

AFTER THE SHOW TONIGHT
A Collection of Short Stories

by

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Deep Cut

Margaret's food court fantasies were unbridled. It was easy for her to squint at a stranger and see how their life was far grander than "going shopping" or "taking a break from work" or "eating a twisted pretzel hot dog."

See the teenage boy with the backwards hat and the teenage boy with the muscle shirt talking to the teenage girl with the golden hoop earrings working the register at Fecund Fruits? The boys were asking—no, daring—the girl to decide who she thought the better kisser was.

See that handsome fellow sipping a large drink from Lemonade Parade? The tall one with salt and pepper hair, checking his fancy watch? He was Sir Reginald, a British horologist (Margaret had recently read a mystery where a dashing horologist was the prime suspect).

Margaret didn't personally find Sir Reginald handsome, of course; she was married to Opus. Almost five decades wasn't worth throwing away for a glorified watch salesman from across the pond. She had just turned sixty-eight, and while yes, she was still working, she was most certainly retired from all that other business. And married. Married to Opus.

Bzzz went Margaret's watch. *Time to move!* it scolded. She sighed. The watch was right, though. Her lunch break was almost over.

Like the other mall kiosks, First Times didn't have a proper store front. It was just a cart and a couple chairs located in the center of an atrium surrounded by the real stores. There was some natural sunlight and plants, so not the worst place a kiosk could have been. The cart housed a computer and control panel that powered the experience, with a tangle of wires connected to the Hook Up chairs. Margaret's manager, Eddie, had made it clear that the chairs were for customers only.

"Even if there are no customers?" Margaret had asked during her training.

"Especially if there are no customers," Eddie said. "Seated employees are 46% less approachable."

Margaret suspected this wasn't an actual corporate policy and that Eddie just made up statistics to support his power trips. Eddie was half Margaret's age, but he was already balding, his remaining hairs a brittle staccato. The rest of his body appeared to be deflating due to years of improper maintenance. He wore short-sleeved collared shirts tucked tightly into his jeans, an arrangement which threatened to explode in a protest of paunch at any moment. Eddie had bought a First Times franchise because, as he repeated constantly, he wanted to be his own boss. Margaret wanted to tell him to go boss himself off a cliff, but what good would that do? She needed the job.

Margaret had applied to First Times after Opus got let go from Evergreen Gas. She had applied without knowing what First Times was. After applying, she read the description of what they offered—electrochemically mediated memory simulations—but Margaret still didn't know what that meant. After the first day she had it figured out, although even now a few months later

she still had not tried it herself. The existence of a catalog of memory simulations seemed like a preemptive disappointment, as if life was merely a list of verbs and nouns to be checked off.

First time driving a car.

First time seeing snow.

First time tasting a peach.

It was the only job listing without any requirements she was able to find on the career section of the mall website. She'd picked the mall to work at because it was within walking distance of their house. Ever since the accident, they didn't have a working car. "The shop is waiting on parts" had been Opus's explanation the last time she asked him about it. For a while, there was talk about a possible insurance payout, but he'd stopped bringing it up and she had stopped asking.

Margaret imagined her son David didn't know about the troubles she and Opus were having. The money troubles, that is. Why would he know? She hadn't told him, and Opus certainly wouldn't have. Opus didn't tell anyone anything. Margaret had only found out when Opus had suggested that she get a job so that they wouldn't have to move to a smaller place again.

It wasn't so bad to be working. It cut into Margaret's reading time, but otherwise it was nice to get out of the house. Instead of the bestsellers she used to check out from the library, she could pass the time reading the First Times catalog. Most of the options struck her as boring, but she had fun imagining writing out the scenarios she'd want to experience instead. If one day they asked employees to contribute suggestions for an updated catalog, she'd be ready.

First time holding someone's hand during a scary zombie movie in a dark theater.

First time getting your hair deloused by a school nurse with long fingernails.

First time locking eyes with a stranger in a crowded museum, sharing a knowing glance, then walking together silently for hours through every exhibit without ever saying a word.

“Margaret, there you are,” Eddie said as she arrived back at the kiosk. Even though it was still a few minutes before her break was officially over, Eddie’s tone implied she was late and moments away from being reprimanded. “We have a customer interested in a Hook Up. Can you please help him out?”

“No problem,” Margaret said, her eyes going to the Hook Up chair area.

To her shock, she saw Sir Reginald, the handsome horologist from the food court. She felt her cheeks get warm.

“Hi there,” Margaret said, trying to hide her surprise. “Welcome to First Times.”

“Howdy,” the customer said in what was not a British accent.

Too bad, Margaret thought. *Still handsome though*. Warmth from her cheeks traveled down her throat to the top of her chest. What was going on with her today? Indigestion? The food court food wasn’t great, tasty but barely food, though it didn’t usually disagree with her. She’d been feeling some type of way ever since that morning, when on her way out the door Opus had grabbed her arm and told her that they needed to talk. Opus never wanted to talk, so catastrophic scenarios immediately filled her head, and they were allowed to stay there in the unhurried silence that followed his urgent declaration. He slumped down on the stairs of the front porch. She stared at him, waiting, something she’d done many times in their life together. Maybe he was having an affair or, God forbid, something was wrong with David. But no. He just had to tell her that their payment had lapsed on their insurance—which they’d been paying for out of pocket since he lost his job—and they’d need to switch to Medicare.

Margaret asked when it had lapsed.

“A while ago,” Opus said. “I’m sorry. I thought I could fix it but it’s too late now. I haven’t switched us over yet. The website is a mess. I’ll handle it. Just don’t get hit by a bus today or anything.” As she walked to the mall for the start of her shift, Margaret realized how much better it would have been if he had confessed to an affair. She didn’t cross paths with any buses, but the thought of a chance collision occupied her thoughts the entire walk to the mall. Not because she wanted to die, but because she got satisfaction imagining how it would make Opus feel after saying something so careless like that to her.

Margaret willed herself back onto the script she was supposed to be following with the awaiting Sir Reginald. “Do you have an inaugural experience in mind for today or would you like to browse the catalog?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Could you tell me more about what you do here? Your sign caught my eye. I’m in town visiting my son. He’s still at work. He’s a doctor, like his old man—and like my old man was, too.” *Sir Reginald, former horologist and legacy doctor*, Margaret revised in her head.

“I see,” Margaret said. “We need doctors.”

“Yes. Well, hopefully you don’t. I mean, you look healthy. Anyway, my son works at Saint Barnabas. The hospital down the road? I’m wandering around the mall with some time to kill. Sorry, time to pass. I’ve been trying to use less violent language in my casual conversations. Sorry to bother you with that.”

“It’s no bother at all,” Margaret said. *No wedding ring. What happened to Mrs. Sir Reginald? A divorcée or a widower?*

“Kind of you to say. See, I was going for a stroll just to try to get to know the area, but I just got too hot. I’m not used to the humidity. I had to come in for the air conditioning. I’m from

Arizona. Hot there, but dry. My son headed out east for his residency and never came back. I wish he would. He's got a girlfriend now with family out here, so I think I lost that battle. Sorry for giving you my life story. My wife used to tease me for telling strangers way more than they needed to know. 'They didn't ask for your memoir, Lawrence!'" He said it with a soft fondness, no edge to the recalled words. He gave a sad smile as he waited for her to respond.

Widower, Margaret revised. "Lawrence, I'd be happy to read it if you ever wrote a memoir," Margaret said, trying to infuse the words with the same timbre that people applied to the phrase *Sorry for your loss*. "I like reading."

"I do too," Lawrence said.

For years she had given Opus a new novel on his birthday. She'd pick ones that she had already read from the library that had a character who overlapped with some interest of Opus's. The year he got into watching Formula 1 on television, she gave him a murder mystery with a racecar driver suspect. There was even a racecar on the cover. He'd thanked her and then added the book to the pile next to his nightstand. She finally stopped after David told her that the books made Opus feel bad, like she was rubbing it in his face that she was a reader and he wasn't.

Margaret knew Opus wouldn't have told David that directly. Opus never told anyone anything. So it must have been something David surmised on his own. David had always surmised on Opus's side, even when he was a little boy. It was natural for a boy to want to defend his dad, but shouldn't he want to defend his mom sometimes, too?

"Besides reading, what do you do?" Lawrence asked.

"I work here," Margaret said. She sensed Eddie was eavesdropping and would probably write her up later if she didn't steer this conversation toward a purchase soon. "I'd be happy to tell you more about First Times, since our sign caught your eye."

“Tell me everything. I don’t think we have these in Arizona yet.”

Margaret picked up one of the thick catalogs from the kiosk and opened it to the first page. It had a series of illustrations in segmented panels, like a flight safety card. She put on her best stewardess voice and pointed to the corresponding images that explained how the process worked.

“Our researchers have decoded the unique combination of synaptic activity and receptor uptake associated with a long list of inaugural experiences,” Margaret said. “Gel pads placed on your temples allow for transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation that communicates directly with the hippocampus in your brain’s temporal lobe. A typical First Time module takes about twelve minutes, although the experiential time can feel longer.”

“Wowza,” Lawrence said. He seemed a little confused by her explanation. That was normal for most customers, but she expected the jargon to be less intimidating to a doctor. Lawrence read her expression. “I was a podiatrist, not a brain surgeon,” he added.

“I read a book on reflexology once,” Margaret found herself saying. “Well, a character in it was a reflexologist. And a taxidermist. A reflexologist taxidermist. I remember her saying there were seven chakras in the human foot. Or it might have been an alligator’s foot. Does that sound right?” Margaret was embarrassed to be rambling, but she couldn’t help herself.

“I must have missed that lesson in med school,” Lawrence said. He didn’t say it meanly. They shared a chuckle. “But I can tell you that the human foot has twenty-six bones.”

“I bet you give a great foot massage,” Margaret said. She heard the words come out of her mouth as if someone else had said them. If she didn’t know that she was married to Opus and over all that other business, she would have thought they sounded like the words of someone who was flirting.

“You’d win that bet,” Lawrence said, then he glanced down, his gaze striking her chest and making what was underneath flutter. “Margaret,” he said as his gaze returned upward. Margaret brought a hand to her nametag and let it linger.

The moment was broken by a commotion on the other side of the kiosk. “For the last time, we don’t do that here!” Eddie yelled after a trio of youthful figures, laughing and shoving as they zigzagged away in a paroxysm of adolescence, like a clowder of cats who’d just gotten caught stealing bacon from the table. Margaret recognized them as the teens from the food court.

“What was that about?” Lawrence whispered.

“Kids being kids,” Margaret said. “Pretty much every day some teenager thinks it’s funny to come ask if we offer first time simulations that are more, shall we say, adult.”

“Wait, do you?” Lawrence asked.

“No, of course not! This is a family-friendly establishment, sir,” Margaret said, feigning outrage.

“Too bad,” Lawrence said. They laughed, as if the teens had left a contagious giddiness in their swirling wake. The connection Margaret was feeling with Lawrence seemed to be developing rather fast. Whatever this was frequently happened in novels but wasn’t something that happened in real life, at least not in her real life; in the back of her mind, she knew that she must be imagining it. As their giggling continued, though she felt silly and self-conscious, she didn’t want it to stop.

Eddie let out a pointedly supervisorial clearing of his throat.

“Any other questions about First Times?” Margaret asked, trying to regain her composure, shaking off whatever it was that had just happened. Maybe that was still happening.

“Hmm,” Lawrence said, stroking his chin as he picked up the catalog. He scrunched up his nose as he read.

Margaret realized with a jolt that Lawrence reminded her of someone. Someone she hadn't thought of in a long time, someone she'd known before she ever met Opus, when she was just a teenager. Scott Pike. Scott Pike had scrunched his nose whenever he was concentrating on something, too. So odd for that name to come back to her now. She wondered why she hadn't thought of him when she first started working at First Times. After all, Scott Pike had been so many of her firsts. What ever happened to him? To them? He had joined the Navy, but that wasn't really an explanation. It just hadn't worked out. Nobody's fault, just one of those things that happened. Or, more accurately, one of the many things that didn't happen.

“I do have one last question, actually. What exactly do you do here?” Lawrence laughed.

“Customers put on a headset and we simulate the experience of doing something for the first time,” Margaret said. “The topics vary. Some are exciting. First time hiking Machu Picchu. First time doing a backflip on a trampoline. Some are more run-of-the-mill. First time seeing an ant. First time going to school. That sort of thing. There are lots to choose from.”

“Do many people actually want to relive their first day of school?”

“Some people find it healing,” Margaret said. “I have a regular who comes in once a week to do the first day of middle school module. She says she does it instead of therapy now.”

“Oh. So it shows you your own memories?”

“Good question. If it's something you've lived before, yes. If it's something you've never done before, then it's more like a crafted simulation.”

“Like virtual reality?” Lawrence asked.

“More like memory karaoke,” she said with a smile. Eddie didn’t like it when Margaret called it that. She suspected it was because there was an actual VIP VR Karaoke kiosk in the mall where you could sing songs with your favorite celebrity. It was always busy.

Lawrence flipped through a few more pages in the massive catalog. Margaret didn’t think he was genuinely interested, but she liked that he was lingering.

Suddenly, Lawrence looked up, as if something had just occurred to him.

“It doesn’t replace your actual memories, right?”

Margaret was touched. It said a lot about a person’s general life satisfaction whether they found the possibility of replacing memories a good thing or a bad thing.

“No, it doesn’t replace your memories, it just temporarily mutes your independent recall,” Margaret assured him. “If you choose a module for a life event you’ve personally experienced, they say it’s a bit like going under anesthesia. You remember being asked to count down from ten, but then the next thing you feel is a sensation of absence. It allows you to experience your own memory *as if* for the first time, without any preconceptions.”

“Where do they get those memories from?”

“They’re all licensed from a certified reminiscence repository.” Margaret’s eyes darted around to see if Eddie was listening. She lowered her voice. “The licensed memories tend to have a bigger letdown effect than just reliving one of your own. After you unplug, I mean. The euphoria during can be sharper, but upon realizing the memory wasn’t from your own life, some customers report a feeling of FOHMO.”

“Huh?”

“Fear of having missed out.”

“Oh. I get it. Same thing happened to me when I tried MDMA,” Lawrence said.

“The drug?” Margaret was surprised. She didn’t peg Sir Reginald as the type.

“Yes. It sounds odd to say, but my son suggested I try it after my wife died last year. I was grieving. Depressed. Still am, of course, but I was in a real dark place for a while. Anyway, there seems to be some evidence it can be therapeutic. That’s what my son said anyway.”

“Is your son a psychiatrist?”

“Podiatrist.”

“Right. Did the drugs help?”

“I was happy for a moment, I suppose. Not just happy. Overflowing with pure joy. Then the joy left and it was terrible. Even worse than before. I had a feeling like, ‘Oh no, if that joy was fake, then is all joy fake?’ It’s silly, I know.”

“I don’t think it’s silly,” Margaret said. She felt an intense urge to hug him. “Even if joy is just chemicals in the brain, that doesn’t mean it’s fake. All we have is what our brains feel.”

“Maybe so. I’m no brain surgeon,” Lawrence said. “But I’d like to think that what we’ve done, and who we’ve done it with, matters.” They were the only people in the mall. They were the only people on the planet.

“So!” Eddie said, popping up next to them. “Have we reached a decision over here? Did Margaret tell you about our Happiest Hour discount? Ten percent off for the next twenty minutes.”

Margaret expected Lawrence to graciously pass on the offer and say it was time to head back to his son. She didn’t want their interaction to be over, but she knew it had to end at some point.

Instead, Lawrence looked down at the catalog again. After a moment, he pointed to Module #431.

“I think I’ll go with this one. ‘First time operating a one-person sailboat on a lake.’”

“Excellent choice,” Eddie said. “I’ll handle the paperwork and Margaret here can get you Hooked Up.”

Margaret showed Lawrence to the closest chair. She helped him down into the human shaped cavity. She took out one of the wired gel pads and brought it close to his face. “Let me just...” she said as she gently brushed back a curl of grey that had fallen onto his forehead. She placed the gel pad on his skin, tenderly smoothing it into position.

“Why’d you pick that module?” Margaret asked as she applied the second gel pad.

“I’ve never sailed before. Never even been on a boat,” Lawrence said. He swallowed hard.

“Really? No boat of any kind?”

“Afraid of the water. Nancy always wanted to do a cruise. But I just couldn’t. My older brother drowned when I was two. I don’t remember it. Not really. I was there, though. My mom was tending to me after I’d eaten some sand, so she wasn’t paying attention to him, and then—” Lawrence paused abruptly. “Anyway, my parents made sure I was afraid of the water after that.”

“I’m sorry,” Margaret said. She felt so protective over this man she’d just met. She felt responsible for his safety and happiness, or more than that, she wanted to be responsible for it.

“It was a long time ago,” he said.

“You’ll like sailing,” she said, unsure of what else to say. “The modules are all positive experiences.”

Lawrence nodded. He seemed reassured by her words.

“Now, take a deep breath, close your eyes, and count back from ten.”

Lawrence took a deep breath. He closed his eyes. “Ten...”

Margaret watched as his eyes began to move rapidly underneath their lids. The machine beeped to life and Margaret entered in the input key for the module he selected. The control panel's blue status light came on, indicating that Lawrence was currently experiencing something completely new, someone else's inaugural experience as his own.

Though it wasn't meant to act as a lie detector, the control panel's lighting schema could be used that way. A blue light meant it was a new experience, since the computer found no similarly coded memory in the customer's brain; a green light meant the machine had found a corresponding memory cluster similar to the chosen module, dampening the recall function so that it could be experienced anew.

Usually, the actual running of the module was a welcome break for Margaret. Once the customer was under, she just had to watch the monitor until the experience ended, like she was a babysitter putting a kid down for a nap and turning on the television until they woke up. With Lawrence it was different. She didn't want him to be asleep. She wanted him to stay up and keep her company. She worried that once he awoke, whatever spell had been cast might be broken. She looked around to make sure Eddie wasn't watching and, before she could think about the impulse, she reached down and slid her hand into Lawrence's and held it tight. It almost felt like he was holding hers back.

Even though Lawrence was not in a real place, Margaret felt like she was there with him. In her mind, she started to narrate where he was at in the module, fantasizing that she was experiencing the sequence of verbs and nouns with him.

Removing shoes.

Wiggling toes in sand.

Eyes up to the horizon.

Sun setting.

Sailboat on shore.

Hands push hull.

Feet in water.

Legs in water.

Cold.

Body in boat.

Boat floats away from shore.

Rudder down.

Sail up.

Hand grips tiller.

Head ducks under boom.

Sun on face.

Wind ruffles sail.

Waves slap hull.

Sail goes limp.

Hand pushes tiller.

Head ducks under boom.

Wind fills sail.

Sail is white with one red triangle.

Faster now.

Sun is gone but its light lingers.

Soft orange sky.

Sailing.

After twelve minutes, the blue status light turned off and the machine whirred down. Margaret pulled her hand away from Lawrence's before he opened his eyes. She gingerly removed the gel pads from his temples as he began to slowly blink. His stare had not yet focused on his surroundings.

"Take your time to adjust. You are in a mall. You've just experienced a simulated memory at First Times..." Margaret read on mechanically from a script meant to reorient the customers. He looked at her after she finished speaking. For a moment, he didn't remember her. She could tell. Margaret was used to customer disorientation when they were first unplugged, but the lack of recognition on his face unexpectedly stung. Less than an hour ago they'd met for the first time; in a few seconds, they'd meet for the first time again, then he would leave forever.

Lawrence was quiet. He still hadn't moved. Margaret's aunt Sally used to say you should try to remember your dreams first thing in the morning before you moved a muscle, because moving your muscles is what makes dreams go away. She said this like it was a scientific fact.

Lawrence finally got up with some effort. Margaret helped steady him on his feet. Their faces were close as he stood up, closer than people who were recently strangers usually stood. Neither moved away. She could imagine them kissing now. It wasn't so crazy of a thought.

*Foreheads touch.**Eyes close.**Lips kiss.*

"I never—" Lawrence started to say, but then stopped himself. "I wasn't the type to—" He stopped again.

"You're all right," Margaret said.

“I like this song,” Lawrence said.

“What?”

Lawrence gestured all around them. An old soul song Margaret vaguely recognized was playing softly in the background over the mall’s speakers.

“P. P. Arnold,” Lawrence said.

“Oh yeah,” Margaret said. “Deep cut.”

Lawrence smiled, then he hugged her. When he pulled back, he gave her a look that broke her heart. He settled his bill with Eddie at the register. He walked away. Margaret waited for him to turn around, to come back and tell her something amazing. The rest of her shift passed in a dull daze. Eddie left before closing time, as he usually did, leaving Margaret to clean up.

Bzzz. Stupid watch. She looked down and saw that it wasn’t her watch yelling at her about steps. It was a notification that she’d received a voicemail from David. She fetched her phone and put it to her ear to listen to her son’s message. “I’m worried about Dad. He just called me and didn’t sound like himself. He was, like, incoherent. I called back and he didn’t answer. Where are you? Why aren’t you at home with him? I think he needs help. I can’t get a hold of him. Call me back.”

Why would David say all that? She put her phone away and picked up the cleaning solution, then put the cleaning solution down and took her phone out again to call David back, then she thought about calling Lawrence instead just to make sure he was fine, but then in a huff she dropped both the cleaner and the phone and collapsed to the floor. What she wanted to say, David wouldn’t have understood. It wouldn’t ease his worries if she called him back and told him that his father hadn’t sounded like himself in a very long time. She reached for her phone, then pushed herself to her feet. She was tired. She looked around as if she might be able to find

someone who would understand, but the hard, reflective surfaces of the mall's interior were devoid of company. She was alone. The skylights high above had blackened. All was silent except for an omnipresent electrical buzz. At some point the music had stopped.

She sat down in the chair where Lawrence had been. She imagined she could still smell him, even though the chair's proprietary antimicrobial material promised that wasn't possible. She took a deep breath in. As she held her breath, she felt herself sink a little deeper into the chair's cavity. It enveloped her on all sides, as it was made to do, like she was a cookie returning to the cutter from which she came. The mall's overhead lights shut off, and with it the buzzing left, too. Margaret broke the new silence that settled over her with a heavy sigh.

The handbook strongly advised against doing a self-Hook Up, but it was possible. You just had to set a timer for the module to auto-release after the experience ended. Without getting up from the chair, Margaret leaned over and picked up the catalog. She put her finger on the side of the first page and caressed it until she stopped next to the memory she had in mind.

She put the wired gel pads on her temples, initiated the module, then lowered her torso back down into the chair's embrace. She closed her eyes. Twelve minutes later, Margaret returned to reality. Wet with tears, her cheeks glistened in the control panel's soft green light. The text of the simulation's title was still blinking on the screen: *First time falling in love.*

As Margaret exited the mall, she heard a smacking noise. On a metal bench next to an overflowing trash can, the teenage girl with the golden hoop earrings was making out with the teenage boy with the backwards hat. Margaret stood and watched. Sensing her gaze, they stopped and turned to face her, their mouths frozen in matching puckers.

“Don't stop,” Margaret told them. “Whatever you do, don't ever stop.”

When she arrived back home, Opus was sitting barefoot on the sagging second step of their front porch. His sharp jawline pointed upward. He'd taken off his glasses and was squinting, as if he'd lost sight of some flying thing he'd been tracking in the darkness and hoped would return. He didn't notice Margaret until she sank down next to him. "Thank God," he said, and he crumpled into her lap. Margaret put her nose to his scalp and breathed him in, his scent encoded with the echoes of a lifetime of shared pain and fugacious joy, loyalty and mundane devastations, sickness, health, regret, play, dread, and laughter, all swirling together like notes to a song whose name you can't say but still know by heart.

Hunting a Ghost

Let me tell you about how I finally became happy. It happened after we'd been staying home for months at the start of the pandemic, before the state of emergency was officially repealed but after we stopped scheduling video chats with our friends in place of bar trivia, still drinking but home alone instead, thinking our need to socialize with the aid of alcohol was more cute than alarming. It happened in the fall, though the season felt more like one of resignation than transformation. Shows how little I knew about anything, especially my own life and what was about to happen in it. It happened in a borough where one was equally likely to mistakenly crunch a leaf or a cockroach underfoot. Brooklyn, obviously. It had nothing to do with any of that, though—it all had to do with Frank.

Frank was my cat. She'd been a stray for a year before I adopted her. I often wondered what she had gotten up to before I met her, what magical powers she must have mastered to survive alone for as long as she did. I adopted her spontaneously one day, like I was throwing a candy bar into a grocery cart while waiting to check out. There had been a pop-up cat adoption

going on near my apartment, inside a warehouse filled with cages, distressed meows echoing off every surface. As I made my way through, I paused before each creature, like every cat was a painting in an art museum worthy of appreciating.

Then, I saw her: the cat I would soon name Frank. She was black with white front paws, a coloration that cat people call “tuxedo.” Even in this setting, she looked dignified, as if the formalwear had been named after her fur pattern and not the other way around. She was the lone creature sitting silently amid the caterwauling. She had the demeanor of a prisoner who had escaped before and was confident she could do it again. I respected her immediately.

“Could I hold that one, please?” I said, pointing at pre-Frank.

A volunteer followed my gaze, then she froze.

“You may, but there is something you must know about this cat,” she said ominously. The volunteer had a mane of scraggly white hair that called to mind an invasive shrub. She took a step toward me and held a crooked finger to my face.

“Oh? What’s that?” I asked.

“This one’s feral. A true wild spirit. She grew up on the mean streets of Brooklyn all alone, like me. I sense it in her.” The volunteer’s eyes rolled back in her head, becoming marbles of milky white. “You will love this cat, but you will never know if she loves you!” Her voice echoed, the lights flickered, and the other cats fell silent as a wind from an unseen source rattled their cages and an electrical tension filled the air. “Worst of all, she will never be a lap cat! If she purrs, it will be only for herself and not meant for you to hear. She! Is! Psnickety!” Outside thunder boomed, though it had been sunny when I entered.

The cage door burst open, and Frank leapt out. I caught her and felt her life force. Twenty needles pierced through my shirt as she discerned how safe she was from her new vantage.

“I’ll take her,” I said to the volunteer.

The volunteer’s eyes returned to normal, the other cats resumed their meowing, and the static charge dissipated from the air.

“As you wish,” she said. “Just one more thing. One day, years from now, the cat will be no more, and your heart will break open. Heed my words! Knowing what I have foreseen, if you still wish to proceed, sign here.” The volunteer held up a clipboard and a pen. I signed.

A few minutes after arriving in my apartment, Frank shat in the bathtub. The tub was just a couple feet away from the new litterbox I’d purchased for her arrival. That’s when I named her “Frank,” because shitting in the bathtub after I had set up a new litterbox right next to the bathtub seemed like a real Frank thing to do.

Frank settled into my life. As the years passed, I cycled through several jobs, putting my passions on hold for practicality, first for the interim, then indefinitely. I remained in the same small Brooklyn studio apartment, which Frank held dominion over. Frank shat in the litterbox now instead of the bathtub, but she carried herself like she might go in the bathtub again if she ever felt like it.

When Frank stalked around the apartment, eyes filled with intensity, it looked to me like she was hunting ghosts. Even when Frank wasn’t on the prowl, she would sit on her carpeted, three-tiered cat tower—rather than with me on the couch—staring off into the corners of the ceiling.

“Hunting ghosts, Frank?” I’d say to her.

She would not acknowledge me.

Sometimes I’d be reading a book, then I’d look up in thought and notice that Frank was staring right into my eyes, startling me. It felt like she was gazing at my soul. Or not gazing at so

much as appraising. I've always thought of your soul as a little ghost that lives inside your body until you die, then it gets to float away somewhere else.

As quarantine phase of the pandemic began, Frank seemed annoyed with me for interrupting her daily routine. I felt like she was judging me for sitting with my laptop in my sweatpants all day. As if out of frustration, Frank began meowing. Meowing is normal for a cat, of course, but up until this point meowing had not been normal for Frank. I had assumed meowing was beneath Frank's dignity. But now, out of nowhere, she meowed loud and incessantly, as if she was making up for all those years she hadn't meowed. I moved to the bed with my computer, but her meowing continued. I fed her, and she stopped meowing just long enough to wolf down her food, looking up at me as she did, like she was trying to get me to understand something. Like, *See what I'm doing? This is it. This is how it is done.*

Over the course of the next several days, the meowing started a little earlier each morning. It was an insistent, percussive, unrelenting meow, undulating between a moan and a siren. Then she started doing it at night. She'd hop right up on my pillow and meow directly into my ear. If I tried to calm her with a rub between the ears, she'd swipe at me and meow louder from just out of my reach.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked Frank. She meowed once more with emphasis before leaping away, a clear affirmative. In the darkness she bumped into a sickle that had been leaning in the corner, knocking it over. The sickle came dangerously close to slicing into my foot at the edge of the bed.

My job had made the transition to remote work. I had to be on a video meeting by 9 A.M. every morning to hear my boss say things. These things could not be emailed. My boss needed to see my face and the faces of all my coworkers on his screen while he said them. These virtual

meetings were like the friend video chats we used to do, except that I had to keep going to these even after I was tired of them, and I did not drink during them, usually. I didn't want to sleep through my alarm and lose my job, but I was starting to think Frank did.

“What's your problem?” I asked Frank during her nocturnal meows. “Do you need help?”

I considered Frank with fresh eyes. Her hair was ruffled, strangely like the feathers of a bird drying on the shore after getting caught in a hurricane. I hadn't considered there might be a health issue causing her change in behavior. In the morning, I called the veterinarian to make an appointment. The soonest they could fit us in was the following day. It was the first time I'd made an appointment for anything in months. I hung up, feeling like I'd failed Frank by not calling sooner.

I began to cry. I cried thinking about all of the times I could have been kinder to Frank when she had annoyed me when I was trying to get work done that I didn't actually care about, and then I cried thinking about the time when I visited London and saw the Animals in War Memorial in Hyde Park, and then I cried that I could feel so sad about something as small as a cat when there were such big problems in the world, especially these days. Frank only weighed seven pounds. The problems facing our country weighed so much more.

Overnight, Frank's health deteriorated. She no longer had the strength to leap up to her cat tower, so I made her a bed with a towel on the ground. I stayed up with her all night. I fretted about whether I should wait for our appointment or take her to a 24-hour emergency clinic.

“What should I do, Frank?” I asked.

In response, Frank pulled herself into my lap. She'd never done that before. I pet her and she allowed it. She'd never done that before, either. I pet her softly, moving just one finger back

and forth on the scruff of her neck, in the same spot where I imagined her feral mother had carried her after she was born underneath the Williamsburg Bridge. Frank closed her eyes, and I heard her purr. I tried to keep my body from trembling too much because I didn't want to disturb Frank, who finally seemed to be at peace.

One of my tears fell into Frank's fur. I rubbed it in with my hand, the wet spot glistening like magic. At some point, I must have drifted off to sleep. I was awoken to a horrible howl coming from a torrent of dark fur and feathers.

The frenzied swirl came to a stop. In the spot where Frank had been stood what appeared to be a black and white rooster.

“Frank?”

She hopped up onto her tower and cocked her head.

One might assume that my first thought would be that I was dreaming. Or hallucinating. Or dead. I hadn't slept, my head ached from all the crying, but no, I knew instantly that this rooster shared a continuity with Frank. Her eyes stared at me with the same insistence of will they always had. Her feathers were black all over with the same patches of white. My obstinate cat had refused to abide by all pet precedents and transformed her physical form.

I reached for my phone on the bedstand. I tried to see if there was any information online that could explain this. There was nothing. I read on Wikipedia about different types of roosters, and from that I deduced that Frank was now some variant of a Brahma. This information did not help.

“Eerrrgh-eh-eergh-eh-eeerggh!” Frank crowed.

“Frank, I'm so glad you're okay,” I said through tears as I got out of bed and extended a hand to pet her. As soon as I made contact, a flurry of beak, spurs and wings was upon me,

leaving my forearm with a fresh gash in it, blood already a bright red in the hint of early morning light sneaking past the edges of the blinds.

I got up and cleaned my wound in the bathroom.

“Eerrrgh-eh-eergh-eh-eeerggh!” Frank crowed again. A neighbor banged on my wall. It was still the middle of the night.

I went to the kitchen portion of my studio to see if I could find something a rooster would eat. I picked up a can of Frank’s old wet cat food. Chicken morsels in gravy. That seemed wrong. I put it down. I checked the cupboards. Boxes of dried pasta, cans of beans, half-eaten bags of chips half-heartedly clipped shut and now stale, a large burlap sack of birdseed. Wait. A large burlap sack of birdseed? I didn’t remember I had this, but it was perfect.

I grabbed a handful of seed and sprinkled it across the hardwood floor. Frank diligently pecked away. I went and sat on the couch, crossed my arms—tenderly minding my wound—and stared at Frank as she ate her breakfast. It took her a long time to find each grain. She was thorough. Once she’d pecked up every morsel, she fluttered up to her cat tower again, stray black feathers floating off her. She pulled her wings in, turned away from me, and appeared to drift off to sleep.

I woke in a start as sunlight hit my face.

“Shit!” I shouted. “My 9 A.M. meeting!” I was late. In my frantic search for my laptop under piles of dirty laundry, I didn’t notice that there was no longer a rooster in my room.

“What is your job?” a melodic voice asked.

A beautiful woman stood in a silken robe in front of the window, the morning sunlight silhouetting her. I was startled, although I was starting to think nothing should surprise me anymore. Her robe was black with white cuffs.

“Frank?” I asked.

“That is what you have always called me, but that is not my name,” she said.

“What’s your name?”

“People have called me many things. If you must call me something, you can call me Cora,” she said.

“Okay,” I said. “Hi, Cora. I have so many more questions for you, but I’m late for a meeting. I don’t want to get in trouble at work. I’ll still take you to the vet later, if you need, but you seem like you’re doing fine. You look luminous, actually. Can you help me find my laptop?” I renewed my frantic search.

“I ask you again, what is your job?”

I turned to her, incensed. After all these years, how could she not know what I did for a living? Even if she had been a cat for most of that time. Hadn’t she ever paid a sliver of the attention to me that I had paid to her? Riled up, I opened my mouth to reply, but suddenly I couldn’t remember what my job was either.

“My job? I do remote video meetings,” I mumbled. “Video meetings with my boss. And coworkers. It’s hard, my job is, that’s for sure. For one thing, it’s hard to keep track of being muted or unmuted—during the video meetings? Plus, the emails! I must reply to every email I get, and sometimes after I reply, it just makes the other person reply back, and it goes on forever. The job is important because it is how I get money. To buy things. Like the cat food I fed you before, and whatever it is you need now.”

“You didn’t always do this. You used to be a farmer,” she said, her voice sweet as nectar.

I laughed. “Me? A farmer? Someone like me could never be a farmer. I’m what they call an indoor kitty.”

Cora gestured to the sack of birdseed, then to the sickle. “Having been wrong about the way things were before, why are you so certain about yourself?”

With that, she levitated into the air, hovering over me, and began to transform yet again. Her dark robe fell away and twisted in on itself, returning as a golden gown. Her skin radiated sunshine. Her hair turned to red fire and a bough of wheat appeared under her left arm. She extended her right hand toward me, exposed her palm, and from her skin a single green sprout grew.

A mental fog lifted that I hadn’t realized had settled over me. In my mind, I saw a young man standing in a field, a piece of straw between his lips, one eye shut to block out the sun, the other surveying the horizon for rain.

How had I forgotten? How had I raised and harvested agriculture from the soil to bring to market so that others might eat food or manufacture textiles? How had my weak, ineffectual body, which lately did nothing real, ever do something as ontologically verifiable as farm the land?

I looked at my hands now. Uncalloused.

I scanned my fingernails. Dirt free.

I considered my muscles. Soft.

Sensing my confusion, Cora gently led me to the closet. In the back, behind the winter attire, she showed me some of my other tools. My pitchfork. My hoe. My 25-liter stainless steel barrel milking machine—it was a decent-sized closet for Brooklyn.

From the depths, she summoned a pair of weathered, denim overalls. I touched them, tracing a patch that had been sewn on to cover where the fabric had worn through, infused with dirt from some part of the earth where work had been done.

“Want to try them on?” Cora pressed the overalls to my chest. “See if they still fit?”

I put my hand on top of hers and held it there above my heart. I felt the potential to change, born from the simple truth that I once was other than the way I was now. The little ghost that lived inside me stirred, breaking itself open to the happiness that exists in our world, just waiting to germinate. I let it all pour inside.

Progress Report

In lieu of your Weekly Status Update, please answer the following twelve prompts reflecting on the progress you have made during your first year of employment at Friendlai. Please take your time and do a thorough job (note: this task is intended to be completed in under thirty minutes).

#1. What is your role at Friendlai?

“Role” meaning what I do all day? Well, I spend a lot of my time saying no. For example, to the refund requests of our customers. In terms of my title, other companies call it Customer Service or Customer Experience or Customer Happiness Ambassador Ninja. At Friendlai, we call it Customer Triumph.

Sam, are you the one who reads this? As my supervisor you know what my job is, but if “role” is supposed to sound more holistic, then my role is to do a mediocre job with most customer complaints, but a measurably Triumphant job dealing with one repeat customer:

#3. How would you describe Friendlai to someone who had never heard of it?

I'd tell them to Google it. Or they could read on Wikipedia that "Friendlai is a tech company that produces a neuro-hardware body-insertable that does some of the 'heavy lifting' for your brain in social interactions."

But if I'm supposed to phrase this in my own words, I'd put on my best cheesy salesman voice and say, "Can't remember the name of your friend's girlfriend and he's reminded you too many times to ask again? Friendlai remembers for you, conveniently overlaying her name directly onto her forehead whenever she enters your field of vision! Did you somehow forget it's the three-year anniversary of the day your coworker's beloved dog Pippy died? Friendlai drafts a consolatory text message with an appropriately reminiscent Pippy pup pic so you just have to say 'send!' Does the group of strangers you play Pickleball with at your local park keep asking you to get drinks together after work but you feel too shy to say yes even though you desperately want to say yes? Friendlai makes you say yes!"

Or I'd just tell them that Friendlai is a way for an introvert to pay to put something into their body that makes them an extrovert.

#4. What does the "Triumph" in Customer Triumph mean to you?

What do you expect people to say other than what they're supposed to say? Here's the answer from the handbook:

“Triumph is defined as the customer reporting that it is ‘highly likely’ they will maintain their Friendlai subscription for the foreseeable future. The foreseeable future is defined as two quarters.”

Seriously, why do I have to fill this report out? This is a waste of everyone’s time.

Sam, you already explained to me in our last bi-weekly eval sync that my overall Triumphant Rating for my non-Jonah complaint chats has dipped to 17%. I’m aware that’s the lowest it’s been since I started. You also told me that if I didn’t have the Jonah buffer thing going on, there “wouldn’t be a compelling corpus of evidence to retain my employment.”

#5. Can you provide an example of something you’re proud of?

I’m proud of how good I am at Pickleball. Seriously, I’m a pickle pro, a paddle whisperer, a dink master. I’m so good, the other regulars at the court I play pick-up at always want to be my partner, even though I’m quiet and not friends with any of them outside of the courts, like they all seem to be.

But if this answer is supposed to be work related, I’m proud that Jonah likes me. Want to see our first chat? I have it saved to my desktop. I have all our chats saved.

- *Hello I am having an issue with my Friendlai subscription. It says that I am approaching my Friend Limit but I don’t understand. Why is there a friend limit??? I have 149 Friendlai friends. My name is Jonah Budgeon.*

- *Hi Jonah. How are you today?*
- *Not good I'm worried about my friend limit!!! I bought Friendlai to be more social/likeable not to limit my socializing/likeableness!!!*
- *I understand. Besides that, though, are you okay?*
- *Besides that? ... Yeah, I'm okay.*
- *Good, I'm glad to hear that.*
- *Thanks.*
- *Well, Jonah, my name is Gurt and I'm here to help you.*
- *Is your name really Gurt?? Or is that a typo??? No offense!!!*
- *Not a typo. I never make typos. My name is really Gurt.*

Yes, Sam, I am aware that my name is not really Gurt. This is a harmless game I used to play to see how weird of a name I could get customers to believe and type back. Had I known that Jonah would become my regular, I might not have picked the name Gurt. I used to feel a little guilty when Jonah would call me Gurt after telling me about his personal life, like how he loves hugs but a hug more than three seconds makes him feel claustrophobic. But now when he calls me "Gurt" it just feels like a sweet nickname, or a shared secret that only one of us is aware of.

Anyway, as Gurt, I did my best to explain to Jonah that he only paid for the Basic Friendlai subscription, which limits the number of friends you can have in your Friendlai Social Circle (FSC) to 150. I explained that our founder chose this number because of a podcast he listened to where the host recounted some study that some anthropologist did a while back that humans

evolved to only be able to have 150 “meaningful relationships.” That’s why modern society is so messed up. We weren’t designed to be able to care about the thousands of people we see online.

I explained to Jonah that with the Premium Friendlai subscription, he could transcend the social limitations of evolution to have even more than 150 meaningful relationships. Specifically, he could expand his FSC to 500.

But Jonah didn’t want to upgrade. I thought I’d failed at another chat. I was ready to move on with my day, already thinking about the next weird name I’d make up.

Then I got the happy notification chime. Jonah had rated our interaction as Triumphant.

And then, Sam, whenever you and whoever else in marketing realized Jonah’s clout potential, I was told to take “extra time” answering Jonah’s concerns if/when he messaged again. So when he messaged the next day, even though we’re supposed to keep our chats to under ten minutes, I talked with Jonah for three hours. We’ve talked almost every day since.

I have no idea why Jonah rated our interaction Triumphant, but I’m proud that he did. I guess Jonah just thinks I’m special. At least, he used to.

#6. What is an area where you could improve? Try to be as honest as possible.

You really want honesty? Okay, here’s some honesty for you: I don’t use Friendlai. If I did, like we’re encouraged to do, I’d probably give improved answers to customer questions like “Is the

Network Schmooze Boost add-on worth it?” or “How accurate is the Sarcasm Meter?” or “Does the Inhibition Inhibitor really make you feel as socially courageous as two tequila shots?” or “Does the Teenage Depression Detector ever confuse Detrimental Melancholy with Age-Appropriate Angst?”

To be even more honest, I have this job because it was the only job I could get after college. If I could pick any job in the world, it would be professional Pickleball player. I know that sounds like I’m joking, but I love Pickleball so much. When I play, it’s the only time I don’t think about anything. I just get into a flow and exist.

That’s me being honest. Do I have to finish in one sitting or can I save and come back? My brain is fried. Sam, if you or another human really does have to read this, I apologize for being so all over the place. I’m having a bad day/year. I need a break.

[Progress Report saved.]

[Resume?]

#7. What’s a productivity impediment blocking you that could be eliminated? Be specific.

I’m back. “Productivity impediment”? Who wrote these questions? Probably someone who gets paid more than I do. Actually, I bet whoever wrote the questions doesn’t get paid much, but I bet the person who approved the questions does.

Jonah has a big announcement that he's going to stream on his channel soon. Once he does, it's all over for me. I will no longer be necessary. I'll just be a living, breathing productivity impediment.

#8. Can you describe a habitual way you go above and beyond?

Actually, I do have a good answer for this one. When Jonah asks for advice about making friends, I always try hard to give him good advice, like the type of advice that I wish someone would give me, advice that I wish was true because it would make life so simple. Like this from one of our chats earlier this month:

- *Remember, Jonah, your friend group should be a beautiful tapestry.*
- *A tapestry?*
- *Yes, a tapestry. You don't want all the threads of your tapestry to be made of the exact same material, do you, Jonah?*
- *No?*
- *Of course not! Some threads can be a soft satin. Others a tough twine. Others a fuzzy flannel.*
- *That sounds like a weird tapestry. Is a tapestry the same as like a quilt???*
- *Tapestries are supposed to look weird. Otherwise they would just look like the drab beige carpet of an office building. Would you want to be friends with an industrial rug, Jonah?*
- *No?*
- *Of course not! So, before you pick that final friend, you need to look at your social tapestry and ask yourself... which threads are missing? Do I have my fuzzy flannel?*

- *I get it now*

Later that night when I was watching his stream, it made me feel so good when I heard Jonah quote my advice to all his followers. He said, “Remember, chat: friendship is like a quilt. Sometimes you gotta patch a hole, but that only makes it stronger.” I didn’t care that he got my advice a little twisted. I knew what he meant.

#9. What’s your favorite part of your role?

Chatting with Jonah, duh. Don’t worry, it’s not just chatting. I still try to be a good employee and sell Jonah on a Premium upgrade. A few weeks ago I told him about the new Ooh La La Friend With Benefits? Meter that picks up on verbal and non-verbal clues that a platonic friend is potentially interested in a sexual hookup. I told him how it was the single most requested feature from our customer focus groups. I told him that’s probably why I have had to deal with so many angry messages lately from raging Premium subscribers saying that the feature is broken. I told him I got the vibe that most of those messages were from guys who were angry that a girl they were friends with didn’t want to hook up with them.

#10. What’s something your supervisor might not know that you think they should?

When I play Pickleball, I like that I don’t need to talk much, and when I do, I know exactly what to say. I say the score before I serve, I call a ball out if it lands out, and afterwards, win or lose, I always say “Good game.” Pickleball makes life simple. No matter what happened before, you can always have a good game.

Sam, I know the prompt means something work-related, so here you go: you should know what Jonah told me earlier this week.

- *BIG NEWS!!! I FOUND MY FUZZY FLANNEL!*
- *What, Jonah?*
- *My fuzzy flannel. You know, like you said. My final friend. MY QUEST IS OVER!!!*
- *That is big news.*
- *I know!!!*
- *Are you sure this potential friend is a good fit, Jonah?*
- *Yas Gurt I'm ready to pick my 150!!!*
- *How are you so sure? This is all happening so fast.*
- *Not really it's been months and I think my followers are ready for me to talk about something else on stream lol but yes I am sure because of something you told me once that is really really really important to have in a friend*
- *What did I say?*
- *It should be easy to talk to them.*
- *Oh. I see. I said that?*
- *Yes! And Gurt? When I'm talking with them, it doesn't feel like work. It just feels easy. Like I'm myself. Talking to them does not deplete me. It pletes me. It pletes me completely. Does that make sense?*
- *Yes, Jonah, that makes sense. You know, even though you've filled the 150 slots of your FSC, we can still chat.*

- *Welllllllll I'm going to end my subscription after I announce my final friend on my next stream. For my next project I'm going to sample the Ranch dressing at every Buffalo Wild Wings in the country. Time to move on, you know?*
- *But Friendlai could still help you with that, Jonah. Talking to waiters? Getting drinks with strangers? That stuff can be scary. You might still need Friendlai. You might still need me.*
- *Nah, I think I'm good. Thanks though.*
- *Okay. Good game, Jonah.*
- *Huh?*
- *Sorry that was a typo.*
- *Oh. Okay. Later Gurt.*
- *Jonah, can I ask you one more thing?*
- *[CUSTOMER HAS LEFT THE CHAT]*

I feel dumb for feeling whatever it is I'm feeling, and I guess what I'm feeling is that I'm getting dumped. I know that's stupid, but that's why I've been less than professional in this report.

I'm sorry. I can't focus on this report or any of my tickets. I'm too distracted.

I'm not even thinking about Jonah. I'm thinking about when my parents first moved us to Florida to be near my Grandpa Stan. He was retired and had the time to help with stuff around the house. Specifically, help with me. It's how my parents saw me at that point: as stuff around the house that they needed help with.

They needed extra help with the heavy lifting.

I hung out with Grandpa Stan every day after school. He taught me Pickleball. We played all the time. I didn't care that we only played against his old friends. The old people didn't say I was weird for still wearing red dinosaur sweatpants in sixth grade. The old people were funny and had interesting stories. You just had to listen.

I was there for my Grandpa Stan's last words. Even though both of my parents and the hospice nurse were also in the room, he spoke his last words directly to me. He motioned for me to come close. I put my ear up to his mouth. "Always say 'good game.' It means you're a good sport." I was not expecting that. I had heard him say it before and didn't realize he thought it was some goddamned profound key to understanding the universe. Then he said one more thing that was even more unexpected. "Go to college." His voice was barely audible. Then he closed his eyes and five minutes later the hospice nurse said he was gone. He never went to college himself, so it was important to him that I went. I guess. So, I did what he said. I went to college. Big waste of time, but I did it. Total bullshit.

Sorry for unloading this all here. I don't have anywhere else to put it.

Sometimes bullshit can have some truth in it, but sometimes that's all it is. Like that 150 "meaningful relationships" theory. There's no way that it's the same for every single human on Earth. Maybe some people are only able to have twenty real friends, maybe other people can

have two hundred, maybe some people have so much love in their heart they could be friends with thousands of people, like Ghandi or Jesus or Keanu Reeves. And, sure, maybe some people have exactly 150 meaningful relationships, but for me personally, my whole life the most I've been able to have is one. One is enough heavy lifting for me. All I want is one. One friend. I don't think that's so greedy.

Sam, I just thought of one other thing you should know. This morning, I used an admin log-in credential that you accidentally forwarded me and I opened up the backend to find Jonah's credit card billing address. I looked up how many hours it would take to drive there. I spent a while thinking about how I could just go to him and see him. In real life. Ask him if I could be the one to be his final friend. His fuzzy flannel.

But after an hour I was still in my chair. Because I was afraid. Because I am always afraid. Because I'm an introvert. Because I'm a social coward. Because I am the way that I am. Because my brain chemicals are the way they are.

If only there was something that could help me, some product I could insert into my body to change the way I am.

[Progress Report saved.]

[Resume?]

#11. Anything else that you would like to include in your Progress Report?

Oooooooooohhhhhhhhhkaayayyyy woowwww I logged off work early before I finished this stupid form to go to the Cherry Creek mall to get Friendlai installed and I even got the Premium upgrade and then I drove all night to Jonahs house and I waited in his driveway watching his page on my phone and I waited until he went live and then I pumped my Inhibition Inhibitor to the max actually past the max I used the beta unlock code that QA Matt gave me to pump it more than regulation allows so I could be outrageously courageous like extroverts just are naturally and actually it feels less like two shots of tequila and more like two lines of cocaine which I did one time at a party in college I hated it and I broke into his house into Jonahs house when he was streaming and I cut my hand on the glass and I went in there to the room where he was streaming and I got down on one knee and I asked Jonah to please be my fuzzy friend and he asked me who are you and is that blood and the Friendlai Social Cue Reader told me he was afraid but I didnt leave and I told Jonah I didnt have any slots filled so even if all of his slots were filled he could still be one of mine like a secret we both shared but only I knew about and I tried to explain to him that I was Gurt from the chat but before I could even tell him my real name he got real freaked out and the Friendlai Banter Generator suggested I tell him a joke but by then one of his viewers had called the police so I had to get out of there fast but not like it mattered because my face was on his stream plus everything I already told you and it wont take long for them to find me so I know Im going to get fired and maybe even get the jail add on even though Jonah didnt save it to his channel because people clipped it so you can watch it online forever and guess what he didnt want to be my friend anyway and Friendlai doesnt work and it feels bad it doesnt actually fix you so thats what I would tell my friends if I had any and if they asked I would tell them it doesnt work its all a scam the tech doesnt fix you it just blurs you like

a drug and like everything else in life its one of those things that strengthens your strengths if you already have strengths and if you dont it doesnt matter and somehow thats your fault even though its just the personality you were born with but you should feel like there is something wrong with you because society happens to prefer some personalities more than others and my phone is dying and Im typing this while Im driving home it isnt so far if you drive fast I need to rest I need to sleep I need

[Progress Report auto-saved.]

[Resume?]

#12. Before you submit, look to the future! What goals do you have for next year and beyond?

Sam told me that before they deactivate my account, they want me to submit this report. It makes their metrics messy if a report has been started but not submitted. Sam also told me if I sign an NDA confirming I won't publicly state that I was using Friendlai when I was on Jonah's stream, they'll give me one month of severance pay.

Sam, are you reading this? Did you see all the people making fun of me online? They made a meme out of me. I'm the Please Be My Friend! Guy. They said it looked like I was drugged out of my mind. They said instead of "roid rage" I had "friend fury." It's funny. Not haha funny, but funny nonetheless.

Jonah isn't pressing charges, by the way. Maybe he feels bad for me. I'll take pity. I'll take what I can get. Also, the hospital removed the Friendlai implant and they said its residual adrenergics have already passed from my system.

Sam, to answer the final prompt, since I do have the utmost respect for this report: I have no future goals. I do have one plan, though.

Right after I hit submit, I'm going to go get ready for pick-up Pickleball. I decided that if the regulars invite me out again, I'm going to say yes. I hope they ask. I'm visualizing it my mind. I can see myself parking and walking toward the court with my racket. There's a warm, soft breeze. I hear the sublime sound of plastic spheres popping off rounded rectangles of composite graphite. I hear familiar voices cheering, louder with every step I take. I get to the court, and I slot my paddle into the wooden shelf hanging on the fence, letting everybody know that I'm ready and waiting. Then when it's my turn, I'll say yes. I'll say yes no matter what.

[Progress Report submitted]

Pause

When I remember my last childhood Christmas as a family of three, I don't dwell on whether or not it happened like it did in my memory. The overall impression of the day is so strongly imprinted in my mind. The way the soft light of the early morning hours surrendered to the intense midday rays that filled the living room, reflecting off the television screen. The way that bright winter sunlight made it so you couldn't see anything outside, just solid white glare, like our whole existence was procedurally generated in a vast white void. Mostly, though, I just remember how happy I was. I was happy because I was sitting close to my older brother, as close as Luke would let me—so close our knees were touching—watching him play his new video game, *Defiant Corpse Atonement: Part II*.

The game was Luke's Big Gift from Santa, although it was actually, of course, given by Mom. I remember thinking there was something absurd about the juxtaposition of a violent game being given to celebrate the sacred birth of Jesus, but I didn't say that out loud. At the time, pointing out absurdities like that had the effect of making my brother leave the room, muttering

something like “Simon, don’t be weird.” I would have kept my mouth shut forever if it meant he wouldn’t leave. That’s all I wanted in the world.

Instead, my Big Gift from Santa had been an unrequested bicycle.

“It has pegs on the back,” Mom said, pointing to two metal bars poking out of either side of the back wheel’s hub.

“Pegs?” I asked.

“That way a friend can stand on them and you can give them a ride. The man at the store said this is what all the kids had.”

I didn’t need to look at Luke to know he was stifling a laugh as I awkwardly wheeled the bicycle from the living room out into the garage. As a high school freshman, something about the gift of the bicycle felt deeply insulting. Like with many of the kindnesses Mom showered upon us, I felt just a little too old to receive it. I knew it was just her gentle nudge to encourage me to be more social, as if the reason I didn’t hang out with the other kids in my grade was a matter of transportation. In short, to be more like Luke.

My memories of our earliest Christmases involved snow-silhouetted windows, but the day’s complete absence of frozen precipitation made me wonder if global warming was to blame or if my memories themselves were faulty, a trick of seasonal expectations clouding my head with flakes. This is an example of another thought I would have suspected Luke would dub *weird*, so I didn’t say it out loud either.

That was around the time I’d tried to stop saying my nearly constant stream of weird thoughts out loud, not just around Luke, but at school, too. Especially at school. Over the course of the fall, the other freshmen had gone from ignoring my unsolicited ponderings to mocking them—an unwelcome turn. Even the teachers had taken to saying that I was “precocious” with a

tone that didn't sound like a compliment. Now as a middle school teacher myself, I never say that word. Instead, when I have a pupil attempt to impress with their knowledge, I just say, "Interesting. Thank you for sharing. What else?" I try to be the one person in their life who doesn't mind that they have more to say, the person who would never grow tired of more thoughts. Mom was that for me.

Not that I appreciated her enough at the time. Mom still treated us both like babies, which I resented. Hence, our Big Gifts still being from Santa. She even called us each her babies, as in, "Do my babies want lasagna for dinner?" or if we were about to drive somewhere, "Do either of my babies need to use the potty before we leave?"

Luke did not look like a baby. Luke was a high school senior with enough stubble he could have walked into the teacher's lounge without raising an eyebrow. Not a young adult so much as a fresh adult, one that was still cooling from its final pressing at the Adult Factory, pink and hot, steaming a little bit, battery fully charged.

I, on the other hand, was a baby-faced freshman replete with childlike physical properties, all my parts baby-teeth waiting to be swapped out for the real thing. I attempted to compensate for this with an elevated vocabulary informed by books and YouTube channels that did deep dives on sci-fi and fantasy lore. Could we use actually giant space lasers to terraform Mars? What's the difference between Tolkien's Orcs and the Uruk-hai? Could a human consciousness theoretically experience the fourth dimension?

"Oh, shit! You can equip the helms of the Ghoul Knights you kill," Luke said. "That's sick. I gotta find a forge and repair this."

"I wonder if you can pillage their sidearm, too?" I said it like I was uncertain, but I knew that you could. I'd watched a video on YouTube about it the previous night. Luke walked back

to the body of the fallen Ghoul Knight, as if he was about to try my pillaging suggestion. Instead, he pressed the button to make his character crouch down, then he made his character stand up, then he made him crouch down again, over and over, right on top of the Ghoul Knight's prone body. Luke kept repeating the action like it was a ritual, squatting down and up, down and up. I suddenly realized what he was doing, but I tried to act like I didn't. With my brother, my strategy for acceptance had calcified into playing the role of the innocent who needed protection and guidance. Whenever I acted like his equal or, worse, like I knew something that he didn't, I would be vanquished.

“What are you doing?” I asked, pretending that I didn't know what teabagging was.

“I'm teabagging him,” my brother said.

“Teabagging?” mom asked from the couch. “What's teabagging?”

Teabagging—squatting up and down on a character after they were killed—was possible because of a simple mechanic built into most games. After your character was downed, there was a brief liminal moment where time paused for you but not for others, during which you could see your character's lifeless body on the ground in a third-person perspective while you waited to respawn and play again. In those fleeting seconds, you were held captive, unable to move, as you watched the other players who were still alive do whatever they wanted to your corpse. For example, you might be forced to watch the stranger who just killed you come over and dance on your grave or, in the present example, crouch repeatedly over your head. That was teabagging.

On a message board I learned that the term came from a sex act where a guy puts his scrotum in the mouth of another person. So, in the visual poetry evoked, the guy's ball sack is the teabag, and the receiving person's mouth is the teacup. In video games, though, teabagging

wasn't a sexual act. It was more like a way of communicating something bigger, an existential proclamation. It was a way of affirming your presence. The computer-controlled characters—the bots and the NPCs—did not engage in teabagging. It was something only humans did. In multiplayer, you did it to make the other human player mad, and making the other human players mad was funny. Or, that's how it started anyway. At this point, gamers had already started to sarcastically posture like they cared about making another player mad, and this type of ironic detachment was even funnier than direct trolling, probably the funniest and most unvanquishable thing a person could be.

“It's nothing, Mom,” Luke said. “Don't worry about it.”

Luke stopped his teabagging and began leisurely piloting his character around the misty medieval woods, exploring the open world casually without any urgency to advance on the narrative path that the game developers had carefully laid out like breadcrumbs for players to follow. He jumped onto the narrow ledges of roofs that you weren't supposed to jump on and he tried to chop down trees you weren't able to chop down. Normally I would have been annoyed that he was being so inefficient, but on this Christmas day, I didn't mind that he was dillydallying. I wanted to linger with him in this extended moment, one for which I was already feeling preemptive nostalgia. I was already constructing the memory as we sat there, trying to encase it in plastic and water, a snow globe I could return to and shake alive. I was reveling in stolen time, knowing that Luke was liable to bolt at any moment.

“Did my babies get enough to eat?” Mom asked from the couch.

“Yes, Mom,” we said in unison.

“Thank you,” Luke added.

“Yes, thank you,” I agreed.

The intensity of Mom's babying was heightened on holidays, and Christmas was the biggest of the holidays. Mom was a true believer. She was the type of Christian who went to church every Sunday, but whose faith still had ample room for Santa. I suspected that most or likely all my peers had moved on from the Santa charade a long time ago, but I followed my brother's lead and kept up the suspension of disbelief for the benefit of Mom. By this point, we were both too old to pipe up and say, "Mom, we know Santa isn't real." We'd crossed the Santa Rubicon: she knew we knew; we knew she knew we knew. To declare that Santa didn't exist now would be to slay something forever that could never respawn.

The night before, like we did every Christmas Eve, we had gone to church and sang songs while holding the stubs of the candles that they kept in storage the rest of the year. I remember how in my peripheral vision I could see Mom periodically checking to make sure we were actually singing the words and not just silently moving our mouths. We sang for her, but we found other ways to amuse ourselves in the process. Over the years, Luke and I had developed a game where we'd try to spill the accumulating candle wax onto the other person's skin, pretending like it was an accident when we'd gotten carried away singing a hymn. What made the game fun was that you couldn't make any noise when the hot wax hit your exposed flesh, even though it burned like hell, since we were in church and pretending to take it seriously.

On this final occasion, though, Luke changed the rules. As I initiated the first volley of molten wax, he just let me pour the hot, white droplets straight onto his hand without any evasive maneuvers. He looked me in the eyes, unflinching, calmly singing the words to "O Come, All Ye Faithful" as the wax hardened into beads on the back of his hand. After, as we followed Mom out to the car in the parking lot, he peeled the wax pellets off his skin and threw them at me.

And so our last Christmas Eve had ended, and now Christmas Day was slipping away, too, as Luke kept playing his game. I was happy to be with him, yes, but my happiness was tinged with dreading when he'd inevitably quit. It couldn't go on forever, even though that's what I wanted. It was already the longest we'd been in the same room in a long time. Both of my legs had fallen asleep, but I didn't want to move, afraid that I'd achieved some magical position that was stretching out the present moment. Luke was a flight risk. He had that quality in him, radiating out of him, the same essence that Dad had. It made you feel grateful that he was around, made you appreciate him while you could. It was some extra gland they both possessed that I hated and envied.

I sat hunched over, my chin resting in my controller-free hands, my crossed legs a million pins of agony. Luke was upright and firm, his body alert, as if the figures he battled on the screen might jump out at any moment and he'd really need to protect me and Mom. We were able to sit like this—on the floor and far closer to the television than was ophthalmologically recommended—because Dad was no longer around to yell at us not to.

Mom never yelled at us for anything. She didn't have to. Her sadness was a quiet but powerful deterrent. Mutually assured depression. For example, the three of us were currently wearing matching pajamas. Last year Luke had attempted to end the tradition, coming out of his bedroom wearing jeans and his baseball hoodie. Mom had instantly teared up, saying something about how there were "only two Christmases left with the whole family," a subset that no longer included Dad. Luke immediately returned to his room, emerging a few minutes later wearing the pajamas that I had been patiently sitting in while his sartorial rebellion played out.

Today, without protest, we both sat in our matching pajamas: green flannel tops with a smiling cartoon reindeer pattern and red flannel bottoms with a precariously open fly.

“Do my babies need anything?” Mom asked.

“We’re good, Mom,” Luke said.

“Is the game fun, sweetie?” Mom asked.

“It’s super fun. Thanks again, Mom,” Luke said.

“Are you going to let your brother play, too?”

“It’s his turn when I’m done, Mom,” Luke said.

“Okay, sweetie.”

A few moments later I heard her cleaning up the dishes from the French toast she made us for breakfast. As soon as she was done cleaning, she’d start working on Christmas Supper, a special mix of a late lunch and an early dinner centered around a baked ham with a sweet pineapple glaze. On any other day I’d go help her clean up, but I knew she was happy that I was spending time with my brother on Christmas.

Luke had been a good older brother to me. Especially when Dad left. On the day it was final and real, Luke gave me all of his Battle Beast action figures, a precious collection he knew that I coveted. Even better, he played with them with me. We staged an elaborate war in my room, with Luke’s invading marauders attacking a multi-tiered fort I’d created across my entire dresser. After many advances and retreats, in the end my defenders had thwarted the attack. All was well and peace settled over the realm.

Bzz-zz. The noise startled me. Luke’s phone called his attention to something outside of our home. It had started. I could feel him getting pulled away.

Recently we hadn’t been close. It hurt when he acted like he didn’t know me even though we were finally in the same school again. There was the time when I had tried to sit with him in the cafeteria and he had told me the seat was taken; the denial had hurt, but the tone it was

delivered—as if he was speaking to a stranger—was why I’d rushed to the bathroom to cry. Or the first week of school when I asked him for the keys to his car because I’d left my hoodie and I was cold in the school’s blasting AC. He stopped the conversation he was having with his friends and said, “If you’re so cold, try putting some muscles on, you scrawny bitch.” His friends laughed. The next morning after he drove us both to school, he reminded me to take my hoodie when I got out of the car.

I remembering looking at him as he thumbed a reply on his phone, trying to guess what he was saying. Even in loose-fitting flannel adorned with a cartoon reindeer, I could sense his muscular physique underneath. Somehow just the tapping of his thumbs on a phone seemed to make his lats and traps pop and dance as they flexed with the small effort. I knew of his lats and traps because Luke had been working on them all fall in preparation for baseball in the spring, hitting the weight room after football practice as instructed by Coach Doone. Since Luke was my ride home after school, I’d sit patiently in the hallway and read a book until his training was over. Looking back now, that’s one of the unexpected things I miss most. Just waiting for him, reading a book, sitting on the institutional carpeted hallway, knowing that he was about to appear and take me home. I’d give anything to see him pop out of the locker room again, sweaty and vibrant, ready to tell me something he had just learned about the way the world was and thought I should know.

“Coach says arms are for show, legs are for go, and lats help you win the show,” Luke told me repeatedly. Luke often quoted things that Coach Doone told him. I imagined he was hoping I’d get inspired and start caring about sports or beefing up my ectomorphic body which might lead to a rise in my social standing, his version of gifting me a bicycle I didn’t want. I wondered if Coach Doone filled a dad-shaped hole in Luke’s life. I felt the hole in my own and

perhaps could have sought a similar solution, but I didn't care about sports, nor did I have the constitution for them.

In a word, what I cared about was research. I especially liked reading fantasy books because of all the worldbuilding. *A Wrinkle in Time* was my favorite, though that semester I had been trying to read more grown-up authors like George R.R. Martin and Brandon Sanderson. For nonfiction, I liked history, especially books on the Cold War, the Space Race, and the Russian Revolution.

"This game is pretty cool, but the fight mechanics suck ass," Luke said, his phone at his side and his attention back on the game.

"*Da*," I said. "*Dermo*." *Da* was Russian for yes and *dermo* was a Russian swear word I'd picked up from YouTube videos of Russian teens doing parkour in abandoned skyscrapers.

"Don't let Mom hear you say that," Luke said.

"Sorry," I said.

Dad was Russian. He wasn't born there, but his parents were. He grew up bilingual. He was proud of being Russian. At the time, I was adamant that wasn't why I was into Russian history, that it was just a coincidence. Dad was born in Virginia, and it wasn't like I was into the history of Monticello, I reasoned. Russian history was objectively fascinating; what I cared about had nothing to do with him. Dad's Russian allegiance had become even more touchy that year. It wasn't like him and Mom talked anymore anyway, but after Mom had shared a story on Facebook about a Ukrainian mother who had shielded her baby from a Russian missile attack, he'd replied that she was "brainwashed by the woke mind virus" and then returned an hour later to comment a profane insult in Cyrillic. Mom deleted the post.

“Here we go,” Luke said. He approached a moss-covered forge hidden among some temple ruins in a forest clearing. He pressed a button, and his character took out a damaged helm from his impossibly cavernous satchel and placed it on the forge for repair. A horizontal bar began to fill with a shimmering cobalt to indicate his progress.

“Looks like you found the Temple of Ga’Lül,” I said.

“Did you say the ‘Temple of Ja Rule?’” Luke said with a snort.

“Ga’Lül,” I said. “Just a guess.”

“Right, just a random guess,” Luke said, raising his eyebrows, not taking his attention away from the screen. He played on. Having repaired the helm, he now took out an ancient sword—the Cursed Cutlass of Pantoubar—and an empty bucket. He made the character slice his hand, filling the bucket with his own blood. His character took out a rag, dipped it in the blood, and began to bring the rag up and down the length of the sword. As the sword was raised into the air, an endless stream of red dripped down as the shaft emitted a faint, crimson glow while yellow sparks flew up and disappeared into the sky, like evaporating fireflies. It was beautiful.

“This game is getting boring,” Luke sighed.

“Could you pause?” I asked.

Luke hit the pause button, letting out an exasperated groan.

“What?” he asked.

I hadn’t been expecting him to comply. I tried to think of something to say.

“Could you explain the game to me?” I ventured. “Like, what’s going on?”

Luke looked at me. “I think you know,” he said.

“I don’t,” I said.

Luke's eyes narrowed. I knew more about the backstory of the game than he did, and I suspected that Luke knew that I did.

"Well," Luke said, "my character is the tank-boy with the blood-greased sword. See him?"

I nodded, as if it was possible to miss the tank-boy with the blood-greased sword at the center of the screen.

"He's called a Tainted. As a Tainted, you attempt to atone for your Tainted ways by going on this big quest to seek atonement for the great, terrible sin that you committed before the game started. The game never says exactly what you did, but it's implied that it had something to do with violence. And maybe sex. Possibly snakes, too? There is lots of snake imagery throughout the game. Anyway, once you beat the final boss, you emerge as a gloriously atoned *Untainted*."

"Why is his sword greased with blood?"

"It's his own blood. You can make your Tainted cut himself with the Cursed Cutlass of Panda Bear or whatever, which then gives you special abilities otherwise impossible to get. It's called a Sacrificial Benefit."

Luke unpaused. He snuck behind what looked like a mix of a large troll guarding the entrance to a cave. Luke's Tainted sprang forward and cut off the troll's head with the blood-greased sword. The creature made a wet squelching noise with a tint of surprise to it, like his head couldn't believe he wasn't attached to a body anymore. Acts like this didn't seem like a good way to atone for your sins to me, but who was I to question the game designers. Sometimes an unholy act could result in the creation of something sacred.

As Luke's Tainted moved in and out of darkness, leveling up his experience points, the sun faded in our real world, intensifying the glow of the screen on our faces. The white void outside transitioned to black.

"Christmas Supper will be ready soon!" Mom called from the other room.

"The ham smells good, Mom!" Luke shouted back. The sweet, savory aroma wafted through the house.

Luke paused the game.

"Bio break," he said. He got up and walked to the bathroom.

I could hear him peeing from down the hallway. He had a powerful stream. My typical urination sounded like water gently trickling out of a watering can onto a paper plate. His pee sounded like a power washer cleaning the grime out of an old refrigerator. His penis was bigger than mine, obviously. It gave me hope to think my brother's size was a portentous sign of what was to come in my own future, a hope that would not be borne out by reality. Luke had been a nerd like me when we was smaller, but then he'd gotten big. I don't think I was so crazy to wait for my body to do the same, but it never did.

Luke was still peeing. I looked down at the controller he'd left behind on the floor. It was next to his phone. The TV displayed the still image of the paused game. I circled my fingers in the worn brown carpet. Without it feeling like a conscious decision, I watched myself in the third-person as I picked up the controller. I looked up at the screen. My right thumb hovered above the pause button.

"Don't do it, dingus," Luke said as he walked back into the room.

"I wasn't going to," I said.

"Give it," Luke said, extending his hand for the controller.

Bzz-zz. The haptic vibration again, an intrusive assault, like a solicitor knocking during a mealtime grace. We both looked down at the illuminated phone, still on the ground, with a text that said “hey.” The enigmatic missive was from a contact named simply “emily.”

There were two girls in Luke’s grade named Emily: Emily G. and Emily S. I considered the probability of which Emily my brother would receive a text from on Christmas. Emily G. had glasses and had been in our local paper recently for winning a regional debate tournament. The paper had made a big deal of the fact that she was a debate champion who was also a cheerleader. I knew less about Emily S., except that she was pretty and on The Poms, the dance squad that performed at Luke’s baseball games.

In movies the cheerleaders were the popular kids, but at our school the cheerleaders were dorks and The Poms were cool. To an outside observer, they served similar functions: each was a group of teenage girls who wore revealing outfits in school colors while providing encouragement in the form of synchronized movement at sporting events while music played far too loudly for developing ear drums. The Poms, however, performed only one rehearsed dance per game. The cheerleaders cheered throughout, cheering even louder at pivotal moments. The cheerleaders’ support was unyielding and freely given; The Poms’ comparative withholding is perhaps why they were more alluring.

Personally, I was drawn to the cheerleaders. Thinking they might even be in my league, I’d developed a bit of a crush on a freshman cheerleader named Jillian after I saw a copy of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* fall out of her gym bag, which we had been assigned in Honors English.

“Crazy about those Tralfamadorians unstuck in time, huh?” I said after picking the book up and handing it back to her.

“What?” she said.

“The Tralfamadorians?” I repeated. Evidently, she hadn’t gotten to that part yet. I relayed the events to Luke that night at home. He told me that with girls, sometimes less was more.

I extended the controller in my hand toward Luke, but he ignored it. His attention was now fully on his phone. Without sitting back down, he bent over and picked it up. I watched him tap out a quick reply but couldn’t see what he wrote.

“Which Emily is that? Are you guys dating? Are you sneaking out tonight?” I asked, unable to stop the questions from spilling out, desperation rising inside me. I could sense that the flight was about to take off.

“Not your business, nobody says ‘dating,’ and maybe,” he said. “Don’t tell Mom.”

“Are you done playing?” I asked.

“Yeah, for now,” he said.

“Maybe we could play a little more before we eat though? Get to the next checkpoint?” I said, hoping I didn’t sound as desperate as I felt. “You haven’t even got to the Forsaken

“I think I’m done. I’m going to go see if Mom needs help setting the table. Turn it off for me?” He nodded to the controller still in my hand. “Or save mine and start your own if you want.”

Some part of me was certain he wouldn’t return after dinner. As Luke reached the room’s threshold, eyes on his phone, I instinctively squeezed the controller as hard as I could. My thumb mashed into the pause button so hard it hurt. I raised the device above my head, like I was brandishing a weapon.

“Look at me!” I shouted.

He turned back, confused. Just as he started to move back toward me, I brought the controller down with all my might onto the edge of the coffee table. The controller shattered. A sharp shard of plastic broke free and fell to the ground, the tiny city of the motherboard bouncing away, destroyed, the small blue power light indicator fading to nothing.

That's when I became detached from time.

At first, I was frightened. I didn't know what was going on. I was disoriented. I felt like I got the wind knocked out of me because, as I learned, when time is frozen there is no air to breathe. Time was thick and gravity was goopy, like the fourth dimension had been filled with a translucent, viscous membrane. Dust particles were suspended perfectly still in the television's glow. The ambient atmosphere here was colder than it had been all day. It felt a bit like I was in a frozen snow globe, a flashbulb memory I'd be able to slosh around in for a spell.

I looked at the living statue of my brother, stuck mid-step. I went to him, my movement reminding me of the underwater level of a video game. I looked up and, with some effort, was able to bring my hand up to touch his face. He didn't move. Despite the cold all around us, he was still warm. I'd read a bit about theoretical time dilation, so I imagined in this suspended state that his blood was no longer actively pumping through his veins, but the atoms inside his cells were still vibrating in some capacity.

I took the phone out of my brother's hand and tossed it aside; in his hand I replaced it with a plastic shard from the shattered controller, positioning it carefully like it was a sword in one of our Battle Beast action figures. As long as the time dilation lasted, I could do anything I wanted. I could snoop around in my brother's room. I could raid the neighbor's fridge. I could ride my new bike to Jillian's house to...I don't know what. But I didn't want to leave my brother.

It occurred to me that my paused time might run out soon. I wanted to make the most of it since I knew I'd never get this chance again, but I didn't want to ruin it by trying too hard to make it meaningful. Whenever our family went on vacation, maybe once every two years, Mom was so desperate to make it special that it squeezed the fun right out of it. When we visited her sister in Missouri the summer before, as a treat we'd decided to stay at a nearby hotel instead of in her sister's basement, which smelled of mold and mildew on account of unfixed water damage. The whole drive there, Mom kept talking about how she was going to have a glass of wine in the hot tub at the hotel. She'd even called ahead to find out the hours of the hot tub. When we got there, the front desk person told us the hot tub was broken. Mom got real quiet. Luke and I didn't know what to say to make her feel better. Later when we were unpacking in our room, she cried.

I got a stool from the side of the room and put it right in front of Luke. I stepped up so I was face to face with him. Still acting on impulse, I took off my flannel pajama top and dropped it to the floor. I pulled my brother's pajama top away from his body, then ducked my body inside it so that my head was against his chest, held tightly there by the fabric. I couldn't hear my brother's heart beating in this paused place, but I could feel his warmth and smell his sweat. I took a deep breath, inching my nose closer to his armpit. I stayed there for a while, taking deep breaths, a little longer and little slower with each inhale. His smell was different than my own, but familiar and comforting. After a long time, I pulled my head out and put my pajama top back on.

That had felt good. That had felt close.

I began to bend Luke's body, a big brother-sized action figure. I pushed at the back of his knees, bending him down into supplication, like a squire waiting to be knighted or a sinner awaiting communion.

Even kneeling, Luke's face was still too high for what I had in mind.

I got back up on the stool, so that my groin was just above his head. I reached my hand into the fly of my pajama bottoms and, with some maneuvering, flopped out my scrotum. It hung there like a fleshy coin purse. I gently squatted down so that my ball sack tapped ever so softly onto the crown of his forehead, right at the edge of his hairline. I did it again and again and again. I was not doing something gross or sexual; I was performing a sacrament, a proclamation that I was here.

When I had completed the ritual, I returned my testicles and my brother's body back to their proper places. I went over to the shattered controller. I picked up the large plastic shard I had placed in Luke's hand and, knowing it would be sharp enough, dragged it across my own palm. Blood appeared in the slit I made, bright red, but there was no gush behind it. Without a pulse in this paused place, I had to milk the red out, pumping my forearm like an udder. I dripped my offering over the controller's remains.

Time reattached with a loud crack.

The transition was disorienting, like stepping onto a treadmill you weren't expecting to be there. Luke fell to one knee, disoriented. He saw the broken controller and my bloody hand. His face searched mine, trying to make sense of what had happened.

"Boys?" Mom said as she staggered into the room, steadying herself with a hand on the wall.

"What was that?" Luke asked.

“I think an earthquake,” Mom said, then she noticed my bleeding hand and she gasped. “My baby! Is that blood?” She rushed to me and grabbed my arm to look closer at the gash. The blood was now flowing freely as my heartbeat returned.

“I’m fine, Mom,” I said quietly.

“How did this happen?” she asked again, but I didn’t answer. She pulled me tight, unconcerned about the stain I was making on the carpet and now her clothes. Over her shoulder, I looked at my baffled brother. Then, as if feeling the phantom kiss of my tenderest part, his hand went up to his forehead. He looked back at me. I could tell he sensed something, but what? Had some part of him remained awake for my advent liturgy? Some night next year after he’d left for college, would he jolt awake when some deeper part of him remembered our holy communion? I never got the chance to ask him. He never returned home after that first semester away. All flights take off, but not all land.

“I’ll get a towel,” Luke said, backing away from me.

“My baby, my baby, my baby,” Mom kept saying, like an incantation, holding me tight. “My baby, my baby, my baby.”

After Luke returned with the towel and Mom was satisfied that I was not in mortal danger, I went to the bathroom to wash up. Suddenly, there was a soft tapping at the window. I opened it a crack to see Emily G. crouched outside in the bushes. She looked cold and like she’d been hiding for a while. She was not at all wearing the right garments for the task at hand.

“Hey, you’re Luke’s brother, right?” she whispered as she nervously pushed her glasses up her nose. “Is he home? He stopped answering my texts. We were supposed to meet up?”

“He’s not here,” I said.

“Where is he?” she asked. “He said he was home.”

“I can come,” I said. “Where are we going?”

“To a party at the Owens’ place,” she said. “Luke said he could give me a ride.”

“I have a bike,” I said. “It has pegs.”

Emily G. considered this as she pushed her glasses up her nose again.

I finished bandaging up my hand. I tiptoed past the dining room, where I snuck a glance of Luke helping Mom set the table, a smile on both of their faces that I can still summon to this day. Without a word, I grabbed Luke’s baseball hoodie from the hook by the front door, went to the garage, and rode my bike out into the great dark beyond.

After the Show Tonight

It's late. I'm thinking about the past. I'm thinking about all the things I had to learn to make it in the comedy business. I'm thinking about how by the time the worst of the devastation was over, I was arguably the funniest person alive. Why else would they have made me the host of America's number one late-night talk show? To be fair, it is now also the only late-night talk show. Still, for a lifelong comedy nerd like me, it was a dream come true, a validation that meant my lifelong case of imposter syndrome had been a false-positive all along. Every time I see my name on the marquee, I know the choices that I made to get here were all worth it. I was once a boy from a small town who got made fun of for his lisp, so instead of going to parties I stayed at home and watched reruns of sketch comedy shows on television. Now I'm a famous TV comedian. Who's laughing now? For my sake, hopefully some portion of the millions of survivors who still have working televisions.

Tomorrow's show is a special one. We're commemorating the anniversary of The Collapse. The lights are off in my office. The computer screen casts a pale glow on my hands as

they hover above the keyboard. I keep thinking about where I'd be now and who I'd be with and what my life would be like if I'd never gotten the staff writing job in the first place—or if they'd fired me like they probably should have done right after I first started. Most of all, though, I'm wondering if it was her sitting in this office instead, would she be thinking of me?

#

I called her K. Nobody else called her that but me. She was the head writer who hired me, making her my boss, but, before that, she was my first comedy friend. We stayed friends, more or less, until my tenth week working at the show, the week I was supposed to find out if my contract was going to be renewed or if I was going to be fired. Turnover was high; most new writers did not get renewed. That all-important week started with a pitch meeting on Monday morning. To survive, I needed it to go well. I needed to impress J.

J is what everyone called the host. When J arrived, agitated and wearing sunglasses, I was in the middle of an anti-anxiety breathing exercise that wasn't working, seated and waiting with the other twelve staff writers around the big, oak table in the conference room. All the other writers had their pitches on pieces of paper on the table in front of them—everyone except for Cordova with his notebook and me with my laptop. I'd prepared some visuals for my pitch. Visuals that were suddenly striking me as foolish, desperate, and too late to change.

Everyone was tense except Cordova. Cordova was the most veteran staff writer, even though he'd never been promoted to head writer. He had been at the show for as long as J had been the host. Staff writers like me came and went. Head writers like K came and went. Showrunners, executive producers, directors, talent liaisons, music bookers, lead graphic designers, social media managers, security guards, video footage library assistants, interns—they all came and went. Through it all, Cordova remained. He'd carved out a niche for himself and

seemed content to stay there forever. In his first contract cycle, he'd pitched what would become the show's signature bit: "Viralize the News Karaoke." Now Cordova was sheathed in the comedy writer equivalent of tenure. They'd never fire him.

I watched him with more than a twinge of envy as he leaned back in his chair and twirled a pencil. He must have had something golden in the chamber. My pitch was shit. Desperation was settling over me. I thought about shutting my laptop and just winging it. *Think of something funny think of something funny think of something funny.* Somehow that didn't work. I was sweating bullets and Cordova was cool as a cucumber. At all times he carried himself like he was moments away from holding court and regaling everyone with a funny story. He was most in his element after tapings when we were all drinking at our script cluttered desks. That's when Cordova liked to tell war stories.

"One time J stopped a pitch meeting to make an intern go buy a paper shredder. For real. We all waited silently in the room for, like, thirty minutes for him to bring it back to the conference room so J could shred the pitch in front of everyone," Cordova had said after a taping my first week. "Everyone was terrified. It's funny that he really did it, that he committed to the bit so hard. Glad it wasn't my pitch though."

I asked Cordova whose pitch it was.

"Don't remember. Whoever it was, they're not around anymore."

I had the image of a paper shredder floating in my mind as the pitch meeting began. J was especially petulant this morning. After the first writer finished his pitch, J stared off to the side glumly. He didn't give a definite no. He shrugged his shoulders, gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, then K indicated it was time for the next writer to start talking.

I tried to stay focused on the meeting as the writers went down the line—willing confidence into their voices as they pitched, each to varying degrees of success—but instead I found myself thinking about how J’s demeanor reminded me of a pouty birthday boy who thought he had given very clear instructions to all his classmates on what gifts he wanted to receive, yet tragically each gift he unwrapped disappointed him more and more. The birthday boy would soon want mommy head writer to punish all these naughty staff writers for not bringing him better funnies. None of these funnies were making him smile.

From the silence that suddenly filled the room, I could tell it was my turn to pitch. K shot me a look. This was it. I knew I was going to bomb, but in that moment, I had to fake it. Essentially, it was my job to pretend that at all times I had something worth saying. Not only worth saying to the people in this room, but worth repeating to millions of television viewers across the country.

“You know how the Axtress is on the show this Friday?” I said. The Axtress was a superhero played by a celebrity. She had the power of axe throwing. Her appearance had been discussed for weeks. J stared at me with an expression that said something like *Every second of my time that you waste costs the network twelve thousand dollars.*

“Anyway, my pitch is called ‘Kiss, Marry, Axe.’”

I flipped around my laptop to reveal a crudely Photoshopped image. I kept my eyes on my screen and kept talking, afraid that if I saw how my pitch was going over in real time I’d freeze and never be able to speak again.

“So, we’d show three different famous faces. For example, Taylor Swift, the Rock, and Beyonce. Then you and the Axtress each decide who you would kiss, who you would marry, and who you would axe.”

I clicked and then an animated GIF showed the Rock's face getting cut in half with a clip art axe. I had spent two hours the night before figuring out how to make the GIF. I instantly knew my time had not been well spent. Silence exploded in the conference room like a mortar shell. My coworkers averted their eyes. My bombing had sunk the pitch meeting to a new nadir.

"Who would I axe?" J repeated slowly. "You want me to say, on national television, which celebrity I want to kill? Great idea."

"Oh. I was thinking more like how axe can also mean to fire someone," I stammered, barely above a whisper.

"Fire someone? Interesting choice of words," J said. A few writers chuckled nervously, the first time there had been anything close to the sound of laughter the entire meeting.

I opened my mouth to reply but couldn't get any words out. I braced for J to demand an intern throw my computer in a woodchipper, maybe while holding a finger or two of mine down into the spinning blades for good measure. Instead, he moved his gaze up to a soft focus above the heads of everyone in the room and moved things along.

"Anybody else?" J asked. Half the writers still hadn't pitched, but nobody moved or raised a hand.

After what felt like an eternity, Cordova casually said, "What if we do a thing with that story about how aliens are real or whatever?" He twirled his pen in a gesture that said he didn't care if J liked his pitch or not.

"Sure. What do we do with it?" J asked, looking at Cordova with relief. Cordova was the only staff writer who didn't talk to J like he was afraid of him, which I could tell J appreciated.

"A classic sketch," Cordova continued. "A sketch sketch. We haven't done a sketch sketch in a while, you know?"

“Yeah,” J said, sitting forward in his chair. “Go on.”

“So, you could play an alien trying to get into a club and the Axtress is the bouncer, but you keep saying obviously alien things, right? Like, ‘Take me to your leader—oops, I mean, take me to your ... bottle service?’”

“Hah,” J said. That’s really what he said. Hah. He didn’t laugh, but saying hah was still a sign of potential interest if not outright approval. Then he smiled. Gears turned in his head. He looked up at the ceiling and smiled bigger.

“Yeah,” J riffed, “I could be like ‘Is that a ray gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?’”

“And then she goes ‘No, it’s an axe,’” Cordova riffed back.

“And then I could go, ‘Ooh, an axe—what cutting edge technology!’”

The writers laughed, right on cue.

“Exactly,” Cordova said. “It writes itself.”

“No, you do,” J said. “Write it up by lunch.”

“Can do,” Cordova said.

“Good. Then I think we’re done here?” J said it as a question, but before anyone could reply, he stood up and left.

K followed in J’s wake. She paused in the doorway, waiting until J was out of earshot. “Dude, that was brutal,” she said, addressing me specifically. “You should know that J hates it when people read pitches off laptops. Haven’t you figured out how this place works yet?”

#

There were a lot of unwritten rules you had to know to be a late-night comedy writer.

You had to know that J liked rhyming but thought limericks were corny.

You had to know that J didn't like when a joke got applause instead of laughs, and he absolutely hated it when a joke got a groan.

You had to know that everyone called the show "the show," often emphasizing *the*, as if there were no other shows on Earth. People said this without knowing that one day it would be true.

You evidently had to know that J did not like it when people read pitches off laptops.

You had to know that everyone referred to the host by his first initial instead of saying his whole name. "J wants new ideas for the topical cold open" or "J was hoping the writers could come in and work this Sunday on some additional Super Bowl pitches." Some people acted like saying "J" was to save time, like every day was such a catastrophically important scramble that we couldn't possibly say two syllables out loud or type the rest of those letters. With other people, it was more like "J" was a secret codename in case our emails ever leaked to the press, even though it was the easiest code in the world to break (although, at this point in history, a late-night host named J could have been Jon or John or James or Jimmy or the other Jimmy). Eventually, though, I came to think that the real reason was even more irrational, like everyone was afraid of saying his full name out loud lest he be invoked, like saying "bear" in the Middle Ages or "Voldemort" in the Harry Potter universe or "J.K. Rowling" on social media.

K was hard on me those first ten weeks, but she taught me a lot, too, just like she always had. Usually, it felt like she was looking out for me, even if her motivation was so that I wouldn't make her look bad by association, given our history. I assumed the other writers knew that she was why I had the job.

A decade before she was head writer, K was just another bright-eyed kid who moved to New York City from a small town to try to "make it in comedy," sarcastic jazz hands implied. I

immediately recognized in her a kindred spirit, though not an identical one. We were cut from the same cloth, although her shape in progress had more sharp edges than mine did.

The first time I met K, we were both barely of legal drinking age standing in line (or, as the locals said, standing on line) to see a show at the cool comedy theater of the era, the one in the basement underneath a grocery store, the one with alumni who had careers that comedy nerds like us coveted. These real comedians still graced the theater's dingy halls, where subterranean carpeted walls gave you mysterious rashes if you leaned on them while watching a show, as we soon would be doing almost every night. K and I hit it off immediately, and then clung to each other tightly. That first night ended in a nearby Irish dive bar, where we poured our hearts out to each as we poured pitcher after pitcher of cheap beer, making promises and prophecies about the *commedia dell'arte* we wanted to dedicate our lives to creating.

"It's a cult," K joked as we looked at the cost of a class listed in a pamphlet she had snagged. "Pay us so we can teach you how to be the right type of funny, like us."

"More like a multilevel marketing scheme," I said. "Let's sign up."

We lived in crappy apartments, survived on dollar slices of pizza, and took classes at the comedy theater, inhaling as much comedy as our bodies could handle. We performed anywhere that would give us stage time, no matter how derelict. Most evenings eventually led to the same corner booth of the same Irish dive bar, riffing with our newfound tribe, trying to say the funniest thing, be the most casually transgressive, devastate each other with the most well observed personal roast, and above all do whatever it took to make each other laugh. Throughout that time, although I was more fulfilled than I'd ever been, I was also in a desperate rush to get to the next step of things. My conception of life was that it would be like this forever, perhaps only more so, and that our passion was enough to sustain us ever upward.

One late night during those early days, K and I were headed home together on the subway. I was telling her about my favorite Cook and Moore sketch for the hundredth time.

“See, what’s what so amazing about it—”

“I’ve seen the sketch, dude,” K interrupted me, annoyed. “Don’t talk to me like you know more about comedy than I do.”

I got quiet. We jokingly teased each other all the time—it was the primary way we spoke—but her tone had an edge to it I didn’t recognize. I was acquainted with Sarcastic K, Caustic K, Sardonic K, Snarky K, Wry K, Cynical K, Irreverent K, Flippant K, Impudent K, Profane K and even Blasphemous K. I adored all those versions of her. But I’d never encountered Mean K before. I tried to figure out what had caused the transformation. My mind went back to earlier that night when we’d done a show in the back of a taco shop. It hadn’t gone well for anyone, but K had bombed especially hard.

“Maybe you’re too pretty to be a comedian,” I’d blurted out right after her set without thinking, trying to cheer her up.

“And you’re not pretty enough to be an asshole,” she’d shot back without hesitation.

Neither of us spoke for several stops as the subway plodded along. When her stop came, the train halted with a lurch, causing her to slide along the hard plastic bench and into me. She didn’t move away. Our legs were lubricated by the humidity of the city’s underbelly and the sweat of our youth. K was wearing shorts. Yes, earlier that night at our comedy show, up on stage in front of strangers who bought tickets, she’d been wearing shorts. The audacity. Who did that? K did that.

She invited herself into my crappy Brooklyn apartment. By way of foreplay, we sat on my bed and took turns showing each other comedy sketches we liked on my laptop. The sex was

sloppy and fun. She was the first and only person that I ever laughed with during sex without it ruining the mood. We were never officially anything. We never talked about what it meant. We were *Yes And-ing*, following the rules of comedy we learned in class, never saying no.

Eight months into our comedic rumspringa, K and I decided to take our fate into our own hands. We were no longer going to wait for the cool theater to ask us to join their ranks. We were going to put up our own comedy show. We didn't have a venue, but it didn't matter. We had a vision. We were going to make it in comedy. Even then, we had different definitions of what that meant: For me, making it in comedy meant being accepted by others who saw the same absurdity in everything that I saw; for K, making it meant having those same people not just accept her, but defer to her superior taste, a taste which she believed in with a confidence I couldn't fathom. It didn't matter, though, because we both agreed that our show would change the face of the New York City comedy scene forever. That was our first decision as a comedy team. Once aligned on that, next we spent hours deciding on the name of our duo. We eventually landed on "Three Old Cunts." K insisted that "cunt" be in the name, so we started with cunt and built out from there. Cunt was our keystone; cunt was a promise on a flag that, once raised, had to be delivered upon. It would force our shows to be irreverent and fearless. It was also an homage to the British comedy we both adored. Including the "three" in our name even though there were only two of us was my contribution. And the "old" was because we weren't and never would be, therefore the name would be funny forever.

We then went about actually writing the content of the show. We figured this would be the easy part. With our dedication, it actually was. We met three times a week, usually at a Starbucks. It felt like we were doing what we were supposed to be doing. I preemptively imagined our success, being interviewed after we won awards and acclaim, talking about when

we were just starting out, this very time, writing our first show in a Starbucks. I secretly delighted in the exhibitionism of printing out our sketches and bringing them to a public place in broad daylight, in Final Draft script format, our jokes spelled out in the unmistakable Courier font, proclaiming to any strangers who happened to look our way that we were Comedy Writers.

K believed that co-writing was bullshit, so our process involved solitary scripting and then mutual readthroughs where the other would offer punch-up suggestions. K's sketches were acerbic and sharp. They had titles like "Stupid Boss," where an employee kept telling her boss how dumb he was with increasingly cutting insults, and the boss would reply with increasingly meaningless business aphorisms. My sketches were typically mundane slices of life where something weird would happen, like a couple shopping for new khaki pants when suddenly a mannequin would start speaking and try to convince them he was a real person who'd been frozen because he was mean to a janitor/witch, usually with a dash of forced commentary that late-stage technocapitalism was bad. The working title of that sketch was "Crazy Mannequin." I was perpetually convinced that every sketch we wrote was hilarious. We laughed until we cried, freely offering each other joke after joke, incrementally improving each other's work, crossing out punchlines and writing better ones that we riffed.

One day when we were reading through our latest sketches, K got a phone call from a number she didn't recognize.

"Hello?" she answered. I watched her face transform from confusion to ecstasy. It was like Jesus had just called and tipped her off that she should set down her coffee and head outside for the rapture.

"It was the artistic director calling about Fluffernutter!" K exclaimed after she got off her phone. "He just cut Nick. He asked me if I wanted to be on the team!"

Fluffernutter was one of the official house teams at the cool theater. Being invited to be an official member of the team meant that K would get to perform to a sold-out crowd every week. It meant that she'd get her face in a team photo on the wall and her headshot on the website. It meant she was one step closer to all our dreams coming true.

I jumped up and hugged her, trying to match her enthusiasm.

"I'm going to be on Fluffernutter," she said, her voice full of wonder.

"So cool," I offered. "You deserve it. Sucks for Nick. I wonder what happened."

"I'm going to be on Fluffernutter," she repeated. "I mean, it's not like Fluffernutter is as good as New England Clam Shower, but still." New England Clam Shower was the theater's premier team at the time, performing in a coveted Saturday night slot.

"Yeah, New England Clam Shower shows are the best, but Fluffernutter is still pretty funny, too," I said.

"Fluffernutter is really funny," she corrected me.

"For sure," I said, noticing her allegiance shifting before my eyes. "Should we get back to work?"

It took K a moment to realize what I was talking about. Her eyes found the sketches on the table. I'd paid to print them out at Kinkos on the way to meet her here. They suddenly didn't seem like proof we were Comedy Writers. They were just more paper detritus, fitting right in with the stained cups, empty sugar packets, and stirring sticks strewn about the table, ready to be discarded.

"Back to work?" K asked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean keep working on what we were just working on," I said. "On our show."

"I mean, I'm on Fluffernutter now," she said.

“So?” I asked. “Why does that change what we were doing?”

“I think I should focus on this,” K continued. “This could lead to something big for me. Sorry if that sounds selfish, but if you’re never selfish, you’ll never achieve anything. You understand, right? I thought we were on the same page about what we wanted.”

We stopped meeting up to write. Then K stopped replying to my texts. She was always busy hanging out with her new team. A few months later the cool theater held auditions, and I got placed onto an official team, too: Barf Narf. Now my picture was on the wall, Barf Narf’s photo right next to the one of Fluffernutter. I’d see K backstage or at the bar after shows. She started replying to my texts again, but things weren’t like they’d been. I realize now that K didn’t want things to be like they’d been before. She was looking forward. I followed her lead, rushing off to the next thing, being selfish in the name of achievement.

It worked. Before I knew it, I got my first real comedy writer job and moved to Los Angeles. K and I fell out of touch again, but I still followed her on social media. I watched as K’s professional success once again surpassed my own. She posted about becoming head writer of the show. I got jealous. The typical hustle in between gigs of a comedy writer’s scrappy existence grew to a hitherto unknown length for me. The hustle became a struggle, and then the struggle became a drought. My savings dwindled. I got desperate. I sent K a text out of the blue. I wasn’t sure if she’d reply. I figured I didn’t have anything to lose. If my text annoyed her, the worst that could happen was just that we’d continue not talking.

Yo! Long time no talk. Congrats on the head writer gig! You’re too smart for that show, by the way. That said, if a staff writer spot ever opens up, I’d love to submit :)

A minute later, my phone rang. It was a call from K. The audacity. Responding to a text with a call? Who did that? K did that.

“The show needs to hire a writer right now,” K said without preamble. “We just let someone go who wasn’t working out. How soon can you put a packet together?”

“Hey. Good to hear from you. Uh, why didn’t it work out with the other writer?”

“She cried too much,” K said. I couldn’t tell if she was joking.

I packed up my life, moved back to New York, and started the following week. I couldn’t believe how fast my life changed, how quickly I was still willing to abandon everything just to chase a shot at making it.

The first ten weeks passed in a blur. I had no idea if I was doing a good job. I suspected I wasn’t and I prayed that nobody else but K could tell. Despite being chronically stressed and busy with her own work, K tried to offer me tips to improve my pitches whenever she could. She tried to show me how this place worked.

You had to know that J liked doing jokes about a certain budget airline but not if we’d already done a joke about them that week.

You had to know that J genuinely believed that it was his mission to bring people a little bit of joy at the end of their day.

You had to know that it made J furious when parody song lyrics didn’t exactly match the syllable count of the original song they were parodying.

You had to know that J was open to doing more jokes about this whole “government acknowledges uptick in UFO sightings” thing, but not in a super serious way.

You had to know to never use mayonnaise as a prop or even use the word “mayonnaise” or even “mayo” in a joke because it reminded J of pus.

You had to know that you were lucky to be here.

#

By the end of the day after my epic pitch meeting fail, I still hadn't heard if I was going to get renewed or not. After the taping, I stayed even later than normal at my desk, trying to prove my worth via the act of hanging around.

K had sent out an email to the writers saying that J was looking for new cold open ideas to do about the Congressional hearings happening that week. I saw it as one of my last chances to prove I shouldn't be fired. I stared at my screen, typing pitch after pitch, but they were all garbage.

Close to midnight, K popped into my office. She was barefoot. Her glossy blonde hair was twisted into a knot with a ballpoint pen stuck through the middle. She glowed with the aura of a college student pulling an all-nighter for an exam they were already prepared for but wanted to ace to impress the professor. I thought about the time I told her all those years ago that she was too pretty to do comedy.

"I had a feeling you'd still be here," she said with approval.

"I'm still working on those alien hearing cold open ideas you emailed about."

"Good." She made as if to leave, then hovered in the doorway. "You know, when I first started working here, I heard someone say it was the hardest job in late-night because we do ten thousand calories of work for what could be a one hundred calorie job."

"Good thing I've been looking for a new cardio option," I said. "I hate spin class."

"I've got some whiskey in my office," she said. She took a step toward me and slid the door shut behind her. A ripe vanilla fragrance wafted off her. I couldn't tell if it was her perfume or if she'd already started. "Stop by when you're done and we can riff. Like we used to do. Unless you've got plans. Which I know you don't. By the way, I recently rewatched that Cook and Moore sketch you love so much. The one where they're talking about women in the pub."

“Yeah?” I said. I was touched she remembered. “And?”

“Doesn’t hold up,” she said.

I worked on my pitches for another hour before going to her office.

“Come in,” she said as I knocked. She was standing in front of a large corkboard covered in notecards with the names of famous people next to a row of dates and segment numbers. In her left hand she held a glass filled with a generous pour of a brown liquid. In her right hand was a notecard waiting to be pinned.

“Hey,” I said.

“What’s up?” She said it without any indication that she’d invited me to stop by.

“I submitted my pitches.”

“I hope nothing on the alien hearings.” She said it without any indication that five hours before she had sent out an email telling all the writers to make our pitches on that very topic.

“Why not?” I asked.

“J wants to keep things light tomorrow.”

K pinned a notecard to the wall while bringing the drink to her lips. She did it with an expertise that suggested practice. “J was just here. You should have stopped by earlier. It’s good to get face time in with the boss.”

“I thought that’s what I was about to do. With you.”

K didn’t reply. Her eyes stayed glued to her work. I turned to leave.

“I better go write some new pitches.”

“Dude,” K said, finally looking at me. “Do it in the morning. Sit. Talk. Help yourself.”

She gestured to a bar cart and sat down on a leather couch, which made me take note of the fact that her office was big enough to have a bar cart and a couch.

I poured myself a drink from a bottle with a brass buffalo on it and sat next to her. I took a sip and decided it was what I'd smelled before. As I took another sip, I made eye contact with a Phoebe Buffay Funko Pop figurine on K's desk. It was next to an expensive-looking fountain pen under a glass display.

"Any guests we still need pitches for?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it. I've got it all sorted. Want to play a game?" She undulated her eyebrows. There were bags under her eyes. I knew that she barely slept. Based on the time stamps of when she sent work emails assigning new tasks or giving blunt notes to scripts that had already been turned in, it seemed possible she didn't sleep at all. But the fatigue I saw in her face now seemed like a new level of exhaustion. In a word, she looked unwell. I wanted to be able to worry about her, but that was never our dynamic and now it seemed like it might be too late to start.

"What game?" I asked.

K exaggeratedly reached into her purse, making a show of it. After a moment she lifted a one-dollar bill into the air. She wiggled it suggestively, gestured like she was going to shove it down my shirt, then stood up and opened the window. We were on the fifth floor and there was no screen. Cold air and traffic noises spilled into the room. Without explanation, K dropped the dollar. It disappeared into the night.

"Your turn. What do you raise me?" she said.

"Fun game," I said. "You know, I'm glad having this high-paying job hasn't changed you." I wondered, though, had it? Her job had changed me, so how could it not have changed her? Or maybe the power had just given her permission to be who she was all along. I still wanted her acceptance; she still required my deference.

“Fine,” K said. “I’ll go again.” K produced a one-hundred-dollar bill from her purse.

“Geeze, why do you have a stack of bills in there?” I asked. “Are you a drug dealer or a high roller at a strip club?”

“Why can’t I be both?” she said demurely.

“Also, isn’t going from a single to a hundred skipping a few steps?”

“It’s called heightening, dude,” she said, taking a sip of her drink. “Try it the next time you write a sketch.”

“Shots fired,” I said. “Then how about a Rolex? Or a Fabergé egg? Or a gold brick?”

She placed her drink down and started intently folding the hundred into a paper airplane.

“Which one of those is the funniest?” she said without looking away from her work.

“What?”

“Rolex. Fabergé egg. Gold brick. One of those would be the funniest choice for you to throw out this window right now. I know which one it is. Do you?” She finished her currency origami, took another sip of her beverage, and looked at me expectantly.

“Gold brick?” I asked.

“Hm,” she said. She went to the window and sent her hundred-dollar airplane flying.

“Care to raise me?” she asked. “Hiding a gold brick in your pocket?”

She reached over and patted the top of my pants, frisking me.

“Afraid not,” I said. “You win.”

#

The next day, none of my pitches were chosen. I didn’t get anything I’d written on the show. My final week to impress was looking bleak. That night, I found myself late at my desk again, all alone. I was about to leave when I saw that K had emailed the writers a new directive:

J wanted to see more pitches for the Axtress's appearance on Friday. Evidently J had soured on Cordova's alien bouncer sketch and he wanted to see new ideas. The Axtress was not only the most important guest of the week, but maybe of the entire season. If my pitch was chosen for her, it would redeem my pitch meeting fail and possibly save my entire career. It was my last chance.

I tried to write, but I had nothing. The blinking cursor on the blank page was telling me in morse code that I'd never write anything funny ever again. Then there was a knock at the door.

"Let's get out of here," K said. "We can take my car."

"You have a car?" I asked.

"Yeah, dude. The company car service."

"You get a company car service?"

"I do if I stay after ten," she said.

"Don't you stay after ten every day?"

"Of course."

When we got inside the back of the car, K asked abruptly, "Do you like working here?"

"Sure," I said, trying to play it cool. "It's a dream job, right?"

"It's not too low-brow for you? In your text when you begged for this job, you said that I was too smart to work for the show. I hate when people say shit like that." There was an edge to her voice that I recognized. Mean K. She probably didn't think of it that way. She probably just thought of Mean K as Boss K, her default way of operating at the show. The last ten weeks, I was never sure if I was talking to Boss K or Friend K, or when one would slip into the other.

"Sorry," I said, trying to ascertain who I was talking to now. "I'm grateful for this job."

“Then you need to start getting more on,” Boss K said. She wasn’t smiling. “There is a sense of urgency for you to get more on the show.”

“I’m trying,” I said.

“Try harder. If you get something on this week, it’ll be easier for me to not put you on the chopping block. It’s about who has the most points on the board. Get it?”

I told her that I got it.

After finishing the rest of the drive in silence, when we arrived outside my place, I figured our night was done and the car would take K to her fancy apartment, but she got out and joined me on the sidewalk. She took a step toward me as the car drove away.

“I guess I better work on my pitches for tomorrow,” I said, unsure what was happening.

“You squatting in this dump alone?” K said.

I didn’t respond.

“Dude, relax. I’m not going to fire you,” she laughed. “Not tonight anyway. And I’m not going to seduce you, either. Wouldn’t be very professional of me, what with the power dynamic and all.” She caressed my cheek with what felt like mock flirtation. Some things done ironically just become the thing.

“Very funny,” I said.

“You wouldn’t cancel me though if I did, would you?”

“Hah,” I said, not laughing but saying the word.

“Dude, you should see your face right now,” she said, breaking away. “Come on, let’s have a drink and riff on some pitches. You could use the help.”

I got a glimpse of my reflection in the front door’s paned window as I locked it behind us. I was wearing a plaid shirt that had been a part of my wardrobe for over a decade. I’d

probably worn it in a show we performed in together at some point. It was a shirt that I used to think of as my “nice shirt.” It had red, purple, and yellow stripes. I had worn it for the official Barf Narf team photo. I’d been proud when I saw the photo hanging on the wall of the cool theater. It meant I belonged. It meant that I’d made it and that people who could recognize the imposters had said that I passed the real-one test and that everything that was supposed to come next would come inevitably.

As we ascended the stairs to my apartment, I wondered what K saw when she looked at me—the me I was now or the me I had been when we first met. So much had changed, and nothing had changed. I still wanted K to think that I was funny.

I got us each a PBR tallboy from the fridge, our drink of choice when we were young. I waited for K to criticize my selection, but she didn’t. We cracked open the beers, toasted, then sat down on the edge of the bed, the only seating available in my studio.

“Want to play a game?” K asked.

“Oh no. What game?”

“We each type out an email to J from the other person’s account with a message that would get us fired—”

“Absolutely not.”

“—and then at the same time we hit send. Whoever hits ‘undo’ first loses.”

“No way.”

Her eyes flared devilishly as she handed me her phone.

“Dude,” she said sweetly. “Don’t be a pussy. I’ll give you a little taste.” She placed her drink between her legs, then began typing from my phone. “Something like, ‘Hey J, quick pitch.

What if we made a porn parody of the show, but the joke is that it's really you in it? Hard core, full peen.”

“Stop!” I said, laughing despite the real terror I felt.

K angled my phone to show me that she had actually typed it. To my added horror, J's email address was already in the “to” field.

She placed my phone on the bed between us, then handed me hers.

“Your turn,” she said.

“Fine,” I said, giving in. “What's your passcode?”

“Four twenty, six six six,” she said. I thought she was kidding, but I tapped it in anyway. It worked. I was tired and couldn't think of anything funny, so I wrote out what K had said about the porn parody. I turned her phone to show her.

“Wow, you're so clever,” she said. “Even when we're playing games, do you still have to ride my coattails?”

Something inside me snapped. Out of nowhere, a sense came over me that I had a chance to prove something to her. I didn't know if I could ever be as funny as she was, but I could try to be as selfish. I tapped her phone, sending the idiotic nonsense to J. I held up her screen.

Message sent. Undo? floated there, taunting us.

“No!” she screamed, her mood instantly changing.

“How long do we have to hit undo?” I took on her devilish tone. “Thirty seconds?”

“You bitch!” She lunged for her phone, but I held it away.

“This game was your idea!”

“Dude!” K yelled as she grabbed around my torso and pulled us both down onto the bed. I still didn’t let go. She slapped me, hard, and my grip finally released. She wrenched her phone back and frantically tapped at the screen.

I looked on. We both held our breath.

Sending undone.

We exhaled together.

“Oh thank God,” K said to herself. We were both lying down on the bed.

“You fucker,” she said to the ceiling. “That would have been bad.” Her eyes were tearing up and there was fear in her voice.

“Sorry,” I said.

“I can’t believe you hit send.”

“I can’t believe you slapped me. That’s the first time I’ve been slapped.”

“But it’s not the last,” she said, rolling over to face me on the bed. She slowly raised her hand up into the air, giving me time to move away if I wanted. I didn’t move. She slapped me again, slightly softer than before. I feigned outrage, then we both laughed hysterically once again, dissolving the remaining tension that had built in the room. Even in the perfection of that moment, I still could sense the power she had over me. It was simple: I cared what she thought of me, but she wasn’t bothered by what I thought of her.

When I woke up the sun wasn’t out yet but K was already gone. It was Thursday and the new round of Axtress pitches were due by 8 A.M. Only two shows left to get something on.

As the sun rose, I drank a black coffee and watched the trailer for the Axtress’s upcoming superhero movie again to try to find some sort of inspiration that had not yet come. I opened

Wikipedia. I learned that in college the Axtress majored in poetry. An idea popped into my head. It was stupid, but maybe so stupid it was genius.

FOR WHOM THE AXE THROWS — In this bit, J invites the Axtress to compete in the hot trend of bar axe throwing, but here's the twist: since the Axtress was a poetry major, they won't just be throwing axes at a bullseye with numbers on it. They'll be throwing axes at a wall with dozens of random words on it. The wall will have the look of a fridge door filled with magnetic poetry. That's right, J and the Axtress will each be creating a poem with their axe throws! Whoever axes the better poem—as determined by audience applause—is the winner!

When I got to my desk an hour later, I had an email with the subject: Bad Axe Poetry — Production Meeting. I read on and saw that the title had been changed, but the pitch was mine. They'd picked my pitch! I was elated. But then I saw that in the credits section, I wasn't listed as the writer. K was. My pitch, but my name was gone. No name, no points on the board, no contract renewal.

I felt dizzy. Maybe it was a misunderstanding. Everyone was so busy, lots of moving parts. Suddenly I was knocking—too loudly—on K's door.

“Come in,” she said, distracted. As I poked my head into her office, she briefly looked up from her computer before refocusing on whatever she'd been working on before I interrupted.

“What's up?”

“The axe poetry bit?” I said.

“What about it? I’m slammed. Want to work on it with me? I could use someone to help on the production elements and run rehearsal tomorrow morning. You know, all the bitch work,” she said. “Will you be my bitch?”

“It was my idea,” I said.

Now she looked at me with her full attention. She was angry. Instead of the apologetic explanation I’d been expecting, she looked ready to put me on the chopping block herself and cut my throat. She got up from her desk and approached me.

“One thing you should know, and you’ll learn this if you work here longer, is that sometimes people pitch the same thing. We had the same idea. Big deal. Her character throws axes in the movie, she likes poetry, and axe-throwing bars are a trendy thing right now. Tah-dah!” She took her hands and mashed them together.

“But I came up with it.”

“We riffed together last night.”

“Not this! I came up with it this morning. The blurb is what I wrote verbatim.”

“Not the title!” K said. “Your title was too wordy. You have to work on that.”

“So you admit that you saw my pitch!” I said louder than I should have. “Why wasn’t my name on it? You told me I’m supposed to be worried about getting points on the board.”

K sat back in her chair and looked at me like I was a child asking for dessert after refusing to eat my veggies while simultaneously shitting my pants.

“I had the same idea, okay?” she said. “I might have used your blurb to save myself the twenty seconds it would have taken to write up that mind-blowing pitch, time that I have now lost explaining this to you. But for the record, if me repurposing something you’ve written frees me up to do one of the other hundred things I need to get done this morning for the show, then

that's good for the show, okay? My job—as head writer, in case you forgot—is to take mediocre staff writer crap and make it good enough to show J and then he makes it good enough to make America laugh. Got it? That's how it works, that's the deal you signed up for.”

“But you told me I need to be getting more on—”

“That's still true!” she cut me off. “But guess what? Even if it was your dumb idea, it's more likely that J would pick the idea if my name was next to it, not yours. He trusts me. He doesn't know who you are,” K said.

I wasn't sure what to say. She turned away and went back to her desk. She sank down in her chair like her legs had given out, as if reprimanding me had sapped her remaining life force.

“I'm just trying not to get fired,” I said.

“That's not the best headspace to be making comedy,” she said.

“No shit,” I said.

Whatever expression I had on my face at the moment made her soften. She sighed.

“Look, if your presence here makes my job easier, then you stay. But if keeping you is more work for me than replacing you...” she raised her eyebrows and shrugged, like however that sentence ended was beyond her control. “Cool?”

You had to know not to take anything personally, even the personal.

You had to know when to shut up and do what you were told.

You had to know that it wasn't your show.

“Cool,” I said and left.

I didn't see K the rest of the day. The production doc was updated to say that we were co-writers, although I took the lead on everything—I wrote the script, coordinated with props, consulted with wardrobe, gave feedback to graphics, tracked down the sound engineer to

wrangle an intro song from the band. I soon forgot my anger with K and got swept away with the feeling that, just maybe, I was a real comedy writer.

#

When I got ready in the morning on Friday, I put on my nice shirt. I got to the studio earlier than I needed to. I didn't want to be late for running the Axe Poetry rehearsal. For the first time in ten weeks, I felt more excitement than dread. The crew seemed excited, too. The danger of flying axes infused everything with an electric giddiness. For so many of the show's signature bits they did week after week, most of the crew could be on autopilot. Whenever there was something new, they had to pay attention.

At five o'clock eastern, ready or not, it was time to start taping. Despite the residual weirdness with K, I was feeling elated. The thrill of seeing something I'd thought up performed in front of an audience live for television—for television!—was magical.

The band started playing the show's intro song, and even though I'd heard it hundreds of times before, I got chills. This was it. Things were moving fast. I felt my head swimming.

The monologue and the first act went well. It was a hot crowd. I had a shot of panic there was something I'd forgotten to do—Double check the cue cards? Perform a final review of the props?—but even if I had, it was too late now. The panic mostly turned back into excitement, but it was all the same to my heart rate.

“How's everybody doing!” J boomed as he walked out from the curtains with the Axtress at the start of the second act. The audience roared. J fed off their energy, sucking it up and giving it back to them tenfold. He was so good at this. In person, watching him in front of a crowd, his talent was undeniable.

“I'm here with the Axtress!” he roared. She curtsied. The crowd cheered.

I was standing off to the side in an area called the air lock, near the booth where one of the executive producers was working the APPLAUSE sign's plunger, flashing the illuminated letters on and off, impossible for the audience to ignore. K stood a few feet away.

"We've got a fun new bit. It's a little game," J said to the enraptured audience, a twinkle in his eye. "We get to wear stylish safety goggles, plus it involves axes *and* poetry. Not sure if the safety goggles are for the axes or the poetry." The audience laughed.

"Can I keep these?" the Axtress said.

"For you? Anything. Hey, any poetry fans in the house?" J asked the crowd.

One person in the back row gave a meek *whoop*.

"Uh oh," J said, feigning concern. Another round of laughter.

"Um, I'm a poetry fan! I was a poetry major in college!" the Axtress said.

"You know, I bet that's why we're doing this," J said. More laughter.

My hands were overtaken by a nervous buzzing. I shoved them into my pockets so nobody around me would see them shaking.

As J explained the rules of the game to the audience, I said a silent prayer to the comedy gods of the universe.

I know I am a miserable phony but please let this bit go well.

Almost immediately after it started, the bit did not go well. Which was, to the credit of the comedy gods of the universe, a funny choice on their part. J was throwing his axes too hard. Some would stick, but most kept bouncing off the target wall, leaving untouched the spattering of words I'd spent hours carefully curating for maximum comedic effect. The Axtress—who, as I was now realizing, was not quite five feet tall and had forearms thinner than, say, the handle of an axe—was failing to get most of her throws all the way to the target, resulting in clang after

clang as her axes ricocheted off the studio floor. After ten minutes of struggle for what was supposed to be a six-minute segment, J asked the control booth to overlay the words they'd manage to strike to make their "poems" on the studio monitors.

"Okay, time to read our poems," J said. If he could tell that this was going as poorly as I could tell, he didn't show it. From his face, you'd think everything was going exactly according to the script.

"Oh no," the Axtress said. "You go first."

"Gladly, I love poetry and I'm great at it," J said. The audience laughed. "Okay, here goes mine. Ahem. *Dank puppy nevermore languid enormous but.*" J gave a spoken word flourish to nevermore, like he was discovering the sound of each consonant and vowel for the first time in each moment—neh-vur-more?—and the crowd roared with laughter, eating it up. I realized then with a jolt that it was a stupid idea that did not arc towards genius but rather stayed firmly in the realm of stupid, but it didn't matter. J was selling it. I felt an unexpected and tremendous amount of gratitude.

The Axtress went next. "Here's my poem. *Latent what was.* That's it."

The audience was silent. The Axtress looked to J. They didn't know if it was funny or not. Everyone—the audience, the Axtress, the crew, K, me—were all looking at J. We were all waiting to see if he laughed.

J laughed. And then all was good.

"Latent what was?" J said with an explosion of mirth. "That's the best poem I've ever heard!" He buckled over with laughter. The audience followed suit, palpably relieved to realize that the bit they were watching was funny, that they were being given a good show. The Axtress

laughed, too, throwing herself at J in a spasm of glee. The audience laughed more in response, happy to be a part of this shared moment.

“Latent what was? What does that even mean?” J cackled, and the thunderous laughter started again, his every word gasoline thrown on the fire. I was in shock. My panic transmuted itself into utter confusion. I had thought my plane was going down in a fireball of destruction, when in reality the pilot was just dipping in preparation for a crowd-pleasing loop-de-loop.

“Okay,” J said, wiping tears from his eyes. “Who thinks my poem ‘Dank Puppy Nevermore’ should win?”

The audience applauded. The single poetry fan from before gave another *whoop* and the audience laughed again. I felt a twinge of the spell that live theater can cast, a feeling I had lusted after in my twenties.

“Thank you, sir. See you at poetry club later,” J said. “And now, who thinks The Axtress’s poem should win, ‘Latent What Was’?”

The audience ignited. It was the loudest I had ever heard the studio. J egged them on and they applauded louder. The Axtress milked it, taking bow after bow, and they clapped louder still. Following J’s lead, the crowd began chanting the poem’s words.

“LATENT WHAT WAS! LATENT WHAT WAS! LATENT WHAT WAS!”

The audience was still chanting as J threw to commercial. As the studio band played us out, the chanting turned into applause and more cheers. The lights dimmed as the crew cleared the set to prepare for the Axtress’s talk segment in the next act. I inched closer to overhear. J hugged the Axtress, then jogged off stage to talk with K.

“Whose bit was this?” J asked.

K nodded in my direction.

“Nice one, pal,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “Super funny.”

J jogged back to his desk where the Axtress was already waiting in the guest seat. J and the Axtress were each swarmed by make-up artists and hair stylists adjusting their looks to be camera ready when we came back from commercial.

I felt like I was dreaming. I looked over at K. I wanted her to tell me the truth. Had the bit been funny?

Perhaps sensing my stare, K looked me in the eyes. She knew what I wanted to ask her. She leaned close, her lips grazed my ear as she whispered, “Let’s talk after the show tonight.”

#

When she finally found me at my desk, hours later, my anxiety was at full froth.

“Hey dude,” K said. Her tone was casual, like I wasn’t expecting a verdict in a trial where my life was on the line. “I’m getting drinks with J in the Rainbow Room. You should come.”

My head spun at the invite. “Wait, does that mean I’m not fired?”

“I didn’t say that. I’d say it’s a good sign that J wants to get drinks with you, though.”

“J wants to get drinks with me? He said that?”

“Dude, stop being a spaz. Come get drunk. You, me, J, maybe a couple EPs.”

I couldn’t shake the feeling this was a setup for intense humiliation. The other shoe would drop and I’d be punished for thinking that the bit had gone well or, worse, that somehow I deserved credit for the laughter that J had elicited from the crowd.

“I don’t know,” I said. I stayed in my seat.

“Dude! You have to! I need you to!” K’s typical pep had a manic quality to it. The perpetual bags under her eyes were darker than I’d ever seen them. Her skin was pallid and

clammy. If I was a stronger person or thinking of someone besides myself, I would have insisted that she skip drinks and rest.

“You know what?” I said instead, “I could use a drink.”

A few minutes later, we were toasting outside on the balcony of the 65th floor.

“Is J joining us here?” I asked.

The two EPs that K had come with shared a bemused look.

“He’s not meeting us *here*,” one of them said like he was explaining to a child why Santa hadn’t stuck around on Christmas morning while the child was refusing to eat his veggies and also shitting his pants. “We have a private room in the back.”

We downed our drinks and went back inside. After a short walk and a whisper to a hostess, we were led to a private room. When we entered, J was already there.

“My friends!” J said with outstretched arms. “Welcome.”

The table was filled with shrimp cocktails, mini-tiramisu cups, hummus spreads, Connecticut-style lobster rolls, stuffed dolmades, and charcuterie of all denominations. The décor was full of last-touch-of-lipstick refinement: a barely illuminated crystal chandelier; chairs upholstered in soft mahogany leather and gold rivets; a wall covered in glamorous black and white photographs from the show’s history, some of which included J and many that included his predecessors. Closest to me was a candid photo of J laughing with one arm around a former president and the other around a Beatle.

As we approached the table, J noticed me. I was so used to flying under the radar at the show, his gaze felt like an assault. I winced, expecting him to demand I justify my presence. Instead, he stood and gave me a hug.

“Hey bud!” J said as he embraced me. “You’ve been killing it, pal. Latent what was? So funny.”

“Thank you,” I said. In my wildest dreams, I couldn’t have imagined a better greeting. I let myself believe that I deserved it.

A waitress came. J did the talking and ordered a round of drinks for the table. The waitress asked if we wanted anything else to eat. There were no menus. It felt like we could have asked for anything and it would have been brought to us on silver platters. I ordered what K ordered.

J held court. I was enraptured. The drinks came. We drank. J told more stories. More drinks came. We drank more. J regaled us with anecdotes about starting his career and mishaps from the early days at the show, incredible stories I’d never heard him tell. Was it possible these stories were new to K and the EPs, too? They reacted like they were. I was reminded of how funny a comedian J had been when he was just starting out; self-deprecating at times, but also cuttingly funny about the show’s celebrity guests in a way I’d never heard him be publicly. He let his guard down so much, I felt like I’d been let into some sort of inner circle of trust.

At some point, I’d had enough drinks that I felt comfortable joining in with J’s jokes. It was like I was a fan who had hopped down from the stands at the U.S. Open, picked up a tennis racquet, and was now holding his own rallying with a Grand Slam Champion. The EPs laughed whenever J said anything, and they laughed whenever J laughed at something I said. K rified with us for a while, but she was fading. Her exhaustion intensified as the evening went on. Soon she looked positively haggard. Eventually she fell asleep, or maybe passed out, still sitting up in her chair. J put a napkin on her head. I laughed. K didn’t wake up.

“I’ll raise you,” I said as I slurped an oyster and put the empty shell on top of the napkin on K’s head. She still didn’t wake up.

“That’s the funniest thing that I’ve ever seen!” J said and even though I knew it couldn’t possibly be true, I believed him.

J grabbed a cocktail cherry from one of the EP’s drinks and put it in the oyster shell. In an attempt to heighten, I downed a champagne flute and reached it toward K’s head. As I let go, K jerked awake with a cough, causing the napkin, oyster, and cherry to tumble down—and the glass to slip from my hand and shatter on the floor, inspiring a burst of laughter from everyone but K. We were surrounded by a dangerous mess. K looked around in confusion, taking in the laughter and trying to understand the joke.

“I need to go home,” she said quietly. “I’m sick.” J and the EPs had already started up a new conversation. It was like she said it just loud enough for me to hear. K pushed back from the table. She got up, unsteady on her feet, glass crunching beneath her shoes. She looked so sick that I briefly felt a moment of sober clarity. I thought about offering to help get her to the car service, or even going with her to make sure she got home okay. I stood up and put my hand on her back as she toddled to the door.

“You okay?” I whispered.

She nodded.

“What did you want to tell me?” I asked.

“Huh?” she asked.

“Before drinks, at my desk, you said that you wanted to talk with me. Was it about my bit? You can tell me the truth. I can handle it. Was it funny?”

“Oh,” K said meekly, like I was talking about something from another life. “It was nothing. Cordova was fired. I fired him. Earlier today. J said we need new blood around here.”

“Sucks for Cordova,” I said, sneaking a look back at J. “I didn’t think he’d ever leave.”

“Neither did he,” K said. “Sorry, dude, I’m so fucking tired. I have to go.”

She looked at me expectantly. J said something and there was a burst of laughter back at the table. I turned away from her to see what I’d missed. By the time I turned back she was gone.

I stayed in the secret room with J and the EPs all night long. We drank and laughed, more and more and more. Then one of the EPs shook my shoulder and told me it was time to go. At some point J had slipped away without saying goodbye.

“Don’t forget this,” one of the EPs said, handing me a phone. In my groggy state, it took me a moment to realize it didn’t belong to me. They’d left me there. I waited for an employee to tell me to leave, but nobody came. I was all alone.

As the stupor of alcohol eased its grip on my mind, I considered K’s phone. I wondered how K had gotten home without it. I tried to figure out what the right thing to do was. I could bring her the phone and some chicken soup or Gatorade or whatever it was that non-comedy people did to be nice. Instead, I thought about how I knew her passcode. I thought about how K had so easily left our comedy duo as soon as she had a better offer. I thought about how the only reason I had this job was because of K. I thought about how she’d been so mean to me after we’d slept together, but also how she’d picked my pitch. I thought about how she’d fired Cordova instead of me. I thought about what K would do. I tapped the screen. In her email drafts, the messaged I’d written to J was still there.

A few days later, K was dead. It happened so fast. I never got the chance to tell her sorry or thank you or goodbye. I hadn’t made it to see her at the hospital because I thought we had

more time. Plus, I'd been so busy and focused on work. A week after that, in the chaos of trying to keep the machine running, I was promoted to head writer. All the success I've had since then is just because I kept sticking around, staying at the party as late as I could.

#

It's late. I'm out of jokes. Comedy is a young person's game and the game ended and became a job for me a long time ago. The job wasn't about being funny. It was about pretending that at all times you had something worth saying and then saying it with confidence, putting others at ease, giving them permission to smile even when times were tough.

I don't know if J ever got the email I sent him from K's phone. He never mentioned it before the virus got him, too. It bothers me that if he did get the message, I don't know his reaction. It was the one time when, for a single sentence, I got to pretend that I was K. I'd like to know how I did.

I haven't typed anything in a while and my computer just went dark. In a moment, I'll bring it back to life and write something. Tomorrow I'll say whatever is written, willing it to be funny and then it will be so. But not yet. For now, I'll sit in the near darkness with my memories for a few moments more. The lights are off, but my hands are still illuminated by the full moon shining outside my office window, lit up bright like God's APPLAUSE sign, commanding us to enjoy the show.

In the end, you had to know that even when it was your show, it wasn't.

You had to know that no one was laughing at what you wrote.

You had to know that everyone was just laughing at you.