

ANYONE ELSE BUT ME

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Robert Duncan owned twenty-eight button-down pinstripe shirts, each of them stitched from a wrinkle-free, poly-cotton blend. Half were short-sleeved, worn during daylight savings time, and the other half long, put on when the clocks fell back. Fourteen made a reasonable laundry load, and Robert liked marking alternate Saturday afternoons on his day planner for washing. When he first developed this routine, he switched sleeve length on the weekend of the time change, and if the date was out of sync with his laundry schedule, he washed a mix of shirts on the following washday. It bothered him, though—opening his closet to a system in transition, caught between the adjustment of clocks and the wardrobe reset. The solution was simple. When Robert's scheduled washday fell afoul of the time change, he recalibrated, taking care of laundry, sleeve length, and clocks in a single weekend.

In 2006 long-sleeved shirts were phased out on the first of April. While the laundry ran, Robert set his clocks. He was in his office, adjusting time on the Betamax video player, when the doorbell rang. It was Zach from next door, shirtless as usual, tattoos vining up out of his jeans.

“Hey, Dunc,” he said, drifting into the front room as if he’d been invited. The hairstyle was new, black as shoe polish this time, a cut that might have been done with sheep-shears, gelled so stiffly the edges looked dangerous. Zach looked a decade younger than the fifty-plus he admitted to when pressed—and clearly out of place among his shaggy housemates, who looked as if they’d been plucked off the hillside at a Willie Nelson concert, circa 1973, then pickled in New Age mumbo jumbo and self-help truisms. They seemed not to know which decade they longed for.

“I’m changing the clocks,” Robert said.

Zach’s face was a perfect blank. “Isn’t that tomorrow?”

“Got a new computer,” Robert answered him. “Want to see it?” He turned and walked through the converted living room into the re-purposed dining room, the former given over to tech curiosities, among them a working Victrola, the latter flush with computers, between the rooms a wide

opening that had once held French doors. Together these rooms served as office-hobby shop-museum.

Zach whistled when he saw the new gaming machine, the imprint of flames on the garish red console.

“Take a look,” Robert said. “I’ll fix the time on the iMac.”

“Won’t the computers do it themselves?”

“I do this for a living, remember?”

“What about that old thing?” Zach indicated Robert’s Kaypro 10, clunky as a vintage suitcase, on the little corner table. “It have a clock?”

“Not this version.”

“What do you keep it for?”

“It’s a classic.”

“I don’t think so. Heather has one of those.”

“Hers is a *Mac* Classic.”

“That’s what I’m telling you,” Zach said, then, “Hey, that reminds me”—a clear sign that one of his non sequiturs would follow—“we’re having a party. I gotta help get ready.” He made to leave.

“You forgot something.”

Zach turned, blank again.

“Whatever you came over for.”

“Right!” Zach whacked himself in the forehead. “The party. You’re supposed to come.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“We’re moving out. I told you, didn’t I? You gotta come, Dunc. It’s gonna be loud—you won’t sleep.” Zach paused at the stairwell, looked up, then tossed one of his fey looks at Robert. “Better have a nap. Wish I could tuck you in. Just this once wish I could see what you’re hiding up there.”

§

Robert had claimed a space of his own for as long as he could remember—an only child with parents who let him close the door to his bedroom as soon as he was able. His father—old already—had died when Robert was ten, his mother so deep in grief she lived behind closed doors for the better part of a year. Robert discovered that dust settles on its own, that disarray happens even in an orderly household when no one is looking. One morning weeks after the funeral, he asked for grocery money. He organized the pantry shelves and kitchen cabinets, washed weeks’ worth of dishes, made lunch for two, and insisted that his mother eat. In the weeks that followed, he cleared dust and clutter. He put the household on a schedule.

He pulled his mother's old 78s from their sleeves, cleaned and organized them, played them on the hi-fi while he did house work. When spare time ballooned into his weekend days, he discovered tinkering. It started in the attic, with his father's ancient Remington typewriter, draped in cobwebs and dust. The keys and carriage still worked, though sluggishly, even after Robert blew the dust out. He loosened parts and oiled them, fit them into place again, his eyes, his fingers, memorizing the Remington.

Robert knew, of course, that his schoolmates didn't spend their hours as he did. They would have scorned him as a *momma's boy*, an orphaned loner, a hopeless bore. Or pitied him. Pity was like sludge, a sickening sweetness. For weeks after his father's death, he'd lived immersed in pity. When he discovered that he liked clean and orderly rooms, that he enjoyed the routines that kept them so, he learned to be meticulous in his choice of companions. He brought no one home who might judge or feel sorry for him.

This approach worked until September of 1967, when Robert left home for college. His campus was infected by the spirit of the times—the idea that each of us needs fixing, that the fix is readily available. Free love, primal screaming, transactional analysis. A book by R. D. Laing. During his third year, he had sex a number of times with a young woman who looked like a

librarian from central casting. What they did together otherwise felt like dating to Robert, but the young woman claimed labels were confining. Timothy Leary, she suggested, could open their minds. Robert liked his mind as it was. Still, one evening at her little efficiency, the librarian lookalike served up soft drinks on ice, and only after he had begun to feel decidedly strange did she announce she'd spiked their drinks, a tab of lysergic acid diethylamide in each.

“You have no right,” he said and headed back to his dorm, trying to maintain calm even as the trees, the hydrants, the streetlights throbbed at him. He was never certain, afterwards, how long the walk lasted or what impulse had lured him to a shower stall down the hall from his dorm room, the cold hard tiles he woke on when morning came, a half circle of his fellow residents staring quizzically at him. It took weeks to banish the voices that had called to him, the tempting chaos they had conjured.

Decades later, when the neo-hippies moved in next door, Robert was prepared to exclude them. Until Zach knocked, goofball Zach, wandering the downstairs rooms, saying, “Wow!” Saying “Trippy!” He seemed at first beneath contempt. And then amusing. The come hither looks, the blatant innuendo might have been a bother if Robert had felt a glimmer of attraction

in return. That temptation came when he bumped into Heather out front one afternoon, a current arcing between her and Robert from the moment he laid eyes on her. It was sex and more than sex; he could see that Heather sensed it too. She made a joke of the situation. A junk store, she called the house, laughing, when Zach brought her over for a tour. Not at the rooms she'd just been shown, not really, Robert thought. Rather, at Zack's perverse insistence on wanting Robert, at Robert's reflexive attraction to Heather. At herself, too, turning whatever she felt into a laugh line. Robert laughed with them. Afterwards in Heather's presence, he was aware of himself acting as if he were in on the joke and wishing otherwise and seeing her read this in him.

§

Inevitably, the moving-out party spilled over. Robert was standing at an upstairs window, taking a break from the bookkeeping work he'd spread out on the desk there. He had just raised the window to the beginnings of a cool evening breeze when Zach appeared on the stoop next door, three men behind him, longneck beers in hand, all four of them, their voices at party volume. Crossing a rather large backyard to the old garage on the alley, the men opened the doors wide and disappeared into the murky interior. Moments later the pool table appeared. Zach was handy with tools, his

housemates given to whimsy. They'd hauled an ancient but solid pool table out of a bar being refurbished on Sixth Street. The old garage was airless; it was poorly lit. Mr. Crazy Hair had installed state-of-the-art locking office-chair rollers on the table legs and a halogen light fixture beneath a bright open-sided tent guy-wired over the perfectly level slab he'd poured and troweled in the driveway beneath Robert's window. With Zach in the lead issuing directives, the men wheeled the old pool table along the perfectly spaced cement tracks he'd also poured and troweled. They disappeared beneath the canopy with the table, reappeared to fetch their longnecks from the garage, then disappeared into serious levity.

When women's voices mixed into the fray below, Robert rose from his bookkeeping and stood at the window again. Half a dozen partiers, bikini clad, downing margaritas, had assembled in and around the hot tub. They were clearly younger than Zach, most of them by a decade and a half, all except Heather, her face showing forty-seven years' worth of worry, her body just simply amazing, the curves ample and smooth, as if denying the age she frequently and loudly proclaimed. She was two decades beyond the woman she shared a bedroom with, the only other female of the household, a zaftig simp who, when asked, whispered that her name was Genevieve, the

French pronunciation. Heather bossed them all, showering Zach and his three male housemates with casual disdain. One of them was Chuck, another Rod. Or was it Don? None of them seemed to have a last name, though leaving for work each morning—always in slacks and tie, always well-combed—they looked as if somewhere they were Mistered.

“Hey!”

Robert came out of his unfocused stare; Heather had spotted him.

“Want something to look at?” She turned and spoke to the others in the hot tub. Laughter. Then arched backs, hands out of sight behind them, and their tops dropped into the frothing water.

Heather rose. Robert all but lost his balance staring at her breasts. Quickly, efficiently, she stepped out of her bikini bottom and raised it in his direction like a toast.

“Come on down!” she shouted.

“Yeah!” Zach back-stepped from beneath the pool canopy, his head raised toward Robert’s window. “We’ll give you something to remember!”

§

Heather met him at the front door, a flimsy silk wrapper clinging to her, wet from the hot tub. She handed him a margarita, said, “Catch up.” He

downed the drink. She brandished a pitcher and filled his empty glass, empty again by the time they'd got him in the hot tub and yanked his trunks off.

The tequila loosened his tongue, whereupon he launched into a commentary on Heather's name. Her birth would have pre-dated the explosion of girl children with names such as Rainbow and Sunny and Skye. The name Heather, he told her, its rustic romantic nuances, belonged to that age, not to respectable parents at the end of the Fifties.

"You think every woman you know has the name on her birth certificate?" she asked.

"What's on yours?"

She licked at the salt on the rim of her glass and drained what was left of her drink. Slinging ice, lime wedges across the yard, she set her glass on the deck beside her.

"Hertha," she said, leaving a dramatic pause before she went on. "If you laugh, you'll lose these." Her hand cupped his scrotum. She squeezed—but gently—then smirked at what the rush of blood had done to him.

"My mother was sentimental," she told him. "Named me after her grandmother's spinster sister. A maiden aunt is what Momma called Aunt

Hertha; spinster was my father's word. Wonder what was said behind her back. Wonder if she kept house with someone else's maiden aunt."

The water bubbled. Robert willed her to touch him again. Wishing didn't make it happen.

"Heather's an anagram," she said.

"But Hertha has one *E*." Making a loose fist, he flipped up the index finger, counting one. "Heather has two." He flipped up the middle finger. Two.

"My maiden name was Engel," she said, "German for *angel*. There's your second *E*." She gave him one of her looks. "Only you would count vowels."

Robert's thoughts tumbled out haphazardly. One, at least, of his unlikely neighbors had a last name. "I guess you aren't all Stepford hippies after all." General laughter from the women in the hot tub. "And you've been married," he said. "*That* must be an interesting story."

"It's how I got the Classic," Heather told him. "Stole it from the ex."

"You mean took it," he explained. "When you split."

"No," she said. "Zach and I? We burgled his house."

Robert pulled on his trunks and abandoned the hot tub after Heather got out. For a while, he watched her playing volleyball with the others, and later, she joined the men at pool—a riddle, this woman who teased and flirted, who made a punch-line of desire. But her eyes—sighting along a cue stick, unaware of being watched—her eyes, the lines of her face, were marked by a private sorrow, a grief that buffered her. Except from Zach. Studying the movement of players about the table, the spinning of solids and stripes across the felt, Robert envied the moments Heather and Zach came together—a look from her, a gesture, at home inside herself when her friend was near.

“You look lost.” Zach had materialized beside him. “Look like someone should take you in hand.”

“Suppose there’s a volunteer available?”

“Could be arranged. Might loosen you up.” Zach indicated Heather, poised at the table, lining up a shot. “Perhaps she could help.”

“I’m a bit eccentric.”

“Some of us find kooks alluring.”

Balls clicked as Heather made her shot.

“Take me,” Zach went on, “gay boy lusting after strait-laced straight computer geek.” He arched his brows at Robert. “I can’t resist a man who keeps himself a secret.” He put hands over his eyes and mock called, “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Robert was watching Heather. “And her?” he said, hearing hope in his voice.

“Heather’s old-fashioned,” Zach said. “Make your move already.”

“But how?” Robert was surprised to hear himself voice the question. He gave the tequila credit.

“You might not want my advice,” Zach said. “I’m told I could be more subtle.”

Zach was brash. He could be clueless. Scatterbrain was the word Robert’s mother would have used. But Zach could glance at a person and see what others invariably missed. He’d known Robert for a matter of weeks—unannounced visits, each one more off-kilter than the last—when Robert chanced upon Heather out front one Saturday afternoon and introduced himself. Not half an hour later, returning from a pick-me-up at the local coffee house, Zach dropped by, having discovered Robert might play video

games with him on a weekend afternoon. He looked Robert up and down, then reached a hand to his forehead, as if to confirm a diagnosis of fever.

“You’ve met Heather,” he said. “She’s done this to you. Damn, that woman has all the luck.”

Once during the first year, Zach showed up just as Robert concluded a phone call with his mother, who had rehearsed her usual. She wanted a woman in her son’s life. She wanted Robert to be happy. She hinted at grandchildren. Minutes after Zach’s arrival, he hit the pause button and set aside the video controls.

“*Dude*,” he said. “You’re acting like a twelve-year-old. Been talking to your daddy?”

“My father is dead,” Robert said—the first piece of personal information he’d volunteered.

“Guess it was your momma then,” Zach said. “Lighten up. It’s only a game.”

§

As the moving-out party began to fizzle, Robert stepped into the bathroom to relieve himself. He was standing at the commode, tucking himself into his trunks, when he heard the sound of shower curtain rings

behind him, and tough, smooth workmen's hands grabbed him on either side of the waist.

"Ooh," said Zach, "love handles."

Turning, Robert took Zach by the wrists and held him off.

"I know," Zach said. "Your zone. I can stay out of it. You stand there, I'll stay here—plenty of space between us. Just my mouth on your dick."

Robert laughed. But the oddest thing: Zach started crying—a single choked-back sob, a spill of tears. Had the laugh insulted him? Had he wanted this too badly?

Robert reached a reassuring hand to Zach's shoulder—a mistake—and suddenly, Zach was everywhere he shouldn't be, his arms around Robert, his face in the nook between Robert's neck and shoulder. He was crying freely now.

"I'm sorry," Robert said. He didn't know how long to count before pulling away or where to put his hands in the meantime.

"Make it up to me," Zach said, his voice shaken by crying and husky with longing. "Just this once. Pretend it's Heather's mouth." In a single motion, he dropped to the floor and slipped Robert's trunks down around his knees.

Robert shoved him and backed into the door. He reached behind himself, turned the knob, and backed into the hallway.

Genevieve was standing there. She must've been waiting for the bathroom.

"Well," she said. "Someone's having a good time."

Robert pulled up his trunks and made his way home.

§

He'd found the house wandering an overlooked East Austin neighborhood in the spring of 1973—a vintage California bungalow, sturdy but needing a facelift. And cheap. It took Robert five years to bring it up to mark, a decade to pay off the mortgage. His neighbors were predominantly Latino—Chicano was the term in use at the time—but Robert had a passing acquaintance with Spanish, and besides, most of them spoke English. What he liked best about his neighbors was that they raised families, they worked, they kept regular hours, they *slept* at night.

Robert was not political, no particular leanings one way or another. But he had thought the business of college would be, well, college. Taking classes, studying, making reasonable grades. He had not been prepared for the wholesale disruption that closed out the sixties—the hair, the shouting,

the body odor. He'd witnessed sexual congress on the South Mall—after dark, admittedly, and behind shrubbery. But still. He'd stopped walking the West Campus, a lovely old neighborhood full of boarding houses and trees, because so many of the pedestrians streamed cannabis and patchouli behind them like a contrail. They offered him a hit. Or guessed his astrological sign—males and females—with the implication that sexual privilege might accrue.

One day, an egregiously stoned young woman approached, breathing whispery nonsense. Robert didn't want to be rude, but when she rested a delicate hand on his chest, touching the hollow beneath his Adam's apple with the tips of her fingers, he took a step back. He explained that there was a measurable space around him, eighteen inches from any surface on his body—chest, shoulder blades, thighs, knees. It worked like the offshore boundary of a country, he said, recognized by the international community. "No one gets closer without being asked."

He might as well have been speaking Swahili. Martian. His was not a currency she dealt in, this young woman dispensing banalities about peace and love. She turned, retreated down the sidewalk several yards, turned back.

“What you need,” she said, her voice tender as a band saw, “is a good fuck!”

Well yes, but who didn’t?

§

Robert woke badly hung-over. He spent the morning upstairs, sipping coffee from a drip unit in the kitchenette he’d designed for a corner of his bedroom. He popped a bagel into the toaster that sat beside the coffee maker, spread it with cream cheese from the mini-fridge, and finished up with a handful of granola from the snack stash he kept in Tupperware on a shelf at eye level. The only thing he’d ever missed easing into a day upstairs was the morning paper, but with the internet he could browse the *Times*, the local daily too, without leaving his second-story refuge.

It was early afternoon before he ventured downstairs. In an open quadrant of the front room, he found Zach, cross-legged on a cushy rug put there especially for the gaming console that engaged him, an original Nintendo Entertainment System sitting on the lower shelf of a 1982 oak veneer TV cart, one of the cords snaking across the floor toward Zach, his fingers at the controls, his gaze directed at the Zenith System 3 Space Command television set that sat atop the cart. Onscreen, a red-capped little

Italian zipped silently through the bouncy schtick that had pulled in millions for his Japanese maker.

Robert made a silent resolution about drink. He was remembering flashes from the wee hours—one hand at the front doorknob, the other reaching for a pocket his trunks didn't have, for keys he'd left upstairs hours back, thinking he'd step across for a drink or two. Hours later, back at the top of his stairs, dizzy, he'd let himself lie down, thinking to lock up shortly. He'd fallen asleep, of course, the unlocked door erased from memory when he woke at four to pee.

“Hey, man,” Zach said, “gimme a minute.” He picked up the Zenith remote and set the volume up, then worked at the game until Mario reached a juncture. Setting the controls aside, he stood. “Sorry about last night,” he said. “We had a lot to drink. I thought maybe I had a chance. Last chance, anyway. Always had a thing for straight men.” He shrugged. “Guess I like the challenge. Guess I like wanting what I can't have.”

Two years Robert had been exposed to his neighbor, and still sometimes he was struck speechless by Zach's curious honesty, his self-deprecating banter. He seemed entirely recovered from tears, from the need that had fed them.

“What about you?” Zach said. “You ever want what you can’t have?”

“I have this.” Robert’s gesture took in the gaming system, the room, the house.

Zach crossed to the front door and opened it. “I’m not talking about what you own.” He stepped onto the verandah. Robert followed him.

Clear evidence of a move had accumulated next door—a debris pile in the driveway by the street, beneath it the pool table that had been brought there with such care, the legs knocked out from under it. On the street beyond sat a rented moving truck, rear door up, interior packed tight.

“What about desire?” Zach said.

“I can always find a woman.” Robert felt as if the person speaking were someone else, someone in a story he’d read with passing interest.

“Does she want you? I mean more than once?”

“I prefer a limited engagement.”

“And when that’s not available?”

“I take care of myself.”

“Next time I do that”—there was relish, merriment in Zach’s voice—
“know what I’m gonna picture? You. On a heart-shaped bed in Vegas. Red plush. Naked. *Taking care of yourself.*” He put air quotes around the phrase.

Robert stepped off the verandah and crossed to the discard pile. Atop the wrecked pool table, its felt surface ruined, his neighbors had stacked haphazard boxes, old clothing, junked kitchen gadgets, a couple of broken-legged chairs.

“Hey,” Zach said, pointing. “Something to add to your collection.”

There, between boxes of paperbacks, sat Heather’s old computer, looking ripe for rescue.

“What’s with this?” Robert tapped the edge of the pool table.

“Couldn’t move it.” Zach shrugged. “Well, could’ve . . .”

“But I said no.” Heather materialized between them. She picked up a tattered paperback fluttering at the top of a box and seemed to study the cover. A seaside embrace—dark bare-chested man, pale bare-shouldered blonde. *Lovestorm*.

“Hey!” Heather turned an impish grin on Robert. “I believe someone set a trap for you last night. Wonder how that turned out.”

“I don’t remember.” Robert smiled at his little white lie. “Maybe someone got lucky.”

“*You* might get lucky”—she put a hand to his butt and squeezed—“if you stopped looking out your window and made a move.”

“Too late now,” Zach said. “Dunc’s a city boy. Bet he never gets out to see us.”

The move had been a sudden decision, they explained, provoked by a visit from the landlord—upset about improvements they’d made without his okay—on the same day an affordable mortgage dropped into their laps. Zach would put his talents to work on the place—a run-down house on two acres twenty miles out. The others would make the payments.

“We’ll put in a garden,” Heather said. “Zach’s gonna feed us out of it.”

“You’re city people,” Robert said. “What do you know about growing things?”

“I’ll learn,” Zach said. “It’ll be an adventure.”

“Might want to keep your hands to yourself. Unless you want a tire iron upside your head.”

“I grew up country.” Zach could be cocky as a tomcat, mauled but preening. “I know the signs. Got my ashes hauled plenty.”

“What about you, Robert?” Heather said. “Ever had an adventure?”

“Thought about it.”

“I bet you did.”

The morning of April 3 Robert made room for Heather's Mac Classic in his computer collection. He set the dusty thing on the kitchen table, blew the dust out with an aerosol, and cleaned the screen with a fresh dishcloth dampened in tap water. The dampness he wiped off with an old cloth diaper; these were perfect for television and computer screens.

Back in the office, he made space on the little table that held his Kaypro 10, set the Mac up, and plugged it into the surge protector. Finally, before turning it on, he rubbed the screen with a special lens-cleaning cloth.

When the Classic booted up, he double-clicked on the trash bin icon. As he'd suspected, the trash itself had not been purged; he would have to empty it. There were a dozen or so folders and a trailing list of files. A folder titled Zach_Household held an orderly assortment of spreadsheets that broke down rent, groceries, miscellaneous expenses. Another, unimaginatively titled XXX, showcased a dozen naked women in poses so far beyond frank Robert was embarrassed to feel his throat thicken. He assumed Heather had put them in the trash bin after she and Zach lifted the computer—leftovers from her ex, these splay-legged creatures, evidence of an unworthy coarseness in the man who had collected them, though Robert knew the laid-back demeanor, the smooth post-feminist civility of other men—Heather's current

housemates, for example—was not to be confused with what they wanted when no one was looking.

There was a folder of tax returns, another with numerous sub-folders holding Heather's teaching files, as well as documents for her ESL certification. He'd seen her from an upstairs window the occasional morning as she left for school, disguised, he thought, in a simple shirt-waist dress, matronly shoes, her hair in a modest knot at the nape. The paltry evidence she'd left on her computer was even less revealing, arbitrary combinations of letters and numbers tapped into the circuitry alongside a discarded husband's pornography.

Robert clicked around until the only folder left was the one he'd noticed first. It was labeled simply Private. Running the cursor over the icon, he felt like Zach putting his hands where he hadn't been invited. "You have no business here," he said, his mother's sturdy words holding their own in the empty room. But Heather wouldn't know he was treading where he oughtn't. Besides, like the triple-X trove, this folder might have been her husband's doing. Robert chuckled, thinking of his mother again. "A fool believes the lies he tells." If the porn folder were the work of Heather's ex—

private images bluntly labeled—it was highly unlikely he'd felt the need for a discreet space here.

Two clicks and the folder opened. Inside was a single word processor document. The label said DearReethah. He recognized the anagram instantly. And double-clicked. The document was password protected. He typed in HerthaE—really, this was too easy—and a page of typescript opened.

Dear Reethah,

You're twenty today, that's all I know. I wonder—what IS your name? I don't know where you are, I don't know who you call Momma. I wonder has she told you about me? I wonder do you take after me? Do you have your father's coloring?

Robert stopped there, though the letter went on. He clicked out of the document, clicked out of the folder, and closed the trash bin. He'd committed a violation more consequential than any that had been visited on him, but he couldn't think about that now. He could only think about Heather pregnant many years ago, Heather at the keyboard—when?—months ago? Years? What he thought was blunt as his mother's words before. Fool, he thought—he might've spoken this word aloud—*fool*, to have carried

an unnecessary fetus to term. To have harbored these messy afternoon-TV emotions. He made a fist with one hand and socked the cupped hand he'd made with the other. He had tears in his eyes, and he didn't know why. Now who was the fool?

§

His only brush with pregnancy had ended badly but without a child. It had finished his one serious relationship, had instilled a deep skepticism about the companionship of a woman. That's what he'd wanted—companionship, not complications. And Faye had seemed perfect—a bank teller fresh out of the university with a business degree. Robert was ready to bring a woman, a relationship, into the system. He'd transformed the house—supervised kitchen and bathroom renovations downstairs, a master suite and laundry room upstairs. The roof was new, fresh paint applied outside and in. His work—consulting, writing code at home—was predictable but engaging.

Faye liked him from the get-go. She didn't push for more of his time than he offered, didn't lean or cling. When she came to the house for their first night together, mutually agreed upon beforehand, she had a diaphragm in her purse. It was his first sex without a condom, better sex than he would

have thought possible. Robert knew the statistics on condoms, diaphragms, the pill. Carelessness, he thought—and inconsistency—were responsible for the failures of birth control.

Within weeks, Faye had two drawers in his bedroom, a third in the adjoining bath, a slot in the master closet. And a place at the breakfast table most Sunday mornings, which is where, two years in, she announced that despite their care with her diaphragm, she was pregnant.

Robert paid for the abortion. He took her in on the day of the procedure and sat in the waiting room while the doctor did what was necessary. He drove her home and took care of her, insisting she take extra days off work. In the weeks that followed, there was more silence between them than before, but he thought the words, the laughter would return. Faye needed time. She would be herself again.

In the interim, Robert kept his own counsel. What might he have said if Faye had broached the subject? Would he have advised her to put this episode behind her? They'd had the necessary conversation—about marriage, about children—well before her pregnancy scare. He'd made it clear he was willing to consider the one but not the other. And Faye had said she understood.

Still, one Sunday morning, an hour after excusing herself from breakfast, she appeared at the bottom of the stairs with her suitcase and a hanging bag.

“The rest is upstairs,” she said, her voice too calm. “I’ll put these in my car. Be back in a minute.”

At the door, her hand on the knob, she turned. A single word of weakness escaped him.

“Please.”

It was so little, and yet clearly she would have stayed. He saw what the word accomplished in her face, saw her move toward him, his name at her lips.

“Robert.”

He felt a wave rising—like panic, like breath expanding beyond the capacity of lungs to contain it, breath pushing, pushing at his ribcage.

“No!” he said, stepping back, shaking his head, arms clasped at his chest.

No. It was as simple as the saying of it. Faye was gone.

§

By the time he brought another woman home with sex in mind, he’d prepared the guest bedroom downstairs. The situation unraveled from the moment she stepped into the front room and took in his collection.

“Where’d you find all this *stuff?*” she said.

Robert regretted the drinks they’d had beforehand. He kissed the woman, and that seemed to remind her why they’d come here. She kicked off her shoes and followed him to the guest room, where clothes came off quickly, and they brought each other to a passable climax.

Afterwards, dressing, she opened the door to the mini-fridge—the third refrigerator he’d installed in the house, an extravagance that pleased him. She held up one of the single-serving liquor bottles he’d stocked there.

“It’s a hotel room,” she said. “I think I feel used. Guess I should ask for payment.”

At the door, again, she dispensed with tact.

“No need to ask me back. I’ve had better sex in a bucket seat.” She cast a final disparaging look at the rooms she was departing. “What’s upstairs? You got a body hidden?”

Robert gave up on the guest room; he found other ways to take the edge off. A swanky men’s club, for example, a dancer there who caught his eye, mockery in every line of her face as she lap-danced him off, a stall in the men’s room afterward, wiping the goo out of his shorts. The surprise had done it—the impact of her contempt like a slap, blood-stirring, the surge in

his groin, too, as it dawned on him he could get all the way there without so much as an item of clothing removed, without the clench of sweaty limbs, just he and his dancer in a dim-lit corner graced by flocked wallpaper. A gentlemen's club, they called it. He'd put on a suit for the occasion.

Sometimes he missed Faye. Twenty-five years later, even, there were days he became painfully aware of himself alone, when he ached for the ease he'd felt with her things in the house, her presence touching him even when she wasn't there.

§

On the morning of Saturday, May 27, as Robert pulled a recent purchase from his collection of old 78s, the doorbell rang. It was Zach and Heather. He'd had no word of them since their move to the country, the rooms he occupied eerie with quiet. He was aware of feeling eager when he opened the door and Zach grinned—then awkward, knowing a secret that wasn't his.

"We're having a picnic," Heather announced. "Memorial Day. You seem to have forgotten us—we might invite you anyway."

Behind her, Zach's inquiring gaze. "You look like the cat that ate the canary," he said. "Been stepping out on me?"

Robert put the record on for them, and Heather stood beside him at the Victrola while Zach drifted into the computer room.

“What *is* this?” she asked, taking the record sleeve from him, her fingers brushing the back of his hand. A touch. But he’d been alone too long. Desire moved in him like a current.

“It’s the Andrews Sisters,” he said, willing calm. “From the Second World War.” And then, reaching, trying to bridge the space he’d always felt between them: “My mother loved this song.” He’d not mentioned family—a life outside these walls—to her before.

“Bit scratchy,” Heather said.

“Picture soldiers and their girls. Dancing.”

“You *are* an odd duck.” Crossing to the opening between the two rooms, Heather leaned into the doorjamb there. Robert moved to her side and raised a cupped hand, lightly, to her shoulder blade.

Zach was at the little table, his fingers idly at the keyboard of the Kaypro 10.

“So. Are you coming?” he asked. “To our picnic Monday?”

“He’s got his feelings hurt,” Heather said. “Thought surely we’d hear from you.”

Had Robert not seen what he'd seen on the Mac Classic, he would likely have called and gone out there. Had he not seen what he'd seen on the Mac Classic, he'd have quickly thought of something glib to say now.

"We'd like to—" Heather paused. "I'd like to see you."

She slipped her thumb into the belt loop at Robert's lower back and with her fingers gently massaged the flesh below. Robert opened his lungs to the air they wanted.

Zach was still at the table, still fingering the keyboard there. But he must have sensed a change. He turned, head only, slightly to the left, his eyes flicking over Robert's face and down to his fly. Surely, the stirring there wasn't visible. Not yet. But Heather had a hand on him, and Zach's stare intensified the lovely pressure in her fingertips. Robert felt a swelling he was sure could be seen.

Zach looked away, busied himself at the table again. "Get a room," he said, the words infused with hurt.

Robert couldn't think about him; he could only think about Heather. He prepared himself to say yes, he'd like to see her too, yes to the coming picnic, yes if circumstances might disentangle Zach from her this afternoon and leave the two of them alone.

But Zach changed all that.

“You took it!” he said, pointing. “Heather’s computer! You took it?” His tone wasn’t accusing, exactly. Robert heard, rather, an element of surprise, as if, despite the fact Zach had suggested it, he couldn’t quite believe Robert had expended the effort on this unimpressive little piece of molded plastic.

They were both looking at him now, Zach and Heather, a question in their looks, nothing more. But Robert felt hot with knowing what he knew.

He saw Zach seeing it. The Victrola needle, circling in its groove, would buy a moment’s delay. But Zach followed him—a whisper as Robert lifted the needle. “You read her letter. *Dude—*”

Robert turned and there was Heather looking at him. Her eyes were the eyes of a woman who sees everything—like Faye in the doorway in the last moment, just before she closed the door and walked out of his life.

This time would be different. This time he would hold the woman close. This time the woman wouldn’t walk away. She was right here. With him. She would know him and stay.

Something about her eyes on him, her steady gaze. He felt pleasure and shame and knowing and telling all mixed together, rising in him, receding, rising again, a pressure in his chest, words pressing to be spoken.

“I read your letter.”

A question in her eyes.

“To her.” He brushed aside Zach’s restraining hand. “Your daughter.”

“My daughter?” On her face the beginnings of resistance. But he would have her understand.

“Don’t fuck it up, man!” Zach said. “You’re so close. You could have her. Don’t do this. Let it be.”

Robert didn’t take his eyes from Heather. “Your daughter,” he said. “The letter.”

Zach collapsed between them like a cartoon version of himself, saying, “No no no no no!”

And Heather, her eyes on Robert, seeing. In a single burst of strength, she put hands to his chest and pushed him hard. Robert lost his footing, the back of his head connecting with the doorjamb as he fell.

Zach hovered over him when he came to. Robert sat up and felt the back of his head, a bruise rising there, his skull ringing. Distantly, as if through a muting vacuum, the word concussion suggested itself.

Heather was on one knee beside the corner table, unplugging the Mac Classic.

Robert stood. "I'll take out the hard drive," he said.

"What about you?" she said. "What's in your head. You got a scalpel handy?"

"I'll get my tools."

He grabbed his office toolbox from a shelf on the wall and scrambled for a screwdriver, his life elsewhere already and no way back, as on the walk home years ago hallucinating. He had to make it right with her.

"We'll smash the hard drive. I've got a sledgehammer."

Zach took the screwdriver from him and put it back in the toolbox.

"There was a password," he said. "How did you—?"

"Reethah," Robert said. "Heather, Hertha E. Same letters."

He was very tired now. Heather would be gone soon—his hand at her back, her fingers in his belt loop—no way to stop her now.

"You knew?" he said to Zach. "About Heather? The daughter?"

"Everything. Night we met."

Robert felt a flicker of jealousy. And blocked it out.

"Reethah," he said. "Sounds urban, sounds—"

"The missing father was black," Zach said. "Still is, I imagine."

Heather had found her way to Robert's desk. She picked up his stainless steel letter opener and seemed to study it.

"I think he might've married me if Daddy hadn't been so nasty." She spoke as if to herself, the most intimate words Robert had heard in this house. But he was outside looking in. "I was sixteen," Heather said, "nothing mine until this baby growing in me. I wanted to marry the boy, even when he flat-out refused."

She held the letter opener to the light flooding in through the windows. The blade gleamed. She set it back among the things on Robert's desk.

"After that, it was the baby I wanted. Even when it was too late. Even now. Some days every breath hurts. You ever wanted anything so badly?"

"Yes," Robert said. *Order*. There was no point in saying it. No one had ever understood.

Heather went on as if she hadn't asked a question.

"My father won out. My child is gone. Can't get her back."

She reached a hand to Robert's cheek—gently—as if to check if he were real.

"I envy you," she said.

Robert looked at her, trying to understand.

“You’ve got nothing to hide,” she said. “Nothing worth hiding, anyway. You’re the same inside and out.”

§

The change to long-sleeved shirts fell three days before Halloween. At half past three, Robert was done with laundry and clocks. He set up at the kitchen table and carved two pumpkins, one for either side of the front steps. He’d supplied the pantry with peanut butter cups, his single concession to sweets. Come Tuesday evening, he’d sit on the verandah and dole out candy to the trick-or-treaters—a quiet evening, no raucous costume party next door. A couple had moved in there. He didn’t know if they were married, didn’t even know their names. They waved if they saw him out front. Otherwise, they kept to themselves.

He hadn’t gone to the Memorial Day picnic at Heather and Zach’s place in the country. They hadn’t withdrawn the invitation, though clearly Heather had been done with him. Zach he’d seen once in the interim, a brief visit in the last week of September. Surprise of surprises, Zach told him, he’d found someone, a local five years his senior. “Gray hair,” he said. “Bit of a stomach.” And then, the old randy humor showing: “He’s got what I want

where it counts.” Leaving, he gave a fatalistic shrug. “Well, Dunc,” he said. “I guess this is it.”

Robert missed Zach’s unannounced visits, his uncurbed enthusiasms. He replayed the last afternoon with Heather, the flare of pleasure and shame that had carried him too far, the words he’d spoken closing the distance between them. And opening a space he wouldn’t cross again. On a quiet day, when he wanted something more, the best he could do was one of his old records—something with energy, like the Andrews Sisters.

Upstairs after the pumpkin carving, he paused at his window as a car pulled into place where Zach and his housemates had shot pool. The car door and the back door to the house opened simultaneously, as if prompted by a single impulse. The woman got out of the car; the man stepped onto the stoop and called to her, an ease in him suggesting both eagerness and calm, an ordinary evening ahead. But with her. He saw Robert at the window and waved. The woman looked up from her place by the car. Robert waved and stepped away.

Ten seconds ago, he had known what he would do with his evening. He had a suit waiting, a complementary shirt and tie. And entertainment cash, a zippered leather pouch flush with weekly infusions, the same dollar amount

every week whether he spent it or not. Enough for dinner and drinks at his club, a private booth if a dancer caught his eye. Black label on the rocks, that icy burn spreading all the way to his toes. Limo service home and sleeping in on Sunday morning.

Out of nowhere, he remembered Zach's fantasy about a heart-shaped bed in Vegas, getting off to an image of someone who would not return the favor. Before, Robert would have smiled. This afternoon he couldn't. Buying a lap dance, jacking off in front of his bathroom mirror—he looked as pitiful to himself as he must have all those years ago, in the aftermath of his father's death, when pity was the one currency others seemed able to give.

He called the cab company and cancelled the pickup he'd arranged for the evening.

As he let the phone settle in its cradle, there was a muffled pop somewhere down the street, and the power went out. A squirrel, he thought. A squirrel must have shorted out a transformer. He stood and listened as the white noises that marked his days ebbed from the air, the walls, the rooms below, the street beyond, until there was no evidence left of eardrums, of the synaptic leaps that pass for sound. The house was perfectly quiet now, the day at that halfway point between light and dark when time felt suspended,

such stillness within that except for a vague pressure he thought might be the soles of his feet, he'd lost the feeling of himself inside a body, nothing left but a space of glowing amber that used to be called window.

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