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Invisible Ailments: A Collection

An Honors Paper for the Department of English

By Jane L. Godiner

Bowdoin College, 2023

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Are You There, God? It's Me, Sweetie.

It was much chunkier than the girl had imagined it would be.

As she stared at her underwear, now stained with her newfound womanhood, she felt her legs tremble beneath her. She wondered what she was supposed to do now. She was fresh out of gender-segregated seventh grade health, so she knew she wasn't dying, but her 81-year-old teacher never mentioned what's supposed to happen after you get home from school and notice that your underwear looks like a scene from *The Shining*. She wondered if she should burn them—or maybe wipe off the excess and put them back on? No, that seemed too gross. Also, she wasn't too keen on touching it. Just as she began brainstorming another potential course of action, she was jolted by the sound of loud, rapid knocking on the bathroom door.

"Sweetie, it's been a little bit," her mother's voice cooed from the other side. The girl checked her watch. Fifteen minutes. It had been a while, she thought.

"Sorry, Mom. Just dealing with something in here."

"Well then you should have told me that! I've been missing you out here," her mother replied.

"I think I just got my period."

"Oh, *sweetie!*" Her mother's tone shifted from angry to relieved—joyful, even. "Oh, sweetie, you have to let me in there. You have to let me see!"

"No, Mom," the girl said, her face flushing, despite expecting this response. "That's weird. I need privacy. Do you have a pad?"

“Not so fast,” her mother said. For a split second, she could see a flash of her mother’s glassy, blue eyes. “Not until I see it! I have to make sure it’s the real thing. I need to *see* you become a woman!”

“I’m pretty sure it’s the real thing,” the girl pushed back, feeling her chest tighten. “It’s red, and it’s...like, viscous? This is really embarrassing, Mom. Can we stop?”

“If you’re embarrassed, sweetie, that’s your fault. I never asked you to describe it to me. And I still won’t give you a sanitary napkin until I see it. I need to see it, sweetie.”

The girl knew she had no choice, as usual. Her mom clung to these moments—she had a lock of hair from the girl’s first haircut, a square of plaid fabric from the girl’s first day of school outfit, and, now, she wanted to see the menstrual blood from the girl’s first period. It was just how it was.

“Fine, but you’re not coming in here,” she said, as she removed her sullied underwear and slid them under the crack at the bottom of the bathroom door. As soon as she lost sight of their front hem, she heard her mother gasp.

“Oh, *sweetie*, it *is* your period! Oh, this is so wonderful!”

“Are you crying, Mom?”

“I’m just a bit misty—you don’t know how long I’ve waited to have this talk with you!”

“Can I please just have that pad now?” The girl shut her eyes tightly.

“Don’t be silly! You can’t use the same ones that a 45-year-old woman uses. We get to go shopping together!”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Mom—”

“My mom did this with me, and now I get to do it with you! Hurry up and put your pants on, already!”

...

The girl never knew that there were so many different sizes of pads and tampons. Her mother savored her ignorance.

“We’ve got light, regular, super, overnight...you know, let’s just get one of each. Not the post-partum ones, sweetie, those aren’t for you. Yes, the others. You don’t know what your flow is like yet, so it’s best we cover all of our bases, right? Okay, right this way.”

The girl’s mother walked by, and the girl caught a whiff of her sweet perfume. For a brief moment, it comforted her. The girl wondered how girls without mothers were supposed to do this on their own. How would they know to get four different species of pads? How would they know what a *flow* was? As she watched her mother walk down the family planning aisle, ever-so-slightly ahead of her, she wondered if her grandmother had also looked at her mother’s menstrual blood, or taken her to Kroger for pads. Surely, this must just be the way that things went. Their shopping cart eventually reached its maximum capacity—a sea of pink and yellow cardboard boxes.

“I don’t mind pushing the cart to checkout,” the girl said.

“Oh, *no*, sweetie,” her mother snapped her head around. “We haven’t even done the best part. Why don’t you step on the cart, like you used to do at Costco when you were little? I’ll push!”

“I don’t know if I’ll fit anymore,” the girl said, feeling her face heat up again.

“Don’t be silly. Here, just step on the side, just like that,” her mother said, grabbing her hand and steadying her as the girl teetered.

“I don’t think this is going to work, Mom—”

“No, look, you’re on now. Ready?” Without waiting for a reply, her mother jolted the cart forward, and the girl immediately fell off. She looked at her mother worriedly. “Fine,” her mother said solemnly. “I guess you really are growing up.”

The two walked in silence until they eventually reached their final destination: the candy aisle.

“Having your period isn’t a picnic—I know that all too well,” her mother said, rubbing the girl’s shoulders a little more vigorously and firmly than was comfortable for the girl. “Let me treat you to whatever goodies you want! Go, go look!”

The girl never really cared for sweets. Her mother knew this—it was often a point of playful contention between the two of them. The girl didn’t want candy. She wanted two Advil and a moment to herself. But something about her mother’s expression made her begin reaching for the nearest bag of Oreos.

“What else, sweetie? What else?” She could hear her mother calling behind her as she halfheartedly picked up a Mars bar. She turned around to see her mother throwing bags of sour candy in the already-full shopping cart. “These, you’ll need these,” she said. Her brow was furrowed with determination.

As the girl’s mother caught up to her, the girl took notice of her mother’s wrinkled hands—she could have sworn that there were fewer wrinkles on them last week. Her eyes scanned them as if she were reading a book. Her gaze slid up and down their sharp slopes and

settled on a particularly deep wrinkle on her middle knuckle. Something about this particular wrinkle made the girl want to cry. The girl surprised herself by reaching out and putting her hand over her mother's.

“I love you,” the girl heard herself saying.

“Oh, I love you, sweetie,” her mother moved her hand so it was over the girl's. “I love you.”

...

“So, uh,” the girl's dad's voice quipped uncomfortably over the phone. “Mom told me the big news.”

The girl rolled her eyes. Of course, her mother would break her streak of ignoring her father to tell him that she was menstruating. She could picture her mother on the phone with him. *Not that it's any of your business*, she had probably said, looking straight ahead and inhaling deeply. *But your daughter is a woman now*.

“I know—I don't know why I had to know about that,” her dad continued. “But, now I do, so, is there anything I can do to help you out?”

“I get that Mom means well, but I need a little bit of space,” the girl said, her voice lowered.

She heard him chuckle and her heart sank. This was exactly the kind of thing that would amuse her dad. The girl noticed that he found her mother's antics a lot more humorous since their divorce. She couldn't recall him laughing once while he lived with the two of them. As she waited for her dad to formulate his response, she studied her reflection in her bedroom vanity. Some days, she could see the physical resemblance between her and her mother, and this was

one of them. While she didn't have her mom's piercing, fake-looking blue eyes or her sharp cheekbones, their noses both had the same bump in the middle. Both of them hated their respective nose bumps, but would insist that the other's suited her face. Her finger ran over the bump as she heard her dad begin to speak.

"You know what I'm going to tell you," he said to her, and the girl put another inch of space between her ear and her phone's speaker. "You have to break the chain. Disengage with her. Taking the path of least resistance is always the best way to deal with her."

"But what can I do afterward?" the girl asked. "You know, after I take the path of least resistance. What can I do to make myself feel better?"

"Turn 18 and move out," her dad chuckled again. "Until then, just be grateful you weren't married to her."

...

The first cramp felt more like a gut punch than the "tummy ache" that her health teacher had described.

"Oh, you're in for it, alright," the girl's mother said, rubbing her shoulders and neck again as she peered over her. "I used to get such bad cramps when I was a girl. It'll even out itself as you get older, but you have a long way to go."

The girl didn't expect her abdomen to feel tight. As she lay on the couch, clutching a hot water bottle and watching *Friends*, she thought about all of the people she knew who presumably had menstruated. She wondered if Jennifer Anniston had ever had her period while filming any of the show's 10 seasons. Statistically speaking, it seemed likely. How did she do it?

“Sweetie, go check your room—there’s a surprise in there for you,” her mother suddenly said, emerging from the hallway. The girl felt a shot of electric pain run up her spine as she removed herself from the couch and made her way into the bedroom. On the carpeted floor, right next to her bed, was an under-inflated air mattress, topped with 3 pillows and a yellow patchwork quilt.

“I don’t—”

“I’ve decided to spend the night with you,” her mother said, “so that I can watch over you and hold your hand during the bad cramps.” She met the girl’s gaze, and the girl saw her pale eyes widen. “Oh, come on, sweetie—it’ll be like a sleepover!”

Like the time where the girl’s mother made her get her eyebrows threaded, or spend three hours in Victoria’s Secret, the girl had a feeling the choice wasn’t hers. When the girl had so much as scrunched her nose at the idea of doing any of these activities, her mother would throw a tantrum. It could be tears, or the silent treatment, or an exit to her boyfriend’s house. It was best, as her father had advised her, to take the path of least resistance. When the time came to turn off the lights, things were silent for a minute. Then, her mother’s voice again.

“So, do you feel like a woman yet?”

“Not really, Mom,” the girl said, facing away from her. “I’m only 13.”

“Yes, sweetie, but you could now, theoretically, conceive. You know how—”

“Yes, you told me. I’m not doing...that stuff.” She felt her stomach turn.

“I know, sweetie, but you have to understand—”

“Mom, can we stop talking about this?”

“Oh, I didn’t—”

“Please?”

“Geez, someone’s mood swings have kicked in,” the girl’s mother said. A corner of the girl’s mouth turned up—this was one of the few instances where a silent treatment would work to her advantage. In the darkness, she pictured her mother’s lips pursing.

“I guess I’ll pipe down, then,” her mother continued. “I guess I’ll just shut up, right? That’s obviously what you want.” More silence. The girl shut her eyes.

“I love you, sweetie,” her mother said. Then, “Come on, say it back, sweetie. I don’t like to fight.”

“I love you, Mom,” the girl said hastily. She turned around, and her eyes met her mother’s, which were wide, disturbed, and as pale as ever, before they quickly shut.

...

The sleepover continued for several days—for far too long, as far as the girl was concerned. Every time that she tried to suggest that her mother sleep in her own room, the subject seemed to naturally change to something less inflammatory, like their joint plans for the day, or how the girl was liking the new heating pad. Her dad advised her not to push back.

“The more you resist, the longer she’ll want to stay,” her dad had said on one of their phone calls. “She’ll feel like she has to *make* you like it before she can go. And, trust me. She’ll do *anything* to make you like it. Just keep quiet.”

When the girl watched her mother migrate more of her pillows and bedding onto the girl’s floor—or when her mother accidentally referred to the girl’s bedroom as “our room,” or when she walked in on her mother changing into her pajamas, and she yelled at the girl to “remember to knock”—the girl would hustle into the bathroom and check to see if she was still

bleeding. As she heard her mother's voice trailing behind her, she would lock the bathroom door, yank down her pants, and look down—frantically, desperately—with hopes that her pad would be in its original, unused condition. Her hopes were in vain until, five days later, on one faithful morning before school, she woke up to a pristine overnight pad.

“Mom,” she said, rushing back into her room. Her mother lazily lifted her head up. Her wiry, black hair was tufted on one side, and the silk sleeve of her night shirt peeked out from under the covers. “It’s over! It’s done—my period’s over!”

“Mmmm,” her mother said after a second, turning over and shutting her eyes again. “That’s nice, sweetie.”

“So, I think now I won’t need a sleeping buddy anymore,” the girl said. She saw her mother’s eyes open slightly, and hastily added, “but this has been really nice, Mom.”

“Then how come you’re in such a rush to get me out?” her mother asked, propping herself up. The night shirt wrinkled, matching her forehead. “I thought we were having fun.”

“We are, we are,” the girl said, squirming a little. “I promise. I just miss having my own space, is all.”

“Well, I didn’t think I was being any trouble,” her mother said, her voice quivering slightly but her forehead wrinkles smoothing out. “I just shut my eyes and go to sleep. I can’t understand how that would be such a bother to you.”

“It’s not, Mom! It’s not—”

“Okay, sweetie, now there’s no need to yell at your mother.”

“—I just think it might be nice to have some privacy.”

“I give you so much privacy, sweetie,” her mother said, standing up and aggressively balling up her comforter. “All I ask is to spend these nights with you. Hearing your breathing brings me a world of peace. If only you knew, sweetie. If only you knew, you wouldn’t ask me to leave.”

“Mom, I’m sorry, but I want my room back again.” Silence. Her stomach turned as she wondered what her father meant when he said that her mother would do *anything* to stay.

“Fine,” her mother finally said, dusting herself off. “I understand.” She walked past the girl without meeting her eyes, and the girl felt sick.

...

The girl had no choice but to go to school. She hoped that by the time she returned home, her mother would have moved back into her own room, but there was no way for her to know. She studied her reflection in the mirror and felt, briefly, that her cheekbones were almost as high as her mother’s.

On the way to her fifth class, she heard rushing footsteps behind her. She turned around and saw Clarence.

“Hey,” he said sheepishly, the way boys always did when they talked to the girl and her friends. “How’s it going?”

“It could be worse,” she replied.

“Hey, okay, that’s good to hear,” he said, still catching his breath, the nostrils of his large nose flaring. Her eyes drifted to his shirt, which seemed damp with sweat, even though track practice was in the mornings. “Hey, I was wondering, would you maybe want to go to the dance with me on Friday? Like, as a date?”

“There’s a dance on Friday?”

“Well, yeah,” Clarence said, evidently disturbed that the girl did not say yes right away. He scratched the back of his head, which made his curls rustle in the front. “It’s the fall one. You know, in the caf. We don’t have to, though. It was just a thought.”

“No, no,” the girl said, feeling the corners of her mouth turn upward. “I’d like that.” She saw Clarence’s expression soften.

“Hey, that’s awesome. My mom offered to drive. I can pick you up?”

“No, I can’t,” the girl said, smiling wryly. “If I’m going, my mom has to be driving me.”

“Oh, okay,” Clarence said, his brow furrowing slightly, and his large nose wrinkling.

“Well, hey, that’s fine. I can just meet you in there, then.” He started walking away.

“Bye, Clarence,” the girl heard herself saying. She thought that she heard him say that he was excited, but he couldn’t be sure.

...

When the girl got home, her mother wasn’t there.

There was a note, though:

Off to Jared’s, sweetie. Stouffer’s in the freezer.

Need some space. I’m sure you’d understand.

Just fucking dandy, the girl thought to herself. Her mother’s choice to escape to her boyfriend’s house wasn’t necessarily a punishment for the girl, but with the dance four days away, she was working against the clock.

The girl wondered what her mother had told Jared—if she had run into his lanky, anemic arms, sobbing as she sometimes did, or if she showed up stone-faced and committed to her martyrdom. She pictured Jared rubbing her shoulders and saying all of the right things. Her

mother would make sure he knew that she was holding back tears, her thin lips flattening and face flushing. She wondered if she told Jared about the girl's period, or the five-day sleepover. She wondered if Jared would shoot the girl a dirty look the next time he saw her, or if she would get another lip flapping, porcelain-toothed lecture about how her mother "won't be around forever."

As the girl peeled back the plastic layer of a frozen lasagna for one, she thought about Clarence—about his face when she told him she'd go to the dance with him, and the back of his head while she was walking away. She felt a fuzziness in her chest as she punched in "5:00" on the microwave.

She pictured her mother driving to Jared's house alone. Would it have been so bad, the girl thought to herself, to let her mother continue staying the night? If she had taken the path of least resistance? A sense of guilt washed over her as she thought of the tired expression on her mother's face when she left her room. Would she be back in time to drive her to the dance?

The girl felt different since her period ended—or maybe since Clarence asked her to the dance. The girl couldn't tell, but it didn't matter. Her lasagna was ready.

...

On the day of her third Stouffer's meal, the girl's mother walked through the door, nose first.

"Oh, hi, sweetie," her mom said, as if she had only left this morning.

"Hi, Mom."

"Did you miss me?" her mother said earnestly, hanging up her windbreaker. She paused in the doorway, hand on her jacket, until the girl knew that she had to speak.

“I did miss you, Mom,” the girl said, feeling her shoulders tense up. “I did.”

“Well, that’s good to know, sweetie.” Her mother said, smiling slightly, and leaving her coat on the rack. “How are you?”

“I’m good, Mom,” the girl said. “Actually, really good. I got asked to a dance on Friday by this boy at my school.” The girl watched her mother frown. “His name is Clarence. We were in study hall together last year.”

“Oh, I see,” her mother said, dropping her expression and nodding slowly. The girl felt her stomach drop. Even though she had seen this performance countless times, it still pained the girl to watch. “You need me to drive you. That’s why you’re giving me the time of day.”

“Mom, I—”

“You didn’t bother to call me when I was at Jared’s—to apologize, or even just to ask how I was doing.” Her mother’s voice quivered again, and the girl stopped being able to meet her glassy gaze. “And, sure enough, I come home, and the first question you have for me is if I can do you a favor! How heartbreaking is that?”

“Mom, please don’t cry.”

“Sweetie, it’s so hard for me. It just is so painful. You will *never* know how much I love you.”

“And you will never know how much I love *you*,” the girl said, the words feeling unnatural. It didn’t seem right that she had to mirror her mother.

“Oh, yeah, kiss my ass now,” her mother said, quickly wiping her eyes. “Take advantage of me when you know I’m vulnerable. That way, I’ll drive you to that dance, and then you can act like a dumb slut with Carson—even though I raised you better, that’s for damn sure.”

“His name is Clarence.”

“Are you sure he didn’t ask you to the dance as a joke, sweetie?” her mother said, her just-crumpled facial expression replaced with one of genuine concern. “Because that happened to a lot of my girlfriends in high school. Not to me, but to a lot of them—”

“Mom!” As much as she knew her mother was acting out of desperation, she felt her eyes begin to sting.

“Oh, don’t play the victim now. Stop that. Stop crying, sweetie. I’m just looking out for you. I’m your mother, after all.” She crouched down and took the girl in her arms, their two bodies quaking in unison. The girl flinched at her mother’s touch.

“Oh, sweetie,” the mother continued. “We got ourselves all worked up, didn’t we? Of course I’ll take you to the dance, sweetie. Of course.”

“I’m sorry, Mom,” the girl said. “I love you.” She felt her mother’s body relax in her arms, and she buried her face in her mother’s shoulder. The smell of her perfume was familiar. She remembered that her mother had asked her to stroll the Macy’s perfume department and pick the girl’s favorite one when she was only six. Her mother had been wearing it ever since.

“I love you, sweetie,” her mother cooed, her voice steadier than before. “I love you.”

...

“So, you convinced her—you won,” her dad said during their next phone call. “So, wait, I don’t understand why you’re upset.”

“Things aren’t getting better,” the girl said. “She’s just as desperate as before.”

“Give her a chance to cool down,” her father said, and the girl wondered what he was doing. Maybe cross hatching absent-mindedly on the back of an envelope; maybe unsticking his

thin, brown hair from his sweaty forehead. “You know she needs some time. Believe me, this is a crisis averted. You don’t know what she’s capable of.”

“I just feel like I’m doing what you said, with the disengaging and all of that,” the girl continued, choosing to ignore her father’s cryptic words. “But it’s not working. She’s still unhinged. And mean. Her words still hurt.”

“Well, that’s on you,” her dad said. She could hear his smile. “You know she’s crazy, and you still choose to take her words to heart. That’s your problem.”

“She’s my mother,” the girl said. “How am I not supposed to believe her—even just a little bit?”

“Hey, that sounds like something she’d say to you!”

...

“That is a *short* skirt,” her mother said when the girl emerged from her room. “Does it go down any further?”

“No, Mom,” the girl said, heat creeping up the back of her neck. “It’s supposed to be like this.”

“Well, I’m sure Carson will love it. Clarence. Sorry, sweetie. What does he look like, anyway?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Just trying to make conversation. Are you ready to go?”

“Sorry—yeah, let’s do it.”

The two entered the car. The girl let her shoulders relax and suddenly felt too small for the passenger’s seat.

“Are you nervous?” the girl’s mother asked.

“Maybe a little.”

“It’s normal, sweetie. I was nervous for my first date with your dad. He turned out to be an asshole, but the sentiment is still there, right?” Unsure if she should agree with her mother, either out loud or in her head, the girl rested her forehead on the window and watched the raindrops slip past her vision.

“Don’t do that.” The girl felt a hand on the back of her collar pull her into an upright position. The girl’s frizzy, caramel ringlets bounced. “We just did your hair, sweetie. Oh, it looks so good—I’m so excited for you. You’re a real vision. I even think that the skirt is growing on me!” The girl smiled tightly before realizing that her mother could not see her. She dropped her expression.

“Thank you, Mom.”

“Of course, sweetie. See, isn’t it nicer when we’re not arguing?”

The girl made an extra effort not to look at her mother’s deep, cracked hands. They drove in silence until the mother approached the school parking lot, which was crowded with cars.

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to pull in. How about you text me when you get inside?”

“The door is right there, Mom.”

“Oh, I know that. My car just won’t make it in.”

“I know. I’m just saying that you could watch me go in. Why do I have to text you?”

“Sweetie, you know it would make me feel better. What’s the big deal?”

“I don’t know! What’s the big deal with you needing a text?” The girl knew better than to be defensive, but her nerves were morphing into adrenaline.

“There’s no need for an attitude,” her mother said, her voice raising.

“I’m not giving you one,” the girl said, matching her tone and seeing her mother’s behavior as comedic, just as her father had, for the first time. “I just don’t know why you need a text so badly when you can watch me go into the caf!” She made a sweeping gesture to the school’s cafeteria—an homage to her mother’s theatrics. Fuck breaking the chain. She caught a look at herself in the mirror and felt, with her deep, round brown eyes, and young features, that she looked nothing like her mother.

“I would recommend getting your ass out of this car now,” the girl’s mother said, “before I turn us around and change my mind about letting you go to this stupid fucking thing. And you’d better text me when you’re inside.” The girl glanced at the steering wheel. Her mother’s cracked knuckles were white and her hands quivered as they gripped the wheel.

Without a word, or a text, the girl turned around and left.

...

Clarence’s hands were softer than the girl had expected. As they swayed back and forth to the music, the girl ignored the frequent buzzing in her back pocket. She felt her hands starting to clam up, but didn’t know if he would be offended if she let go of him. Eventually, she couldn’t hold out for any longer, and swiftly wiped her hands on her miniskirt. She saw his mouth move, but couldn’t hear him over the commotion in the cafeteria.

“What did you say?” she said, daring to get closer to him.

“I said,” he briefly touched her waist, “do you want to go somewhere?”

The girl felt her stomach turn. She knew exactly where she was going, although she had never been, herself. The hollow corner behind the stairwell was the hub for juvenile sexual activity, and, as Clarence took her hand and began leading her there, she decided to put her phone on silent.

Clarence's lips were softer than his hands, but in a different way. The exchange was slimier than she had thought it would be. As he hungrily kissed her, the girl found herself unsure of what to do with her hands. She raked one through his hair, and then rested it on his shoulder, feeling the soft, warm cotton of his t-shirt. As Clarence's lips grazed her neck, the girl, feigning confidence, pressed her hand to his crotch. She felt Clarence's breath quicken, and she quickly moved her hand away.

“Can I do this?”

Without waiting for an answer, Clarence began massaging the girl's left breast. She heard her own breath quicken as he continued. She thought she heard a moan escape his lips, but her heart was ringing too loudly in her ears to know for sure.

She tried to ignore the occasional light emitting from her back pocket every time it received a new text message.

...

Clarence's mother was in the parking lot at 10:03. The girl followed him out, and, before she had time to reach for her phone, she heard the window roll down.

“Hi, Clare, is now still good? I can drive around the circle again, too,” she said, addressing Clarence. Her soft, tired eyes then met the girl's. “Hi, there! Don't you look beautiful? Who's your friend?”

“It’s Lola,” Clarence said, opening the car door.

“Nice name, Lola. Clare, why don’t you see if your friend wants a ride? Do you want a ride, Lola?”

“I can’t ask that of you—”

“You didn’t,” Clarence’s mother said, winking at the girl. “Come on in.”

Clarence’s mother drove, and the two children sat in the backseat. Clarence absentmindedly stroked the girl’s leg as he scrolled through his phone.

“Oh, sorry, Mom,” he said, suddenly. “I didn’t see you texted.” The girl reflexively twitched.

“That’s okay, Clare,” she said, still facing forward and brushing a strand of thin blonde hair out of her eyes. “I figured you were having too much fun in there. Next time, just try to remember to shoot me a quick something, okay?”

“Of course,” he said, resting his head on the girl’s shoulder. “Sorry.”

“No need to say sorry,” his mother said. “I love you.”

“Mmmm,” Clarence hummed, smiling softly and shutting his eyes.

...

“How the hell did you get home?” The girl’s mother was perched at the dining room table when she walked through the door.

“Clarence’s mom drove us.”

“Who the fuck is—oh, the boy, right? The boy’s *mom* drove you home? What did I tell you about getting into cars with strangers?”

“She asked!”

“And you couldn’t even think to text me? Here I am, biting my nails, worried sick about you. Sweetie, you know how I worry!”

“I just figured I was earlier than curfew, I—”

“Who gives a fuck about curfew? I was so excited to pick you up from your first real date with a boy, and to have a girl talk on the car ride home. Then I’d tuck you into bed, and—”

“Mom!” The girl turned around, heart racing, and began pacing to her room.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Her mother’s voice called after her. “Sweetie, please come back!” The girl locked the door behind her, and immediately heard it rattle on the other side. “I love you, sweetie! I love you! Say it back! Goddamnit, say it fucking back!” She heard her mother’s voice break and she closed her eyes tightly.

Silence, then the fading footsteps of her mother walking back up the hallway. The girl collapsed on her bed.

She began thinking about Clarence—about how warm his hands were, and that, for the brief second that her hand was on his pants, she felt him eagerly press up against her. Her hand migrated underneath the waistband of her miniskirt as she remembered how he sighed in her ear, and how his warm breath tickled the nape of her neck.

As her heart rate quickened, she could no longer conjure up clear images—just fragments of the night. Her breath, Clarence’s moaning, her legs quivering—in the stairwell and now, in her bed. She could hear Clarence say her name in her ear, and she shut her eyes tightly as she squeezed her legs together. Waves of heat, coursing through her extremities in a perfect, supernatural rhythm—and, then, nothing but her beating heart as she lay on her back, arms and legs spread, wondering what she had just done.

...

Once the girl had gathered her bearings, she was surprised by how hungry she was.

She wasn't too keen on seeing her mother again, but the girl was convinced that she had never been this hungry in her life. As she slowly inched toward the door, she looked at the clock—which read 11:30—and figured that there was a fairly good chance that her mother had already turned in for the night.

The girl pressed her ear against the door, and, hearing nothing, slowly cracked it open. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that the lights were off, and walked quietly, but quickly, to the kitchen.

She heard shuffling from inside the kitchen, and, before she could think, she snapped the light on. She heard her mother gasp, and then she heard her own as her eyes scanned the kitchen counter.

The blood was thin. Much thinner than the chunky sludge that the girl had seen in her underwear for the past week. It splattered and speckled the countertop. A drop of blood punctuated her gaze as it fell off of a dulled steak knife and hit the kitchen floor. Suddenly, she understood what her dad meant by the word “anything.”

“Sweetie,” the girl’s mother’s voice said shakily. “You’re not supposed to see this.”

As her mother frantically attempted to wipe up the mess with her shaky hands, only spreading it across the white countertop, the girl somehow believed her.

Ollie

My first thought was that going to the vet wasn't like going to the doctor. There was something less clinical about it. In simpler terms, a doctor's office never smelled like ripe dog shit. My second thought was concerning the source of the smell, since the waiting room was empty except for me, an elderly receptionist, and my ex-wife's dog. My third thought was interrupted by the now-familiar retch that meant that the dog was emptying his guts onto the waiting room floor.

"Don't worry," the receptionist said, shuffling over with a roll of paper towels. "Happens more often than you'd think."

"Yeah, he's not doing so hot," I replied, not knowing what else I could say.

"I'm sure that they'll help him out," she replied as I took the roll from her and started cleaning. "Sweet boy," she said to Ollie, who wagged his stubby tail enthusiastically, apparently over the incident. Something about the tone of her voice made me feel guilty.

Ollie was Carrie's dog. For reasons unknown to both Ollie and myself, Carrie had left Ollie a week ago, at the same time that she had left me.

You just don't care about *anything*, Stuart, she had said during our last fight. This fight had been identical to the many fights that came before it, during which she acted like the subject of a soap opera and I wished that I were the subject of an obituary.

Look, you're not even saying anything now. I had asked her what the fuck I was supposed to say. She told me to defend myself. Prove me *wrong*, Stuart, she had said. She was in

hysterics. Snot was running down her chin. I had seen this red, puffy picture so often that it meant nothing anymore.

I feel like I could just walk out the door, she had said, and you wouldn't even get up and run after me. I had known then, without a doubt, that she was going to leave. For Carrie, not a lot of time ever passed between the moment she thought of something and the moment she did it. She had been fascinating like that since the day I met her. I married her because I knew my life would never be boring with her in it—I would always have a job. I would always have something to figure out.

When I came home from work the next day, she was gone. Drawers empty, parka out of the coat closet, one suitcase short. There was no dramatic note or anything. That wasn't her way. When she did things like this, it was never to be dramatic. She genuinely felt like she had no choice but to leave. Where she was, though—*that* was most certainly a mystery. I imagined her barreling down the highway, blasting The Cranberries and sobbing, on her way to some sort of solo wilderness hike, or straight to Los Angeles or Chicago, or to join a monastery or something. Whatever it was, I knew I would never be able to guess. I wasn't perfect at my job.

Unexpectedly, there was Ollie, wagging that stupid stump tail and waiting for someone to take him out. She took the fucking decorative plates from Venice, but not the dog that she worshipped. I couldn't understand it.

It didn't take three days after Carrie left for Ollie to start leaving warm, slimy puddles of half-digested Purina all over the house. I seemed to find them in a new place every day: hiding behind the couch, sitting underneath the kitchen table, camouflaged by our brown rug.

Five years of having this dog and not once had he gotten sick. If he had, though, Carrie would have known what to do. She seemed to speak his language, or maybe it was that he spoke hers. They were both wildly impulsive and never still for more than a few seconds. They were a team. Sometimes, they made me feel like I was their fucking adversary just for acting like an adult. In any case, Carrie would have known what to do. The best I could manage was to call the number on the fridge and book an appointment with his vet that day. I had never been before—that was always Carrie’s job—but now, here I was, cleaning up dog vomit and trying to breathe through my mouth.

“Ollie?” I heard a woman’s voice calling from the hallway outside of the examining room. Why do they call the *dog’s* name, I thought to myself.

The nurse weighed Ollie, took his vitals, and checked his eyes and ears. She made a few failed attempts at small talk and then asked me about Ollie’s symptoms.

“He’s been puking,” I said, and then, feeling stupid, “vomiting. Quite a lot. At least once a day.”

“Is he on any medication?”

“I don’t think so.” She looked at me confusedly. “No, he’s not,” I said, still not entirely sure.

“Any sneezing, coughing, or diarrhea?”

“No.”

“Alright, I’ll let the doctor know that you two are here,” the nurse smiled politely and ruffled the fur on Ollie’s head. He craned his neck to lick her hand.

It wasn't that I hated Ollie, I just never understood why we needed him. Sure, I was angry when Carrie had first brought him home, but that was because she didn't tell me she was going to come home from work with a 60-pound mutt from the ASPCA truck. I remember seeing the two of them standing in the doorway wearing the same crazed look on their faces. A compromise, she had called him, which meant that she had decided that we were keeping him and there was nothing I could do to stop her. I still couldn't understand why she had left me with him. She would have known what to do. For one thing, she wouldn't have been nearly as uncomfortable sitting in this wooden stool as I was. For another thing, he was her fucking dog.

"Is that Ollie?"

The door creaked open, and in walked the veterinarian—an average-looking woman in all respects except for her breasts, which were extraordinary. You could tell that they were, even while they were obstructed by her scrubs. Getting to stare unapologetically at nice breasts was a pathetic consolation prize of my failed marriage, but it was one that I still accepted. Finally, she stopped setting up the examining table and addressed me, and I was forced to look somewhere else.

"Usually, your wife comes by," she said as she gently pressed down on Ollie's stomach.

"Finally giving her a break?"

"She couldn't make it today."

After that, there were no more questions about me.

"Did you ever figure out how old Ollie is?"

"No," I said. I didn't have to feel bad about not knowing this one. "Neither of us know. He's a rescue, we got him fully grown."

“Yes, that’s what your wife said when she first came. I’m sure she told you that we guessed that he was around nine, but that really meant that he could have been anywhere from seven to eleven.”

“She did,” I lied.

“How long have you had him for?”

“This is year five.” I then realized where the conversation was going. I snuck one last look at her breasts before the environment became too somber to do so.

“Ollie’s an old guy,” she rubbed his stomach. I couldn’t see his face but I heard his tail thumping against the metal examining table. “He’s certainly happy for the most part, but he’s more lethargic than I’ve ever seen him. I think the vomiting is likely a precursor to something bigger and a little bit scarier.” She turned her gaze from Ollie to me, and I wondered if she thought I didn’t look concerned enough.

“I know this is not the news that any pet owner wants to hear,” she continued. “But I would expect to see a rapid decline in Ollie’s comfort and happiness. As a vet, I worry about how his vital systems are going to take it. As an owner, I think you should be thinking about quality of life.” She was sympathetic, but there was something rehearsed about the way she spoke.

“How long do you think until it gets worse?” I asked.

“I would be surprised if it hasn’t already been getting worse for a while. Ollie’s likely been under a lot of stress before he even started presenting these symptoms.” When I didn’t respond, she said, “I suspect that in a week, he’s going to be a very different dog. I’d like to see him again then, if that’s alright.”

“A week?”

“I can tell you that he’s in a lot more pain than he is presenting,” she said more forcefully than before. “He’s been fighting for a while. I know it’s hard to tell, because he’s such a brave boy.” She directed the last part to Ollie, who looked up at her as if to agree.

“What happens at this next appointment?” I asked.

“We’re going to check on his stomach, see what other symptoms might have developed,” she said while scratching his ears, “and then we’ll reassess. Figure out where to go from here. We might have to make a difficult decision, but ultimately we’re going to have to do what’s best for Ollie.”

“What are the chances that we’d have to put him down?” As soon as I said it, I regretted it. Her expression stayed relatively neutral, but I saw the corners of her mouth turn down ever so slightly. She started petting Ollie more vigorously, as if to make up for my lack of compassion.

“If I had to guess, I would say that next week, we might come to that conclusion. In any case, I would prepare for it. Keep an eye on him. He’s already having trouble keeping food down, but if he stops eating altogether, I want you to give me a call.”

I was still frustrated that I couldn’t get a straight answer, but I had gotten the information that I needed. Not only had Carrie decided to leave me with her dog, but her dog was dying. I thanked the vet and left, Ollie trailing behind me, the two of us defeated.

I had gotten used to sleeping without Carrie pretty quickly. When she had first brought Ollie home, he had slept on the floor by the bed, but, one day, she had decided he would sleep in between us. It had been one of the most infuriating things to happen during our marriage. Sure, we hadn’t had sex for the better part of a year, but by letting Ollie sleep with us, she might as

well have said, “I am never fucking you again.” Sometimes I would roll over in the middle of the night and see Carrie’s face buried in his neck, her snoring muffled. I had always wondered how she didn’t suffocate in his scraggly fur. I tried not to roll over too much, though. Ollie would sleep with his mouth open, and his breath always smelled like a can of his food that had been left out in the sun. I never understood how Carrie ignored it.

Once Carrie left, I had kicked Ollie out of the bed. On the night of his death sentence, though, I started letting him sleep there again. It had been eight years since I hadn’t had a living thing asleep next to me. Sometimes, when I listened to the sound of his breathing long enough to know that he was in a deep sleep, I would reach my hand over his back and rest it on his stomach. I would try to match my breathing to the rise and fall of his—like a game. Within a few minutes, I’d be out cold.

Five days before Ollie’s appointment, I came home from work to find shit all over the floor.

I tried to think about what Carrie would do. When she had first adopted Ollie, nobody had bothered to house train him. She never once yelled at him, though, even when he peed on her precious silk throw. She would quietly clean up the mess, and then, after pretreating the fabrics, she would caress Ollie’s face as if he were a small child. These things happen, she would say to him. I had always told her that he wouldn’t learn that way, that he would never stop if she kept petting him every time he had an accident. They don’t respond to anger, Stuart, she had told me, like she had just earned a PhD in canine behavior. It only confuses them, they can’t be held

accountable like we can, she had said with more edge in her voice, like I had something to learn from her words. She was right. He was housebroken in two weeks.

This had been the first time that Ollie had gone in the house in five years. Even on the days where he really had to go, he had always waited until Carrie got home to walk him. I followed the brown smudges on the floor and eventually found him lying on his side underneath the kitchen table. His legs and the bottoms of his feet were caked with his own mess. He didn't move his head, but when I sat down beside him, he licked my hand over and over until I moved it away and wiped it on my pant leg.

I picked Ollie up and carried him to the bathroom—Carrie would have needed my help for that anyway—and gently lowered him into the tub. I had seen her give him a bath a few times, but I had never done it myself. I turned on the faucet and let the warm water run over his body. Luckily enough for both of us, he was still able to keep his head above water. I took each of his paws in my hands, one at a time, and worked the dirt out of them. Some places were more stubborn than others. The pads of his feet had intricate grooves that looked like they had been engraved with something tiny, like one of Carrie's sewing needles. It seemed to take an endless amount of time to scrub them clean. As I was crouched down, I could feel him lick my forehead reassuringly.

It felt like I should wash the rest of him after going through the effort of getting him in the tub. I lathered soap all over his body, making his fur more of a tangled mess than it already was. The harder I scrubbed, the tighter he closed his eyes shut. The only way that I knew he was enjoying it was by the sudsy water that his tail was sending everywhere. I took his face in my hands—which was, to my surprise, a much smaller face when it was wet—and gently worked the

soap through his whiskers. They usually felt bristly, but I could feel them softening as I turned them around in my fingers.

“These things happen,” I said to him.

Two messy days later, Ollie stopped eating altogether. I had given up on getting him to his food bowl, but usually, if I brought it to him, he would eat. That day, though, there had been no such luck.

I didn't just do what Carrie would do—I did everything that I could. It felt wrong not to. I opened up three new cans of food, but he wasn't interested in any of them. I tried to give him anything I could think of: deli turkey, cheese, even some of the doritos I had been eating, which I later learned had onion powder and would have killed him. All he did was look at me, almost apologetically.

“He hasn't eaten at all?” the vet asked when I called her the next morning.

“Nothing,” I said. “I've been trying for the last 36 hours.”

“That's not something to be taken lightly.” She spoke with conviction, like Carrie would. “It's one thing if he can't keep down food, but it's usually a very bleak thing when a dog stops eating altogether.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

“If he doesn't eat anything between now and the appointment, I think it would be best to go through with what we spoke about earlier. It might be time to say goodbye.” Just as she finished her sentence, my cell phone began to ring. It was Carrie.

“Alright, that makes sense,” I said, probably too curtly. I could picture the corners of her mouth turning down. “Thank you for letting me know,” I added for good measure.

“Do you have any questions?” she asked, in a tone implying that I should. My phone kept buzzing.

“No. I’ll call if I do. Thanks again.” I hung up and picked up Carrie’s call.

“Stuart, are you there?” I heard her say.

“Where have you been?” I asked. I was careful not to say it in a way that implied I wanted her to come back.

“I’ve been staying with my parents,” she said. “Down in Poughkeepsie. Just for a little while, before I figure out something more permanent.” She added the last part hastily, just to make sure that I knew that she didn’t want to come back.

“I heard it snowed there last weekend,” I said, trying to fill the silence, but my mind was racing. I hadn’t even thought that she had been with her parents.

“Yes, it was nice,” she said, like she would to a neighbor. Then, “I sent divorce papers to you today, Stuart.” Then, “I hope you understand.” Then, “Do you understand, Stuart?”

“I think so,” I said.

“You just never were *there*, Stuart. Even when I left, you couldn’t so much as call me.”

“I figured you wanted space.”

“Maybe,” she said. She sounded genuinely unsure. “But maybe I wanted to see how much it would take for you to actually *say* something to me.”

“We spoke every day,” I said, knowing what she meant.

“I know we *spoke*, Stuart. I just wanted to see that you cared.” I couldn’t think of how to respond. Luckily, I didn’t have to. She continued.

“When I first met you, the most exciting thing about you was that you kept to yourself. With you, there was always something to figure out. I thought that because you married me you *wanted* me to figure you out, but it took me eight years to learn that this is just how you fucking are!” Her voice was pitchy, as it always got when she’d had it with me. If I concentrated, I could see her contorted face.

“I always thought that I was the one who was supposed to figure you out,” I said back. She paused for a moment.

“Well, I guess we both wasted our time then,” she said finally. I didn’t respond. I thought maybe if I stayed silent for long enough, she’d hang up.

“How’s Ollie?” she asked.

“Why did you leave him with me?”

“I was planning on coming back to get him, Stuart. My mom would flip her shit if he was here, you know that.” I didn’t.

“Ollie’s fine,” I lied.

“Okay, okay, good,” she said. “I promise I’ll be back for him soon. Just give me a little bit of time to find—”

I hung up before she could finish her sentence.

...

“Ollie?”

I looked up and saw the vet in the doorway. The three of us went through the motions, but the fact that Ollie couldn't get onto the examining table without my help—even when the vet lowered it for him—told all of us that this was the end of the road. I don't even think she bothered to listen to his heart.

“First, a little bit of a sedative. Stops them from moving around too much.” She pulled out a syringe and laid it out in her hands, like it was a bottle of fine wine and she was about to pour me a glass. She smiled tightly, with closed lips.

She took Ollie's leg and stuck the needle in. As soon as she pushed down on the syringe, Ollie let out a strained yelp. The vet started shushing, loudly, almost like she was trying to drown him out.

“Hang on, what are you doing?”

“It's normal,” she said to Ollie, not to me. “The sedative is cold.”

When she had emptied the syringe, we waited. I could see the thin muscles on Ollie's legs start to relax. After a minute or so, his eyes began to close. His breathing was rhythmic and comforting.

“This is what we use.” I looked up from Ollie and saw the vet hanging up an IV bag filled with what looked like Pepto Bismol. “Pentobarbital. It's a seizure medication, but when we administer it like this, it essentially slows down the heart. Eventually, he'll just go to sleep. It's very peaceful.”

I didn't say anything. I stared at the patch of scruffy, gray fur underneath Ollie's snout as she put the IV in his leg. He didn't yelp this time. I thought about telling her that he wasn't my

dog, that I wasn't some sick son of a bitch who didn't care that his dog was dying, but I didn't know what good it would do.

"I'm going to step out," she said. "I'll be back in about ten minutes."

I heard the door shut, and then the room was quiet except for the persistent buzzing of fluorescent lights and the soft, shallow breathing of a dying thing. I took a stool that was sitting under a poster ranking dog food brands, a poster that you'd look at if your dog wasn't dying, and pulled it next to the examining table. I sat down so that I was level with Ollie's face.

Immediately, I smelled his hot breath. I didn't know what to do.

Carrie would have known what to do. Sure, she would have been a mess—snotty, unintelligible—but she would have known what to do. I thought about the way that Carrie used to pet him. With the grain, she would always say with her authoritative voice. I never understood how she found the grain—Ollie's coat looked like it grew in all directions—but I tried it then, softly petting his waxy fur. I knew I'd have to wash my hand afterwards.

I looked up. The IV bag was half empty. I kept petting Ollie, watching the slow rise and fall of his stomach that had only just started becoming familiar to me. My eyes traced the streaks of gray breaking through his black fur. Salt and pepper, Carrie had called it. I tried to think about what Carrie would want me to do for him. I started shushing, but not like the vet did. I was slower, softer. The more I did it, the more I felt like I should stop, but I kept going.

On the last of Carrie's birthdays that I had spent with her, she had dragged me to the park to play fetch with her and Ollie. They had gone together every Saturday, but that was the first and only time I had ever gone with them. I had sat on a park bench and watched the two of them run around together, both of them with the same disjointed gallop. I was too far away to hear

what Carrie was saying, but it sounded like she was speaking to an old friend. She would point at him, or throw her arms up in the air, or cackle sometimes, the way I had only seen her do after a second glass of sangria. At one point, I had even heard her say, “I know! I know!”

When she had tired herself out, she had flopped down next to me on the bench. I remember then that she had turned and looked at me expectantly. I had known that she wanted me to do or say something, but I had no clue what it was. I had looked back at her, smiling—a real smile—but to this day, I still don’t know what she wanted.

We were interrupted by the tinny sound of Ollie’s collar as he ran towards us. Instead of coming up to Carrie, though, he had dropped his tennis ball at my feet.

“Look at that, he wants you to throw it for him!” Carrie had said.

Ollie had looked like a fucking idiot. His tongue had been hanging out of the side of his mouth, and his stubby tail had been wagging so hard it had looked like it could fly right off of him. I had stared into his massive, dark eyes and realized how much they looked like Carrie’s. I remember taking that slimy tennis ball in my hand and hoping that throwing it would make me feel like Carrie was my wife.

I looked back up at the IV bag. There was barely any of the Pepto Bismol left. I thought Ollie’s eyes would stay closed, but they started to open as his breathing became fainter. The way each of his breaths started and stopped scared me. It was like someone was pressing on the gas, and then suddenly the breaks, and then suddenly the gas again. I started shushing louder, quicker. Eventually, Ollie’s mouth opened, but no breath came out.

When his chest stopped rising and falling, I took my hand off of his body. It was too still.

Godiner

The vet opened the door a crack again before coming in—another thing that felt too rehearsed—but did not seem surprised that I wasn't an emotional wreck. She checked Ollie's pulse and confirmed, in coded language, that he had "passed."

When she asked me what I would like to do with Ollie, I responded, "Whatever people usually do with their dogs." Once again, she seemed disappointed in my answer. When she told me that lots of owners cremated their pets, I opted for that without asking any more questions. When I left the office, I realized that I was still holding Ollie's leash and collar. I threw them in the back of my car and drove home. It was the quietest drive I'd had in eight years.

When I got home, I mailed Ollie's dog tag back to Carrie with a note:

I hope this gets to you soon. Ollie passed away. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I don't think you would have liked being there, though. And I'm also sorry that I wasn't able to figure out that you wanted to figure me out. I'm sorry for a lot of things.

The vet said most people cremate the dogs, so that's what I did. I'm sorry if that's not what you wanted. I can send the ashes or you can pick them up. Whatever you want.

Ollie was a very good dog. I know he missed you, but I'm sure he understood.

I couldn't be sure, but some parts felt more true than others.

A Quiet Kind of Boyhood

“And did you want to know the sex of the baby?”

The snaggle-toothed sonogram lady had asked it plainly, but the truth was, it had always been a complicated question. “Want” was simultaneously too strong a word, and not strong enough. “Need” felt more appropriate, although embarrassing to admit. I might not have *wanted* to know, but I felt like I *needed* to. At the same time, I didn’t *need* it to be a boy, but I *wanted* to know if I should start preparing for one.

“You can still teach a girl how to catch, you know,” Kelly said the night before the appointment. I responded by shutting off the light. She knew it wasn’t about that.

I’m not going to give you the thing that most expectant dads would give you—about not “getting” girl stuff, or wanting to spend my Sundays doing Tee-Ball practice. Hell, I was never even good at Tee-Ball and doing it with my son probably would have awakened some sort of old, repressed trauma. It didn’t have to do with any of those things. It had everything to do with my dad.

Really, I should have known I was damned from the start, because my father had set the bar impossibly high. He was one of those plain-old, dependable people. Furiously kind and endlessly patient. I idolized him, of course, but I wasn’t the only one who saw him that way. He was everyone’s handyman; everyone’s superhero. If there had been any old ladies in my neighborhood growing up, you bet your ass that my dad would have rescued their wispy, anorexic cats from tall trees.

I imagine it's always hard to lose your dad, no matter who he was, or who you are, but losing him when I was thirteen was a total gut punch. It wasn't exactly ideal for my mom to teach me how to shave or give me the sex talk. I found myself thinking about him in the important moments—when I got my first girlfriend, when I got into college, and even recently when I got promoted. I sure as hell thought about him when Kelly told me that she was pregnant, and he was the only thing on my mind the night before that fateful ultrasound appointment. Over the course of her pregnancy, I became determined to finish what my dad and I had started. Surely, there was some of his goodness within me. Kelly had kept telling me not to be too hard on myself, but a lot was at stake here. I've never felt like a great person, but something told me that I could be a good dad.

“The sex of the baby is male.”

The sonogram lady's lisped s sounds sent a spray of spit across the room, but it might as well have been congratulatory confetti to me. I could barely contain myself. I've never been the type of guy to get super emotional about things, but, when she told us, I felt my face get hot and I blinked for many, embarrassing seconds. I mean, sure, it would be easy to say that I'd be happy no matter what now, but, to this day, I can't be completely sure. I think Kelly knows that's true, too.

Like always, Kelly did the talking. This time, I was thankful for it. I wouldn't have known where to start.

“Oh, wonderful,” she said, glancing at the ultrasound screen before turning back to the sonogram lady. Then, to me with a chuckle, “I guess we'll have to exchange the pink blanket from Talbots, right?”

She didn't look at me. There was no blanket.

...

We drove home in a kind of quiet, satisfied silence. To both of our surprise, I was the one to break it.

“So, I was thinking about names, and—”

“Of course we can name him after your father.”

“We don't—”

“No, come on. I know that's what you want. And I've always liked the name Paul. It's okay. I'm good with it. Let's do it.”

When her hand began rubbing my shoulder, I breathed a shaky sigh of relief.

...

The baby's birth was straight out of a Hallmark movie. Kelly spread eagle, screaming and sweating bullets; me clutching her hand and pretending to ignore the competing aromas of shit and amniotic fluid. They don't usually show that part in the movies, but it was a big part of my experience. The nurses circled around her like the SWAT team and so I did my best to stay back and out of the way. It was a short labor, all things considered. In two hours, I was holding a tiny, warm, shrieking human body in my hands. I had thought that I would have this life-altering, full-circle moment where I'd see my dad in his eyes or something, but that didn't happen. Instead, I just felt clueless.

“Oh, he's *magnificent*,” my mother had said during her first visit, reaching her arms out expectantly. I delicately transferred him over to her, and when he was secure in her arms, she

looked up at me. I stared back, but I couldn't read her. I still don't know what was going through her mind that day.

The first weeks—months, even—went by quickly and slowly. Whenever I looked at Paul, I felt a type of ache in my chest that I hadn't felt since my dad died. I went from not having cried in over decades to feeling my eyes sting every time I looked at him. Most nights, I couldn't help but get out of bed and shuffle my feet over to his crib, towering over his small body and looking at the shadow that my beer belly would cast over him. His eyes would be closed tightly—not that it mattered, since he rarely looked at us when he was awake. I'd wonder if my dad ever stood where I stood, over his only child and wondering if he was doing it right so far. Sometimes I'd even imagine myself in the crib—my father's face, as it looks in the picture from Texas Roadhouse on our fridge, staring down at me. When I shushed Paul to sleep, I could swear I heard my father's breath escape my lips. Not that I even know what that would sound like. This neurotic, quasi-dissociative episode would almost always wake Kelly up.

“Is he still breathing?” she'd ask through lazy, tired lips, only halfway sarcastic.

“He's sleeping well,” I'd always answer.

“Are *you* breathing?” she once asked back.

“I just can't stop looking at him.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, flipping over to face me and the crib. “He's ours.”

“He looks like—”

“I know,” Kelly said. Not dismissively, though—never dismissively, just with the comfortable familiarity that comes when you've heard someone say something tens of times already.

“No, but really. My grandma showed me his baby album after he died.” Silence. I spoke again. “Do you know what to do with him?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” I said, knowing. “Have your...I don’t know, have your maternal instincts kicked in or something?”

“I don’t know what that means, Dane,” she said. “I think about him all the time. I worry if he’s safe. I drain my tits to feed him. I compulsively search for preschools and he’s not even a month old.” She punctuated her last sentence with a soft, wry chuckle.

“I love him so much,” I said, walking back to bed. “I want to be good enough. I don’t have...tits to drain. That was kind of a gross way to put it, by the way.”

“It’s what happens!”

“I just want to give him what he needs.”

“Well, right now, he needs a diaper change,” she said, turning back over. After the deed was done, I joined her in bed and the three of us breathed in rhythm.

...

When Paul turned 18 months, the pediatrician (who was also, coincidentally, snaggle-toothed, although less lispy) told us that it was unusual that he hadn’t spoken a word.

“Are you sure he’s not just a shy kid?” I had asked during our appointment. “He’s not even two.”

“He still could be a shy kid,” Doctor Muller had replied, her brow wrinkled. “But, we’d expect that by a year and a half, he would be saying some basic, building block words. ‘Mama,’ ‘Dada,’ you get the idea.”

By the time that we'd gotten back to our house, Kelly had already scoured the internet and amassed a phone notes page full of possible diagnoses. It featured selective mutism, cerebral palsy, developmental language disorder, and other multisyllabic disorders I'd never heard of.

"What if he's deaf? He could be deaf," Kelly said, holding Paul's pinky finger—he never particularly liked it when we held his hands—and leading him into the house.

I paused for a second.

"BOO!" I said, quickly turning around. Kyle's head snapped up, his eyes wide and his lip quivering.

"See?" I said, meeting Kelly's annoyed eyes. "Not deaf."

"This isn't some sort of joke, Dane," she said, pushing Paul through the door. Then, softly, "something could be seriously wrong here."

"I don't know if you can call it *seriously* wrong," I replied as I walked into the house. "He's alive. He's healthy. He eats, drinks, and shits. Who cares if he's not talking?"

"Well, according to Muller, *we* should."

"Hey, buddy, come here," I said, crouching down and watching Paul's short legs propel him toward me. As he drunkenly stumbled over, I outstretched my arms to steady him. As usual, he didn't take me up on the offer.

"How are we doing?" I asked him. "Good? So-so? Not good?" I gave him a thumbs up, flat hand, and a thumbs down to show him his options. Without hesitation, and with his eyes laser focused on my hand gestures, he gave me a tiny thumbs up. I reached out for a hug, but he smiled bashfully before scurrying away. When he left my line of sight, I made eye contact with Kelly. She smiled tightly before hanging her coat up and walking out of the hallway.

...

“Well I *have* to agree with Kelly,” my mom had said, with her usual sing-songy, didactic inflection. “Why, we couldn’t get you to *stop* talking when you were Paul’s age.”

I still hadn’t gotten used to her saying my dad’s name and not actually referring to my dad.

“So, what do you think we should do?”

“Hear me out. *Magnesium* tablets.”

“Come on!”

“I’m serious! He might be deficient!”

“I don’t think that’s why he’s not *speaking*.”

“Okay, well what *have* you done?” she asked.

“We took him to the doctor,” I replied defensively. “We didn’t even know there was a problem until today.”

“And now that you know,” she started slowly. “*What* are you going to do *now*?” It was with no doubt a question, but it came out as more of a declarative statement. I said nothing and thought about it for the first time that day. What came next?

“I don’t know,” I finally said.

“Well, show some type of effort here, Dane. Try to get to the bottom of this,” she said.

“Lord knows it’s what your father would have done.”

...

A couple of months later, my son was a regular at the speech pathologist’s office.

Every Tuesday, it was the same deal: drop Paul off at 3 in the afternoon, pick him up at 3:45, watch Kelly look at Paul with wide expectant eyes as he bolted past us, meet the regretful eyes of Miss Sandra, watch her shake her head slowly. She would say some iteration of “It was a tough session for Paul, today,” and Kelly and I would hang our heads in shame and trudge into her office.

“What can we do?” Kelly would ask desperately. For some reason, in those moments, my heart would pound and I would feel a depressingly intense kind of love for her. I’d carefully place my hand on her leg while Miss Sandra would tell us that the only thing that we could possibly do is continue cutting weekly \$250 checks to her insurance-unfriendly practice. We did it without question.

“This is ridiculous,” Kelly would always say as I drove home, looking straight ahead. “There’s no reason why this shouldn’t be working. She’s a quack, or something. Maybe I can ask Stacey for a referral. I’m sure she’s got a list.”

“Our neighbor with the fucked up kids?” As my eyes glazed over, I remembered the countless days that I watched Stacey’s kids toddle across her backyard to the outstretched arms of some sort of overpaid child aid. “Paul doesn’t need the type of doctors that her kids needed.”

“They *weren’t* fucked up, Dane,” Kelly responded, her voice darker and dripping with fatigue. “And we don’t *know* what Paul needs, yet.”

From then on, I would let Kelly do the talking during the drives home. Evidently, there was nothing I could say that would make her feel any better. I didn’t even know how I felt about all this. I couldn’t help but think about what my dad would do if he had to drive his son to and

from speech pathology before he was even two years old. When I was optimistic, I'd imagine him being supportive, despite my mom's passive-aggressive suggestions of otherwise.

"Stay the course, Dane," I'd hear him saying in a voice I couldn't even remember anymore. "One day, this will be behind you. Think about it as ammo for when you meet his first girlfriend. This is the *perfect* dinner table story."

Most days, though, were not optimistic. Oftentimes, I'd find myself wondering if my dad would be ashamed of me. Ashamed that I couldn't get my own son to speak with me. That he wouldn't even hug me, for fuck's sake. I wondered if my dad had ever even worried that I loved him. I never remember him begging for a hug, but he used to ask for "some knucks" a lot. Was that, too, a desperate gesture for affection?

I broke my focus on the road and stared at Paul in the rearview mirror.

"Hey buddy," I said. I saw the corners of his lips turn up slightly, but he didn't look back at me.

...

Paul's second birthday came and went, and even Miss Sandra started losing hope. With a sullen look on her face (presumably from not being able to take any more of our money in good conscience), she referred us to a child psychiatrist—also not on our insurance plan, of course.

Our last meeting with Miss Sandra felt entirely like a breakup. After Paul did his usual tipsy scurry out of her office, she silently beckoned us in—much like Paul, unable to meet our gaze.

"As a speech pathologist," she started, and I could see Kelly's eyes glaze over. She knew what was coming, and I did, too. I chose to keep listening.

“As a speech pathologist,” she continued. “It’s my responsibility—to you both, and to Paul—to know when I have done everything I can for him. I have tried as many techniques and approaches with Paul as I think would serve him, and, unfortunately, I’m not seeing the progress I’d hope to see by now.”

“So now what?” I asked, impatient.

“Now,” she said, evidently upset that I interrupted her monologue. “We have to consider other options. I think it would be in Paul’s best interest to see a pediatric psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist?” Kelly said, breaking her silence. “So, there’s something wrong with him, mentally?”

“I’d encourage you to not think of it as something being *wrong*, per se,” Miss Sandra continued, trying to stay on track. “Paul just needs a little bit more help than I have the facilities to give at this time. And I have some colleagues who I think will be able to pick up where I’ve left off.”

“So, that’s it, huh?” Kelly said, her voice quivering. “There’s just nothing else that we can do?”

“Mrs. Clemson, that’s not what I’m saying,” she continued. My hand took its usual position on Kelly’s knee as I heard her breath quicken. “I’m simply saying that it’s time to try out another option.”

“And what if that doesn’t work?” I asked.

“Well, then I’m sure Doctor Colter will have more insight on the next steps. In the meantime, I’ll give you her contact information.”

Defeated, we left her office. I tried to grab Paul's hand on the way out, but he wriggled and squirmed until I dropped it and let him walk away from us.

...

"Autism spectrum disorder," Doctor Colter said, satisfyingly snapping her binder shut before looking up to meet our gaze. "Any questions?"

...

"But Stacey's oldest is autistic," Kelly had said on the drive home. "And he does all of that stuff with the rocking and the hand-flapping. Paul never did any of that! How can she be sure?"

"She said that it manifests differently in different people," I said, thinking that now was not the right time to stay silent. "It's not like there's a one-size-fits-all. If she says he has it, then he has it. Nothing that we can do now."

"How can you be so nonchalant? Our son's life—*our* lives—will never be the same!"

"I'm not nonchalant! It's not like today is the day he 'caught' autism. He's had it since he was a baby. He's healthy, breathing, eating, and right now he's sleeping in the back of the car, so maybe we should keep it down."

"I don't know how you can sit here and tell me to count our blessings right now."

"It is *fine*," I said, ignoring her. "This is *fine*. Our son is healthy and you need to calm down before you wake him up."

When we got home, Kelly disappeared, Paul in her arms, to put him to bed. I went to our room.

“I *told* you, the magnesium, Dane,” my mom groaned when I finally gave her the call.

“Did you even *give* him the magnesium? Oh, God, why don’t you *listen*?”

“It’s not like it would have made a difference.”

“You don’t *know* that,” she said, her voice jumping up the octave. “And, now, you never will. No closure. How can you live with that?”

“Mom, please,” I said desperately.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. There’s really nothing you can do?”

“I don’t think it’s a matter of doing, Mom,” I tried to reason with her. “He’s still Paul. The diagnosis is just an explainer for some of his quirks. Nothing more.”

“What if he never talks? *Ever*? Some autistics never talk, did you know that?”

“You can’t call him *an* autistic, Mom. Surely, you know that.”

“Well, I’m flustered!”

“Mom, I can’t tolerate this. We have to take it day by day. We don’t know anything. We have to stay the course.” I saw my dad, hands clutching a puffy Texas Roadhouse roll, in my mind, and I shut my eyes tightly until I saw static.

“No other choice,” I heard her say, as I opened my eyes and watched the reflections of light dance around me.

I managed to stop crying by the time that Kelly opened the door.

sweat.

sunday may 12.

the first time i heard the devil's breath in my ear i mistook it for my own. in my defense i was fresh off of my evening run and my heart was still ringing in my ears. as i panted heavily i noticed that the sound had an unnatural timbre.

usually when i finish running there's a muffled quality to my labored breathing but as i stood in my dorm's parking lot catching my breath the sound was strangely clear. it felt like my breathing didn't belong to me but at the same time my breath was easier to hear than usual. i thought little of it since i had forgotten to take my calcium supplement that day. the pediatrician that i still saw from back home told me that "things" could happen if i stopped taking it.

this morning though the breathing sounds are back. in fact even though they're quiet i think that they woke me up. i haven't even gone for a run but somehow they're more noticeable than before. i know for a fact they're not my own anymore. they're shakier than mine and each breath is punctuated by a low growl. that's not how i breathe. hell that's not how any mortal person breathes. i was skeptical at first but all of the signs are here.

it's clear that i'm being inhabited by the devil. believe me when the thought first crossed my mind i tried to dismiss it because on the surface it does seem unlikely. but when the thought lingered i could hear a slightly louder and longer confirmatory breath in my ear. the tone was

more assertive. if the last breaths had all been commas then this one was a period. it was an indication of agreement. i don't think that he could've been more clear.

the most perplexing part of this whole thing is that i have no idea what the devil would want to do with a jewish girl from scarsdale. i mean the first time i learned about the devil was when i read the crucible in fifth grade. but maybe that's the point. maybe i'm being punished for not fearing him enough. but isn't that the punishment for not fearing god enough too? maybe i'm being punished for both. maybe i'm being punished because i made out with a girl at sigma chi when i saw that kyle was watching. i don't know what i'm supposed to answer for here. like even right now i'm trying to see if the devil will say something or give me some sort of sign. it would be easier if i knew what i did wrong. he just keeps breathing.

monday may 14.

i skipped my accounting class after i woke up this morning and confirmed that the devil is still inside of me. possessing me? i'm still figuring out the proper nomenclature. that's why i took the day off. i need to do some research. or at least try since the breathing is becoming majorly distracting.

i searched how to know when you're possessed by the devil online. Most of the major churches don't say much about it on their websites but the indie faith blogs had a lot of insight. almost too much. one of the bloggers said that the first sign of demonic possession is doubting the goodness of jesus. i don't know what to make of this because i don't know if i ever have believed in god. i've certainly never believed in jesus. why would all this be catching up to me

now at 19 years old? if being raised jewish was the reason why the devil is possessing me then why didn't he get to it sooner?

i also saw these videos of other people like me. people who have been possessed too. but they seem different. they writhe and snarl and roll their eyes into the back of their heads. the only reason i know that i'm possessed by the devil is because of his soft breathing. if i'm in the driver's seat then the devil is more like a passenger. but watching these videos worried me because maybe they're a sign of what's to come.

i texted kyle letting him know that i wasn't going to be able to see him tonight. it's not like we had plans but i figured he'd likely come over at one in the morning after spending the entire day ignoring my text just as he usually did. we actually work well together because he's aloof and i'm extraordinarily desperate. not that any of this is worth getting into in the middle of my current crisis.

for a second i thought that i had lost the devil but i just hadn't been focusing on his breath. i could live with it if i was able to ignore it all the time but there is something so disturbingly delicate about his breathing. every now and then he pauses like he's about to say something. i can't really visualize the devil but if i focus hard enough i can imagine his mouth hanging open. but each time this happens he eventually resumes breathing – starting even more softly but then working his way up to his original volume. he makes himself known but he won't break our silence.

tuesday may 15.

the theory of demonic possession doesn't seem to be as popular anymore. maybe it's my ignorance but i thought that exorcisms were still a semi common practice in christian circles. apparently most demonic possession claims today are dismissed as things like epilepsy or schizophrenia or somnambulism. but i haven't been diagnosed with any of that. surely there have got to be a few other people besides me who have actually dealt with this. there was also something thrilling about the possibility of me being the first one but i assume that's a long shot. as i heard the devil's steady breath in my ear i couldn't help but feel a connection to other possessed people. to the ones whose problems have been attributed to an "organic ailment." i understood them and somehow i could feel them understanding me.

wednesday may 16.

i told my roommate i'm sick when she asked why i've been in bed for the last 72 hours. she wouldn't understand if i told her the truth. i also feel like the devil's breathing has been sounding angrier lately and i'm worried about upsetting him further. maybe i'm just worrying for nothing but i'd rather be safe than sorry.

it's not like she'd notice that i wasn't there anyway. she likes me i think but she nonetheless teases me for speaking quietly and quickly which apparently is different from mumbling according to her. she thinks i'm moody because i've told her on more than one

occasion that i needed more personal space. she probably thinks that this is just an extension of my usual bullshit which would typically piss me off but as of right now is fine by me.

she did say something pretty weird though.

“i saw kyle” she said. “and?” i said and did my best to prop myself up. “that’s it. i just thought you’d want to know.”

“well where did you see him?” i tried asking while simultaneously trying not to lose my shit. what, she’s buddy buddy with him now and i can’t even get a text back?

“just at the grocery store, that’s all.” she said. ironically the “that’s all” convinced me that that wasn’t all. a grocery store scene is so domestic. kyle wouldn’t even see me in daylight hours. what does she have that i don’t?

i acted like it didn’t matter to me but it obviously did. i wondered if he saw her or if they talked. but she didn’t offer and i couldn’t bring myself to ask.

i spent most of today looking up how and if exorcisms can be performed virtually. apparently it’s a polarizing topic. some spirit guides say that they refuse to give their services over a video call because they believe the process of exorcism is a tactile one. i don’t really know if i’d want someone touching me even if we could meet in person. plus i don’t think i could justify using my dad’s amex to fly to one of these exorcists so maybe it’s for the best that i don’t like their style. another group of guides believe that the power of the lord is transmissible through a screen and that the guides in the former group are simply unable to harness it. i’m hoping that they’re onto something.

i’ve scheduled a bunch of consultations for tomorrow because i want to make sure i’m trusting the right person. a lot of historical exorcisms were ugly. immolation, dismemberment,

the whole nine yards. i don't know what the standard practice is now but i'm hoping that the self harm is outdated. i need to find a guide that has modern principles but is still loyal to the ancient ritual. each of these calls is running me fifty bucks so hopefully one of them is a good match.

thursday may 17.

i wound up not getting the chance to speak with most of the guides because in the middle of my first appointment with a priest i finally realized what i had to do. we were about 30 minutes into his powerpoint presentation and so i dont think i'll be able recoup the consultation deposit but i requested refunds for the others. i feel a bit bad about canceling all of these calls at the last minute but it's not my fault that i had a revelation.

as i was consulting the exorcism literature this morning i noticed that historically priests would draw blood from the possessed person to "ring out" demonic spirits. when i first read that i didn't spend much time thinking about it except to pause and wince at the thought. the devil's breathing seemed to grow quieter for a second. i should have realized that i was on the right path but i guess i was too distracted by my consultation schedule.

it was hard for me to focus on reverend john's presentation because as he was boasting his collection of rosaries and the one time that he made someone levitate during an exorcism (no witnesses obviously) i started thinking about what it would feel like to bleed out the devil. i imagined the acute relief of feeling him seep out of me. of his voice dripping out of my ears and growing fainter until coming to a permanent stop.

the issue is that i just can't get my head around the idea of hurting myself. plus when i was 8 my pediatrician told me that i have a vasovagal reaction to blood which basically means i pass out whenever i see it. i guess if i did it without looking i could manage but it's also hard to imagine the entire process. even the idea of pressing something sharp into my skin – of feeling the give and the snap of of my first layer of dermis – is enough to form a lump in my throat.

but here's where my epiphany comes in. is it really the blood loss that's doing the exorcising? or is it simply the expulsion of bodily fluid? i realized that if it's the latter i had scheduled all of these fifty dollar consults for nothing. i wouldn't need anybody's help for this. i'm also still in school and a homemade exorcism seems more fiscally responsible.

my first idea was that i could chug a couple of gallons of water and then try peeing out the devil. stupid i know. but truly how many degrees of separation are there between blood and urine? plus kyle's been sleeping over a lot lately so my urinary tract could probably use all the help it can get. i realized though that there is one critical difference between blood and urine: blood is vital while urine is simply waste. that pee had to come out of me at some point. why would the devil now suddenly follow suit if he hasn't already?

that's when it finally hit me. i could sweat out the devil. sweating is easy. all you have to do is get warm. no pain. no bodily harm. plus it's a passive activity. if the issue really is that i need to repent i'll have plenty of time to do so while i'm sweating my ass off in my room.

i didn't realize how late it had gotten. it feels like i just woke up. as a peace offering to the devil i've decided to let his rhythmic breathing rock me to sleep one last time. i can manage until tomorrow.

friday may 18.

no class today so my roommate sent me her usual neurotic friday night plan-setting text. i don't know how many more times she'll write "hey girlie! what are the moves tonight?" before realizing that nobody knows where they're going at 10 a.m. on a friday. this morning was different though.

i couldn't shake the idea that something was going on between kyle and my stupid fucking roommate. maybe it's irrational but i don't know why she would have even thought to tell me that she had seen him if she didn't want me to have a reaction. i wondered if she was expecting me to freak out but was relieved when i acted like i didn't care. i all but gave her permission to go right ahead and keep fucking him. i cursed myself for faking my nonchalance but something about the devil's rhythmic breathing reminded me not to jump to conclusions too quickly. i paused my own breathing so i could listen to him better. he seemed calm and so i settled down too.

in any case i had my "sick :(" text locked and loaded. my phone immediately buzzed after i hit send and once i checked to make sure there weren't any follow-up questions i turned my phone on silent.

i locked my bedroom door before turning off all of the lights. i turned off the elephant humidifier that my mom got me for chanukkah. i also took off my star of david necklace just in case. i stuffed a towel between the crack in my bedroom door and closed my windows to prevent any warm air from escaping. then i turned my thermostat as high as it could go. it's a college

dorm so i could only get it to 85 degrees but hopefully that'll be hot enough to sweat the devil out. i also scrubbed off all of my deodorant for good measure.

there's not much else i'm able to do. i searched up how to sweat on the internet and tried all of the common suggestions. i did jumping jacks until i felt dizzy. i even drank a little bit of the bottle of sriracha sitting on my bed. i had to drink a lot of water afterward but that also wound up being a suggestion for sweating more. then i just collapsed in my bed and that's where i've been since about noon today.

i can feel a couple of beads of sweat forming on my forehead and i felt one trickle down my back as i did my last jumping jack. but i'm not sweating buckets the way i thought it would. with barely any sweat i'm still obviously subject to the devil's breathing in my ear. the warmer i get the more drawn out his breath becomes. it makes me wonder if he's getting tired.

saturday may 19.

i woke up this morning in a puddle of my own sweat. i breathed a sigh of relief before hearing the devil do the same. almost as if he was mocking me.

i guess it was wishful for me to think he'd be gone in a day but i hoped that my dedication would speed things up. i wasn't so worried at this point because i hadn't even begun the other phase of my exorcism which was repenting.

but before i could even get started my heart sank as i realized i had to pee which i hadn't originally thought through. but i was worried that stepping into the bathroom and leaving makeshift exorcist chamber would undo my sweating progress. i'll admit i was ashamed to use

the popcorn bowl sitting on my nightstand but i also knew that i was acting out of necessity. i got used to the smell quicker than you'd think but the heat definitely didn't make it any easier.

once i had finished my business and crawled back into bed i couldn't help but peek at my phone. no more texts from my roommate besides the one where she waxed poetic about me feeling better. no texts from kyle either. that upset me far more.

i realized that maybe this was a good place for me to start my reflection.

kyle and i have been more than fucking but less than dating for the last six months. we met at a halloween party last semester and headed home together within 20 minutes. my roommate trailed behind us as i listened to him talk about his nft project and pretended to care. "my brother is nuts about nfts" my roommate had said to our backs. then to me: "fiona remember when my brother visited and talked about the nft stuff?" i had nodded but i realize now that she probably couldn't have seen that from behind us. i should have known why she was so desperate to insert herself in our pre-coital small talk. she hoped that he'd change his mind and go to her room instead. the devil paused as if to consider this possibility.

kyle was unlike the guys i dated in high school which i think is what initially drew me to him. he's the kind of person my mother would politely call "alternative" and my dad would impolitely call "a loser." he'll talk about government surveillance in the same sentence as he'll talk about his new dual-monitor PC gaming system. there was something enigmatic about the way he smudged his eyeliner while also donning basketball shorts. i also was never really into blonds but there was something about the contrast of kyle's hair and his otherwise dark features and style that i found quite beautiful.

i was far from the only one who noticed him. he could sleep with any girl or guy he wanted to and for the most part he did. it didn't usually bother me when i saw a barbie doll or a mousy twink hanging off of him at a sigma chi party but maybe it did because two nights ago i still felt like i had to make out with the nearest saccharine sorority bitch i could find. as she started biting my bottom lip i opened my eyes and saw that kyle wasn't looking back. i felt a confusing sense of relief when he showed up to my room that night in his pajamas and plainly asked if he could stay over. as he was laying in my bed that night and snoring softly i felt safe but i also felt guilty. i wondered why we'd never seen each other in the daytime. maybe he spends the days with my roommate.

and now surely enough i haven't heard from him since i began my exorcism.

maybe this is part of the devil's punishment. or maybe the devil is punishing him too for associating with me. or the devil is punishing me for associating with his gender-ambiguous sexually-fluid deviance or something. i still don't know what i'm supposed to be answering for.

but in any case if this is a time for me to repent then i should get started.

i used to think i was a victim of my emotional unintelligence but the devil's presence has made me realize that it's at least partially within my control. if i were able to be more vulnerable i wonder if things would be different between me and kyle or me and my roommate or me and my grandmother whose calls i'm inexplicably too embarrassed to pick up.

hell i don't even know how i feel about having a demonic spirit living and breathing inside of me. i just feel like i should want him to be gone. and it frustrates me as i sweat through my shirt and run my teeth across my dry tongue and pretend i can't smell the bowl of piss in my room that he is still here.

sunday may 20.

my roommate decided to pay me a visit today.

i'm far past the point of being able to get up so i just croaked an affirmative when she asked to come in. she stayed in the doorway. i think she caught a glimpse or maybe a whiff of the piss bowl because after tossing me a bag of cough drops she closed the door until it was only open a crack. maybe though she is too embarrassed to face me.

"how's the beauty rest going?" she said. i felt a lump in my throat as i thanked her to avoid her question and flipped over as she debriefed me on "the moves" of this weekend. the devil was breathing so loudly that i couldn't hear a word. i don't think he likes her. maybe the devil feels like she's undermining his authority. maybe he's starting to realize that i could be onto something with her and kyle.

monday may 21.

the cough drops have fully melted on my radiator and now a sickening smell of anise and menthol is doing a fairly good job of masking the sweat and piss swamp that is my room. when i pull on the skin on my hand it doesn't snap back. i'm kind of mesmerized by the way it slowly settles back down. the devil seems to finally be on my side about my roommate and it makes me nauseous but also proud of my intuition. it almost makes me want to keep the devil around but it's far too late for that now.

tuesday may 22.

i forgot that in order to keep sweating you have to keep drinking water. i thought that if i stopped drinking i'd eventually shrivel up and the devil would have no choice but to evaporate as well. but biology was never my best subject in school so i probably should have known better than to trust myself.

now i know i need to drink water but i am physically unable to get to my feet. every time i try to move my body my head starts to spin and i'm disoriented by the squelching of my soaked bedsheets. i think the devil is too because every time he hears them his breathing briefly becomes sharper. maybe he's fearful and he knows his time is almost up.

even though the devil's breath hasn't subsided i feel a strong and almost supernatural conviction that the exorcism is working. that satisfaction i felt on the first day of my exorcism has only increased. there's something that feels absolutely right about laying in this very spot and allowing myself to be cradled by this musty heat. i've long given up on wiping my forehead when it gets damp and so i let the beads of sweat caress my temples as they drip down the sides of my head. it's meditative and it's almost beautiful.

but lately the sweating hasn't been as constant and a quick online search tells me that it's because i'm dehydrated. eventually i'm able to prop myself up on one side and reach the glass of water that's been sitting untouched on my radiator for the past two days. i chug half of it and it goes down like warm sludge. it feels thicker than water. like i'm drinking my own saliva.

it doesn't take long for my stomach to start lurching. i try to breathe through my nose but the air is hot and acrid and only makes me feel sicker. in between my shallow breaths i hear the devil growling in tandem with me.

then all of a sudden it stops. i hold my breath and wait for the devil's steady breathing to return but it doesn't.

my chest begins to swell with relief. i'm finally safe. and more importantly i saved myself without anyone's help. i can't do anything but laugh with delight. i laugh so much that it dissolves into drawn out moans. as i lay on my back i squeal and shout and sob and i let my tears cascade down my face and mingle with my sweat. i writhe and snarl and roll my eyes in the back of my head like i had seen all of the other possessed people do in all of the other exorcisms. every now and then i hold my breath and make sure that the devil hasn't come back but when i hear nothing i laugh louder.

eventually my laugh seems to start running away from me. it begins to encircle me while my mouth hangs open. silenced. i hear my laugh but my vocal chords aren't vibrating. it's not coming from me. and then it stops completely.

wednesday may 23.

i was cold when i woke up.

i pulled up a paper-thin crumpled linen sheet and my heart sank as i saw the IV in my arm secured with a piece of white, blood-stained gauze. i followed the plastic tube up to a bag filled with clear liquid.

as i began gingerly unsticking my hair from my sweaty forehead my roommate pulled back a plastic curtain protecting me from the judgmental gaze of the emergency room receptionist. she walked in and knelt beside me.

“fiona?” she asked. “what happened back there?”

i wanted to look at her. i wanted to tell her that i actually did remember her brother’s nfts and that i was sorry i didn’t help her curl her the back of her hair before the sigma chi party and it’s stupid of me to think she’s fucking kyle but i couldn’t bring myself to do it. as i shut my eyes tightly i could have sworn i heard the devil softly chuckle.

Weightless

The Heaviness did not come all at once.

It started in my fingers and toes. One morning, when I woke up, I noticed that it was just slightly harder to move them. It felt like someone had injected a microdose of lead into the tips of all twenty of my extremities. It was enough for me to notice in the mornings, but barely a nuisance as the day went on.

One week later, the Heaviness had crept into my hands and feet. Instead of propping myself up with my arms when I woke up, I began having to use my upper-body strength to rock myself into an upright position—my brain would shake in my skull like the blue triangle in a cloudy Magic 8-Ball—but once I left bed, the feeling was more or less unnoticeable.

It didn't take long before I was only able to drag myself from place to place. The Heaviness had consumed my legs almost entirely. Jenny more or less ignored it—she was used to my “episodes,” as she called them, like the week where I became fleetingly addicted to reading obituaries and lost my appetite for a week, or the time that I lost a bidding war on Craigslist for a bearded dragon and spent the next day in bed.

“You should come with me for a run, sometime, Patrick,” she would say as she rubbed my shoulders. “It'll help you get the lead out. You're just out of practice.”

“I can barely walk,” I would say, craning my neck to see her smiling face.

“You probably have a Vitamin D deficiency by now, Patrick,” she would say, laughing. “When's the last time you saw the sun for more than a couple of minutes?”

I could tell she wasn't concerned, but I knew that this time was different than my previous “isms,” as she called them. I could no longer drive to work because it took me a full,

dangerous minute to switch my foot from the gas pedal to the brake each time. I almost t-boned a minivan as it turned the corner of my street because I could not summon enough strength to change pedals. Our cars were only spared because the minivan driver accelerated—complete with horn-honking and bird-flipping—once he saw that I wasn't planning on slowing down for him.

After that, I began having to take the bus, instead of my now-useless car, to the library. The bus was a good two miles from my apartment, but it had far better odds of survival. My first time on the bus, the driver didn't even know I was trying to get off when we had arrived at my stop, and I wound up in the next town over. The second time, I moaned a desperate *Wait!* as he began yanking the door shut. He looked back at me and allowed me to take in his bristly eyebrows, which were wrinkled in annoyance, or maybe confusion. After that day, he got used to my routine. When my stop would arrive, I would avoid the eyes of annoyed passengers and a confused bus driver as I slowly inched towards the door, my legs barely leaving the ground. My fifteen-minute commute had turned into ninety. I began having to wake up at 6 in the morning every day, even before the magpies outside of my window had stopped singing.

Work wasn't any better. I had never known how much talking I did at the library until the Heaviness made talking nearly impossible.

"Late again, Patrick," my boss had whispered—only whispers during operating hours—through the shelf directly next to the entrance. I saw her beady eyes and I almost wanted to laugh, if this weren't happening to me. It's hard to determine someone's tone through their whisper, but I've gotten good at it. I knew right away that I was in for a tirade. I remember

dragging my feet behind me as I walked past her, and wincing once I heard her companioning footsteps.

“Patrick, you’ve always been a little...off the cuff,” she whispered. “You’ve always been pleasant, don’t get me wrong, and you’re a good worker—or, you *were* a good worker. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, lately, is what I’m trying to say.”

“Just a little tired lately,” I mumbled as I continued my trudge to the circulation desk.

“I think, *Patrick*,” she whispered, spitting out the first syllable of my name, “that you need to take a good look inside, and think to yourself, ‘What is my *role* here? What am I *doing* to keep the institution of the Library *alive*?’”

“I work at the circulation desk,” I said, slowly turning around to face her. I held her gaze as it morphed from bewilderment to anger. Ultimately, her expression wilted to dejection, and I watched her walk away while my heartbeat continued to ring in my ears.

My pounding heart became the fastest part of my body. Waking up became the worst part of every day. My heart did all of the work, while I took five minutes to lift my heavy eyelids and tried my best to ignore the sour taste in my mouth. My mind began to only play white noise—the kind of noise that used to emit from the humidifier in my childhood bedroom. After a week of hearing it, I listened closer, but when I tried to pick apart the tangle of sounds, the things I heard made me groan and wretch. From then forward, the white noise was a relief. I became terrified of the moment when my feet would leave my bed and thud onto the ground. I would hear the resonance of my feet on the floor, and my heart would pick up the pace.

I was not completely powerless against the Heaviness—there were certainly things that I could do to make it worse: visiting my folks and seeing how old they looked when they cooed

their “Hi, Patrick”s; ignoring my sister’s texts about her ongoing dissertation; missing the bus, or the elevator, and running late to the library; trying to initiate sex with Jenny and watching the corners of her mouth turn downward. When one of these unfortunate events would happen, I would feel the Heaviness intensify almost immediately. My face would sink and it would become almost impossible for me to move any of my muscles. My cheeks would become tingly and numb, like they had fallen asleep. I fought every urge to crawl back into my bed—to stop making an effort to keep my eyelids lifted and to succumb to the downward pressure on my muscles and joints. I often gave in.

When I could muster even the smallest amount of energy, I would spend my time discovering ways to alleviate even the slightest amount of weight from my desperate body. As the weeks passed, I learned the few ways that I could feel marginally lighter.

Skipping work and staying in bed helped, so I started calling in sick at the library. I lay in bed and let my knowledge of our newest titles and monthly events dribble out of my downward-facing ear. I’d feel them tickle my earlobe on their way out as I tested the strength of my fingers and toes.

Getting drunk also helped, so I began slowly chipping—and eventually hacking—away at my liquor cabinet, drinking even the shittiest of liquors and even the obsolete bottle of star-anise vodka that my parents strangely gifted to me for my 28th birthday.

Putting in my headphones and turning the volume so high that I would induce a migraine helped, and it was even better when I could find something to break.

When Jenny wanted to have sex with me, that helped, so I began begging her for it incessantly. I budgeted my meager supply of energy for attempting to seduce her—to tell her

how gorgeous she looked in her scrubs, how much I'd missed her during my day in bed, and how I felt like I was falling in love with her all over again. At first, she'd roll her eyes, smile sheepishly, and say "Shut up" before climbing on top of me, but the success rates of these phrases were unreliable, and they only diminished as I began recycling them.

But all of these anti-Heaviness resources were finite. By the one-month mark of the Heaviness' reign, I was out of booze and things to break.

"You can't even look at me when we make love," Jenny had said to me, before she left one evening. "It just makes me feel empty inside." It was the last evening that she spent with me. I still remember the flash of her tired, auburn hair as it swept across the crack of my closing door.

I no longer had to induce my own migraines—I now had one that was virtually incessant.

Barbara began calling, emailing, and texting me, but the Heaviness had gotten so overwhelming that I could not even lift my fingers to pick up my phone. I would lay there and let it ring—once, twice, three times, four times, five—and then listen, eyes still closed, to the frantic and eventually angry messages from my boss. I welcomed her yells as a respite from the white noise, which was a respite from my shameful thoughts. "You *know* it's the fall reading festival...all hands on deck...*where* is your *work ethic*?" I wanted to cringe at her comments, but neither my eyelids nor the muscles in my lips had the strength.

One month and one day after the onset of the Heaviness, I was fired. I had missed 13 consecutive days of work. "*This* is how you show your gratitude for the dying institution that is the Library?" Barbara had said in her final voicemail, as she attempted to talk over the white noise in my mind and the beating of my heart. "Nobody *minded* that you've always kept to yourself, or that you left every day at exactly 5 p.m., or *even* that you have *never* led a discussion

in one of our staff book clubs, but I will *not* stand by as you abandon your post! I don't know what game you think you're playing, but it ends *today*, Patrick. If you don't come to clean up your own desk, I'll be throwing your belongings in our donation pile." I knew I'd miss my Desktop Duck, but the thought of entering my former workplace and seeing Barbara's pursed lips made me infinitely heavier.

The next collection of desperate messages came from my parents. "We're just worried, Patrick. This isn't like you." I can only describe their concern as boring. I didn't answer them either.

Jenny called after a while, but when I didn't pick up the phone, she didn't bother to leave a message.

My sister was the last person to call. "Don't tell Mom and Dad," she said. "But I had this too, about six months ago now when I was in the weeds with my dissertation."

"The Heaviness?" I asked her. I tried not to roll my eyes as I tried to conceive of the emotional turmoil that she must feel while writing a 200-page body of work on the mating rituals of various Alaskan birds and, presumably, what those patterns can tell us about ourselves, or something.

"I don't know what the fuck that is, Patrick. But I had trouble getting out of bed too. Just the thought of doing normal, everyday stuff scared me half to death. I felt like I couldn't move."

"What did you do about it?"

"I saw a psychiatrist, obviously. My work insurance covers it, and I think that yours would, too."

"I don't have a job anymore." Silence.

“God, what the hell, Patrick? I mean—well, I’m going to send you a number to call. Just see what they can do. And keep me posted, Patrick.”

She hung up soon after, and I wondered what the point was in calling. As my heavy fingertips slowly fumbled with the seam of my bedsheets, I considered deleting the phone number and allowing the Heaviness to suffocate me.

Something about the image of Jenny’s hair convinced me that I had to make the call.

...

It took me two full days to dial the number that my sister sent me—my fingers could only manage two or three numbers every few hours. With every number that I managed to press, the Heaviness would retaliate on my body and mind. It seemed angry, but I persisted. When it was finally dialed, the phone rang three times before a receptionist picked up.

“My sister said I needed to call, about feeling heavy,” I said, feeling ridiculous as soon as I finished my sentence. My heart collided with my ribs.

“Patrick, yes?”

“Yes.”

“What times are you free this month?”

“I’m free indefinitely.”

“I’ll put you in with Dr. Herman for 3 p.m next Monday. How’s that?”

“Fine.” I continued lying in bed, silent, until she hung up the phone. I think I fell asleep right afterwards, but it was hard to know if my eyelids were simply too heavy to open. The following felt eternal, but not more so than any of the days that came before it.

I also don't remember much about my call with Dr. Herman. I laid in bed and listened as much as possible, and spoke only when I had to. I remember telling him about the Heaviness; about the early mornings and the bus rides and the willful migraines. I remember him asking what the white noise was saying, and me barely choking out my responses. I remember that I somehow felt heavier as I shared my symptoms with Dr. Herman, as if the Heaviness itself was retaliating against my betrayal of confidence. I kept talking out of desperation and out of my frantic desire to remain floating on the surface of my bed—one of my only remaining comforts.

“Anhedonia. Intrusive thoughts. Dissociation. Something I see every day. Cause for concern. Allergies to medication. Address of your local pharmacy. Let's start with ten milligrams. I'll raise it to twenty in three weeks, but we'll probably wind up going quite a bit higher than that. Your sister paid out of pocket. She'll pick up the script.”

Within three hours, I was holding an orange bottle of white pills with green stripes.

My sister met me at home with the crinkly paper bag and a bottle of water. I realized that I hadn't seen her since her own encounter with the Heaviness. When we were kids, I used to call her a scarecrow until she cried, and that comparison seemed even more fitting now post-Heaviness—her blonde hair appeared almost straw like, her clear eyes seeming smaller. I could have been imagining things, but I noticed that the muscles in her face, which usually twitched and shifted under her skin to indicate that she was a living thing, were barely moving.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Patrick? I'm good,” she said, suddenly becoming bashful.

“Let's wait until tomorrow morning,” I told her.

“No,” she said. “You're starting now.”

“You can’t make me take them now.”

“Patrick, come on,” she told me, punctuating her sentence by clicking open the bottle.

“Don’t make this a game.”

“It’s not a game. I’ll take it when I’m ready—”

“But—”

“—and I’m sure as hell not going to take it with you breathing down my neck.”

We went back and forth, but she knew that I had won. She left the pills and the water on my nightstand. I could watch her trying to convince herself that I’d take them after she left. She smiled tightly but didn’t tell me that she loved me, which I don’t know why I’m mentioning, because we’ve never really said that to each other.

I stared at the bottle of pills for three hours before falling asleep.

...

Dr. Herman, who required that I have one phone session with him every week, loved to discuss grounding. “You need to focus on grounding,” Dr. Herman, who would try his hardest to cosplay Sigmund Freud with his white beard and performatively pensive expression, would always say. “Five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing that you can taste.”

“That makes sense,” I would say, not looking at him. “That makes sense.”

I fucking despised him. My one vestige of joy was when he would ask me how the Prozac was going.

“Fine,” I would tell him, performing a slight smile. “Things feel more manageable.” He would nod, muttering some tag about medication management, and my smile would become

genuine as I silently confirmed that he still was unaware that I hadn't touched any of the bottles of pills that he had prescribed.

My nightstand was a scaled-down apothecary, full of little gems that I'd never dream of swallowing. I would lay in bed, reveling in the Heaviness, and scan the bottles. They had varying heights and girths, and when I allowed my eyes to unfocus, they looked like a city skyline.

...

My sister promised that she would help out with groceries, so long as I continued taking my pills.

Every week, at 2:50 P.M., I would drag myself out of my bed and pluck some pills from my apothecary. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven Fluoxetine. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven Trazodone. One, two, three Propranolol. One Lorazepam for good luck. I would take my multicolored bounty, sprinkle it into my toilet, and watch them dance as they swirled their way down the drain.

She would arrive at 2:50 with a bundle of bananas and ingredients for spaghetti.

"You need potassium, Patrick," she would say. She would check my bottles. She would count the contents of each one, and if she lost track, she would start over.

"How are you feeling?" she would ask.

"A bit better every day," I would say.

After I said that stupid, meaningless thing, she would usually just stand there. Sometimes she'd share an interesting tidbit about how Dark Eyed Juncos get it on. Sometimes I'd wish we were kids again, and sometimes the thought made my stomach turn. The Heaviness made sure it didn't matter. Sometimes, I would try to imagine how she met the Heaviness, and why. I'd

wonder if it was my fault, or our parents'. As she stared at me, and as I stared back, my eyes half open, she would swallow sharply.

"I love you," she said once. It made me feel a bit sick, but I believed her when she began saying it more often. "Hang in there," she would sometimes say as she touched my shoulder. The Heaviness prevented me from flinching. Sometimes she would just leave.

...

"When we were younger, nobody was taking any of this stuff," My dad told me over the phone as I stared at my little city of pills. "Well, not unless you were really cuckoo, y'know—"

"*Henry*," I heard my mother whisper from a foot away. Some rustling. Her voice again, louder: "We don't know much about those kinds of medicines, Patrick, but if you're saying it works, then it works."

"It works," I said, closing my eyes. More rustling.

"Are you sure?" my father asked. "These are supposed to be the happy pills, right? Your voice doesn't sound so animated. Hey, how's the job search going?"

"I have to go."

"Oh, Patrick, don't mind him," my mother would say. "We're just glad to hear things are getting better. Let us know what you need, okay?"

Click.

...

Things were getting better every day. The Heaviness was slowly becoming a comfort, and I could finally let it embrace me without a second thought. I would hug it back, letting my feet become numb and my eyelids shut. The white noise was my daily alarm and my nightly

lullaby. Life was simply easier this way. Without Jenny or a job, there was no point in staying lucid. The longer I stayed in my bed, the more delicious the Heaviness became. Every self-loathing thought sunk me deeper—both literally and figuratively—into my skin. My mouth was drier than ever. My breath tasted like death, and, for some reason, I loved it. I would press my tongue down on the roof of my mouth and savor how truly grotesque I was.

My system was also infallible. Flush plus-or-minus 20 pills down the toilet once a week. Receive free meals. Dodge questions—or lie—to Dr. Herman and my parents. Rinse and repeat.

Every now and then, Herman would ask me specific questions about the Prozac. What was its effect on my sleep? How about my concentration? I was never sure what the right answer was, and sometimes, when I gave it my best shot, he would furrow his brow and give me a solemn glance.

“I can’t force you to do anything, Patrick,” he once said after I had evidently failed one of his quizzes. “But you won’t feel better unless you’re using your medication as directed. You’re not getting away with anything if you don’t. The only person you’re punishing is yourself.”

The Heaviness was less comforting that night.

...

Two weeks later, my meeting with my sister was far shorter. She gave me my groceries, counted my pills. She spared me Alaskan bird mating details and instead went to use my bathroom. I sank into my chair, but felt my insides perk up when the door flew open without so much as a flush.

She left less than ten seconds after she had closed the door, and her expression was blank. She walked past me without saying a word—without even looking at me—but the Heaviness kept my mouth shut. After I heard the door slam, I dragged myself to the bathroom.

One, two, three Prozac capsules, floating atop the toilet water.

...

My sister and the groceries stopped coming, as she promised they would if I didn't take my medication. At first, I felt like a martyr. I could handle a hunger strike, I told myself. Hell, I could barely bring myself to cook the food that my sister had been bringing, anyway. There were people who were so invested in one humanitarian crisis or another that they would do it for twenty-some-odd days. Certainly, the Heaviness would be on my side. I felt safe.

The first 36 hours were easy. I fed myself on my migraine, the white noise, and the ugly thoughts. I sipped my water, and continued flushing my pills down the toilet as a force of habit, and to feel productive. I found an archaic bottle of merlot—one that I had apparently missed during my initial bender—and drank until I fell asleep.

Ultimately, though, my resources didn't last forever. In fact, the Heaviness got worse. It had always existed in the pit of my stomach, but it bled into my diaphragm and made each breath feel more laborious than the next. The noise got louder—so loud, in fact, that I stopped being able to hear my labored breathing over it. It began feeling like the white noise was ripping apart the gray matter in my brain. If I closed my eyes, I could hear it. My lips, which still couldn't open, began to tremble. My intrusive thoughts—or, perhaps, my starvation—began making me nauseous.

My body was enacting revenge. I felt like a failure. The Heaviness, which I thought would be in my corner, began perpetuating my feelings of self loathing and contempt. There was no comfort in the ever-sinking feeling in my stomach. For the first time since the reign of the Heaviness, I found myself afraid. The Heaviness had betrayed me to the highest magnitude, and, without the support of my sister, or Jenny, or even fucking Barbara, I was completely alone. My stomach hurt. I was hungry and tired of acting like I wasn't. With radio silence outside of my brain, and deafening noise inside of it, I surrendered.

On day three, I dialed the first digit of my sister's phone number.

...

My heavy hands fumbled with the bottle. When my sister noticed me struggling, she uncurled my fingers from the cap and opened the bottle with ease. She handed me a pill and the opened bottle of water and held her hand under my face.

I could faintly feel water dribbling down my chin as I swallowed my first pill.