amy could see right through me.

“Because it’s a lazy answer,” she said. “Try harder.”

I tried to think, but the screaming in the plane was inhuman. Plus the plane was upside down.

“And don’t tell me,” she said, “that writing is your way of screaming through the long imminent crash of life.”

Exactly what I’d have said.

I scrambled to find a better reason while I still had time to think. Then I hit on it: maybe I don’t need a reason. Why consciousness? Why thought? Why life? Do we need a reason?

I’d fallen for the oldest trick in the book: trying to find a reason.

My last thought as the plane hit: Amy’s right again.

What *is* wrong with nothing?

Mome Gallagher

a tragedy in ten scenes

1.

Catherine's watery eyes reflected the candlelight, and Phil returned her smile, his thumb in his back pocket flicking his folded notes, before downing a long drag of red wine. He had rehearsed the phrase, *Catherine, you deserve so much better than me* in the washroom mirror of the bar, and now, as he took out the notes, which he had been revising for the better part of a year, and which listed their incompatibilities, detailing all the reasons she would be better off without him, she lay down— like a royal flush—two tickets for a one-week all-inclusive trip to Cuba. Phil blinked at the tickets and glanced out the window at the sideways streaking snow. Then he poured himself and Catherine more wine, his notes resting unfolded in his lap under the table.

2.

The bellhop unloaded Catherine's two suitcases and Phil's gym bag inside their fifth floor suite and smiled grandly as the door closed. The furnishings were English colonial side by side with modern amenities like a wide screen television and a coffee maker that Phil tried to figure out while Catherine played with the thermostat. The air conditioning sputtered to life like an old propeller plane.

“Good grief that's loud,” she said, checking the springiness of the bed.

“Coffee?” said Phil.

She checked her watch. “It's after four.”

“How’s the bed?”

“Little stiff,” she said, then went into the bathroom and sniffed the air.

A sliding glass door led to a balcony with two wicker chairs. Phil opened it to the cackle of seagulls and swish of waves, and stepped into the balm and brightness of resort side Havana.

“Close the door,” called Catherine from the bathroom. “The AC is on.”

“Huh?”

“Shut the door!”

Phil slid the door shut and sat down in one of the chairs, still groggy from travel. On the flight, Catherine had brought along a special pillow that wedged into place against the tray table of the seat in front, and he’d watched her sleep. Even in repose her worry-line pulsated, defying the Botox injections her employer had offered her as a backhanded gift. Her bottom lip trembled at times, and Phil glanced at her with a cocktail of toxic emotions, from envy to pity to disdain.

Catherine stepped onto the balcony holding a book the size of a dictionary. Her white see-through dress billowed in the sea breeze over a one-piece parakeet-themed swimsuit. She had a nice figure, not a sexy one. Big-boned, not flabby, tall and regular, with a nice bosom and totally nondescript bottom, neither too big nor too flat, but just there.

She scanned the horizon and breathed in deeply. “Sure beats the slush,” she said, settling into her chair. She opened her book.

“Don’t remind me,” said Phil.

He sipped coffee and scanned the surroundings. Palm trees shaded the pasty bathers at the pool below, and the ocean was bluer than the sky, clear as tap water at the shoreline. The crinkling of Catherine’s page turning every couple of minutes accompanied the distant shouts of children on the beach and occasional fuzzy announcements over the hotel PA system.

“What’s going on with ol’ Mome?” said Phil.

“Failing marriage.”

“Too bad.”

“Too good,” she corrected. “They were horrible for each other.”

“How so?”

Mome Gallagher’s autobiography, the runaway bestseller, was a godsend for Phil. It gave Catherine a focus of attention Phil approved of (i.e. not him or their relationship) and a relatively neutral topic of conversation.

“Nothing in common,” she said. “So after his initial attraction wore off, all that remained was his irritation with her idiosyncratic habits and her overall failure to live up to his ideal.”

“Pretty unfair of him, no?”

“Whoever said life was fair?”

3.

Phil stood on the shore and the lukewarm surf broke around his ankles. He watched clams dig into the sand as the tide uncovered them. Catherine read in a beach cot, wearing a floppy straw hat. His shoulders baked in the rays of the sun, his eyes trained on the legs and hips and breasts and smiles of passing female sunbathers. Phil felt that he deserved so much better than Catherine.

A hefty, carpet-furred dog with shaggy bangs plowed into him. Its owner scolded the dog, apologizing smilingly to Phil as her feet slapped against the wet sand. She splashed into the tap water to get a hold of the jingling leash, and the dog jumped headlong into the water, his tongue trailing out of his mouth like a party streamer. Rising to his feet, Phil submerged himself

in the sea to wash off the sand. When he turned back, he saw Catherine hugging a well-tanned woman. Catherine waved him over.

“Phil, Janice, Janice, Phil,” said Catherine. Water dripped from his hair and congealed in the sand as Phil shook hands with Janice, a petite brunette with dark eyes. “She’s a co-worker.”

“Small world,” said Phil.

“Tiny,” Janice said.

The women laughed and launched into work gossip. Phil looked from one to the other and could not tell if they liked each other. He did note that Catherine’s knotted worry-line bulged. He let his eyes surreptitiously rove over Janice, whose two-piece white swimsuit was thin enough to reveal the outline of her nipples. Then he turned to the horizon and daydreamed until Janice slapped him on the knee.

“He doesn’t even know you’re talking to him.”

“Huh?” said Phil, and the women squealed with laughter.

“Salsa dancing tonight,” repeated Catherine.

4.

For the next few days they made a gay threesome on the dance floor, and naturally ran into each other on the beach or at the buffet during the day.

“Janice likes you,” said Catherine in their room.

“Huh,” Phil said.

Catherine sat propped against the headboard of the bed reading her book. She had a habit, when reading, of sticking her thumb in her mouth long before she was finished with a page, and

so the thumb was wet when it came time to use it to turn to the next. Phil sat on the edge of the bed, remote control in hand, flipping from station to station.

“She even asked if you had a brother,” she said, still reading.

Phil shut the television and lay back. “What’s Mome up to now?”

“First major label recording contract.”

“Must have felt fantastic,” said Phil.

“Yeah,” she said, closing the book on her finger. “Fantastically guilty.”

“How come?”

“Had to turn his back on his band.”

“Why?”

“They were amateurs.”

“So why’d he feel bad?”

“Well, they were friends of his.”

Phil whistled. “High price of success. What about the wife?”

“Oh, she’s history. Now he’s with a woman who really gets his motor revved,” she said, as the air conditioning sputtered to life.

“Good for him.”

“Wasn’t easy,” she said. “Took a lot of soul searching.”

“How so?”

“Had to admit to himself and to his wife that he wasn’t monogamous.”

“That’s one way to call it quits.”

“How so?”

“Put the ball in her court. Make her do the dirty work of ending it.”

“Maybe so. Except, she wanted to stay with him so bad that she accepted it.”

“And?”

“They lasted another year, until he finally got up the nerve to just cut things off.”

“What the hell made him wait so long?” said Phil.

Catherine closed the book on a finger. Her worry line knotted up.

“Obligation,” she said.

Phil knew it was a charged word for her. Shortly after her father abandoned the family, her mother shook her baby sister to death during a long crying spat. Catherine was four at the time. “Marcy no crying now,” Catherine told her mother, who was in the bathroom looking for a blade to cut her wrists. After that, Catherine grew up in the custody of her aunt, who made it no secret that caring for Catherine was a bitter sacrifice.

“Bad reason to stay together,” said Phil.

“The worst.”

“What was the aftermath of that?”

“Ah, don’t ask.”

“Why?”

Catherine mimed a noose around her neck and inclined her head to one side with her tongue bulging out.

“Shit,” said Phil.

“Yep.”

Phil lay there remembering that Sunday morning. He was dressing for church, thinking it was the last time. His parents called him into the living room and sat him down. By the looks on their faces, he thought they’d changed their minds about letting him go to university in Chicago,

a move for which he'd broken up with his longtime girlfriend. The news of her suicide had shocked him into a depression so profound that he dropped out of school.

"But don't feel too bad for her," said Catherine.

"Why not?"

"She was manipulative."

"Then why did he hesitate so much before going through with it?"

She closed the book after marking the page, and turned to look at Phil. "Felt sorry for her," she said. "Which goes to show, don't feel sorry for people or they'll use your own kindness against you."

The air conditioner sputtered to life.

"Didn't he feel responsible for what happened?"

"Everyone is responsible for their own happiness."

Phil thought this over. "Cathy?" he said.

"Yes, my love."

"Do you mean that?"

"I do. You are the love of my life."

"I meant, what you just said, about everyone being responsible for your own happiness?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You were saying that Mome was not to blame because everyone is responsible..."

"I don't know why you're talking about that," she said stiffly.

"It was you who was talking about it."

Her voice rose to a higher, more plaintive register. "I'm talking about love," she said.

"I'm talking about how dear you are to me, not about responsibility!" Phil looked like a scolded

dog. “I don’t know why you always have to splash cold water in my face when I open up emotionally.”

“Sorry,” said Phil at length.

She tapped her temple. “You’re too much up here.”

Phil thought, *maybe not enough up there.*

“We’re having a terrific time so far. Please let’s not fight,” she said.

The air conditioning sputtered out.

5.

Phil thought of Janice while making love with Catherine. She lay on her stomach and he mounted her from behind. When it was over, he tied up the end of the condom and they lay still for a long time.

“I love you,” said Catherine.

The air conditioner sputtered on.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Why don’t you say anything?”

“What do you want me to say?”

She patted her bare chest. He noted that one breast sagged unflatteringly to the side. “Say what you feel.”

“I can’t express what I feel.”

A long silence ensued. Then she sat up. “I love you,” she said pointedly.

“Love you too,” he whispered. Catherine lay back down.

She took a shower and Phil made coffee. He went on the balcony and opened his book, a Christmas gift from his therapist called *The Book of Mercy and Forgiving*. He read the same phrase over and over without knowing what he was reading. He closed the book, went back into the suite. While the coffee was brewing, he went down to the buffet and gathered fruit and croissants.

Catherine came out on the balcony with a towel around her head. Her eyes lit up with extreme pleasure at the sight of breakfast. She smiled at Phil and kissed him. The couple savored the freshness of the papaya and the mango, and joked about the staleness of the bread.

Catherine opened up her book. "This is the life," she said, before diving into it.

"Think I'll go for a stroll on the beach," Phil said after a while.

"Oh, Mome, on the way could you pass by Janice's room and tell her we'll be going to eat at six tonight? She's down in 307."

"You called me Mome," said Phil.

"No I didn't."

6.

The balcony door slid open.

"I can't wait to hear what happens next," Phil said.

"How was the beach?" said Catherine. "I looked for you but didn't see you."

"I didn't actually make it down there."

"Where did you go?"

"I went to tell Janice about dinner, then to the gift shop, then to check out the spa."

"What did Janice say about dinner?"

“Said she’ll come.”

“Anything else?”

Janice had come to the door of her suite wearing only a candy-striped towel and twirled around in it, asking if it made a nice dress. Phil told her about dinner, and she said, “Avec playzeer!” and closed the door, laughing.

“That was about it,” Phil said.

“She’s fun, huh?”

“A little ADHD, if you ask me.”

“She asked if you had a brother,” said Catherine.

“Yeah, you mentioned.” He was staring at the painting on the wall, a small boat in a moonlit alcove. He had stared at it several times since their arrival, and still could not decide if he liked it. “What’s up with Mome now?”

“Thinks he’s met his soul mate,” she said, laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just remembering the words to one of his songs. You know that one that goes, ‘Think I found my soul mate in an east side tavern drinking whiskey from an old abandoned shoe?’” Catherine giggled at her own off-key singing. “Something like that anyway.”

“Good ol’ Mome,” said Phil.

“He says, ‘When you’re drunk at 3 a.m., every woman looks like a soul mate.’”

“So how does he know he’s found one when he’s sober?”

“She made him realize how unhappy he’d been with the other one.”

“The one who got his motor revved?”

“She’s way, way back now,” said Catherine. “He’s mowing through them like crazy now, making up for the time he lost with the suicide girl.”

7.

Their waiter, a dark, sour-lipped man who introduced himself as Hector, showed the three to their table. His sullen demeanor didn’t fit somehow with the mellow sea breeze wafting in from the ocean that lay before them. The ladies were giddy, as if the wine they were about to drink had already gone to their heads. Catherine seemed especially manic. When Hector poured wine into Phil’s glass for him to approve, he motioned to Catherine (she was footing the bill), who proclaimed the wine excellent before tasting it, and then burst out laughing. The levity was new, out of character and a bit awkward. Phil thought she was imitating Janice.

The wine made their worldly cares seem absurd, and the trio laughed to think how they hadn’t noticed it before. The unbearable music of the restaurant was cause for hilarity, as was the dourness of Hector.

Catherine began to speak about her book. “Mome says that most people are walking, talking clichés. He refuses to be one. He lives his life the way he wants, without caring what people think. He calls it ‘kicking the devil’s ass.’ Isn’t that funny? When you try to live up to other people’s expectations, he calls that ‘*kissing* the devil’s ass.’ Isn’t that funny?” As if to back up what she said, Catherine laughed. At the next toast, she said, “To Nickelback!” “To Hector!” said Phil. “To kicking the devil’s ass!” said Janice. And down went the wine.

In their revelry, they began to greet Hector with long-lost-friend enthusiasm when he appeared with each bottle, and tried to bring him into the conversation. “Lighten up, Heck,” said Phil. “Sit and have a glass with us.” Later, Phil begged him to change the music. Hector said he

risked offending other diners if he did. “You risk offending us if you don’t,” said Phil. The women laughed as Hector shuffled away from the table.

Phil’s deadpan irony was so funny to Janice that she laughed herself to tears, egging Phil on. The two developed a rapport that left Catherine on the sidelines, watching their repartee like a tennis volley. Her smile began to fade as each of her stilted interjections was met with silence on the part of Phil and Janice. Catherine clammed up, and her spirits seemed to darken with the sky while Janice and Phil bantered, and somehow kept returning to Janice’s lack of a boyfriend.

“I want a man like Mome!” she whined to Catherine, as if to bring her back into the conversation

“Ah, you,” said Catherine, “you could have any man in this hotel.” And she got up, letting the accusation sink in as she went to the washroom.

Janice watched Catherine leave. Phil became silent and pensive, gazing out at the sunset, where the underbelly of a lone cloud was glowing a bright, almost computer-enhanced pink under the grey top.

“What is going on?” said Janice softly.

“I don’t know,” said Phil. The two looked into each other’s eyes.

“Suddenly, I feel I shouldn’t have come,” said Janice.

“No, it’s good you did.”

“How so?” said Janice. Phil looked into her eyes again.

Phil sighed. “Things aren’t going that well between us, if you want to know the truth.” He looked again toward the sunset.

“That’s too bad,” said Janice. “You two make such a sweet pair.”

Phil listened for disingenuousness in Janice’s tone and, to his guilty excitement, heard it.

“We’ve been together awhile,” he groaned. “But the fact is that I’m attracted to other women.” He glanced quickly into her eyes, then back at the sunset.

Janice looked down into her wine glass.

“Does she know?” said Janice, looking up. “Do you think she feels it?”

Phil shook his head sadly. “I don’t know. Maybe so.”

“Don’t you think you ought to tell her?”

“It’s hard.”

“It’s always hard,” said Janice. “But the longer you wait, the harder it gets.”

“The harder it gets,” repeated Phil, aroused by Janice’s wordplay.

“Don’t you think it’s time for you to kick the devil’s ass?” Janice whispered.

Catherine returned. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said.

Phil rose clumsily to pull out her seat, and poured her a glass of wine. The two women looked at each other; it was as if their wriggling antennae touched.

“Right,” Janice said. “Well then! It has been a pleasure sharing this fleeting moment in time and space with you two.” She brushed Phil’s leg with her foot as she got up, and giggled at her wobbliness while putting on her black high-heeled shoes. “Be good, party people,” she said, and walked away, turning to wave at the entrance to the lobby. Catherine and Phil waved back.

“I shouldn’t have invited her,” said Catherine.

“Why did you anyway?” said Phil.

Catherine sighed. “Masochistic need to self-flagellate, I suppose.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know. For not being fun enough.”

“You’re fun.”

Catherine was hunched over, looking sullen and miserable. “For not being pretty enough,” she said softly.

“You look real pretty in that dress.” Catherine had bought the dress for the trip, and she’d had a facial and manicure in the hotel spa that afternoon to go with it. She modeled it for him in the suite before dinner, twirling in a circle like a little girl. Like Janice had done, in fact. But while he found it cute, it did not tantalize like Janice’s towel-dress, which had revealed a sliver of naked hip.

“You’re attracted to her, aren’t you?” Catherine said.

Phil looked at Catherine like she had just said something that could possibly have her committed to an asylum, and finished off another glass.

“She is your type, after all,” said Catherine. “Fluffy hair. Nice boobs. Bouncy. Happy.” She spoke the last word with inadvertent bitterness. “Sorry, I guess that came out wrong.”

“She’s pretty,” said Phil dryly. “But she’s flighty, and fairly bi-polar, if you ask me.”

“It got on my nerves how flirtatious she was with you.”

“It’s the wine.”

Catherine brought her fist down on the table a little harder than she’d meant to, making the wine glasses jump nervously. She apologized. “Oh, let’s face it,” she said. “I’m just jealous, that’s all. I’m just scared. I have trust issues.” Catherine cried softly into her hands. When she raised her head, she looked puffy and unattractive.

“I just feel so unlovable,” she said, and collapsed on the table, hyperventilating in sobs. Phil’s heart was pinched at the sight of a woman going to pieces in her show dress, on the beach patio of a resort hotel that she was paying for. He took her in his arms and patted her back as Hector approached the table gingerly.

“Is okay?” he said.

Phil shook his head sadly. “No Hector. It’s the music. Nickelback has given the poor lady a nervous breakdown.”

Catherine’s sobs turned to laughter as she threw her tear-stained napkin at Phil.

7.

Hector showed the three tourists to their table. It surprised him that the tall, pale woman was paying. How can that be? Was she their employer? The shorter, dark one could almost pass for a Cuban, he thought. But she spoke and moved and laughed like the other two. In fact, they resembled practically every Canadian tourist he had ever set eyes on. *Tan feliz*, he thought with a sigh. *Y no me extraña. Debe ser agradable vivir en un país tan rico y no tener nada que los preocupe.* Hector thought of his four children at home, the empty refrigerator, the impossible survival.

The more these tourists drank the friendlier they were with him. But Hector sensed a mocking edge to their cheer. *Ustedes tienen todo. ¿Por qué se burlan de mí?* And why was the man so adamant about changing the music? It was their music after all. *Su música, su vino, su comida, su playa.* It surprised him when the shorter, darker one left. Hector had guessed that she and the man were together. So the man was with the tall, blond one after all. *Un hombre con suerte*, he thought. Hector found the tall, fair one more appealing. She was crying now. It wasn’t his first time to see a Canadian woman begin the evening giddy and then collapse in tears later, but he could not fathom the meaning of it. The man made another joke about the music. *Ahora se está riendo otra vez. Ella ama a este hombre de verdad!*

8.

Phil spooned Catherine in bed while she read. The wine pounded in his head and in his blood and he found that his desire to be good with Catherine was a paltry, withered thing next to his desire to be evil with Janice.

“What’s up with Mome, now?” he said.

“Convinced his third wife to try an open relationship.”

“And?”

Catherine read a few paragraphs, raising her eyebrows. “Seems to be working.”

“Good for Mome,” said Phil.

“Just goes to show.”

“To show what?”

“Ask and ye shall receive.”

“Would you like an open relationship?”

She closed the book on her finger and turned to Phil. “What are you talking about?”

“You know, dating other people.”

“Are you insane?”

“Just asking.”

Catherine brushed his cheek. “It’s alright, hon. I know I might be giving you the impression that I want a life like Mome. The fact is, I’m perfectly happy with the life I have.”

She held up the book. “This is just fantasy for me. Just a guy who led a really colorful life.”

“It doesn’t make you want to lead a colorful life yourself?”

“I do lead a colorful life.”

“I mean, a more colorful life.”

“This one is colorful enough.”

Phil looked at the painting on the wall. A boat in a moonlit alcove. He pictured every room of the hotel with the same scene on the wall. As if to invite each guest to celebrate their clichéd existence. It made him dizzy. “Is it?” he said weakly.

“Of course. You know, when we get back, I’ve got a presentation to make before the board. I can barely stand the thought of it.”

“Huh.”

“That’s about as colorful as I can take.”

“Huh.”

“Then there’s the mortgage, renovations for the cottage, my cousin Freda’s wedding. Any more color and I’ll go colorblind!”

Phil’s mercy laugh got caught in his throat.

9.

He tiptoed to the door, slowly worked it open and, with tender care to minimize the sound, closed it. Out in the bright, mirrored hallway, he watched himself slink along to the stairwell.

“You’re just a dog,” his reflection grinned..

Phil knocked. He put his ear to the door. Knocked again. Click of the lock. The door opened, just enough for Janice’s squinting eyes and disheveled hair to appear framed in it.

Shielding her eyes from the light, she said, “You?” She was wrapped in her bed sheet, looking like Phil’s image of Cleopatra.

“Oh jeez, I woke you.”

“What is it?”

“Just came by to clear things up a bit,” he said. “Is it alright if I come in?”

“You’re doing just fine right there,” she said. “What’s up?”

“I’ll just say it straight,” he said. “It’s not that I’m not attracted to you. But I’m torn between my desire for you and my responsibility to Catherine.”

Janice’s eyes first squinted, then widened.

“What do you have in your head?” she shrieked.

Phil looked either way down the hall. “She’ll never know,” he whispered.

“I could never, *never*, do that to her, even if I was attracted to you, which I am not, not, *not!*”

“Not even a little bit?”

She put her index finger and thumb together. “You see this?”

“Yeah.”

“Not even that much.”

“Ouch.”

“Look, me and Catherine aren’t close. I have no idea why she’s been inviting me along with you two. But I can tell you, she’s a good person and she deserves to be with a man who loves her. Capiche?” The sheet billowed out as she kicked it. “Kick the devil’s ass.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Be brave. Be strong. Be for real. That’s what it means. Kick the devil’s ass. Or I’ll have to kick yours.”

“Can I just get a good night kiss?” said Phil as the door shut on him.

10.

“Where were you?” Catherine said.

“Went down for a drink or two,” said Phil with a feigned yawn. “Whatcha doing up?”

“I just woke up,” she said, yawning for real, and opening up the covers. He got in next to her, and they lay still for a while, listening to their own thoughts.

“Baby, I lied,” she said.

“When?”

“When I told you I just woke up.”

“You didn’t?”

“Uhn uh. I only pretended to fall asleep. I heard you leave the room.”

“Huh.”

“Can I be honest, and don’t think less of me?”

“Hit me with it.”

“I spent every second of the last fifteen minutes terrified that you’d gone to Janice’s room.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh.”

“Huh.”

“I actually convinced myself that you and Janice were...you know...getting it on. For real. Each second was like torture.” She nursed her thumb, still bleeding from where she had bitten away the skin around the nail.

“You’ve been reading too much.”

She laughed. “Oh my God. You’re so right! The exact scene played out in the chapter I was just reading. Mome went to the room of his wife’s best friend while she slept.”

“And what happened?”

“What do you think?”

Phil nodded in the dark. “Figures.”

“What figures?”

That I am living the failed version of Mome Gallagher’s life, thought Phil.

“Oh my baby. Do *you* want to get it on? Is that it?” Catherine pulled Phil’s hand onto her breast, and snaked a hand behind her back and into his underwear.

Phil pulled his hand away. “That’s not it.”

“What is it?”

It’s that I...that we...are a clichéd couple. In a clichéd story.

“It’s that I...that we...”

“But my God, when I heard the door open, I’ve never felt so relieved. You don’t think less of me for not trusting you, my love?”

“I’d think less of you if you did trust me,” Phil deadpanned.

Catherine laughed. She took his arm and encircled her breasts with it, wiggling in comfort. “G’night, my love,” she whispered.

Phil lay, open-eyed and blind in the darkness as the air conditioning sputtered to life.

“Do you want a man like Mome, Cathy?” he said finally.

“I want a man like you. Just like you.”

Phil thought about it a while. “You deserve so much better than me, Cathy.”

“Hmm?”

“You deserve so much better than me.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I could say I’m just a lousy piece of shit and it wouldn’t be nearly hard enough.”

She turned her head. “Hey now, don’t steal my line.”

Kick the Devil’s ass.

“I did go down to Janice’s suite,” he said as the air conditioning sputtered off.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“To do what?”

“To talk.”

Her body tensed. He removed his arm and lay back. She got up and put on her pink bunny bathrobe, then rummaged through her purse. She opened the sliding glass door and sat in a wicker chair on the balcony and lit up, staring out at the darkened waters.

Phil slid the door open and sat down next to her.

“You brought cigarettes,” he said.

The crash of waves mixed with the muted strains of thump music from the hotel discotheque. “Never know when you might need one,” she said flatly after a deep drag.

“Did anything happen?” she said at last.

“No.”

“Did you want it to?”

Kick the Devil’s ass.

It sounded like air escaping a punctured tube when he said yes.

She nodded, blew out smoke, stared ahead, eyes glassed over. He tried to take her hand. She drew it away and smoked in silence.

“You don’t love me, do you?”

“I’m not capable of loving anybody.”

A group of teens below shouted lustily, jumping into the water fully clothed.

“Stop that shit. Do you love me or not?”

“Maybe not in the way you want to be loved.”

She tapped out another cigarette and lit it up with the burning end of the first one before crushing out the butt. “You can’t say it straight, can you?”

Kick the Devil’s ass.

“No, I do not love you.”

“Thank you.”

He watched the teens splashing in the water, thought of the shaggy dog on the beach, imagined jumping into the waves himself, swimming out and floating away on his back to the middle of the sea, never to return. This image had a strangely calming effect. He gazed absently at the darkness on the horizon, the pinprick stars in the cosmos, in silent contemplation, until Catherine brought him back, like a man waking up into a living nightmare.

“And why have you stayed with me for so long?” she said.

When he finally spoke the word, she closed her eyes and nodded.

See the Index

Hello there,

Could you please not park in the middle of the two spaces available between the two parking signs on this side of the street? It makes it impossible for another car to fit in. Thanks!

Analysis:

People of that time propelled themselves in wheeled machines (see diagram pp2e). These machines were not collectivized, so only one person owned it, and was responsible for finding a place to store it when not in operation. If the owner was deemed to store it improperly, he or she might be given a notice indicating a penalty, which would result in a reduction of his money. For a more comprehensive discussion of money, see the index.

Hi,

Your car is parked in the middle of two spaces again, meaning that another car cannot park here without sticking out past one of the two no-parking signs. Please, next time you park here try to remember to pull your car up as close to one of the two poles as possible in order to leave space for another car to fit. Thanks again!

Analysis:

Handwriting indicates the same writer as the previous note, since which there has been a lapse of three weeks according to dating.

While it was possible to acquire the rights to a section of the ground in order to store a wheeled machine, most people stored their machines as close as possible to where they wanted to be, so they would not have to walk. For a more comprehensive discussion of walking, see the index.

Hello neighbour!

Time and again I find your car parked in such a way as to make it impossible for another car to fit into a space either in front of it or behind it. I have already left two notes on your windshield, perhaps you did not receive them?

Either way, please agree that, with life as hard as it already is, we all ought to stand together to make it easier for one another.

Analysis:

Note the change of address with the introduction of the word “neighbour.” Though apparently unknown to each other, the writer is emphasizing the social connection they share, and goes on to appeal to a sense of solidarity that was sadly lacking at that time.

Dear Neighbour,

Parked as it is, my car is not taking up any more space than a car of a much larger size.

Have a good day.

Analysis:

This response was scrawled on the other side of previous note, two days later according to dating. Note that the responder appears to share the writer’s appeal to the collective in the use of “neighbour.” Although the note would seem to make no guarantee of complying with the wishes of the writer, we may safely assume that the responder is sympathetic to the writer’s concerns, for the note ends with a common wish of encouragement and friendliness.

Dear neighbour,

I see your point. Your car is small and if mine were as small as yours it would certainly fit, even in the little space that you allow with your car parked the way it is. The problem is, though I agree with your right to reclaim your due “full-sized” space, I still beg you to consider that the bankrupt city has become ravenous for cash and is now giving tickets for cars that go past the pole even by a centimeter. I have already received such a ticket, and, with two young children and a wife to support, I feel my money is far better spent on necessities for my family. That is why, even though your point is perfectly valid, please do the right thing and leave just a wee bit more space the next time. Cordially, your neighbour.

Analysis:

Dating indicates a lapse of a few days, thus we see the accelerating frequency of their communications, indicative of a developing relationship.

We also see that the of this relationship has to do somehow with space. As we have seen, space and time were enormous problems for the people of that era. As the note seems to indicate, one could reclaim one’s right to occupy one’s allotted space, although it is unclear what advantage that would confer.

More importantly, this note confirms the root of the writer's anxiety to be a fear over the reduction of his or her money, which was, as we have discussed in previous lectures, the main collective fear of the people of that time.

Get a smaller car.

Analysis:

Again scrawled on the other side of the writer's note, the responder appears to share the writer's concern over space, and the use of the imperative address suggests the urgency of this concern.

Dear sweet neighbor,

Based on your latest missive, I suspect that large cars are among many things that stick in your craw. I suspect that you pride yourself on the fact that you have opted for a smaller car, which you consider a neighbourly thing to do, since it not only takes up less space, but uses less gas, and so is better for the planet. If only everyone were like you, you probably think, the world would be a much better place.

I suspect as well that you hate being criticized for having taken up too much space, because it contradicts your own self-image as someone who is a good citizen for taking up less space. I suspect that what is especially irritating about it, is that this criticism comes from me, the owner of the kind of car that you hate, a gas guzzling, space-gobbling monster of the previous age of darkness and ignorance.

These however, are only suspicions; correct me if I'm wrong. But if they are right, allow me to appeal to your superior intelligence and morality and thereby make it clear that I am constrained by financial circumstances to make do with this big boat of mine, which is a family-sized car after all, and though it might be hard to remember, I did mention having a family to support.

Thanking you in advance (probably 15 or 20 years) for your kind understanding.

Analysis:

The writer has curiously opted for a change of address usually associated with a letter of love (for a more comprehensive discussion of love, see the index) for reasons that appear to be related to the flattering portrayal of the neighbour as of high intelligence.

Note however how the writer engages in a common pastime of the people of that era, which was a tendency to theorize on the

inner psychological states and motivations of others. The repetitive use of the verb “suspect” is consistent here, for such a pastime, as Horowitz has argued, was based on mutual suspicion, with the fear of reduction of one’s money at the root of that.

Maybe you should have thought more about your circumstances before deciding to reproduce. Oh, and thanks for the psychoanalyzing, putz.

Analysis:

Scrawled on the other side of the previous note, the responder’s message employs a modal construction “should” usually reserved for giving advice, though when used in the perfect form it was a rhetorical device of criticism or regret (for a more comprehensive discussion of regret, see the index.). Note the use of the scientific word “reproduce,” which suggests that the responder may have been a scientist. The use of the archaic insult “putz” with a word of gratitude suggests that like many terms, “putz” could double as either insult or an affectionate epithet, as it is most certainly meant here.

Dear Gandhi,

I think I get it now. You don’t breed because it would mean taking up more space, wouldn’t it?

Will you be buried or cremated? Hmm. Depends on what is the most ecological way of disappearing, doesn’t it? Aren’t you a good widdle citizen?

Sorry for not writing this on recycled paper or using recycled ink. Guess there would be a lot less waste involved if we didn’t have to have this discussion in the first place. But your widdle principles are more important than anything else, aren’t they?

With the highest affection, respect and awe, your humble neighbour

Analysis:

Gandhi was a beloved international leader known for promoting the highest ideals of community living, thus it would seem to make sense to invoke his name in a dialogue that has drifted away from its original intent and begun to wholly embrace the philosophical aspects of citizenry. Note as well the efforts being made to understand where the other is coming from, on both sides, a concern which appears to have supplanted the original subject as well. The writer’s goodwill and empathy is evident in the effort made to portray his neighbour in the best possible light and his or her choice of vocabulary also reflects their growing bond, as words like “breed” imply a dropping of cold

formality. Moreover, scholars who have studied this artifact are unanimous that the obscure word “widdle” is in all probability a casual though honorific adjective of some sort. The writer’s good will is evident in the willingness not only to apologize but to give as high an importance to the responder’s ideals as they deserve. We may then safely assume this to be a successful communication, for the neighbours have momentarily overcome their selfish preoccupations in favour of a more community-based dialogue, and the lack of response hereafter indicates that the subject had been explored to the satisfaction of both. At that time, the population could only conceive of our reality as an ideal, and we must honour them by respecting their efforts in the face of what they assumed was impossible. As we continue to analyze artifacts of this era, we will also focus on exchanges that were far less successful. This one stands, however, as a good example of two citizens of the past with their eyes fixed firmly on a future world free of strife and enmity. For a more comprehensive discussion of strife and enmity, see the index.

An Arguing Couple

In the street I saw them: an arguing couple. As one half of an arguing couple myself, I paused to listen out of morbid curiosity, the same curiosity with which a man petrified of death might attend a public beheading.

I listened to this couple bickering over which way to go with a similarly reluctant sense of recognition on hearing one's recorded voice. The same battle of wills, the same face-contorting fury over not having one's side heard at all.

It had been like that with my own parents. Coming back from a dinner party, they would enter our little stone and wood bungalow in College Station, where they'd slam doors and hide from each other, torture each other with their sulks, then find each other and let it all out before going to bed to recharge their batteries for a fresh morning round.

With uncanny foresight, they named my little sister, Dolores. Pain and sorrow. When things got bad between them, when they really got going, little Dolores couldn't bear it. She hid her thin self under a thin sheet with only a thin freckled arm poking out. She wailed, knocking on the wall with her thin little knuckles.

You'd think that this alone would be enough to make them stop. Instead, my sister's pitiful act of nonviolent protest only became more grist for their mill.

"See what you're doing to her!" Mom would shriek.

Dad fired right back. "See what *I'm* doing? Are you fucking blind? Are you fucking insane?"

Personally, I'd learned quickly to ignore them. They'd named me Peter, after all.

Stone, in other words.

I drew comics in my room, entering the war zone only to pee or make a sandwich. The cat would always be there at my door. She'd race inside my room, under my bed, eager for some peace and quiet. I learned to even ignore my sister under the sheet. I used to pull her away from the couch, take her into my room. I'd lay out some paper, hand her a pen and some colors. But she couldn't shut out the screams, no matter how muffled. She drew on her arm, digging the pen into her flesh so deep that she bled into the ink. I would bring her into the bathroom to clean her off then let her go back to wailing under the sheet.

The comics I drew were horribly violent. I remember drawing two headless chickens, blood spraying from their necks as they continued to argue, having cut off each other's head in the heat of battle. My teachers notified the principal, and my parents were called in. "He's an exemplary student otherwise," the principal told my parents. On the way home, dead silence. That night was bad, because Mom had the butcher knife.

I took Dolores for a walk out back. I've read somewhere that autumn is the favorite season of madmen and artists. I led her to a path and made her lie down, covered her in leaves. I always said it was my parents who made an artist of me. At a young age I understood that you either transformed pain into art or you went crazy with it. I tried to explain this to Dolores.

"Look!" I would say, turning to the pro wrestling channel, where men in leotards traded venomous insults and tried to pull off each other's heads. "It's the same thing."

"They're our parents," she said.

"They're fucking nutcases," I said. "Oh, shit Dolores. Please stop." She was sobbing into her arms. Little Dolores. Even at nine years old, her canines had yet to grow in. I held her stunted body against mine until the tears stopped. "We'll help them," I lied.

Once, I caught our father eating raw chicken hearts in the kitchen, blood running down his chin, in the wee hours of the morning. Stumbling upon his guilty secret terrified me at the time, since I had misinterpreted his shock at being discovered to mean that he was eating our mother's heart.

Dolores lives in an institution now, while I am out on the street, thanks to my Academy Award winning portrayal of a stone. Stones don't feel, at least from the look of it. But those who opt for stoneness feel too much in the first place. Dolores couldn't manage the stone trick. She couldn't turn her back on Marvin and Mary Grossman – "The Bickersons," as they were casually known in sleepy little College Station. In our better moments, I joke to Eileen that the neighbors probably refer to us as "The Bickersons." But seeing our daughter huddled in a corner crying while Eileen and I smash plates and threaten each other is nothing to laugh about.

The faces of this arguing couple in the street contort with hatred. Make no mistake: my face has contorted in the same way when screaming at Eileen for having once again misinterpreted what I meant. She has no idea how much her low self-esteem interferes with her ability to understand the simplest thing. Thinks I'm blaming her when I'm only making an observation about the amount of salt in the food, for example. Salt is like many things, if there's too little, you can add more, but once you've added it, you can't take it away. This escapes Eileen.

She doesn't take it well when I tell her she's talked enough. Women can talk to each other for hours since they don't really listen. Nor do they pretend to. If you focus closely on a female-female conversation, you'll see what I mean. But I am condemned to listen when someone talks to me, so after a long barrage of incoherent, unrelated ideas, I need some time alone, to digest what I have heard. Digest I say. I like the metaphor and don't see anything

offensive about it, yet Eileen takes exception. I tell Eileen that a conversation is a meal, and I am not a goose to be force-fed. That steams her up good for some reason.

The couple is still at it now. They look like cocks ready to peck each other's eyes out. Little do they know what grist they are for my mill. I hide my morbid interest. Pretend to be waiting for someone. Stare at the phone, tap my foot, keep a lookout.

The phone rings, as it turns out.

"Hey," I say.

"It's me."

"Hey you."

"Just wondering who's getting the kids today."

An innocuous question, right? Yet a cardiogram would show a sudden spike in my blood pressure. Was it twice or three times this morning that I told Eileen that I needed this afternoon off? I even held her by the shoulders and made eye contact with her as I said it. What scares me most about women is their intuition; they really do have it. Yes, I had planned a romantic tryst for this afternoon. Yes, Eileen knows, deep down. I don't answer. By my silence, she knows I'm upset.

"Just asking," she says.

"You seriously don't remember this morning...?"

"Yes, you said you have work to do. You can do it after picking up the kids, can't you?"

For all I know she is with a lover at the moment. I hope for her sake she is. It would relieve me of some of the guilt for what I have put her through. What is it that has kept us together? Joy? That's not an attempt at sarcasm; it's our daughter's name. A month or two before she was born, I passed through the hall and saw Eileen folding baby clothes in the baby room.

She didn't see me. I watched her stop folding to press the tiny one-piece bunny pajama suit to her cheek. I saw the look on her face. The dreamy smile told me everything.

I'd been had.

I'd been a vehicle for a girlhood dream.

My single bachelor friends laughed at me as I became more and more domesticated. I was only trying to avoid Eileen's godforsaken nagging. She could get real bitchy, and I hate this quality in a woman. She could always sense when I'd had it. At those moments she would offer a blowjob. "Does little Petey need some kissing?" she'd say. No matter how stressed or resentful I was, I always had to admit that yes, little Petey could go for some kissing.

Little Joy did not cure Eileen of her unpleasantness. So I vowed never to have another. But one day she was pregnant again. And I said, if you're going to have this child you can have it without me. And she said, go then. Just go, you motherfucking shitheel, she said. You've never been good for anything else. That pissed me off, because I felt that I had been good for *a lot* else. I'd adapted. Not an exemplary father but not as bad as all that. And so I told her that, for failing to see the effort I had made, I could, essentially, crack her ungrateful fucking skull. And I picked up a brick with which to do it. And this went back and forth with little Joy huddled in the corner wailing and the neighbours pounding the walls.

Once, little Joy began knocking on the wall, and it froze me mid-stream. She was only responding to the banging on the walls from the neighbours. But it got to me. Brought me back. Why had it never occurred to me to wonder about that knock? Who was Dolores trying to communicate with, there on the couch? What door was she knocking on?

"What's that in the background, anyway?" Eileen says.

"Just an arguing couple," I say.

“They should go their separate ways.”

“I’m sure they would if they could,” I joke. *Like us*, I think. But why can’t we? That’s what I don’t understand. What kept Mom and Dad together?

“Anyway, don’t change the subject,” I say. “You get the kids today, as we agreed this morning.”

“Can’t.”

She knows I’ll capitulate. Yet I will blast her when she gets home. It’s like a dark play we put on for the girls, as if to remind them of the marvels of coupledness they have to look forward to. I couldn’t see any sense to it. We are free to leave each other at any time, yet we will not. We are free to roam the streets, unlike my sister Dolores, who yells at the argumentative voices she hears inside her head. We can separate at any moment, unlike this arguing couple in the street here, who, I neglected to mention, are twins conjoined at the waist.

And they are still at it.

Goodbye, I Love You, and Please, Please Don't Come Back

"Is this the deathbed?" I said.

"It is not," he said, not turning away from the TV.

"It is a sick bed of some sort," I said.

"That may be, but it's not the deathbed."

The laugh track from the sitcom he was watching went off like a bomb.

"Can I ask how long I've been here?"

"You were here when they brought me in."

"Why did they bring you in?"

"Wouldn't we all like to know?"

I'd been awake for what must have been hours. In a dreamy trance, I'd listened vaguely to the storm outside, until I recognized the explosive crackle as a comedy laugh track. That's when I lifted the sheet off my head and noticed my neighbour, laughing along with the show he was watching.

It was not funny, but the old man laughed like mad with the track. I thought, if one was sick, one ought to try at least to laugh, but mine came out dry and hoarse, like the bark of a seal.

"Ought to do something about that cough," said the old man, a thick line of drool connecting his chin to his bib.

A nurse came in and wiped his mouth, pressed on his legs, cleaned out his nose, took a

look at a gauge or two. Then she turned toward me and sucked in air, dropped the bedpan, jumped at the clang it made on the floor, and ran out with a whimper.

“What was that all about?” I said.

“She was the one who pulled the sheet over you.”

“So this *is* the deathbed?” I said.

“This is *not* the deathbed.”

I watched the show with him. The laugh track made it seem like a comedy, but there was something ominous and disconcerting about it. The show was more tragic than could be described. The character of an old man rueing his wasted chances. “I blew it,” he moaned, and the laugh track went wild. I was developing bad feelings for my roommate. He did not seem kind. True, he cried, but the tears sprang from the effort of laughing.

A man in a well-trimmed black beard and large black glasses came in, sat on my bed and studied me. He scratched away in a notebook as he did so.

“Do you know who I am?” he said.

“Some sort of doctor, I’d guess?”

“What makes you say that?”

“The white coat.”

He brought his face close to mine. “Do you know my face?”

I peered into it.

“Well?” he said.

“Where am I?”

“It’s better if it comes back to you. It may, if you let it.”

“Is this the deathbed?” I asked.

“Who told you that?”

“Nobody did. That old guy said that it wasn’t.”

He sighed. “Ah, denial. It only grows stronger as one gets feebler.”

“What are you writing down?” I said.

“What I just said.”

“So it is?”

“It is what?”

“The deathbed.”

“This is not the deathbed,” called out the old man from the other bed.

“Watch this,” said the doctor. He called to the old man, “Hey Jay?”

“Yeah, Doc.”

“Do you trust me?”

“I better.”

“Then hear me out. You know that bed you’re in?”

“Yeah?”

“*That* is the deathbed,” he said.

The TV laugh track erupted. The old man laughed along in triumph.

“See what I mean?” the doctor said to me. “No one can face it.”

“I have no trouble facing it. But what have I got?”

“Amnesia. Good old-fashioned amnesia. Amnesia on the deathbed is the last gasp effort on the part of the mind to refuse to face the facts. I’m writing a paper about it. Amnethanasia, I call it.”

He straightened up, closed his eyes, looked proud. I had to wait for the audience laughter to die down. “No, I mean, why am I here? What am I sick from? What is this thing that is killing me?”

“That’s not the point,” he said. “We all die of this or that. What is rare in your case is that you can’t seem to stay dead.”

The laugh track erupted again, like a burst of lightning in an old horror flick.

At this point a man came in. He gazed at me with a bitter smile, and then glared at the doctor.

“You mother frigger,” he growled.

The doctor threw up his hands. “Mr. Indestructible is back,” he said. Then he said to me, “And this man here, does his face ring any sort of bells?”

“Should it?”

The man gave the doctor a look you could break a brick with. The doctor lowered his head and held up one finger, to signal patience.

“You are quite the troublemaker,” he said with a shake of the finger at me. “You’ve cost me five nurses with your death defying antics.”

The other man gaped. “Cost you? How’s that? Who’s footing the bill for this overpriced Shangri-La of yours? Every time he comes back, you see dollar signs.”

“Now now,” said the doctor.

“You love this,” the other man said.

“Your brother has me all wrong,” the doctor said to me. “No one hoped more than I that this last time was the charmer, that you would stay away for good.”

“You’re my brother?” I said.

“I am,” he nodded. “I used to sing you to sleep after Mom left. We were tight. We had to be to survive. Then I slept with the love of your life. Biggest mistake of my life. And I was old enough to know better, god damn it.”

“You slept with the love of my life?” I said. It was hard to imagine this old wizened coot

sleeping with anyone

“I did. Right on your bed. And I’m sorry for being so pissed off on your deathbed now, little brother. We’ve just been through this too many times.”

“It’s not what your brother thinks,” said the doctor. “I don’t have any interest in keeping you around. He’s barking up the wrong tree.”

“Then why not toss him right into the incinerator after he dies this time?” said my brother. He waited for the laugh track to die down, then turned to me. “Sorry to be so crude about it.”

At that moment a pale, dark-haired man with thick eyebrows came in. His ears stuck out and he had a wide gap between his two front teeth, plus a look of surprise on his face that, I quickly realized, never went away.

“Who the hell is this?” said my brother.

“Did I tell you I had a plan? I’ve called in a master rabbi to administer to the situation.”

“Excuse me doctor,” I said. “I’m no anti-Semite, but I’m not sure I want to be administered to by a member of the Jewish faith.” I turned to the rabbi. “With all due respect, rabbi.”

My plea was followed by a raucous eruption of the laugh track. The doctor and my brother laughed along with it.

“What’s so funny?” I said.

“Hate to break it to you on your deathbed,” said my brother, “but you’re a Jew.”

“Vat is zee problem here?” asked the rabbi.

“As far as I can tell, I can’t seem to die,” I said.

“You don’t say!” said the rabbi.

“That’s not quite it, rabbi,” the doctor said. “He dies with no effort at all. The trouble is, he can’t stay that way.”

“So you keep comink back? Is zat it?”

“So I’m told,” I said.

“Ven you come back, are you vorried about somesing, eh?” He shook his fingers in a circle around his own head. “Is ze little hamster goink round und round?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “I’m just here. No thoughts at all.”

“It mince you felt, eh?”

“Felt what?” I said.

“Felt! You did not succeed!”

“Failed?”

“Ja, felt! It’s just like in school. Vat happens ven you don’t do good your studies, eh?”

“You stay back?” I said.

“Ja, you stay back!” He slapped the bed with a look of such glee that he seemed beyond help.

While I mulled this over, a young woman floated into the room with some sort of package in her arms, flanked by another older coot. Her beauty was such, with her black jacket and dark makeup, her frizzy flowing mane of hair and round, white face, that I knew this must be Death itself.

“Hi again, Papa!” she said, with an exasperated sigh sweetened by a grand toothy smile. Then she took the baby’s arm out and waved it. “Say hi to Grand Papa, Errol!”

“Wait a sec. I’m your father?” I said.

As if to prove it, she took a mirror out of her purse. I looked into it. An old, old man. White hair, with a face sagging off its own skull. I and my old roommate were peers. Colleagues. Death mates. I was the one in denial.

“So this really is the deathbed,” I sighed.

“That’s the mirror I use to see if you’re still breathing each time you die, Papa.”

I looked into her face. “I did that?” I said. It was as if someone brought you to see a great work of art and said—guess what?— you did it.

“You had help,” said the doctor.

“Yes,” she said, showing me the baby in her arms, “and I did this. With some help of course.” She looked lovingly at the old man next to her.

“You had a baby with this old fart?” I said.

“I have daddy issues, thanks to you,” she said.

“Yeah, really, thanks,” said the old guy at her side with a squeeze of her bum.

It occurred to me that this place could be a mental home. These people clustered around my bed could be mental patients putting on some sort of bizarre play.

“But to have a child with someone so old!” I said. “Can I see it?”

She showed me the baby. I was half expecting to see an old man’s face on the thing. But it was just as fresh as the dawn of life.

“He smiled at me!” I said.

“Errol came into the world across the way in the maternity ward, on the very day you first died, Papa. How fitting, we all thought! But now you’ve come back so many times that we don’t know what to make of it.”

“I’ll try again,” I said. “Maybe if you put on some soft music, or...”

“Papa!” she said. “You always say soft music, soft music, soft music and we’ve tried Bartok and Bach and –

“You want me to go?” I said weakly.

“Of course not,” she said. “But in another sense, yes! Do you know what it’s like to prepare for the death of one you love, and then have that person come back, only to keep dying, over and over? It kills me to have to say it Papa, but you just have to stop coming back. Each

time you die we grieve, but we grieve a little less than before, and the more you come back the more our grieving just feels...silly.”

“It’s his very stubbornness that keeps him hanging on,” said my brother. “Like the grudge he holds, all the way to the deathbed.”

“What grudge?” I said.

“Don’t you remember? I slept with the love of your life. After you had confided everything to me. How you had loved her from afar, been her shoulder to cry on, waiting for the magical day, which you never believed would come, when she would love you back. And when that day came, you told me you knew the meaning of success! And I laughed in your face. Success? Is my little brother insane? So, just to prove a point, right on top of your bed, I did what so many had done. So many. And what a feather in my cap it was. But how wrong! How despicable! But how fulfilling. She was such a hot number.”

My brother was getting lost in reverie, so I interrupted. “And what was the aftermath of all that?”

“Aftermath? What a word. You didn’t speak to me for four decades. Four!” He held up five fingers for some reason. “How’s that for aftermath? And then, I come to you, on your deathbed, to ask your forgiveness, only to find that you have amnesia. It’s not fair. What value is forgiveness from an amnesiac?” He sighed like an old balloon. “Sorry, we’ve just been over this so many times.”

“This is fascinating actually,” the doctor chimed in. “Usually it’s the victim reminding the perpetrator of a traumatic event and the perpetrator can’t remember. Here the roles are

reversed. The victim cannot remember. And the perpetrator complains!”

What else was I spared the remorse of remembering? Myself, hale and hearty, racing through a graveyard laughing? Or volunteering at some community function, handing out balloons to kids? Playing “Shark!” with my daughter in the swimming pool? A kiss from the sun in springtime?

“What was her name?” I said.

Before my brother could answer, the doctor held up a hand. “Wait. Let him guess. Maybe it will come back.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Marguerite?”

Everyone laughed.

“What?” I said. “Is that it?”

“That’s *my* name, Papa,” said my daughter, or the mental patient playing her.

I had an idea. “Look,” I said. “Might I not be faking amnesia to make it easier to forgive without losing face?”

“There’s little face left to lose now in any event,” said the doctor.

“*Do* you forgive me?” said my brother.

I shrugged. “Why not?”

The others looked bored. They must have heard my brother’s tearful begging for

forgiveness any number of times.

“Thank you,” he said. “But it would mean more if you remembered.”

“He does,” said the rabbi.

“You do?” said my brother.

“I do,” I said. Lord knows I didn’t. But here I was, presented with a chance to go out on a good note, and I jumped on it. “I was in denial about my Jewishness. Now I finally accept it. Thank you for coming rabbi, to make that point clear. Worse, I was unable to forgive. I regret that more. Oh, I regret so many things. I feel like I blew it. I should have forgiven you right away. So what if you and old what’s-her-name had a little fun. I’m glad it was on my bed. Honored. Oh, I hated you at the time. I wanted you to die. I even paid a voodoo witch doctor to cast a hex on you.” (I was saying whatever popped into my head.) “When that didn’t work I just decided to cut you off. In my mind, you were dead to me. Now I have to live with what I did. Or should I say, die with it. It’s *me* who should ask *your* forgiveness. Please. I blew it badly. I know that. But actually, when I look at you Marguerite, I feel like maybe I didn’t blow it. I’m so happy to see you one last time, my dear. Listen. Be kinder. It’ll make death easier for all.”

My brother stood there crying with relief and gratitude. It was a serious moment that seemed to call for some comic relief. That was provided by little Errol, who threw up.

“I guess I’m ready to go again,” I said with a luxurious yawn, wiggling my toes under the sheet.

“OK, clear out everybody, he’s ready to go again,” said the doctor.

I closed my eyes and began to drift. But the laugh track from the TV still crackled.

“Please turn the TV off!” I moaned. “I just need quiet so I can go in peace.”

“The TV’s off,” someone said. “That was lightning.”

“That’s what it was, all along?” I said.

“He’s delirious now.”

“Marguerite?” I called.

“I’m here, Papa.”

“Marguerite?”

“I’m here, Papa.”

“Marguerite?”

I called to her again and again but heard no response. Despite the pitch black, I could sense an object being placed near my mouth and nose.

The mirror.

“It’s over. He’s gone,” someone said. The muffled sobs of Marguerite sounded like tiny hiccups. “There, there Marguerite. He’s out of his misery.”

“Still here!” I said. “I can hear everything you’re saying.” But my words sounded in my own head. I strained to make a movement, to show them. Did they not at least notice, in my face, the effort of trying?

“Look at his expression. So peaceful. Death must be wonderful.”

“Now it’s over, Papa,” said Marguerite. “Don’t come back. Goodbye, I love you, and please please don’t come back.”

Cannibals!

Rumour had it that cannibals had bought the old Pinkerton place. Someone had, that was for sure. The word “sold” was pasted over the “for sale” sign in the front yard. Henry Hoodwink sat at his desk in the salon and looked over his online portfolio, praying to God that the rumour wasn’t true. He apologized to God for the times he’d mocked Him, begging God not to forget his sense of humour. On that note, Henry pointed out that having cannibals as neighbours was not his idea of a good joke. After all, his home was almost paid off, wasn’t it? He’d moved to the countryside in the first place, he reminded God, to get away from the city, where rampant liberalism had made every act, no matter how degenerate, permissible. “It’s probably not true,” Zia called from the kitchen. “You know how small town rumours go.” “They can go either way,” Henry mumbled. “Besides,” she called, “what the heck do you know about modern day cannibals anyway? Nothing. Not one darn thing.”

Henry said he knew all he goddamn well needed to. “They eat people. I’m a people. That makes them my enemy.”

Let the new neighbors turn out to be cannibals for all I care, Zia thought. It’ll teach you a lesson. She chopped the food, and the more she thought about it, the more she *hoped* they would be. Yes, by God, that would teach him! When Lucille had told them that their long time neighbour, Mrs. Pinkerton, had “passed,” Henry hadn’t missed a beat. “Failed is more like it,” he’d chuckled. Zia smiled, despite herself, at the memory, though at the time she was mortified. Now that cannibals had bought the Pinkerton place, if indeed they had, her husband’s sea of laughter had miraculously parted, hadn’t it? Yes, a lesson in respect and tolerance was called for here. Please let it be true, thought Zia, as she put the chicken to sizzle in the pan.

Henry also thought about old Pinkerton. True, he'd joked at the funeral that dead Mrs. Pinkerton in the coffin resembled alive Mrs. Pinkerton in her porch chair, both with "that unmistakable embalmed look in the eye." But at least he'd never felt menaced by the old bat. Their five-year-old daughter Arnolda, the only human being he'd ever loved without reserve, could play unsupervised in the backyard, roam onto the Pinkerton property, a part of Knowlesville that opened onto a small historic cemetery.

"If it's true, we're moving," Henry called out.

Zia wiped the grease from her hands on a dishtowel, entered the salon and stood with them on her hips.

"You'd do that to your daughter?" she said.

"Keep her safe from being eaten? Yes, I'd do that."

"Do you have any idea how ignorant you sound?"

The phone rang. Henry took it.

"Uh, huh," he said, about five times in a row. He hung up.

"Who was it?" said Zia.

"Lucille."

"It's true?"

"Where's Arnolda?" Henry said.

"I don't know. Out back with the animals. Where else?"

He walked to the back looked through window. "I don't see her."

"She's probably gone on a walk with Miranda."

"Which one is Miranda?"

"You really are blind aren't you?"

“They all look the same to me,” he said, counting the animals he saw. “Anyway, they’re all there. No sign of Arnolda.”

“She’s alright, wherever she is, Hanky Panky,” said Zia, chopping lettuce.

Henry opened the back door. The narfs turned. “Hay!” one of them said. “Hay!” they all began to chatter. Their mother hopped closer and growled as Henry approached. He walked along a small stone path to a nearby orchard. Clouds of insects parted as Henry stepped through the wild grass. “Arnolda?” He turned to look at the Pinkerton place. A faint trail of smoke was coming from the chimney. “Where’s Arnolda?” he said to the animals gathered around him.

“No no?” they said, in singsong. “No no?” They circled around Henry, lifting up their bony shoulders in shrugs. “Arnolda!” he cried.

“Daddy I’m here!” called Arnolda from the back door of the house. “Look what I found in the basement!” She held up a dirty broken collar. “I think it’s Joey’s.” The blue pot-bellied creatures hopped up to the porch. Arnolda held out the collar to for them to sniff. “Jo-eee jo-eee jo-eee!” they cried.

“Daddy, can’t my friends come inside to look for their brother?”

“No, sweetheart. Mom and I have to talk. Stay here on the porch.”

Henry went back inside. Muffled arguing soon came from the house.

Miranda plopped herself in front of Arnolda and said, “Moma dayni faynik!”

“Yes, Miranda, Mama and Daddy are fighting again,” Arnolda said. She stroked the blue scraggly fur on Miranda’s head.

A side window slid open and Henry poked his head out.

“Don’t you dare,” came Zia’s voice from behind him.

“Fucking cannibals!” he bellowed. Zia closed the window on his neck from behind like a guillotine. Henry roared, pushed it back up and advanced on Zia, tapping his neck to check his fingers for blood.

“You’re just an intolerant arse is what you are,” she said, holding a pair of open scissors in both hands like a cross.

“Because I don’t want to live next to cannibals?”

“You’re a hate filled redneck.”

“Because I don’t want to live next to cannibals?”

“Think about the first black families to come into an all-white neighbourhood and the discrimination they faced...”

“Wait a minute, did I just hear you compare cannibals to blacks? Isn’t that a revealing thing...”

“That’s not what I...”

“...for dear miss university professor to...”

Zia shrieked. She transferred the scissors to one hand and came at her husband with the sharp end. Henry managed to grab her wrists, but she twisted free and tagged him across the forearm. He picked up a chair and held it over his head. Zia got on her back, lifting her legs to block the blow.

The doorbell rang.

Henry put the chair down and went to answer it. Looking first through the peephole, he opened the door to find a young, hip-looking couple. He focused first on the woman, a pretty, smiling redhead. Curvaceous and petite, she swished her red hair amicably.

“We’re your new neighbours!” she said, holding out her hand. “My name is...oh! You’re bleeding!”

“Hang on a sec,” he said, coming back inside and closing the door. “Our new people-eating neighbours are out there,” he announced to Zia, “and bleeding as I am, I don’t want to give them any ideas, so you go to the door.”

Zia held Henry’s head in her hands, ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him full on the lips, mumbling “sorry,” over and over.

“I’ll go see Arnolda,” he said.

“Baby, relax,” said Zia. “Arnolda could not be safer. Take a bath. Clean yourself up.”

Zia opened the door. “Hello!” she said.

“Is everything okay?” said the woman. “The bleeding man is alright?”

“That was my husband. Woodwork mishap. He’s fine.”

“Oh good! We’re the new neighbours, I’m Doris and this is Frank.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Zia, holding out her hand to both. “I’m Zia and my bleeding husband is Henry.”

Doris kept smiling with her head cocked to the side. “Great to meet you Zia,” she said. “We’re inviting all the neighbours to our housewarming party. Won’t you and Henry come?”

“We’d be thrilled to, Doris. And welcome to the neighbourhood!”

Doris looked at Frank with a meaningful glance, as if to say, see?

“What a great idea to throw a party!” said Zia. “When is it? What should we bring?”

“We’d be so thrilled just for you to bring yourselves. Wouldn’t we Frankie?”

“Thrilled,” he said stonily. Zia smiled in response, but an involuntary furrow formed in her brow.

“Any dietary restrictions I should be aware of?” Doris said.

“Don’t go to any special trouble,” said Zia. “We’re omnivores.”

Zia liked Doris instantly. Her gaze was lively, curious and observant, unmarred by judgment or suspicion. Frank however, though cute with his large sleepy eyes and curly hair, was hard to read. Thinking him shy, Zia smiled all the more, but he did not respond. Doris watched the brief interaction and leaned towards Zia. “He doesn’t smile much,” she whispered with a wink. “Don’t take it personally!”

Zia found her husband in the bathroom.

“They want to invite us over I take it?” he said, dressing his forearm with a bandage.

“Oh, baby!” said Zia. “I’m so sorry.”

She ran her hands through his hair. He put down the scissors he’d used to cut the gauze. She kissed his lips, poking her tongue into his mouth. Henry picked her up and he took her to bed. He laid her down and got his fingers into the waistband of her pantyhose. She lifted her hips so he could pull them down. They made love furiously.

“Feel better?” she whispered.

“Yeah.”

“I mean about the neighbours.”

He thought of Doris especially. Naked.

“You’re thinking of Doris,” said Zia.

“Yeah.”

“They’re a super cute couple.”

“You think laughing boy is cute?”

“God yes!” she whispered. “I once had a lover who looked like him. One of my students, in fact. Wiry thin, but with a real nice one. Knew how to use it too.”

“Hmm,” said Henry. “I’ve seen fence posts with more pizzazz.”

Zia laughed. “What are you thinking?”

“What am I thinking?”

He was thinking of Doris on all fours, turning her head around to meet his gaze, smiling her sweet smile. He was thinking he might not need to sell the house after all. Then he was snoring softly.

Zia had big news for her colleagues at the university. Professors are an enlightened bunch but even they are not entirely free of envy, and real life experiences with putting tolerance into practice could punch up symposium presentations in an enviable way.

But: “You’re not taking Henry to dinner, are you?” they all asked her. That reminded Zia to stop in at the university library.

She came home with three large books and plopped them down on Henry’s desk.

“What the hell?” he said.

“Some reading material. In preparation for the dinner party.”

Henry lifted his glasses from his nose so he could read the spines. *Modern Day Cannibals: An Introduction. Urban Cannibalism for a Small Planet. You Are What You Eat: The Rise of Ethical Cannibalism.*

“Degeneracy,” he grumbled, shaking his head.

“Sweetheart, please don’t embarrass me tomorrow night. Please think about the discrimination these people face. Think how you would feel if the real estate agent was *legally required* to call everyone in the neighbourhood to let them know that you were moving in.”

Henry laughed at the thought of Lucille calling homeowners to let them know that an intolerant, bigoted asshole was now in their midst.

“Please, Hanky Panky,” Zia said, “have some control over your mouth.”

That was the crux of the issue. Henry Hoodwink had no control over his mouth.

Zia both loved him and hated him for it. In bed, she adored his probing, biting, licking, lapping and sucking mouth, but socially, Henry’s mouth mortified her, exposing his ignorance to her university colleagues like a trench coat flasher in the park. Henry was not very bigoted in fact. He just liked to offend. If reminded that a certain term had become offensive, he’d make sure to use it. Cripples, retards, faggots, trannies, kikes, and gypsies all populated his lively cocktail talk. More than once, a guest at some departmental function or dinner party had left after first remarking to Henry, “I had no idea that assholes like you still existed.” Zia would more often than not apologize to the host for her husband’s rudeness. “We are advocating tolerance of others, after all,” the host would say with a shrug.

Zia knelt next to his chair. “Baby,” she said, lowering the zipper on his trousers and fishing out his penis, “I really don’t want you to embarrass me at the dinner. This’ll be my first time in a cannibal household. I really want to make a good impression. Can you promise me you’ll be on your best behavior?”

Henry nodded. He’d have nodded to anything, the way Zia was working on him.

“Okay, baby?” said Zia. She moved her hand, tightly and slowly, up and down. Cupping her other hand at tip, she caught her husband’s seed in a white puddle.

Zia washed her hands in the kitchen sink and began fixing dinner. The rabbit meat sounded like denim as she tore it from the bone.

“Couldn’t you chop it instead of ripping it like that?” he said, dabbing the perspiration from his neck. “Gives me the heebies.”

“You get more this way,” she said. A comforting aroma filled their home as the meat joined the onions and spices to simmer in the oil.

The doorbell rang.

Henry opened it. Standing on the front porch, in the twilight, was a young woman with deep blue eyes and a shaved head.

“Hello,” she said.

“You’re the babysitter?” said Henry.

“I’m the babysitter.” She held out her hand. “Gabby.”

“Henry. Come on in.”

“Zia!” he called. Zia came downstairs. Her hair was up and she wore silver crescent earrings, a sleeveless white tunic and white slacks. Henry admired his aging wife. She still had it.

“Gabby?” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Great to meet you.” The women hugged. Henry noticed that Gabby had the letters “K.O.” tattooed on the side of her head. He went to the back porch to call for Arnolda.

“So dinner is all ready,” said Zia. “You’re welcome to eat with Arnolda. It’s game.”

“Game?”

“Rabbit.”

“Oh,” said Gabby, looking downward with a tight smile.

“It’s a wonderful meat, if you’ve never tried it.”

“I don’t do meat,” said Gabby.

“Oh my. I’m sorry.”

“Apologize to the rabbit,” mumbled Gabby.

Zia laughed. “Sorry, rabbit!” she sang. “Hope he heard.”

“Where’s Arnolda?” said Henry.

“She’s probably up in her room.”

Henry walked down to the basement and unlocked the freezer. Ice crystals made a scratchy sound as he dug through the frozen meats for a large plastic sac filled with what looked like long slabs of blue ice.

“Hi Daddy!” said Arnolda from the shadows under the basement stairs.

“What are you doing down here?”

“Looking for clues.”

“What clues?”

“Where Joey went. I found his collar down here, remember?”

“Your babysitter is here, sweetheart. Come on up to meet her. We’re on our way out.”

“What’s in the bag?”

“Dessert,” said Henry.

“Popsicles?” said Arnolda.

“Popsicles.”

They walked up the steps.

“Can I have one Daddy?” she said. “For after dinner? Please?”

“No, baby,” he said. “This is our housewarming gift for the new neighbours.”

“Can you open the bag so I can see?”

“No, baby.”

“Please.”

“Arnolda, I said no.”

That made Arnolda grab at the bag, laughing. Henry hid it behind his back.

“Arnolda,” said Zia, “this is Gabby, your babysitter.”

“Are you a woman or a man?” said Arnolda.

“I’m sorry,” said Zia to Gabby. “This time to you, not the rabbit.”

“It’s okay,” said Gabby. Then she said to Arnolda, “Actually, sweetie, I don’t see myself as a woman or a man.”

Arnolda squinted as she tried to work that out. Gabby laughed.

Doris opened the door of the old Pinkerton place dressed in a thin grey turtleneck.

“Thanks so much for coming!” she said. “Come in. Have a look around.”

The place was tastefully decorated, with ambient lighting and techno jazz on the sound system. “My goodness, you’ve reinvented this place!” said Zia.

“Yeah,” said Henry, “old Pinkerton kept it like a mausoleum.”

Doris laughed. She put her hand on Henry’s bandage. “How’s your arm?”

“Better,” he said. “Here, a housewarming gift.” He held up the bag of frozen meat.

“Thank you!” said Doris. “What is it?”

“Narf meat,” said Henry.

“That’s really sweet of you,” said Doris.

“Have you ever had it?”

“No,” she said.

She brought them to the kitchen, where Frank stood in an apron, wearing a chef’s hat and chopping green peppers.

“Hey, Frankie old boy,” said Henry, patting him on the shoulder. Frank nodded and said hi without eye contact.

“Thanks for having us, Frank!” said Zia.

Frank looked at her blankly and then went on chopping.

Zia turned to size up the kitchen. “This place is great. It was always off limits when we’d come over to visit Eileen. I never even knew she had a compost chute.”

“Oh, she didn’t,” said Doris. “We installed it.” She smiled at her husband. “Frankie did, that is.”

“I wish my husband were good with his hands,” said Zia.

“But didn’t you say he hurt himself doing woodwork?” said Doris.

Zia was about to say that if he were better with his hands he would not have hurt himself, but Henry cut her off.

“See what trouble your lies get you into?” he said. “She cut me with the scissors, actually.”

“Yes, I lied,” said Zia sheepishly.

Doris laughed. “Ah, who doesn’t? Wine?”

Henry watched Doris twist the corkscrew into the cork and pull it out, her smooth pink tongue jutting out slightly through her teeth as she did so. He wondered how Frank had scored such a hot number. Maybe the pool of bachelor cannibals was more of a puddle. Doris poured the wine and made a toast. Zia looked at Frank.

“He doesn’t drink,” said Doris.

“Cheers,” offered Frank blandly. They drank.

Doris, Henry and Zia made banter, slipped gracefully from one topic to the next while Frank prepared the casserole in silence. Zia could not be more pleased. The ease did not last when Frank joined the conversation, however. After placing the casserole in the oven and removing his gloves and chef’s hat, Frank asked Henry, a propos of nothing that was being said, “So what do you do?”

Henry didn’t miss a beat. “I don’t eat people, for one thing,” he said, throwing back a long slug of wine.

“Henry!” said Zia. “I’m so sorry,” she told Doris.

Doris shook her head and swallowed the sip of wine in her mouth, and set her wineglass down. “It’s really okay,” she said, her young hands grasping Zia’s older ones across the counter top. “I like it when guests feel free. It is the elephant in the room here, after all.”

“Yes, excuse my wife,” said Henry. “She’s a bore. Thinks the world will be better when everyone holds back what they really think.”

“My husband,” said Zia, “prides himself on being the sort of person who always tells it like it is, regardless of who it might offend.”

Doris nodded. “I see both your points, actually. Do you have children?”

“We have a five year old daughter. She’s with a babysitter now.”

“Who looks like she just got out of the pen,” said Henry.

“My husband needs to work on his tolerance, as you can see,” said Zia.

“My wife thinks herself tolerant,” said Henry, “yet she can’t tolerate anything outside of her own narrow parameters of correctness.”

“If you’re free to spout your clichéd stereotypes, why shouldn’t I be free to point out how damaging those attitudes are?”

“Go ahead and point them out,” he said. “The problem is that people are so afraid of being branded as phobic this or anti that, they keep their prejudices to themselves. Tolerance?” He took Doris in his arms and kissed her, a long tonguing kiss that Doris did not resist. “Tolerate that!” he said, letting Doris up for air. Then he turned to Frank. “Sorry, old boy, just making a point.” Frank stared straight ahead.

“And what point would that be?” said Zia, slugging down her wine, slapping the glass on the countertop and pouring herself another.

“Tolerance is a bullshit word. There’s only intolerance or indifference. If I have no problem with cannibalism, I’m indifferent, not tolerant. If I have a problem with it, I’m intolerant. And I am.”

“You know nothing about it,” said Zia. “I checked out books for him to read,” she said to Doris.

“You don’t have to read books,” Doris said. “You can just ask us.”

“Exactly,” said Henry. “But learning about it has nothing to do with tolerance.”

“I have to agree with Henry,” said Doris. “I was invited to give a talk about ethical cannibalism at a university, and one young man was forcibly escorted out of the auditorium for saying something that was probably on the minds of everyone there.”

“What did he say?” said Zia.

“You know the issues, right? Are people born cannibals, or is it a choice they make. Depending on how you couch it, calling it innate can be offensive, because it implies that we

need to justify the ‘abnormality’ in some way. One young man got up and cited facts about diseases spread through cannibalism which, to him, suggested that it could not be natural.”

“But isn’t that offensive to you?” said Zia.

“When you have a name that rhymes with clitoris you grow a thick skin. But of course it hurts to be judged as unnatural. The problem was, I couldn’t even answer his question. First, he was booed by the crowd, very few of whom were probably cannibals. They booed as a show of rapport with the cannibals present. But after that, the moderator would not let me answer. She took to the microphone to say that discourse promoting hatred will never be tolerated here. And the crowd went wild with applause.”

“That’s it,” said Henry. “When someone tolerates, it implies that they have the power. It lets liberal hypocrites believe they’re fair-minded when they’re really reinforcing power structures. That’s a game I don’t play. I don’t tolerate anybody. I tell people up front that they’re ugly, that they stink. And the funny thing is, blacks and Indians and cripples and faggots love me for it. The ones who haven’t been brainwashed to believe they’re being disrespected if you call them what they are. Before you know it, cannibal will be an offensive slur. They’ll be called, alternate protein source consumers.”

Doris clapped three times quickly. “Bravo Henry! So true! We prefer when people are open with us about their prejudices. But anyway, I see how your relationship works so well! You two must get invited to lots of parties.” Doris had hit it on the head. The Hoodwinks were a sought after couple for this very reason. Dinner party culture had become void of controversy and thus void of life. Guests arrived nodding, nodded through the entire ordeal, and left nodding, went home talking about the “nice time” they’d had before nodding off to sleep.

Henry put the defrosted narf meat in a roaster and into the oven, and the group retired to the living room for some dancing. To the Hoodwinks' surprise, Frank danced like a genius, his upper torso moving independently of, but in perfect harmony with, his legs, matching the rhythm beat for beat. He clapped in sync, twirling and stopping on a dime, varying his moves to follow the music. Zia was charmed, and Doris was proud. Henry meanwhile made the women laugh with his flailing, uncoordinated moves.

Soon, an intoxicating aroma began to waft through the house.

Winded, Zia sat on the sofa and Frank sat next to her. Now that he wasn't dancing, he seemed just as awkward and socially inept as ever. Doris sniffed the air.

"Smells good, huh?" said Henry.

"Heavenly," sighed Doris.

"There's enough for one and all," said Henry.

"Hm. It's sweet of you, but..." said Doris.

"What?" said Henry.

"We don't usually eat farm slaughtered animals, is the thing."

"How is it that cannibals don't eat animals?" said Henry.

Doris shrugged. "In my case it's for ethical reasons. Frank's too, but he also prefers the taste. Don't you my love?"

Frank nodded glumly.

"How's it ethical to kill people for food?" said Henry.

"You should know that modern day cannibals never kill their own meat."

"Who does?" said Henry.

Doris threw up her hands. “God? Fate? People die accidentally all the time. Perfectly healthy people.”

“And you eat them?”

“Only those who’ve given their consent. This way, we get the protein we and the taste we crave without the cruelty of animal slaughter.”

“But who the hell would want to be eaten after they die?”

“Those committed to ending the appalling treatment of animals in our time,” whispered Frank hoarsely.

“Now I get why you chose the old Pinkerton place,” said Henry to Frank. “Nice to know you can get a midnight snack out back in the cemetery whenever you need one.”

Frank stared at Henry without blinking.

“Do you have a sense of humour, or what?” said Henry.

“What?” said Frank.

“I just made a joke. You didn’t even crack a smile.”

“Your joke wasn’t funny,” said Zia, taking Frank’s hands in hers. “It was so obvious. Anyone could have made that joke.”

“That’s just it,” said Henry. “Anyone could, but no one would.”

“It was funny, actually,” said Doris. “It’s just that my husband can’t express his emotions facially. You found it funny, didn’t you sweetheart?”

“Hilarious,” Frank whispered darkly.

“He has a disorder,” explained Doris, “that makes it hard for him to give and receive nonverbal clues. If he does smile, it’s often at the wrong time.”

“Like when bad news is announced,” said Frank.

“He smiled when I miscarried,” said Doris.

“I’m so sorry,” said Zia, tracing the lines on Frank’s palm.

“Maybe he smiled ’cause he wanted to eat it,” said Henry. Doris threw her head back laughing. She scooted over to sit closer to him.

“Look,” said Henry. “The narf in the oven is dead. It lived a very good life. A free life in our spacious backyard. I bring it to you as a humble neighbourly offering. You’ll still respect yourselves in the morning.”

Zia dropped Frank’s hand and turned to Doris. “You should understand my husband before you decide,” said Zia. “His intentions aren’t as innocent as he presents them, he who claims to speak from the gut. Narf meat, especially very young narf meat, is a potent aphrodisiac.”

Doris looked at her husband but he was back to staring at his fingernails.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to make me eat it all by myself,” said Henry.

Doris looked at Henry. Zia looked at Doris. Henry looked at Zia, then at Doris. Zia looked at Frank. Frank glanced at his watch.

“It also increases the pleasure of sex by like fifty times,” Zia said.

Doris looked at Henry and saw that he was looking at her too. “Really?” she said. “I had no idea.”

The buzzer went off.

“I’ll get it,” said Henry. He opened the oven, ignored the casserole, and put a fork into the narf roast. The flesh flaked off like fish, juicy and charred around the edges. He cut a piece, blew away the steam and popped it in his mouth. He set the roast on a hot plate, cut away slabs of meat and set them on a platter he then brought to the living room.

Steam curled from the piece of meat into Doris' nose. Her lips parted slightly. Henry rubbed the meat on her lips like a balm until they glistened with the grease. She sighed, opening her mouth. He placed it on her tongue. She closed her eyes and chewed. Her Adam's apple lifted as she swallowed. Henry fed her a longer piece.

"There's other people here, Henry dear," Zia said.

He lay the platter on the glass table. Zia took a piece in her fingers and held it to Frank's nose. He opened his mouth. She put it in. He showed no reaction as he chewed, but had already swallowed and opened his mouth for the next piece before Zia could cut it.

Slippery sounds of chewing accompanied the ambient electronic music.

Henry went to the kitchen. "Where's the goddamn corkscrew?" he called.

Doris got up from the couch, went to the kitchen, snaked a hand up Henry's shirt from behind. They kissed for a long time. Henry lifted the sweater over her breasts and put his lips on one nipple and then another until she climaxed so powerfully that she had to blow her nose. Meanwhile, Zia stroked Frank's cheek and ran her fingers through his beard. She put her lips on his sleepy eyelids, his nose, then lightly on his lips, and lingered there until his tongue came out to meet hers.

Henry and Doris moved to the bedroom. Zia began to moan and then scream from the living room. Henry disengaged.

"Don't worry, they're just having fun," said Doris.

"I just want to know that he's not eating my wife," he said.

"Enough joking already," said Doris, getting on her stomach and lifting her rear in the air.

From bedroom to living room, shouts of human pleasure reverberated through the once quiet Pinkerton place, as the couples made love several times, stopping only to refuel on cold narf roast. Finally a rapturous quiet settled in the home.

Then, slowly, it was time to sleep for the night. Doris and Frank showed the Hoodwinks to the door.

“Thanks so much for coming,” said Doris, hoarsely, wrapped in a sheet, her red hair disheveled.

“Thanks for having us,” said Zia. She kissed Frank on the nose and hugged Doris.

“We will definitely have to do this again,” said Henry. He held out his hand to Frank. Frank looked at it quizzically.

“Have a great night!” whispered Doris.

“You too!” whispered Zia.

“Sweet dreams,” said Henry.

“Thanks,” said Frank, after the door had closed.

On the short walk home, Henry and Zia held hands. The moon was low and only a small sliver away from being full. From nearby came the sweet song of a lone swallow.

“My God is it that late?” said Zia, leaning into her husband, resting her head on his shoulder as they approached the porch.

“It’s that early.”

Zia yawned luxuriously. “A bit too early for singing.”

“That one couldn’t wait.”

“Mmm, all I want to do is sleep,” she purred, opening the front door.

“Said the well-fucked vixen.”

“Shhhh!” Zia said. But Gabby was asleep.

Gabby’s head rested on one of the cannibal books Zia had checked out for Henry. When they woke her, she screamed. A thick puddle of drool magnified the print on the page her head had rested on. Zia led Gabby to the guest bed.

Henry felt happily tired, in love with his wife, with his life. His apprehensions about cannibal neighbors had dissolved like cotton candy in a rainstorm. No thanks to God, of course. He went upstairs and pushed open the door to Arnolda’s room, letting a golden bar of light from the hallway stretch across her floor and bed. On her desk was a drawing. Henry picked it up and smiled. A girl floated, a mysterious smile planted on her face with a squiggle of the pen. He kneeled next to the bed and brushed his daughter’s mop of hair from her forehead to plant a kiss there. She stirred, opened her mouth, chopped her teeth together. Henry went to brush his teeth, flossing them first to remove bits of dinner.

On the back porch, the narf mother had put her children to bed too. All but one. She sat on the edge of the porch, holding the filthy broken collar. She ran her little claws over it, pressing it to her furry cheek in the moonlight. The moon. Had it seen anything? Could it tell her what had happened? Free of the need to project strength in front of her children, she allowed herself tears.

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Father Material

Mike had never shown much interest in spending time with his daughter so Maggie was pleasantly surprised when he took June to the park without Maggie even having to suggest it.

She chalked it up to Dr. Witherspoon. Before that, Maggie had to suggest everything to Mike because Michael Manners lived in his head. Maggie accepted this for the most part with the stoicism one would expect from the eldest child of an abusive alcoholic. At the same time, she had to laugh bitterly about the turn that her life had taken since Mike had moved in.

“You knew all along he wasn’t father material,” her sister told her over the phone. “He told you so. Leave him be. Can’t you see he’s got something wrong with him?”

Maggie persisted with an argumentative tone, even though what she said only corroborated her sister’s observation. “I think if I moved out and took June with me, he wouldn’t even notice.”

“That’s what I’m saying! Just take what he can give, and be grateful at least he’s not a goddamn drunk.”

That was something. Their father had been a fairly decent man when sober, but sometimes came home so drunk that he’d wake up the girls and begin beating them. The next day, he would remember nothing but his sweet self, and couldn’t understand why his daughters grew to fear and hate him. He put the blame on their mother, a weak woman who, Madison tried to get Maggie to see, had abandoned her own children by not sticking up to the old man when the beatings occurred.

“It’s you who’s turned them against me,” the old man said to their mother, whose favorite response to any stressful moment was to shed an astounding quantity of tears in the hope of securing a pity that never came. Not because it was withheld, but because it did not exist.

The two sisters had a bad start of it, but made good. Madison was a happily divorced schoolteacher now dating an airline pilot. Thanks to the instructive example of her father, she'd honed the skills needed to quickly size up a man, and her iron will was impervious to her emotions. Her older sister, Maggie was the weak one. Maggie had inherited their mother's endurance for a bad situation. She had once lasted 7 years with a lying and manipulative con artist who forged his way into a long prison sentence. Now here she was with Mike, who was decent, never lied nor manipulated, never drank nor went with other women, but basically ignored her and June. He came home from work to settle into his ergonomic chair in front of the desktop computer. If he had anything to say it was about politics.

"He doesn't see the world in front of him," said Maggie to Dr. Witherspoon. "He's in his head all the time."

"Did you hear what your wife said, Mr. Manners?" said Dr. Witherspoon.

"Yes," said Mike.

"Could you please repeat it?"

"She said that I'm in my head all the time."

"Would you say that is a fair assessment, Mr. Manners?"

"What's wrong with being in your head all the time? If you're not there, lots of special interest groups would be glad to be."

"What sorts of special interest groups?"

"You think the decisions you make are your own?" he asked the doctor. "Do you realize that whatever brand you buy regularly, the corporation that produces it refers to you in their business model as a 'mind share?' And the product itself is manufactured overseas by slaves who live like factory-farmed animals."

“Mr. Manners, we are speaking today about the relationship you have with your wife.

Are you interested in that relationship?”

“Of course I am. Why else would I be here?”

“Do you recognize a problem with that relationship?”

“She wants me to be more present for her and June.”

“That’s not an answer to my question Mr. Manners.”

Mike was unfazed. “For me there’s no problem. I work, I make money, I support Maggie and June. And I keep apprised of what’s really happening underneath what we’re told is happening; I do all that for the good of my family.”

“How is that for the good of your family?”

The therapist was asking all the right questions. Maggie approved so fiercely of Dr. Witherspoon’s intervention that she nodded excitedly as the counselor asked them, like someone playing charades nods when the other person comes closer to the answer.

“Look, I’m not a hitter,” said Mike. “I’m not a drunk. I really can’t see what the problem here is.”

“Mr. Manners, the only way this will work is if you actually answer my questions. I’ve a feeling they are questions that your wife would like to hear an answer to.”

Maggie wanted to hear the questions answered so badly, and was so grateful to Dr. Witherspoon for posing them so clearly, that tears ran down her cheeks.

“How is it for the good?” said Mike.

He looked at the therapist. He looked at his wife, her face shining with tears of relief.

They will not understand, he told himself.

You’re in this alone.

“How was the session?” her sister asked.

“Maddie, you were right about Dr. Witherspoon, she is amazing.”

“What did she say?”

“She told Mike that his heart was in the right place. He wants to protect his family from harm, and that explains his need to keep informed of the political and economic situations. But in the process, his neglect of the family is actually a kind of abuse, she said.”

“Did I tell you she was good!”

“I wanted to kiss her. I did kiss her, after Mike left.”

Maggie not only kissed Dr. Witherspoon but fell into the old woman’s arms, sobbing with relief, after Mike had gone out to have a cigarette. Dr. Witherspoon, a square-jowled old Scotswoman, let a fierce tear drop from behind her thick glasses as well.

“She talked a lot about balance,” said Maggie.

“Balance is her thing.”

“She told Mike that the trick was balance.”

“That’s the trick alright. So what did Mike say to that?”

“He said he’d try to be more balanced.”

“And have you seen any signs of improvement?”

“He’s with June at the park right now. And I didn’t have to tell him to take her.”

“I’m happy for you, Magpie. But don’t expect miracles.”

June beamed with pride to be on her way to spend time with her Daddy at the park. It hardly ever happened. She was so proud that she stopped strangers in the street to announce that this was her Daddy she was walking with.

They melted. “You must be a wonderful father,” they said.

Mike was moved. So this is what it’s like to be a good father, he thought. But he also had lots of other things to think about. There was the election coming. He ran a website that agitated for a new kind of voting system that would allow the public to vote with their heart instead of for the lesser of two evils. He had to consider the terms by which to consolidate his site with another similar one. The creator of that one seemed to have other ambitions.

He looked into the sky and noted it was crisscrossed with chemtrails. Mike gripped his lower back, remembering that stiff and sore muscles were one sign of chemtrail poisoning.

Brakes screeched as he realized that June’s little hand was no longer in his.

Close call.

The car was stopped a few feet from his daughter, who had wandered into the street to collect a bird feather. She held it up to the driver of the car that had almost hit her.

“Look,” she said.

“Where’s your Mommy?” the woman asked her. She had three children of her own in the car. Mike jogged up to the scene.

“That’s my Daddy,” said June.

“Hi,” said Mike to the woman. “June, you know not to go into the street like that.”

The woman looked at him. “I hope you realize how close that was,” she said.

Mike picked up his daughter and kissed her on the cheek. She laughed from the tickle of his beard.

“Thank you,” Mike said. “Yes I do.”

He walked away carrying June. The woman watched him go. She had an incredulous look on her face.

“Sir,” she called. Mike turned. “At that age they don’t understand the danger of going into the street. Please watch your daughter more carefully.”

Mike gave her the thumbs up. Another holier-than-thou parent. Yes there were dangers in the street, but there were dangers in the skies, in the foods they blithely fed their kids, in the privatization of the health, justice, and education systems. The government was turning into a corporation under their noses, and they wagged their fingers at you because your child was underdressed.

Other parents at the park looked to him like status quo zombies, with their forced smiles and bland pleasantries. They pushed their kids in swings and patiently helped them do the monkey bars, content with their lives, their jobs, the little corner they’d carved out for themselves. Mike always had the feeling, when he spoke with them, that he and they were reading lines from a book for foreign learners of English, the chapter on making small talk.

“Wonderful day, isn’t it?” said a young mother at the swings while he pushed June.

“Yes, it is,” said Mike. “Great day for being at the park.”

“So true.”

That’s it. Our conversation options are exhausted

“How old is she?” said the woman. “Four?”

Ah. Found another one. Let’s see how long this one can last.

“That’s right. How old is yours?”

“He’s three.”

“I’m three and a half, Momma,” said the little boy in the swing.

“Oh excuse me,” she said, laughing. “The half is so important at that age, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes,” said Mike.

Yes, the half is important. Half-witted, half-assed, half-baked conversations like these, really so important. Why did people fill in conversations like a child learns to fill in coloring books, always staying within the lines.

Mike tried a different tactic at the sandbox.

“It’s the CIA that created ISIS, and that funds them to this day,” he said to a man.

Up until then the conversation had been smooth. But Mike had casually wondered aloud about the world they were bringing their children into, and the man had taken the bait, mentioned a recent horrifying news story.

“You’re a conspiracy theorist,” the man said, chuckling, shaking his head. Mike had a response ready for that, but June called him from the play set.

“Play with me!” June screamed. “Chase me!” Mike got up and chased her around and she laughed. He made monster faces and she ran. Mike began to feel bored.

“Watch me daddy!” screamed June. “Daddy, watch this!”

But Mike went back to the father near the sandbox. He turned and waved to June, who was on the playset going through a tunnel. Why did she want him to watch her do it? “Daddy watch!” She went to the slide and went down. Mike watched and waved and smiled. “Daddy, watch!” She was balancing herself on the jungle gym. Mike watched her. She swayed to one side and waved her arms, swayed to the other, then fell off.

“That term was invented and hyped by the same media that aids the state in covering their own tracks,” he said to the man.

“What term?” said the man.

“You called me a conspiracy theorist.”

“Oh, right.”

“People who use that term are parroting the lines they’ve been fed, like good little soldiers.”

The man traced patterns in the sand. “I think it’s a good term. It fits. If the CIA is funding ISIS, then isn’t that a conspiracy?”

“It’s an alternative explanation,” said Mike.

The man turned to look Mike in the eye. “Whatever term you use,” he said, “you’ll never know the truth, will you? So why waste your time thinking about it?”

“You’re saying we can’t know anything for sure. Doesn’t that sort of mean you should keep an open mind as to alternative versions of events, especially considering that history is written by the winners?”

“It’s alright to keep an open mind,” said the man. “But don’t open your mind so much that your brains fall out.”

The subject obviously wasn’t one of his priorities. To Mike, this father acted so much like a caricature of the rigidly complacent status quo that there might as well have been a laugh track accompanying every one of his parroted phrases. At the same time Mike knew that the mainstream opinion would never be ridiculed in a sitcom.

“Do you realize,” said Mike, “that the society we live in is a brainwashing cult?”

The man laughed. “Look at it this way. Let’s say you’re right. The government is complicit with the banking system and the big corporations and we are all serving their interests. That’s a pretty dark vision. Why did you have children then?”

“I’m interested in helping dismantle this system,” said Mike. “So that my children and your children have a future worth living in.”

“Don’t worry about my children. I’m just fine with the future they’ll be living in.”

“But what you don’t see is that the future you have in mind for your children will be available to fewer and fewer, unless we work together for radical change. It’s already a toss up as to who gets to live in material comfort. When our children are of age, it’ll be a crapshoot.”

The man looked at Mike. “Look, I see your heart’s in a good place, even if your ideas are a little haywire. The ways of the world are way too complex for us to grasp. I think William Blake said that. If it was true two hundred years ago it’s even truer now. Tend to your own garden, as they say. Keep your own children safe, and you can’t go wrong. Sorry, I have to go.”

Mike shook the man’s hand, feeling more alone than ever. The first shoots of purple hue had descended from the stratosphere, and he turned back to look for June. He didn’t see her at the play set. He got up. She wasn’t at the jungle gym or the monkey bars. She was nowhere to be found.

“June?” he called.

No answer.

Mike’s eyes widened in alarm. Parents were leaving the park with their kids, streaming through the gate, pushing strollers, walking hand in hand, calling their children. Mike’s focus went from child to child. None wearing a red windbreaker.

He raced from the park, dialing home as he did so. Did June know how to get home from the park?

“Hello!” Maggie answered in singsong.

“It’s me,” said Mike. “Tell me June’s there with you?”

Maggie screamed.

Maggie’s father had been a member of the communist party of Quebec during the 70s, when the party and the unions that supported them had been infiltrated and broken up by

shadowy elements. The disillusionment was too much, and without the Internet, he took to drinking. Thanks to his drunken blackouts, he imagined that he had been a good father. Maggie, the oldest and more emotionally attached, had protected him from the knowledge of what he had done, but Madison accused the old man of things that, from his point of view, she was obviously making up.

“I never did that,” he said, looking sickly pale, almost green. “It’s your mother who told you I did those things.”

But at 17, Madison cursed him and called him a sick sadist, told him to fuck himself and stay out of her life. The old man never recovered from the shock.

Mike’s call gave Maggie a similar shock.

This is what you get. This is what you get. This is what you get, she told herself as she raced for the front door and opened it.

June was beaming as she walked up the steps.

“I came home by myself!” she announced, as Maggie scooped her up and held her tight.

“Why are you sad Momma?”

“I’m happy,” said Maggie.

“Then why are you crying?”

Mike bounded up the steps. He tried to enfold his wife and daughter in his arms but Maggie twisted out of them.

The Narrator Who Wouldn't Shut Up

1. The Tunnel

The driver of the train found his view darkened by a shadowy mass as he drove into the station. The cracking thud of body on glass, his own cry of shock, and the muffled shouts of his passengers lurching forward as he braked, formed a permanent physical groove in the auditory memory cells of his brain.

At other stops along the line, great throngs of stranded passengers milled about on platforms as a repeating intercom message announced a shutdown of service. As for why he settled on this method, a man planning his own death has a right to privacy in the matter. Still, I'd point out that he chose not to jump from a bridge due to his morbid fear of heights. I mention this in reply to one irate commuter that morning, a heavy-set man in a green windbreaker, who said out loud what many others were probably thinking:

“God damn it, why don't they just jump off a fucking bridge?”

2. The Final Exchange

Leonard Lowe looked like any other guy on his way to work that morning. He even hopped over a puddle to keep from wetting his shoes.

The air held a sweet scent of jasmine after the heavy downpour the night before. Leonard beamed with joy, listening to the dreamy two-note birdsong with the same pleasure a condemned man might get from his last meal.

I'd never seen such a look of peace on his face as I walked along with him. Crossing his last streets. Holding the door of the subway station for the last time. For a mother pushing a stroller, of all things.

At the ticket booth he gave his last smile as he slid his bill under the glass and held up one finger. The agent slid back the ticket, along with his change. "Have a great day," she said through the microphone. "You too," said Leonard. She went back to reading her paper. I tapped on the ticket booth window. "Say it like you mean it," I said. "It's his last time to hear it."

She kept reading.

3. A Public Hanging as Opposed to the Private One She Would Have Preferred

Earlier that morning, Leonard's mother Mary tied two silk scarves together, having gauged the height of the beam in the walk-in closet. She moved a box under the beam and stepped up on it. Then she put the scarves around the beam and pulled herself up to test the strength of the beam and the scarves. She tied one end of the scarf around the beam and the other around her neck, and stepped off.

Death would have put to rest forever Mary's shameful secret. But as she swayed, her involuntary jerking brought the scarves apart.

Slumped in a heap on the floor of the closet, Mary became aware of her sobbing, and pulled at the scarf, retching violently. She cried until she slept, and woke with her husband Arthur standing over her, holding a piece of paper, having spent a refreshing evening at his lover's apartment.

"What on earth are you doing?" he said.

"I fell asleep," she whispered.

“We’re not in a church,” he said. “You can speak up.”

“I fell asleep.”

“I see that. Why in the closet?” He looked at the cracked beam, the scarves.

“I don’t know,” said Mary.

“What’s this?” he said, holding up the note he’d found on the dresser.

“I...started to write a letter.”

“To whom?”

Mary looked down. Her lips trembled.

Arthur read the note. “Sorry about what?” he said.

4. Ghost-forgiveness

Leonard ran from his parents’ home and into the rainstorm outside. Mary started after him, but Arthur’s glare ordered her to stay put. She pattered in the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards for no reason. Arthur watched her, his eyes gleaming in pickled hatred.

What Mary Lowe needed was forgiveness. She needed someone to tell her that it was not her fault.

“You are satisfied, I expect?” Arthur said. “His ruination is complete.”

“He’ll find his way, Arthur. He just needs...”

She stopped speaking as he cleared his throat ominously. “What way, pray tell?”

“He’s just confused.”

“Ah. I see.”

“It’s normal to be confused.”

“Normal at fourteen, perhaps. At thirty-five, it’s pathetic.”

“The truth is that...”

“The truth is that it is you who have put these unrealistic notions in his head all along. Never having realized your own artistic pretensions, you managed to transfer them to our son, who now remains unremittingly tortured with his inability to face the fact that, artistically, he is wholly without gift.”

“He’s not without gift,” she whispered.

“One cannot accuse me of failing to at least attempt to get this message across to you through the years.”

“He needs more time,” she said, pulling at the skin around her thumb, and sucking on it when the blood began to pool in the crevasses of the nail.

“Can you imagine the pain that you have put him through? Can you imagine the pain you have put *me* through, the agony of being forced to witness the degradations of one’s own son? Do you realize how it has been for me all these years to watch him fail repeatedly at something he has no talent for?”

“He’s so sensitive,” she said softly. “So easily discouraged.”

“Ah. There we have it,” said Arthur, and he applauded lightly. “The great Mary Arden speaks about herself, through her son, and she will go to the grave refusing to recognize it.”

“There’s still hope,” she said.

“Hope? What devil do you have in your mind to resort to this word now? At thirty-five, there is no hope. Oh, he’s quite ruined for life. And he has you to thank for it.”

“I’ll stop,” she said. “I’ll leave him alone. I’ll go away. I won’t interfere anymore.”

“Stop interfering? No.” Arthur shook his head. “No. You’ll go on crippling him, instead of helping him to understand that if you are not among the very best at what you do, then you have no business doing it.”

Personally, I’d had enough. “You’ve made your point,” I said. “Forgive the lady. Take her in your arms.”

“He just needs your love!” she cried, drawing her fists into her chest as if they held daggers.

“Take her in your arms,” I said.

“Love?” he said, his tone incredulous. “What do you call love? You have been disobedient and selfish all along. You have gone behind my back at every turn. You think I don’t keep track of every penny that leaves my account? Music lessons! For a person practically tone deaf! Painting lessons! For a person with no sense of perspective!”

“Ha!” I said. “You’re one to talk of perspective. Don’t forget, Mr. Perfect, you can’t even dress yourself without her help.”

I didn’t want to hurt the guy, but it was true. Every morning, the same thing: where is my shirt, where are my cufflinks? Arthur couldn’t fry an egg to save his life either.

“I have saved you,” he thundered. “I have done my good deed for life. But it is asking too much of me to love a woman like you!”

Upon dousing her with his venom, Arthur Lowe’s relief was so exquisite that he thought of his lover. Mary remained crumpled up, on her knees, too stunned to even cry. He left her there, alone in that gigantic house, with the night coming on.

Mary used the kitchen counter to pull herself to her feet, as if she'd been shot or stabbed. The sound of the ignition of Arthur's BMW seeped into the house from the driveway, the motor revving as he sped off to the arms of a mistress. I stood there next to Mary.

"I forgive you," I said.

But she had no use for my ghost-forgiveness.

5. The Drama of the (un)Gifted Child

(Lights open on a living space, with high ceilings and large windows. There is a lounge area, and a large kitchen, with no barrier separating the two. It is the home of a man of taste and success. Antique furniture is set in harmonious counterpoint to contemporary design. Paintings of the masters, some originals, hang on the wall. Arthur Lowe is in his great chair, like a throne, looking over some papers, when Leonard enters, his mother right behind, as if pushing him forward)

Mary. Arthur, Leonard has something to say to you.

Arthur Lowe. What is it?

Mary. He needs your help.

Arthur Lowe. Does he not possess a tongue of his own?

Leonard. Dad, I need your help again.

Arthur Lowe. What kind of help?

Leonard. I need money.

Arthur Lowe. To come begging for money at the age of thirty-five!

Leonard. I swear this will be the last time.

Arthur Lowe. How could this be? You said you were making money. You said they were paying you for your songs.

Leonard. They were.

Arthur Lowe. Then how can it be that you need more money?

Pause.

Arthur Lowe. Were they paying you for your songs?

Narrator. Just give him some damn money. You've got enough for crying out loud.

Mary. He was getting a cheque every month.

Arthur Lowe. Please be so kind as to speak when spoken to. *(to Leonard)* To be quite honest I never believed for an instant that you were being paid for your songs.

Mary. *(whispering)* I love your music, honey.

Arthur Lowe. *(to Mary, savagely)* You dare go behind my back!

(Eerie, discordant music is heard as Leonard begins to speak, then exits. Mary begins to run after him, but turning to see Arthur's glare, she folds her hands and lowers her head as the lights dim. The spotlight returns, focused on the Narrator, who approaches the audience.)

Narrator. What's the good of being omniscient when you are powerless to change one god damn thing? *(Spotlight fades.)*

6. How Scammers Prey on the Ache of the Unloved in Civilized Nations

An acquaintance had put Leonard in touch with an online agent who promised to secure his clients a recording contract with a major label, and offered a money back guarantee. The agent charged a monthly fee. His client had to send the agent at least one demo per week. If, at

the end of the month, the agent had failed to secure a recording contract for his client, the agent would send a refund check for the full monthly amount, minus a 15% administrative fee.

Every once in a while the agent sent back one of Leonard's demos with vague instructions on how it needed to be modified in order to make it more marketable. "Work on the refrain," the instructions might say. That meant the song had garnered some interest from somewhere. The upshot of all this was that Leonard was getting a refund check each month: royalty payments for his music, his inner narrator told him. And that's what he told others.

7. Quality Time for Arthur and Leonard Lowe

Arthur walked with wide strides in his greatcoat and hat, while Leonard scraped his sneakers along the pavement, his wavy, uncombed hair fluttering in the autumn breeze. He was scrawny then, not bloated, as he would later become under the effects of his medication.

"Can you walk?" muttered Arthur.

"I'm walking."

"For the love of God!" hissed Arthur. "It's as if you are attempting to skate."

They came upon a beggar by the metal gates of an inner-city cemetery. The gap-toothed man smiled shyly and held out a torn paper cup. Arthur kept walking, until he noticed that he was walking alone. Turning back, he saw the beggar pat his son on the shoulder and give the thumbs up.

Leonard hurried to catch up with his father. They walked in tense silence.

"Edifying conversation?" said Arthur at last. Leonard didn't answer. "You didn't give him a handout, did you?"

"Just a buck."

“Ah. I see where your allowance goes.”

“It’s just a buck.”

“Just a ‘buck,’ as you say.” Arthur laughed bitterly. “To finance a man’s utter lack of initiative.”

“You don’t know his situation. Maybe he was born into it.”

“Would you like to know who was born into it?” Arthur stopped walking and turned to his son, savagely jerking a thick thumb at himself. They started walking again, and passed near a billboard advertising Arthur’s latest play. “And I pulled myself out of it.”

“Don’t you ever think of the ones you stepped over to get to where you are?”

Arthur cleared his throat with disgust. “If I did, I would be the one with the shit-eating grin, begging for spare change.” He stopped walking and turned again to his son. “How am I ever to get it through to you that this world is peopled with survivors and victims? It is your decision which camp to belong to.”

“Which camp does Mom belong to?”

Arthur shook his head and chuckled. “Your mother is crazy as a bedbug.”

Mary had given up an unpromising acting career after becoming pregnant by Arthur. Even then it was clear that a grand future awaited Arthur Lowe, while Mary Arden, a pretty brunette desperate to extricate herself from the clutches of an overly critical, controlling mother, “could not properly portray a corpse,” as her acting teacher once said in a moment of irritation. Her abiding talent, to put it bluntly, was her inexhaustible capacity to love the irascible Arthur Lowe. Worship is the better word. She worshipped him as a savior.

“Why’d you marry her then?” said Leonard.

“When you have a family of your own, you will see that life is made of compromises. You have, thanks to the interference of your mother, neglected to discover your true talents. Thankfully, you’re only twenty-one, and it’s not too late.” He stopped and turned to gaze ominously on his son. “But it’s getting there.”

Arthur felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to find himself face to face with a stranger.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” said the man. “But, are you Arthur Lowe by any chance? You look just like him.”

Arthur glanced meaningfully at his son, then turned back and admitted that he may or may not be Arthur Lowe, depending on who was asking.

The man shook Arthur’s hand vigorously. “A big, big fan!” he said.

At the time, Arthur Lowe was at the top of his game. His stage portrayal of Lear had been described in the *Times* as “unforgettably heart-wrenching” in a rave review that promised audiences “their money’s worth of emotional release.”

As good as Arthur was on stage though, his greatest performances were in real life. Leonard observed his father while he conversed with the star-struck fan. As Arthur became sweet-natured and charming, Leonard had the overpowering feeling that his father preferred the stranger to him. Leonard even flushed with embarrassment for his father when the man stopped gushing and said, “And this must be your son?”

The truth was that Arthur loved his son dearly. When he got the call about Leonard’s jump in the subway, it almost did him in. He dropped the phone. The caller repeated, “Sir? Sir?”, with the old man’s beast-like screams in the background. Had Arthur managed to convey such grief on stage with the dead Cordelia in his arms, there’s no telling how monumental his legacy might have been.

8. A Silent Prayer

She wanted so badly for the two men to see eye to eye. “We’ll get on perfectly, if you will stop interfering,” Arthur often said. So she was overjoyed that Arthur and Leonard were spending quality time together. Mary saw them out of the three-story townhouse and stood in the doorway, watching them trudge through the dead leaves. Leonard turned back, with the look of a small, cowering animal in his eyes, as he and his father left the grounds through the gate. She waved. He waved back.

She shut the door, and stood with her back to it for a moment. Arthur forbade prayer in the house. Religion was as telling a symptom of weakness as apologies and forgiveness. Alone now, Mary prayed silently; she asked that father and son get along.

But in vain. Leonard’s sense of pity for the weak increasingly brought him into conflict with his father’s tough luck values. Leonard himself had been a sickly child; he had nursed poorly, often vomiting, and Mary found herself secretly repelled by his demands, for she had needed attention from Arthur, who was as often as not up to his goatee in an affair.

“Please, God,” she whispered. “Let them love each other.”

9. An ill-advised gift

For his fourteenth birthday, Mary had secretly given her son a guitar.

He was in his room reading when she knocked, and sneaked inside after making sure the coast was clear.

It had to be a secret, because Arthur felt that, unless one was born with a natural artistic talent, it was pointless to try. And his son, sadly, had none. He regularly assured Leonard, with all the gravitas at his command, “You will never amount to anything special.”

“I happen to have been born with a talent,” he said. “You however, were not blessed with any particular gift.” He said this with his usual solemn dignity, his thick wet lips tasting each syllable, as a cook checks a broth.

But Mary Lowe could not abide by Arthur’s esteem of their son. So she spirited Leonard to art and music lessons in secret. Leonard stumbled from one depression to another trying to live up to his parents’ opposing ideals.

10. Mary’s Secret

Leonard was in bed. Mary smiled down at him.

“Momma, what’s wrong?”

“I’m smiling,” she said.

“There’s a sensor in my head that says something’s wrong.”

“It’s the sensor in your head that’s wrong, sweetie.”

“Is it Daddy?”

“Does our fighting make you feel bad?”

“Is it ’cause of me?”

“Not at all.”

“I feel it’s ’cause of me.”

“Do you feel badly that no one wants to play with you?”

“Not really.”

“Don’t you want to be liked?”

“You like me,” Leonard said. “That’s all that counts.” Mary smiled and kissed him goodnight, turned off the lamp and went out of the room.

“Momma, could you tell me what’s wrong?” he called out.

“There’s nothing wrong, I’m only tired,” she said from the hallway.

“Go to bed then, Momma. I love you,” he said.

“Love you too,” she said softly. Then she went to her own room.

Mary stuffed a pillow on her face and cried. She cried because she’d failed at motherhood. She cried piteous tears for her son, because she was a liar. She was a monstrous liar. She did not love her son.

I sat on the edge of the bed, in which she had slept alone for the last three nights while her husband slept with another.

“Don’t listen to that voice in your head,” I suggested.

She only cried harder.

11. Me and Mary Lowe Down by the Schoolyard

Mary went incognito to Leonard’s school and waited outside the metal gates. At recess the second graders burst through the doors. She stood by a thick maple tree with bare branches, running her fingers over the bark, and watched her son move from group to group that had spontaneously formed.

Balls the children threw to each other seemed to pass right through him. It was as he had been telling her. Day after day, no one wanted to play with him. Eventually, he went to sit against a wall.

Mary Lowe watched until the children were called back in. She watched him disappear through the dark glass doors, alone, while the other children tussled or gossiped together, then she walked away from the school. I walked with her.

“It’s alright, Mary,” I said. “Just a phase.”

She walked down a side road and ducked into an alley. I was at her side, waving my hand before her eyes, which were hidden behind sunglasses. “Yooohoo! It’s no big deal, Mary. Einstein was despised by his classmates.” Onward she walked, crunching over layers of dead leaves.

I glanced at her profile while she walked along the alley fence and made her way to a quiet spot. Her lips were fixed, with a hint of a tremble. She took off her sunglasses and freed her dark curls from the headscarf, then sat down on a tree stump.

“In five hundred years,” I said, “none of this will matter at all. Think about that.”

She buried her face in her arms and sobbed.

12. Leonard’s Earliest Memory

Upon impact with the train, Leonard’s memory cells released all the sounds and images they had gathered up over his lifetime, providing a slideshow for his inner ear and eye, which was then flooded with light before closing forever. The final image of the slideshow was his earliest memory, and the light from that memory blended with the light of death. Leonard had kept a journal, and here is how he described this memory:

There is an open window. A breeze is making a white, see-through curtain flutter. The sun blinds me when the wind blows the curtain out of its way. My mother is next to the window. She is looking down at me on my back, and then looking out the window. Her long dark curls cascade over her shoulders. Her hair tickles me and I try to take hold of it and she smiles.

That is his earliest memory. He is less than one year old. It is the first days of spring. The wind is blowing on the white curtain, making it flutter in a natural rhythm that calms Mary. The perfume of jasmine and wildflowers ride on the breeze into the room. The baby is beautiful, she sees, as she looks down at him; he's happy, and this is enough. Mary sighs heavily, and a feeling overtakes her. Thought cannot touch it. Thought's tentacles, words, cannot grasp it. It fills up her senses as the curtain dances in the breeze and her baby blinks as the sun's rays intermittently splash his face. Mother and child meld to one another as they look into each other's eyes. This moment imprints itself on the infant's memory, for in this moment something has happened in his mother that is so out of the ordinary.

What has happened is that the narrator who wouldn't shut up has fallen silent.