

No One Wants to Be Here
and No One Wants to Leave: Stories

by

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ABSTRACT

Holidays. Anniversaries. Cocktail parties. In *No One Wants to Be Here and No One Wants to Leave*, loneliness surfaces in crowded rooms across America. Having gathered to mark special occasions, the people in these stories instead encounter moments where celebration and sadness intermingle.

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The Celebrator

St. Pete is the Guinness-record-holder for consecutive sunshine so even though it was November, that morning's sky was already bright as I drove over the bay, glinting but otherwise serene some twenty stories below. It's the opposite of London or the Pacific Northwest—the weather here should somehow provoke happiness. There's a reason the Sunshine Skyway's prime real estate when shooting luxury car commercials. Try and find a more inviting visual for a Lexus to go hurtling past. The shot's overwhelmingly blue to the point that the ad agency has to press very little at all to get viewers to associate it with concepts like 'freedom' and 'limitlessness' and, of course, 'happiness.'

It was my second trip over the bridge that morning moving stuff to my new studio when a silver two-door Toyota fell out of the commuter line and halted right there on the northbound crest. I watched for flashing hazards. *Something's wrong*, I thought, and winced: *How perceptive*. But with what happened next I didn't know what to think.

The driver side door flung open so that it even started to shut again but a woman was out before it could. Wearing green velour pants, although that may not've been what I first noticed. She shadowed her car straight to the center span's wall. Not a wasted step.

Pedestrians were long ago banned from the bridge, by the way. Safety reasons.

You hear about these things, sure. But somehow you're never there for them. Or what turns out to be much worse: you are, and you're not enough to stop them.

I've since committed to memory all the precautionary measures, the do's, the don'ts, the in case this happens. I know what to say and how to say it, and also what not to say,

no matter what. Not that there's a script. But there is a method. There I was, though, exiting my own car and trailing this stranger, wanting only to stop from happening what I knew was about to happen while equipped with little more than the kinds of stock phrases that would ensure it occur.

When I got up close, she looked like she was having second thoughts. I was afraid of startling her so I didn't yell. What do you say to someone straddling this world and the next, one leg dangling over the berm? I know now—you implore them to talk; you just listen—but all I could think to say, much too softly to carry, was, *Please. No.*

She didn't notice me, her eyes fixed on the rippleless bay below. In hindsight, I can't help but consider it from her vantage point, seeing that velour pant leg meshing with the emerald shimmering beneath as though she had already done the thing she'd driven there to do, plummeted toward it and met it and been absorbed by it, just as soon as it had been disrupted, its ripples ebbing, diminishing until, again—and at last—serenity.

But the truth is in that moment I had no idea what was going through her mind and so no idea of how to get through to her. My only thought was to get that leg back over the berm.

Acrophobia's the word for extreme, even irrational fear of heights. It's also the sort of word you only learn because it refers to you personally. And that you only think about when you're inside it.

So then she saw me approaching. I stopped, stupidly raised my hands, damp palms outward, as if to say, *Just. Let's just slow down.* Her face in that flash—God. The

desperation of cornered suspect and the abject terror of hostage all in one awful, impossible expression.

What I won't ever know—what I have nightmares about—is what the scene looked like behind me. Had traffic come to a standstill? Were we mere curiosity, oddity? Or were engines idling, their cars' drivers' faces blank with disbelief? When I picture it, I imagine the fear abating with the realization that someone—me—is on scene. That someone trained in this sort of crisis response has responded, is responding. But that is not me, I want them to know in the dreams. I am not who you were hoping I am.

What I will always know now, though, is that I had it backward. I was trying to provide answers when I was meant to be posing questions. You're supposed to implore potential jumpers to talk, to just talk to you about what's wrong. Get them to open up. It's their silence means a decision's imminent—that's how you know. So you need to get them and then keep them talking. Instead, I was speaking for this poor woman I lacked any language to try to speak for.

You don't want to do this. Whatever's wrong, it'll pass.

Platitudes. An improvised PSA. Loud enough now, but still not enough in other, more crucial ways than volume.

And yet, she spoke: It's too late.

It's not too late. It's never too late. Please.

But she just kept repeating: *It's too late. It's too late. It's too—*

You can't know how you'll react. You just can't.

#

First she Frisbee'd something over—license, credit card—and, with her other hand, hurled her phone, and, maybe it says something sick about our culture, but when she parted with that phone's when I knew I'd lost her.

And let me tell you: the worst part is the sound.

She swung her other leg over the berm, leaned forward to look down, then pushed off with the fluid motion of a swimmer entering a lap pool, swift and, in any other context, we might say graceful.

Of course, I didn't think, *Graceful*. I don't remember thinking anything, and all I remember is silence for what seemed like too long. Until.

It's not glass shattering, exactly, but neither is it the dull thud of meeting concrete. A loud crash is closer, or a smack. Something with zero *give*. Even above heavy winds, it carried. It's categorically not—and this is what's most haunting of all, what I can't unhear—the splash you would expect. Brittle. Singular. Nothing suggesting undulation. One and done.

But so you brace yourself for what feels like an eternity, knowing what you expect's coming is coming, and knowing, too, that there'll be a slight delay, that light travels faster than sound, that, were you to brave your acrophobia and peer over the berm, you'd see her disappear before your ears could confirm it. And then, having already swallowed her whole, the cruel *coup de grâce*: a sound so unexpected, so seemingly out of place, it serves as reminder: underneath the order, logic, predictability, all of it, is still something wholly unfathomable, and it's this we're ruled by.

The emergency response unfolds in both alarming real-time and syrupy slow-mo. The Toyota is taken away. The body is never recovered.

Another thing I'll never forget: the license plate of that Toyota read a nearly vowel-less HPPY NOW.

I didn't make it back to my studio that day, as you might imagine. I drove home, where Lara was waiting for me. I don't remember describing it to her, or, really, much of that afternoon, but the way she tells it now, she had to adopt the role of the parent calming a child after a nightmare. There was nothing she could do but be there with me, help me work through my disbelief. I've seen violence, death, tragedy before—I used to work on the show *COPS*. But, somehow, out from behind the camera, it was too real, hyperreal. There was no filter. Life can just end. Just like that.

I don't know that I slept those next 24 hours. The image of her, but mostly the certainty of her movements, haunted me. There was no consideration, no second thought. She'd been dead long before she hiked her body forward over that edge.

I was supposed to be finished moving the last of my equipment to my new studio. I was still useless in that regard. Instead, I was reading everything I could on Skyway jumpers, which, I discovered, was as much of a commonplace as something like that can be. The opposite of comfort in numbers: so many people with the same sad idea.

Here's what I learned: it's #3 in the Travel Channel's Top Ten Bridges in the World and it's also the fourth most common bridge in America for suicides.

Here's what it feels like according to the *St. Petersburg Times*: “Anyone who jumps from a point close to the center of the bridge hits the water in about 3.5 seconds at about 75 mph. The impact usually breaks bones and ruptures organs. Some live for mere minutes before they drown.”

What it feels like looking down, though, or in that three-and-a-half-second free-fall, I couldn't have even begun to imagine.

It was when I read what I thought was impossible: that there'd been jumpers who'd survived. That's when it hit me: I'm a filmmaker; I can do something. I remember that *aha!* moment as vividly as the green velour. I remember thinking of it as wanting to punch potential jumpers in the face with the reality of it, to show that it's not easy, and it's certainly not certain. I couldn't imagine anyone who knew the truth about it would still choose to go through with it. I'd interview survivors and family members to de-glorify the romanticism of the bridge, of the jump, of such an end.

I didn't know where to start.

If you've seen the 2004 film *The Punisher*, then you've actually seen the Sunshine Skyway. In addition to being a popular spot to film car commercials—sunshine, long stretch of open road, high above the shimmering bay, etc.—it's a popular film locale for many of those same reasons. The film, on which I worked as 1st AC, is an origin story of sorts, which ends with the “hero,” Frank Castle, on the bridge vowing, “Those who do evil to others—the killers, the rapists, psychos, sadists—will come to know me well. Frank Castle is dead. Call me ... the Punisher.”

It wasn't reviewed positively. But it had been on my mind immediately after I decided to use my filmmaking to do something good, to try and have some positive effect, and not just because of the bridge itself. Almost like—well. You likely know how embarrassing these epiphanic moments are in retrospect, the unbridled enthusiasm of them, their blinding clarity. I wish I could say this didn't happen, but while shaving that next morning, I stared at myself in the mirror and thought in that kind of sudden

unbidden burst, that lighting-of-a-flare sort of way before you can even censor yourself: “Those who do evil to themselves—the lost, the jumpers, depressives, suicides—will come to know me well. Sean Davis is dead. Call me—” but that’s where it broke off. It became too embarrassing even in the fraction of a second it took to think it. But also I couldn’t finish it because I couldn’t think what I’d be called instead.

What I learned quickly as I set out to work was that not everyone was going to be on board. I was turned down by the Coast Guard and received coldly by the spouse of one deceased jumper. Just as quickly as I’d committed to this project, I saw it already unraveling.

Then this: two Skyway jumpers in as many days. The sight of cameras, I’m sure, made commuters nervous, but I experienced the first pangs of guilt as a result, since the aftermath of those occurrences—which the film would be meant to deter—gave me the kind of footage that would prove most affecting: sirens wailing, fire trucks idling, marine boats searching the once-still waters. I didn’t want to make this movie, but I felt like I needed to. For myself, sure, and anyone it might help, but, strangely enough, mainly for her.

These days, Steve Trotter tended bar on the Ft. Lauderdale strip at the Button and at Penrod’s, although he was always an amateur daredevil at heart. In 1985, as the papers reported it, he tumbled into a kind of media glory when he became the first person to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel. The following year, on his birthday, he conducted a “Tarzan swing” off the Golden Gate Bridge, attaching himself to a 176-foot steel cable affixed to the bridge, the cable itself affixed with a small wooden disk for him to sit on as

he swung freely back and forth at 70mph. Once secured, he walked away from the pivot exactly 176 feet and then jumped over the edge. His fame spread even as he was arrested for the event, charged with trespassing. Ever since, he'd been looking for his next worthy stunt, something that'd put him back in the public eye.

With the Skyway suddenly in the news again, he settled on a sequel of sorts.

It was difficult going over the bridge after that. But the location of Rhino Films, my new production studio, forced me over it twice a day, and so, less than a week after watching someone disappear over the edge of the bridge, I was right back there traveling on it. I couldn't not think of her, of course. Couldn't help but see her again.

I had gotten in touch with a man by the name of Hanns Jones, who'd jumped from the bridge in 2001 and survived. Since then, in addition to his work as an artist, he'd become something of an advocate for suicide prevention, and particularly for those who settle on jumping from the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, inventing E.S.R., or Electro Safety Rail, a metal guard that sits on the bridge's wall and shocks those who come into contact with it. The idea being that only someone who's attempting to jump *would* come into contact with it since the bridge stopped allowing pedestrians or even the stopping of vehicular traffic. Whether deemed too expensive or too Draconian or both, it had yet to be implemented.

I met Hanns outside my studio and quickly realized I didn't know how to act, treating him somewhere in between how I talk to my son and how I'd offer directions to a non-English speaker. It was completely irrational given that were you to meet him on the street you'd have no idea he received such an unlikely reprieve. He's tall and thin, has at

46 just the first stages of a receding hairline and, really, the only thing that might give him away is his serious gaze behind his horn-rimmed glasses. Maybe you'd suspect he'd been through something traumatic, although maybe you'd just write it off as the artistic temperament.

He greeted me with a sheet of charcoal drawings of the bridge, which, he thought, might be worth including in the film. I led him inside and to the area I'd set up for the interview, which, since most everything was still not fully operational or even in place, I hoped would seem simple, elegant: two recliners in front of a black backdrop, a small table between them. Just before I reached the doorway I remember worrying over whether the setup was in fact tactless, too morbid or distasteful—too, I guess, specter of death. Hanns seemed to think nothing of it and quickly took his seat. He was ready to talk.

“Where should I start?” he asked. “Are we rolling?”

A fear washed over me then that I wasn't at all prepared for this project.

“Can I get you anything first before we start? Coffee? Tea? Water?”

Water, I thought. *Stupid*.

He waved the request away.

“Suppose I should just dive right in,” he said, and I worried over what my face looked like at that moment. “I was drinking too much, despondent over certain business and financial problems, and my wife and I had just had a staggeringly ugly fight. I felt like everything was collapsing in on itself and that there was no exit.

“So, it was evening, I was driving my old red Ford pickup across the bridge—and this is before the 24-hr. patrol, mind you, and even before the crisis hotlines that're now—well, I'm sure you know—and I just decide in that moment: *this* is an exit. This is

the *only* exit. Funny thing: I seem to recall John Lennon's "I'm Losing You" playing on the radio then, but I'll never know if it was actually just in my head."

He paused. I knew I could either wait or prod. I waited. He continued:

"Right after I jumped I thought it was a big mistake."

"You mean that's what was going through your head ... in midair?" I cringed, thinking I was being too forward, too direct, too desperate.

He nodded, looked down. "There isn't much time for thinking. You just accelerate, accelerate so fast and then it stops. But when you stop, you don't feel like you hit water. You feel like you hit concrete."

He explained he suffered multiple rib fractures, internal bleeding and a collapsed lung, but was still able to swim to the rocks near one of the pylons, where rescuers found him sitting naked, shivering, in agony. He spent weeks in the hospital recovering.

"You get to that point and it seems surreal," he said. "You just want that unbelievable pain to go away."

Trotter was deep into the planning stages of his next big stunt. Unlike his Golden Gate Bridge jump, he decided this one would be a more straightforward bungee jump, which would lend its spontaneity, its guerrilla approach, more immediacy in what it might be mistaken for by eyewitnesses. It would certainly turn heads, and he planned to somehow install several well-positioned cameras to capture the entirety of the stunt from various angles so that a masterfully edited version of it would inevitably go viral, and then he'd be back on top and could maybe use it as a platform to some lucrative endorsement deals, give up bartending, and make sure that he and Lily were properly taken care of for the

long haul. He had to constantly reign in his ambitions, imagining ten or twenty or fifty participants rushing to and leaping over the 3 ½ foot wall and, one by one, plunging toward the vast expanse of still water below. In the end, he settled on five, which he figured would be enough to give it the impact he was after but was also manageable enough logistically that it could conceivably be pulled off before interruption by patrollers or even good Samaritans.

I spent just under a week editing the footage from my conversation with Hanns while also trying to get in touch with other possible interview subjects.

I was put in touch with Florida Highway Patrol Sgt. Leif Cardwell, a 38-year-old trooper who's been working shifts on the 24-hr. patrol unit that now travels back and forth over the bridge looking for suspicious activity. He tells me what I already know, that there've been around 120 people who've leapt to their death in the bridge's two-and-a-half-decade history, but then he tells me some things I couldn't: that two months before I found myself helpless on the bridge watching as a woman went resolutely over the edge, he'd successfully talked down a potential jumper. He was also on patrol for the most recent jumper, but this time he wasn't as lucky.

“She already had one leg draped over the barrier. I knew I didn't have much time,” he said. “I knew enough to keep my distance. Rushing over would more than certainly cause her to act rashly. I could see in how distraught she was that she was still considering. And she was wearing a watch. I don't know why, but when I saw that I felt like I still had a chance to bring her back.”

We were outdoors for this interview, on location, the bridge itself as our backdrop. Cardwell was leaning against the hood of his vehicle, now and again looking over his shoulder to direct us to the setting of the fraught scene he was describing.

“I did what I was supposed to do, imploring her to talk, to just talk to me about what’s wrong. It’s their silence means a decision’s imminent, that’s how you know. So you need to get them and then keep them talking. But it wasn’t working because she just kept saying the same thing over and over.”

“Which was?” I asked after a beat.

“‘It’s too late.’ Again and again. ‘It’s too late.’ Then she tossed something over—her driver’s license, a credit card, an I.D.—and then her cell phone, and, well, I knew I’d lost her, never even had her.”

Cardwell choked up, looked down.

“Swung her other leg over. Gone.”

“There’s no time to act. It happens too fast. I know. You did what you could, what anyone could’ve.”

“The worst part was the sound. Like hearing the crack of the bat from the bleachers a few seconds after it’s been swung. There was a delay, but even through the heavy winds, I heard it, it was clearly audible. A loud crash, a smack. Not a splash ... It’s a violent way to go.”

Cardwell’s story was moving, difficult to listen to in the way it aligned with my own.

My next interview wouldn’t go as smoothly.

Back at Rhino, I led Patricia Hallowell, a 54-year-old woman who'd survived a jump in August of 2008, to the set. She'd been hesitant to agree to an interview, not wanting to contribute to any project that might ultimately resemble *The Bridge*, the 2006 documentary about jumpers at San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge that's had something of the opposite effect in that it continues to—there's no other word for it, really—inspire those too-far-gone to believing a leap from a bridge will be a thrilling and painless end. Pat, as she preferred I call her, even admitted that her own decision to jump off the Skyway had been the result of seeing that documentary. In just about every way, *The Bridge* was my nemesis.

She sipped the tea I'd gotten her before filming started. I could see she still wasn't entirely comfortable. Much less so than Hanns. Perhaps he'd had more time to come to terms with his attempt.

“Thanks again for agreeing to this, Ms. Hallowell. Pat. I know it's difficult, dragging up these old feelings.”

She nodded, smiled politely.

“Can you—if it's not too much too soon—can you try and bring viewers into your mind when you made that decision? Was there a point where you knew, *I'm going to do this* or was it less definitive than that?”

“Have you ever lost anything you can't replace, Mr. Davis?”

The question caught me off guard. It wasn't an entryway into her story; it was pointed.

“I—I've been very fortunate in that regard. Can't say I have.”

“It doesn’t take much. One day everything’s fine, the next, your world’s over. It’s that quick. That night and day.”

She cupped her mug, but it couldn't have been for warmth. It seemed almost as though she were trying to occupy as little space as possible in her seat.

“No, I—I can imagine. But maybe that’s my question: can a decision like this ever—ever be made *not* in the heat of the moment? Or is it—is it always an irrational choice?”

Her eyes darted up from her mug to mine. I could see I’d offended her. I tried to backpedal.

“Of course I’m not talking illness or insanity or any—”

“This is why I didn’t wanna do this,” she said quietly. She was ready to up and leave, I could tell. I’d lost her.

“I’m terribly sorry if I—”

“You think you’re doing the right thing. The moral thing. Some kind of vigilante superhero thing. But—and no disrespect—you don’t know the half of it.”

I knew better than to speak, at least.

She continued. “You don’t know what you’re asking of some folks, folks like me. It’s too much.”

“I—certainly it’s not the same, but I witnessed a jumper on my way over the bridge. It’s haunted me nearly every moment since.”

“You’re right. It’s terrible. No one should have to see that.”

I felt redeemed until she finished her thought.

“But she shouldn’t have to stick around, neither. What’s the difference?”

“You can’t possibly—”

“It’s always the ones like you catch a glimpse of tragedy think they need to do something to stop it. That’s how you can tell.”

I was flush with outrage. “Tell? You’re accusing me of being self-righteous? Tell what?”

“No accusations. Just sayin. If you knew pain, you’d never be making this movie of yours. I feared it’d be like this. Some kind of crusade. I don’t mean to be mean, I’m not trying to hurt you. I know you think it’s right, even now, still. I understand. That if your movie, that if you can frame me and others like me as a cautionary tale, and can talk just one lonely lost soul down from that ledge, that you’ve done something worth doing, helped in some small way, done quote unquote your part.

“But that’s what breaks my heart. You think you know more than these people, more than me, but—and, again, no disrespect—we know more than you do. Just by virtue of experience. More than you ever will so long as you stay so lucky. Which, believe me, I hope with all I have that you do, honest. Because there’s no unknowing it, is the thing.”

“I’m not trying to present myself as an authority on the subject by any means. I’m a filmmaker, I just think I can—”

“Think you can what? Make some kind of campaign? Against suffering? Loneliness? That we should just live around it? Just get on with it? What good’s that gonna do? See, you’re telling people not to jump out their building because *your* building isn’t on *fire*. Ours is.”

This was the first time I'd even considered that I could possibly do more harm than good. This was supposed to be the anti-*The Bridge*. This was supposed to be something everyone could get behind. Something that could *help*.

Ms. Hallowell didn't tear off her lapel mic, didn't storm out. Our conversation continued from there, though the interviewer-interviewee roles did seem reversed. But I'd been blindsided, and were I not able to go back and review the footage, I'd be hard pressed to remember just what we discussed after that.

I started to feel like a fraud. Her footage, that speech, was the most powerful of any I'd shot so far and yet it was entirely unusable. I briefly considered scrapping the whole thing. Lara was instrumental in convincing me to go through with it, though, helped me line up an interview the following week with a member of the marine unit who patrols the waters beneath the bridge.

In the meantime, I had nightmares in which I tried to talk the woman in green velour pants down from the ledge, and when she finally turned around, she was Pat, looking at me the way Lara and I looked at Luke when his Nana died, him looking up at us like, *Mommy, Daddy, why does this have to happen?* and she and I raising our brows, our shoulders, like, *It just does, buddy. We know, we're sorry, it just does.*

There were five of them in the back of the limousine en route to the Skyway. Trailing behind were several friends who would record the stunt—Trotter hadn't figured out a way to install cameras on the bridge itself given the constant surveillance. The whole thing'd had to be done hastily if it were to come on the heels of the media attention that

every so often brought the bridge back into the public eye, but Trotter'd been able to fall back on much of the formulations from his Golden Gate stunt, and he was confident.

They would stop at the bridge's apex and the five of them would quickly set to work. They wouldn't have much time before state troopers intervened but the rigging had to be precise. They'd rehearsed its assembly countless times in the days leading up to it; they'd shaved whole minutes off their time. Trotter was excited, was ready. He squeezed Lily's hand.

I met Scott Crowell at Station 11 on 31st St. and he took us down the 275 to the waterfront, where we boarded one of the SPFD's search and rescue boats. Crowell's a member of the Fire Rescue's marine unit, which scours the water and surrounding rocks for jumpers' remains. The "rescue" portion isn't something that sits well with them, given their record isn't exactly something they're keen to mention: 2 survivors in 11 years. This, of course, says very little about the ability or efficacy of Crowell's unit and speaks more to just how unpredictable this all-too-common problem remains, even as St. Pete officials authorize deterrents and increase security on and around the bridge. He's discussing the logistics of the crew once dispatched for a cleanup mission when he halts mid-sentence and blurts something out that, were it to be included in the documentary, would've required I bleep it.

Here's what I'd piece together later: as Crowell gives me the tour, some two hundred feet above us, a white stretch limousine pulls to the side of the Skyway's northbound crest and even before it's inert its doors are flung open and out rush five people moving with swift orchestrated precision. Beneath their street clothes they're

outfitted in black Lycra bodysuits and each carries a nest of tightly wound cables. The five of them work together in harmony to rig their steel cable to the bridge's edge, harness themselves to the cable, and, in quick succession, like swimmers, let the weight of their bodies carry them over the edge and into freefall.

As the figures are hurtling downward, though, the plastic sheathing on the steel cable mounting each to the bridge begins to shear off—later studies will show his design had failed to take into account the increased g-load caused by the pendulum action of the jump itself. The clamps connecting them slide off the cable freely, wildly, and the five jumpers continue their descent well past what the bungee cable had been secured to restrict them to until the five bodies each meet the water in a crash, that, though muted, must've been akin to what Sgt. Cardwell remembered hearing, and the momentum plunges each of them farther, 60 or 70 feet below the surface. Trotter and two others will escape with minor injuries, but the other man, Glenn Rohm, will suffer spinal damage, as will Trotter's partner, Lily Martin, who in addition to a broken vertebra in her back will also stop breathing after she's brought back to the surface, causing Trotter, in the kind of panic that can only result from having something so unnecessary go so wrong, to have to administer CPR to keep her alive until they're eventually rescued.

Here's what I'd see in that moment, though: one, then another, then a third, fourth, fifth—five bodies propel away from the bridge, plummeting, tumbling from the Skyway down. Transfixed, my hand at my brow shielding my eyes from the unrelenting sun, I'd think: *She was right.*

Of course now, months after the fact, the documentary close to fully funded and nearly finished, I can write off the “stunt” as stupid spectacle, as unrelated to my

concerns, as sheer fluke, dumb misfortune for all involved. It wouldn't get so much as a passing mention in my film, I'd decided. But living that experience in that moment was something else entirely, something I don't think I'll ever be able to shake: neither Scott nor I nor the rest of the crew—who deal in this kind of grim horror daily—knew just what was happening, so familiar and yet so eerily *not*, that, cycling through possible justifications for what I was witnessing in my mind, I briefly considered the horror that everyone in St. Pete, with the unwanted and unshakeable title of “America's Saddest City,” or perhaps everyone in the Sunshine State, maybe even the country, had lined up for this final resigned high-dive, both beautiful and supremely grotesque, as though all of this—the waking, the sleeping, the eating, the longing—all of it, everything, was suddenly too much for anybody anymore, all our buildings finally on fire.

No Two People

Fourteen floors up and the last of the guests still carried in a chill that clung to their coats. It was mid-December in New York, much less forgiving than Frank and Lynn Loesser's previous residence, Hollywood, where seasons really only took place on soundstages.

Lynn was cornered in a conversation when laughter broke out on the other side of the suite. She craned her neck and, sure enough, Frank was at the center of it, Old Fashioned in hand and Camel dangling from his lips. She looked on as Irving Actman—their third wheel, she said in private, though only half kidding—slapped him on the back hard enough that Frank had to raise his glass above his head to absorb its sloshing. Husband and wife made eye contact and he gestured to his already raised cocktail, mock toasted her, winked, smiled. “Fourteen years in,” she thought, “and still such a charmer.”

These parties normally had a certain rhythm that suited Frank's style, so relaxed and casual as to lead him to coin his own time signature, Loesserando, which, he explained, should fall somewhere between the slow walking pace of *andante moderato* and the reduced heart rate of an afternoon nap. This evening's casualness, however, was already slightly altered, as earlier that afternoon, Frank had negotiated a deal over lunch with Severo Barza, head of MGM, to swap out the song in the key moment of *Neptune's Daughter*, the third picture to pair Esther Williams and Ricardo Montalban and the film Frank was currently under contract to score. Severo felt the song Frank had provided wasn't right, and had asked if he had something more fitting, maybe a proper duet for the

film's leads. Frank mentioned that he and Lynn had several, and one in particular they'd trot out at parties like the one they'd be hosting that very night and which was always a crowd pleaser, and that if he'd like to stop in for a drink or two and see the thing in action, well, then, he was more than welcome, but as far as the party's concerned, this deal never went down. Severo brought fingers to lips, sealing them, and Frank wished he hadn't. It's always the lip sealers who end up shouting things from the rooftops.

Back at his apartment, hours before the first guests were to arrive, Frank mentioned off-handedly to Lynn that there was one more confirmed for the evening, but that the suits—as he himself loosened his tie—had sworn him to secrecy. There were, he went on, ways of making him talk. Lynn smiled in her way of declining without being dismissive. He shrugged it off. “Hosting 101: Never schedule a lunch meeting the day of a party, because, inevitably, they'll squeeze an invite right out of you. I mean, you should've seen the poor bastard.”

“We like Severo, don't we?” Lynn asked.

“We like him okay, sure. But with him it's all business and bottom line and—” Frank faked like he was about to keel over from the boredom of it all. Then, straightening up: “I'm a song and dance, man, dammit!”

“Oh, you won't even notice him,” Lynn said, but Frank's eyes grew wide.

“Won't *notice* him?” he asked, and before he could even puff out his cheeks and waddle toward her—his Severo shorthand—Lynn, already a step ahead, stifled a laugh.

For Frank, that was good enough, so he winked at his wife before announcing he was off to rest his eyes. While he slept, Lynn tidied up the apartment and arranged the bar, humming to herself the entire time in preparation, even though by now she knew her

parts backward and forward: *I really can't stay—One. Two. Three. Four—I've got to go 'way—One. Two. Three. Four—This evening has been—One. Two—so very nice.*

She knew, too, how the evening would pan out, and she looked forward to enacting it. As hosts, they would be the last to perform, but would be coy about it, offering first another, newer duet—her favorite at the moment was the one in which husband and wife ping-ponged, “No two people have ever *been* so in love / *Been* so in love / *Been* so in love”—but everyone would still expect “Baby” as sendoff, and Frank would look at her like, *What do you say?* and Lynn would wave the suggestion away as though it were tired: *That old thing?* Still, someone would insist, and they'd shrug: “Oh, all right, but just this once,” the regulars at these parties—actor and composer friends—knowing it to be a line. The Loessers were better together, and it pleased Lynn to know they were the envy of their friends, which is why she so enjoyed these evenings: they were rare opportunities to revel in it. She enjoyed the feeling of being wanted, of being vital. Being asked after. It wasn't just the song they wanted, it was the song the way she and Frank did it. There was no recording. It required Frank and Lynn to bring it to life; it was theirs and theirs alone.

She remembered hearing it for the first time herself, four years ago, Frank in one of his fits of enthusiasm playing it for her in their suite at the Chateau Marmont, where they were staying while apartment hunting. He'd been so exhilarated by the song's novelty, attempting to bounce back and forth playing both parts which to Lynn's ears sounded cluttered: “I really can't stay-bee it's cold outside / I've got to go 'way-bee it's cold outside.” When she failed to match his intensity, he'd grown even more animated, sat next to her with the lyric sheet, and explained: it was a dialogue just like any duet,

except this one was an actual, real life kind of dialogue, none of this wait your turn, second verse nonsense. This guy and this gal talk at each other, keep interrupting each other, but that's the fun, that's the game of it. They both know, he said, she ain't goin anywhere.

And he'd said it's easy, or that it would be after a few run-throughs, that he was the Wolf and she the Mouse, and he pointed to her designated lines. Then they had tried it together, Lynn beside him at the piano, her arm resting on his shoulder, never taking her eyes off the words, but it had been stop-and-start. So he hooked his arm around her waist and brought her forward and then they were sharing the piano bench. The key'll be chemistry, he'd told her, as much about acting as singing, and she'd gone beyond reciting to consider the words. It was a song celebrating seduction, so she stopped playing it straight, the mouseish ingénue completely at his mercy, and tried on the role of temptress, saying 'no' when she really meant 'yes.'

The night they'd debuted it was one she wouldn't forget, everyone prodding them to do it again and again almost out of disbelief—*you can do that in a song?* Since then, it had grown to something else. Were they to toy with *not* ending an evening with it, someone would surely still request it—now there was expectation. She worried it had lost its novelty and wondered how long they could keep it up before the routine felt tired. Frank seemed not to worry about its longevity, relishing in its laugh lines and constantly tinkering with his delivery; lately, he'd really been hamming it up on “How could you *do* this thing to me?” so that he pouted it more than sang it, a pained vibrato.

#

By now, the party had entered its third or fourth or maybe even fifth hour, who knew, and Frank and Lynn were listening to Roger Edens tell a story about working with Judy Garland when Irving approached them and put a hand on Frank's shoulder. "I was just talking with Severo," he said, and the three of them broke away from the circle. "Thought you'd never agree to get rid of the thing." He looked to Lynn. "No disrespect, of course. But this one"—pointing to his old partner—"as I'm sure you know, can be one stubborn bastard."

Lynn smiled, hiked her eyebrows, but Irving didn't elaborate. When she glanced at her husband, he brought his hand to his mouth and tipped back an imaginary flask.

"Irv," Frank said, already thick with charm. "You need to be topped off? You're hardly even slurring your words yet," and, putting his arm around his friend, led him to the bar, looking back at Lynn as if to say, *Some people*.

Put a piano in a roomful of musicians and it's only a matter of time before someone moseys on over and begins tinkling something. So as was common at these parties, everyone had eventually reconvened near the Loessers' upright for a late night talent show of sorts—"singing for your supper" is how Frank referred to it, after what he and Irving had had to do in their early years at The Back Drop. Number after number until finally the Broadway composer Richard Adler finished his latest offering and began rallying the crowd to get Frank and Lynn up there already to close this thing out with a bang. Playing it modest, husband and wife met at the piano bench.

"And now you've *really* got to wow us!" Irving said for all to hear, which Frank attempted to laugh off. Lynn, connecting the remark to his earlier one, felt deliberately

left out of the evening's running joke, and it showed on her face. Her only conclusion was that her fear was finally happening: everyone had grown tired of their act.

"Now's as good a time as any to inform you fine folks that our *next* gathering will introduce a cash bar," Frank joked, gesturing the way of Irving, and everyone laughed aside from Lynn. "Well, darling, shall we give our esteemed company—and, ahem, Irving over there—what they so desire?" and he tinkled a bright impromptu top line in the song's key of C.

"We wouldn't be good hosts otherwise," Lynn said, more to the crowd than to her husband. "Though I have to agree with Irving. Let's not do it the way we always do it. If it's all right with everyone, I think I'd very much enjoy playing the Wolf just this once," she said.

Frank, without a dip in tempo, looked over at her before settling on:

"A grand idea, Lynn, darling, but one for another time." He looked to his audience. "Have to say, if I'm to play the female role, I require a great deal more time in front of the mirror!" and he fluttered his lashes coquettishly.

"So stubborn, this one!" she said, hoping for support from the crowd, but their faces reflected back a strained consent that confused her further.

Frank, locked into a repeating refrain of "Baby"'s opening, laughed generously, and said:

"Ladies, gentlemen, and Irving," pausing to spruce up the progression with a flourish, "We proudly present the chart-destined"—at which the crowd laughed—"multiple award-deserving"—more laughter—"ticket to early retirement that is Frank and Lynn Loesser's signature number, 'Baby, It's Cold Outside,' offered up tonight as a taste

of what's to come when performed by that most dynamic of duos, Miss Esther Williams and Mister Ricardo Montalban.”

Everyone applauded, and Lynn felt suddenly very warm, worrying it showed in her complexion. She focused only on the performance, on the role in which she had been unexpectedly cast. Because, really, would Esther Williams break character and storm off set, shouting about it being impossible to work under such conditions? So instead she approximated a winning Leading Lady smile, deciding her only way of getting through it was to do the opposite of everything she felt. She would look into her husband's eyes and sing, “You've really been grand” and sell everyone in the room on the sentiment, even as she wanted nothing more than to hurl dishware right between his eyes.

Before their final harmony had concluded and Frank had walked the song's progression back to its tonic the room had crescendoed in a frenzy of *bravos* and *bravas*. But to Lynn, behind its Hollywood gloss, it was as lifeless, as soulless a performance as they'd ever given. Their supposed chemistry could've been fabricated by any two performers, just as it would be on silver screens all over the country when sung by those two pretty mouthpieces.

Frank didn't bother to bask in the reception, nor did he so much as glance at Lynn. Instead, he slipped back into his role as host and announced, “Anyway, we promise to look the other way if you decide to slip a bottle or two of the house red into your coats on your way out,” in a way meant to initiate the party's prolonged exodus to the elevators.

Eventually, one by one or in pairs, the guests thanked Frank and Lynn for a pleasant evening and headed downstairs and out into the snow blanketing 59th St. The last to leave, Severo, pecking Lynn on each cheek and shaking Frank's free hand—his other still holding his rocks glass—did what Frank hated most and quoted a line from “Baby” right back at him—“a duet at gunpoint,” Frank called it. “Well, maybe just a half a drink more,” Severo said, nudging Frank. He was clearly drunk and very pleased with his wit. Lynn loved how well her husband could suffer it—he was a performer through and through—but once it became clear that Severo wasn't about to quit, she swooped in to rescue her husband held hostage. Severo congratulated them both and asked Lynn what it was like to be married to a true genius.

No longer willing to perform for Frank's people—and they were his, she knew, the whole lot of them—Lynn weakly excused herself to the kitchen. Frank played off her curt exit, saying these parties are a real gas but so very draining, and Severo said of course, of course, and that he only hoped he'd be welcome at the next one, and all Frank could say was, “Fingers crossed for a sequel.”

She heard the door close and saw Frank trail casually into the kitchen. He made a joke—of course he did—but she didn't hear it. She turned off the tap and cut abruptly through the drawing room to their bedroom. She walked to the armoire without reason, looked into the mirror above the dresser without seeing, and finally sat at the edge of the bed. She felt the heat of betrayal, as infuriating and humiliating as if she'd walked in on him in bed with another woman. It was a hurt too raw to appeal to reason.

Frank appeared tentatively in the doorway.

“Esther Williams and Ricardo Montalban,” she said. Then, louder: “Esther Williams and Ricardo Montalban!”

Frank took a seat next to her. He swished the bourbon in his tumbler.

“I had to,” he said finally. “If I don’t let go of ‘Baby’ I’ll begin to think I can never write another song as good as I think this one is. You can understand that, can’t you? Baby?” This last word sung more than spoken.

Appropriately, she did not respond, her face now buried in her hands. Out of the corner of her eye she watched her husband start to reach for her, censor himself, and withdraw.

“It was *ours*,” she said, sitting up to say it again. “That one was *ours*.”

“Still is,” he said. “This won’t change that,” at which she laughed nastily.

Why, she wondered, had he kept it from her? Why had she been the last to know? To find out so publicly? Everyone was celebrating this other thing, and then she had, in her ignorance, gone and made it about her. Somehow, this made her angrier at Frank. She rose quickly. He’d gone back to swishing his glass but at the suddenness of her movement looked up startled.

“Why?” was all she asked, though the answer was clear: the paycheck, the career push, the fact that this is what people like him *do*. But what did she do? And what did she do now?

“I was going to tell you. Course I was. Don’t be silly.”

“Right,” she said. “At the premiere.”

He stood, moved closer. “No one can sing that part like you.”

He was a step or a sip away from platitudes. For the first time, she couldn't tell if he were humoring her, suffering her the way he'd suffered Severo only moments before. She saw a fissure that would one day rupture and widen between them, a splitting they would have neither the tools nor the time to repair. Frank was not hers; his was not theirs. Before tonight she had been the only and the finest; now she was neither. So who was she then? She knew what people said in private: 'The evil of the two Loessers.' But there was no real malice; it was just too good a pun to pass on. She had given up her maiden name, Garland, to take his, but Lynn Loesser was no improvement—it just meant a different charismatic figure now eclipsed her, and this one even more glaring: in the historical account of Frank the Great, she would find herself a footnote: Lynn the Lesser. What had he given up for her? How was he now any lesser?

She did not see this as the defining moment or the last straw. It was not an end in itself, merely an overture. Her husband would not stay static a moment, could not still his metronomic foot, resisted silence always.

During this daydream, Frank had taken her in his arms and begun leading her in a waltz around their bedroom, humming the most skeletal of rhythms as accompaniment—*DUM duh duh / DUM duh duh*. She looked at him and saw none of the charm from earlier in the evening, saw instead a jackal smile, felt on her nape bourboned breath sticky with libido. She knew what he thought: that he'd charmed his way out yet again, that to such a wolf this mouse would always represent the promise of easy prey. Still, she entertained the idea of waltzing the rest of the dreary night away, leaving the open containers to fester and the uncorked champagne to go flat while she herself went limp in his arms.

“Who wins?” she breathed, a last, weak attempt at wriggling free.

“Wins?” was all Frank could say in reply.

“Is it really the big bad wolf and the poor helpless mouse? Is it so awful simple as that?”

“Hey,” Frank said soothingly, then: “Is that what switching parts was all about tonight?” He laughed, cradled the back of her head. “I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why you would suggest it. I’m there thinking, *now with the women’s lib stuff?*”

Her head still resting on his shoulder, she said softly, “Everyone else knew. Every—”

“Shhh,” came his interruption.

Sure, he had only shushed her, as though she were a child who’d woken from a nightmare, but he may as well have slapped her for how sharply it stung. Not to mention: how very like him to have the last word.

She kept her head on his shoulder not for the comfort it provided but to avoid having to meet his eyes, this person she had shared everything with yet with whom she had never shared more than a name easily changed.

From the Former President's Private Collection

Cuddly Little Fella #1 (Pastel Backdrop). 2012.

Oil on canvas, 18" x 24" (45.72 cm x 60.96 cm).

Few artists' biographies are so exceptional: Having traded his tailored suits adorned with flag pin for the pastel polo shirts, khakis, and yachting loafers of his Yale days of yore, and while waiting for history to properly judge his legacy, former two-term President George W. Bush, like Winston Churchill before him, decides to take up the time-honored medium of brushes and oils. And while such news led the world at large to envision nightmarish hellscapes in the vein of Hieronymus Bosch complete with gurgling lakes of fire and winged cherubic Dick Cheneys, the truth was far more pedestrian and, somehow, far more unsettling: perspectivally askew but still somewhat endearing soft focus portraits of lovable canines. The George W. Bush who had spent eight years in the Oval Office proved wholly incompatible with the aproned retiree standing proud beside a finished portrait of a Pomeranian. Yet he forged on undeterred, wanting only to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, mostly by angling that mirror downward toward its most adorable creatures to reflect them back lumpier and with noticeably less facial and muscle definition.

Cuddly Little Fella #24 (Same Pastel Backdrop). 2012.

Oil on canvas, 16" x 18" (40.64 cm x 45.72 cm).

Situating himself in the tradition of Monet's water lilies or Dalí's melting clocks, Bush chooses to work tirelessly at mastering a single furry form before advancing to another

subject, perhaps the result of the suggestion in *Painting for Dummies* to “start small.” Postponing his original idea of depicting the world leaders he had, in his previous life, come to know personally, Bush says he asked himself what could be smaller than Sarkozy—“Not much. Fella’s lady sized”—before settling on small dog breeds because, he notes, it’s right there in the name. And yet, in the way they represent unwavering loyalty, they are a subject someone in the former president’s position would undoubtedly find reassuring, given his experiences with the fickle nature of approval ratings, the liberal media, and a certain outspoken hip-hop artist. Man’s best friend, it would seem, is neither random nor accidental, but, like Van Gogh’s sunflowers, the public expression of a private pain that runs immeasurably deep and has at last found creative outlet.

Self-Portrait in Shower with Neat Face in Mirror Trick. 2012.

Oil and water damage on canvas. 18” x 24” (45.72 cm x 60.96 cm).

There is a long tradition of the nude physical form as portraiture subject, and here we see the former president acknowledging that tradition while remaining contemporary with a nod to a technique often found in the digital photographic “selfie,” or “self-involved portrait photograph.” The canvas bears evidence of a thick, impasto application of paint but also large swaths diluted by water almost as though at random, and critics interpret this moisture mystery differently: some claim it to be the artist’s first documented foray into mixed media, a way of conveying the immersive experience of one’s daily cleansing ritual—indeed, standing before the warped canvas, a viewer very nearly feels the water trickling down his or her own forearm—while others read into it a more sinister message:

years later, the mishandling of FIMA's response to Katrina continues to haunt the former president at his most intimate, vulnerable, and sudsy.

Still Life with Just One Watermelon and That's It For a Change. 2013.

Oil on canvas. 14" x 18" (35.56 cm x 45.72 cm).

As Bush gained confidence, he not only broadened his scope but also began to resist certain conventions. Claiming an overwhelming feeling from many still lifes—"Heck, sometimes it's nearly a whole produce section"—he sought to calm frazzled museumgoers by ensuring the focus was unmistakable—as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has elsewhere noted, Bush does not readily subscribe to the School of Complexity. Yet despite its sparseness, denying viewers the chance to see the red pulp firsthand raises the same ontological questions as a traditional still life, with viewers left to wonder: *Is this one seedless? Or are there seeds in there? And who dropped it to make it so misshapen like that?* Many critics believe this purposeful withholding to be a potent metaphor for the intelligence failure in Iraq.

Horse in a Field (Horsing Around). 2013.

Oil on canvas. 14" x 16" (35.56 cm x 40.64 cm).

The former president continues to move into his more assured and experimental "middle" period. Having accomplished his mission to capture the canine form, we see him branching out, challenging himself further, this time with horses, which he has on more than one occasion referred to as "nature's bigger dogs." The shift to an equine subject also marks the first work in which we see him incorporate his trademark relatable humor

and wordplay. And it was a risk the artist lamented he hadn't arrived upon during his Dog Period for all the great dog puns out there. He knows, though, that there's no going back: "And, really, that's the thing's just so great about art: you learn and you grow and there's always the next ones to get it right, and no one's ever gonna go on a TV fundraiser to say hurtful things about you if you mess up one little painting."

**Brook Hollow Golf Club on a Sunday Afternoon With My Friend Youngie Who
Never Gets on My Case About Fixing the Doggone Garbage Disposal. 2013.**

Oil on canvas. 22" x 16" (55.88 cm x 40.64 cm).

Having moved beyond the canvas as mere formal exercise, Bush's recent work has grown more personal and confessional in nature, and two choice biographical details help contextualize this unexpected foray into landscape: first, a cold front across Dallas the day of its composition forced the retiree to cancel his afternoon's scheduled foursome; and, relatedly, perhaps resulting from being trapped indoors for the day, husband and wife bickered over an unresolved kitchen issue. Whether as a form of wish fulfillment or catharsis or both, the artist retreated to his studio—formerly his wife's home office—and set to work, forgoing lunch and his usual treat of two midday naps. The result was eye-opening for the budding painter, who put off his world leader portraits yet again to begin a new series, this one of revisionist histories, wiping away every disappointment, failure, and regret of his presidency with each successive unsteady brushstroke.

I Do Too Care. 2014.

Oil on board. 32" x 36" (81.28 cm x 91.44 cm).

His *pièce de résistance*, proudly displayed over the mantelpiece in the family room—until Mrs. Bush feels ready to broach the subject—features the artist dressed in suit and flag pin jovially fist-bumping hip-hop recording artist Kanye West—who appears in Bush's rendering somewhat lumpier than in real life and with noticeably less overall facial and muscle definition—while behind them spans Bush's now signature pastel blue backdrop. His use of negative space stirs in many viewers the light, airy sensation of a conscience finally scrubbed clean, but Bush, while still stressing that art is open-ended and even conflicting interpretations can be—however counterintuitive it may initially seem—nonetheless equally valid, admits the background choice has more to do with the ease of painting a cloudless sky since, he says, no matter how much he is able to accomplish in whatever time he has left, those puffy suckers will probably always hover overhead just ever so out of reach.

I'm Running for President of the Country

I'm running for president of the country. That's how Miss Garkow says we should begin our speech even though it's just our classroom. 'This year being an election year,' she said, 'and this being social studies, we might as well practice a little bit of democracy.' 'Miss Garkow,' I said like a question, but not before raising my hand, 'How come everyone isn't a Democrat if we live in a democracy?' She gave me the same kind of smile she gave when Levi in my class read his free-write out loud about his stuffed triceratops named Horny. I slid down in my seat and wished I was invisible. She explained to us all how some people are Democrats and others Republicans, but both, hopefully, support democracy. I got confused, but instead of asking any more questions I just nodded a lot. I could just ask Jonathan when I got home.

I'm in the fifth grade, which is practically middle school. There you get lockers and, sometimes, mustaches.

I only wanted to be vice president at first, because it's less scary. If things start going wrong, no one blames the vice president. But Jonathan said, 'They will now, after Cheney, and besides, you should run for president, or why run at all?'

'Dick Cheney's bad?' I asked.

'Very,' Jonathan answered. 'And *you* want to be vice president? Like Dick Cheney, Lord of the Underworld?'

I said, 'What about treasurer?'

He said, '*Treasurer?*' like that and I wished I hadn't said it. Yeah, treasurer is stupid. And secretary's for girls.

I decided not to tell Mom about it because Mom's always busy. Her and Jonathan don't talk to each other now that Dad's gone. Or if they do they're yelling. But they're both nice to me, at least.

It's not just that Mom's busy. Lately, she's just been super sad. Like she's about to cry at any moment, but doesn't, but could. I'm afraid one wrong move on my part like spilling my Coke during dinner and she'll start crying and never stop. That got me thinking: *What if someone couldn't stop crying?* I bet it'd be hard to live like that. Crying while you eat, making all your food too salty, crying at night trying to fall asleep. Even crying while you laugh, which I couldn't picture but thought would be really weird and hard. But I think the hardest part would be being around other non-crying people. You'd say, 'I'm really sorry to keep crying like this,' of course it would sound all weird and hiccupy because you're crying while you say it, and people would say, 'What's wrong?' and you'd say, 'Nothing, really,' but who's going to believe that? So they would ask, 'Well then why are you crying?' and you'd have to tell them and they'd probably make a face like, *Ohhh, I've heard about you*, or else if you didn't want them to look at you weird you'd just have to lie, which I'm not supposed to do. But you could say, 'My mother died' and they would probably not ask any more questions, just say they're so sorry. Jonathan told me about this line that Kurt Cobain sang where he said, 'my mother died, every night,' but when he performed it sometimes he switched out 'mother' for 'brother.' Jonathan liked that. I didn't really know why. Maybe just because Jonathan loves Kurt Cobain. He even plays the guitar like him and also he likes Joy Division. I don't like Joy Division, it sounds like outer space music, but I like listening to Jonathan play Joy Division. I wish I could play too but I'm no good, and even though I write right-

handed, when I try to play guitar I'm left-handed and it's weird because not a lot of people are left-handed, so I feel funny. But when I tell Jonathan, he says, 'What? Kurt Cobain was a lefty. Paul McCartney, too. And Hendrix, of course. So relax, little man, you're in good company. Tell you the truth, I wish *I* were left-handed,' which makes me feel really good because I want to be like Jonathan all the time but that's the only time I've ever heard him want to be like me. When he's not home, sometimes I sneak in his room and play his guitar upside down like how he says Jimi Hendrix used to do. I can only make sounds like *Thwack!* and *Rmmp!* and so I usually don't play very long. Once, I even went to a guitar class after school to learn, but most of the kids already knew how to play some chords and even brought their own guitars and nobody else made sounds like *Thwack!* or *Rmmp!* like I did so I didn't go the next week. Maybe if I become president I can make it so only kids like me who make sounds like *Thwack!* and *Rmmp!* can come to the meetings at first, to catch up.

'What about a smear ad? Done anything like that?'

I was asking Jonathan for help, but I didn't know what he meant, so I just held up the poster I made with construction paper: VOTE 4 ZACH IVE GOT YOUR BACK. Some of the letters had dark bulges or bumpy lines where I guess I didn't smear the glue enough. I like to let it dry and then peel it off my fingers like it's my skin. Jonathan scrunched his face at the poster, so I listened to him while slowly hiding it behind my back, which was hard because it's way wider than me. I wanted to tear it up right then, or at least flatten those stupid bulges.

'No, I mean like digging into the other guy.'

‘She’s a girl. Robel.’

‘Well, whatever.’

‘She’s really smart. There’s a boy running, too, Kenny Anaya. But everyone knows he doesn’t have a chance.’

‘Why not?’

‘Smells funny.’

Jonathan waved his hand. ‘The people have spoken.’

‘It’s pretty much me and Robel.’

‘OK. So tell me about this Robel, then. What’s her deal?’

I didn’t feel like it just then.

‘Do you *like* this girl or something?’

‘No! Gross! She’s my opponent!’

‘You *do, don’t* you?’ Jonathan turned around on his bed and wrapped his arms around himself so it looked like he was kissing someone. He made smooching sounds and did a voice that was supposed to be me saying, “*Robel, I love you!*” but it didn’t sound like me at all.

‘Stop! I do *not!*’

He turned back around to face me. ‘Well then what were you thinking about just now, if not her, which you *obviously* were.’

‘Wasn’t thinking about nothing.’

‘Uh-huh. So she’ll be like your First Lady, then, when you win?’

‘I was thinking about that line you like.’

Jonathan’s face went from smiling to confused. ‘Which one?’

‘The Kurt Cobain one. About his mom or brother dying every night.’

‘Oh. What about it?’

‘Why do you like it so much?’

‘Mm, I don’t know, really. It’s one of those times where it feels real. Not like “love” and “above” or “December” and “remember.” Like if I hear “fingers” I know the next line will be “lingers,” you know? But with that, it seems like he’s changing it for a reason.’

‘How come? Did he have a brother?’

‘Well, no.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘If I was his brother and I went to see him play and he sang that to everyone, that I died every night, I wouldn’t like it. And also, how can someone die every night, anyway?’

‘People do. Not actually. But people do.’

‘Did he?’

‘He was one of them, sure.’

‘Is that why he—you know.’

‘Boy, you’re full of questions today, aren’t you?’ Jonathan doesn’t talk a lot if I don’t ask a lot of questions, and I like to listen to him talk, so I ask a lot of questions. ‘He was in a lot of pain. Like he had this stomach thing that wouldn’t go away, no matter how many doctors he saw.’

‘Did he take medicine?’

‘Sure. And when that didn’t help he started taking drugs.’

‘Jeez.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And then he—?’

‘Yep. To stop the pain.’

‘But that stops everything. It stops even happiness.’

‘Happiness?’

The way he said it, it didn’t sound like he really wanted me to answer, which was good, because I just had more questions.

‘So he was sad all the time?’

‘All the time.’

‘Jonathan?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Mom’s sad all the time.’

‘So’m I, little man. Everybody is, probably.’

‘You are? I’m not, Jonathan, I don’t think. Am I?’

Jonathan had said I needed a platform, something to run on. Like how Barack Obama ran on hope and change, something that everybody can relate to and believe in, he said.

‘Yeah, that’s a pretty good one,’ I said. ‘What about Lincoln? What’d he run on?’

‘His thing was unity, bringing everyone together. He was famous for his team of rivals. Like if you win and you give Robel a spot in your cabinet.’

‘We have cubbyholes,’ I said. ‘What about George Washington? I’ll bet it was hard for him, being the first one.’

‘I don’t think they had platforms then, the presidency being so new.’

‘Oh. Well how about George Bush?’

‘Which one?’

‘The W one. What’d he run on?’

‘Not sure. Human blood, probably,’ Jonathan said and he held out zombie arms, which made me laugh. Jonathan’s funny to me a lot but he doesn’t laugh that much. If he really is sad all the time, even when he’s being funny, then that’s the worst. So I decided my platform would be that. As president my job will be to not let people be sad all the time. I don’t know how I could do it, but at least it’s something that everyone can believe in, like Jonathan says. And my campaign song could be “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” except Jonathan and I think that song’s corny.

Mom hugged me hard when she told me about her and Dad that day. I asked if it was my fault and she gave the kind of laugh like after you’ve been crying and then something good happens, her hand smushing my face into her sweatshirt, and said, ‘No, of course not, honey. No, no, no.’ I remember first lots of parts of me were scrunching, like my face and my fists. You know when you get weird thoughts in your head that you’re not trying to think and so you tell yourself to cut it out but you can’t and you just go on thinking them? I kept thinking without thinking: *Stupid Dad*. But then the scrunching stopped and she got blurry and watery, and there were two of her, then lots.

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Since Dad left us Mom's been like not here. Not like how Dad's not here, which is really, but like she must be daydreaming or something because she doesn't listen to me. She just stays in bed in her same sweatshirt and Jonathan takes me to school.

The other night Mom and Jonathan were yelling again. I was in the den watching *Family Guy*, which Mom doesn't let me watch even though sometimes Jonathan does and even watches with me when Mom and Dad are gone. But now that Dad's really not here and Mom's sort of not here it's like I can watch whatever I want. I heard Jonathan use the F-word and at first I tried turning up the TV really loud but then it was like even Peter and Lois were yelling, it was too much yelling, so I went into my room and closed the door. I could still hear the yelling but now it was like underwater yelling. Not all the way better, but better than before. Plus it was good because it gave me time to write my speech:

Whats up everybody, Im Zach and Im running for President of the country (this class). I was just going to run for Treasurer but thought if Im President I can do more stuff for you guys. Like maybe get us longer ~~reess~~ reesses or more snacks in the ~~cafeteria~~ cafeteria MPR, like a Carls Jr or something. Or more balls for our games, like doge balls and soccer balls and all kinds of other stuff we want. Or maybe we can get Wii Sports insted. I'll make sure we play more so we forget about any bad stuff. So when you go to the polls, remember: Vote for Zach Ive Got Your Back. See you later.

Election Day morning I was ready before Jonathan even got up to take a shower. I dressed like how a president dresses except I didn't have a jacket or fancy shoes and my

tie was a clip-on but it's the only one I have. I wondered how Robel would know what to wear because there aren't any girl presidents to copy. I was nervous about my speech and so instead of worrying until Jonathan was ready like I knew I would do I thought maybe I could try cheering Mom up somehow. Only it was hard to think of how because being in bed is never a happy thing, it means either you're sick or hurt or missing someone. But then I thought: *What about breakfast in bed?* Dad used to do that for Mom every Mother's Day, and she liked that, even though Dad didn't know how to cook and so he would go get her favorite breakfast burrito from Mike's by our house. But because I don't know how to cook either and I'm not supposed to go out of our neighborhood by myself, first I thought: *I could do soup*. But, no, soup is what you make for someone who's sick. It's a sad food. So I looked through the fridge and thought: *What about hot dogs?* It's not really breakfast, but it's also not a sad food because then why would they sell them at baseball games and movies? Plus, it's something I could do by myself.

I pushed the dinner plate button on the microwave, hoping that was how long hot dogs are supposed to cook, because I don't know these things yet. But before the beeps I started to hear pops and so I pressed my finger real hard into the button so that inside stopped spinning and the door flung open and I took out the paper plate that was soggy and splotchy in places and the hot dogs looked all fat and split open and curled up at the ends and not like hot dogs at all, really. I don't know why but I gave the plate a look like, *Stupid hot dogs*, even though it was me I was really mad at, but I thought the upside to Mom not hearing me right now was that maybe she also wouldn't notice how bad they looked. I tried to hide their ugliness with lots of mustard and relish because Mom loves mustard and relish but not ketchup but there was no way to hide the ends, sticking out all

gross. I took the plate and a Diet Coke down the hall into her room. It was weird to see her in bed not doing anything, not even sleeping.

I didn't knock or say anything because I thought maybe I wasn't supposed to even be in there at all, so I just went in and set the plate on top of her. She stared at it and looked up at me looking at her like, *Go on*, and she smiled but then her face went super sad again. I thought for sure she would start crying and never stop 'cause of how sad she looked. *Stupid Zach, you can't run the country. You can't even run your own house.*

But the weird thing was, she started giggling. Just a little, and then she stopped. Then it got a little louder, and went a little longer before it stopped again.

Her shoulders started moving up and down real fast so that the covers over her made swishing sounds, and her face turned red, and her eyes were scrunched shut, and she was laughing, with her mouth closed, like you do when you're in class or church and not supposed to laugh but can't help yourself.

I sure didn't see what was so funny.

She was really laughing now, but like she was trying not to. She waved at me to come here and pulled me close and then squeezed me tighter than ever.

I thought laughing would be better than close-to-crying-all-the-time, but turns out no. I wondered if anything could ever be funny again with just the three of us while I waited a long time for her to stop.

Seen the Universe?

When he opened the front door, the first thing he saw was his son in his *Star Wars* shirt, both hands clasping his JanSport, rocking on the balls of his feet impatiently.

“Let me just get changed,” Wayne said.

“No time!” Keith squealed.

He loosened his tie. “Let me just get a drink, then. Real quick.”

In the kitchen, he filled a glass with Coke, snuck a glance to his son at the front door, and mixed in a bit of whisky. He tightened the cap on the bottle but let his hand dwell there a moment. He removed the cap, poured a bit more in, then a bit more, then one last spurt.

“OK, Keith,” he said. “Off we go.”

“Think we’ll make it?” Keith asked. He was a good five paces ahead, hands again clasping his backpack’s straps, looking back eagerly. He was a good kid.

“Watch your step,” Wayne said instead, pointing at a section of the sidewalk that’d been uprooted from a neighbor’s ficus.

Keith spun around to face forward and leapt over the uneven concrete. “Don’t step on any cracks!” he shouted.

They turned the corner of their street and began up the steep incline that had given the street, Lofthill Avenue, its name.

“See anything yet?” Keith asked his father, squinting at his elementary school atop the hill. “I don’t. Not yet.”

“When did you get so into science?” Wayne asked.

Keith frowned. “I’ve always been into science. Ask Mom.” Then he began hopping rather than stepping to try and see more of the school. “Almost,” he said.

They followed the scrolls of butcher paper with ‘Science Night’ and arrows in colorful paint until they arrived at the four- and five-hundred wings of the school. “Whoa,” Keith marveled, “we get to go in the fifth-graders’ classrooms!” It occurred to Wayne he knew neither his son’s grade nor age with any certainty. Nor, he realized, could he do anything other than ballpark his birthday. *Jesus*, he thought. *Jesus, Wayne*.

“Go ahead. Get a good seat up front,” Wayne said, ushering his son into the classroom after sizing up the room’s dynamics. “Looks like we old fogies are in the back.”

The children sat cross-legged on the carpet, their anticipation so great they couldn’t help but wriggle, hop, crane their necks, clasp their hands to their open mouths, or shout out in giddy amazement when a claw or beak became visible through the bars of a crate. Wayne stood with other parents against the back wall since most of the rows of chairs designated for parents had already been taken. He saw as Keith looked back, scanning the rows of faces. He held up a hand and Keith motioned to the hawk currently on a trainer’s arm, flapping its wings furiously. The room’s doors were then closed so the presentation could begin.

The lead trainer in a safari suit took a seat before the children at the front of the room and held up his hands for the room to get quiet. He introduced himself, thanked everyone for coming, and asked the children if they were ready to meet some of his

friends. The children cheered wildly. Again he held up his hands until the cheers died down.

At the back of the room, Wayne crossed his arms. *Let the kids enjoy themselves,* he thought.

The lead trainer quieted the children by counting upwards in an authoritative tone. “One. Two. Shh, boys and girls, let’s settle down!” he said, two fingers in the air, before motioning for his assistant to place a boa constrictor over his shoulders. The boys, especially, whooped and hollered.

“Now who here’s brave enough to hold Rosie?” the lead trainer asked, holding the snake up with each hand. A few of the children raised their arms animatedly, shouting, “Ooh!” or “Me, me, me!”

Wayne looked at his son sitting quietly, arms around his legs, chin resting atop a knee. He knew his son would never volunteer on his own. He cupped a hand to his mouth and said loudly, “Keith! Keith’ll do it!”

The lead trainer was startled by the outburst and looked up from the eager children momentarily to locate the voice. Wayne was now pointing in the direction of his son. The lead trainer looked at the boy. “Keith?” he offered, mostly out of obligation. Keith shook his head emphatically, curled up into an even tighter ball. The lead trainer looked back at Wayne and shrugged politely before selecting a pig-tailed girl with a hand in the air.

“OK, everybody,” the lead trainer warned while the girl stood antsy at his side, “if we can’t all calm down no one gets to hold her. Remember Rosie’s probably more scared than any of us.” He waited, shushed, and again began counting upwards.

Wayne turned to the woman beside him and said, “I don’t know about you, but I’m curious what’ll happen when he gets to three.” The woman smiled politely and returned her gaze to the front of the room. He continued. “I don’t remember the parental waivers mentioning anything about a possible tranquilizer dart to our kids’ posteriors.” The woman, flustered, only shrugged vaguely and kept staring straight ahead.

The animals back in their crates, the lead trainer thanked everyone for coming and the frenzied children emerged from the classroom and rushed excitedly to the blacktop where a white, unmarked, dent-speckled van was parked. Hitched to the van was a trailer, equally beat up. It was now nearly dark enough to see the stars.

Wayne waited just outside the classroom for Keith. When he saw him exit, he made a show of excitement.

“Amazing, all those animals!” he said. Keith was unresponsive. “Now let’s not go telling your mother just yet, but I think an Aldabra Giant Tortoise is just the thing our house needs, don’t you?”

“Hurry. We’ll miss it,” Keith said and kept walking.

Wayne walked down the five-hundred wing and out from under a pole-lined hallway. It was here he’d taught Keith to ride his bike. It was here he’d let go when he said he wouldn’t, saw Keith look back panicked, saw the handlebars go wobbly, saw Keith collide with a pole. The boy’s cheek had been swollen and crimson for a week. He’d had to, though. He’d had to let go.

Six telescopes were meticulously arranged from back of trailer to hood of van, with a green or white stepstool beside each to allow the children to peer into the eyepiece. A rope adorned with vertical strips of red tape sectioned off a small patch of asphalt near the trailer's door that served as the personnel area, even though the entire astronomy exhibit, unlike the animal show, seemed to be run by a single person, a man whose entire frame seemed to droop, whose curly gray hair seemed all the more striking given his apparent uniform of black polo shirt, black jeans, and black sneakers. Unlike the animal trainer, to whom Wayne had taken an instant dislike, he regarded the astronomy guide with something approaching sympathy, though he couldn't defend either position. He watched the guide remove the ropes with an unnecessary formality each time he went rummaging inside the trailer and imagined he imagined they were made of velvet. Maybe that was it. Maybe that was why he was rooting for him and not the Quiet Nazi.

As children hopped on and off stepstools, glimpsing stars, constellations, or Jupiter's Red Spot, Wayne noticed the crewmember leaning against the trailer, speaking to a group of parents. Curious, he approached casually, as though he were only passing through and not intent on eavesdropping. The crewmember's eyes trailed him without skipping a beat, without interrupting his lecture, and Wayne stopped walking once he was in earshot and squinted as though looking for someone, all the while straining to hear.

"A guy is walking along a beach, just walking along," the crewmember said, "when he finds this lamp. He rubs it and *poof!* Out comes a genie that tells him he will grant him three wishes..."

Wayne frowned and walked on. He scanned the stepstools for his son and found him perfectly still gazing into a telescope, the only stillness in an otherwise hectic evening scene.

“Seen the universe?” Wayne asked.

Keith shrugged. “It’s just dark.”

Wayne motioned for Keith to let him look. He closed one eye and peered into the eyepiece. He tried pressing up against the rubber. He tried looking from a distance. He tried various angles. Keith was right. Nothing.

“Wait here,” Wayne told him.

“Dad,” Keith said, worried.

Wayne weaved through clusters of children toward the trailer, where the crewmember was still entertaining a group of equally indifferent parents. This time Wayne walked with more urgency, his gaze directed right at the crewmember. He interrupted the conversation, whatever it was.

“The children aren’t seeing anything,” Wayne said.

The crewmember looked at Wayne for a long moment, as though his presence were an imposition. Then, looking up, he said, “It’s more overcast than we would’ve liked,” and returned to his conversation.

We? Wayne thought, looking around. Then he looked at the guide’s nametag. It read: *Lights in the Sky Team Member Tom Dorry*. “Still, do you think you could come take a look?”

Tom Dorry sighed. Wayne ignored him and made his way back to the telescopes.

Children waiting behind a duct-taped line were growing restless. Keith was still peering into the telescope. While Tom Dorry looked at Wayne the entire time, he directed his speech to the boy.

“Jupiter or bust, huh, little guy?” he said.

“Can’t see anything,” Keith said. “How come?”

Tom Dorry began adjusting the telescope’s dials delicately. He pulled a notebook from his back pocket and consulted its scribbles. “Some eager beaver must’ve knocked this one off cour—”

“Wait! Wait! I saw something!” Keith exclaimed. “Go back!”

Wayne wanted Tom Dorry to catch his gaze, but, because he failed to look up, settled for an odd breathy sound.

“It was a shooting star! Or comet! It went, *jooo*,” Keith said, drawing an index finger across the sky. He tugged on his father’s coat’s sleeve, attempting to bring Wayne’s head closer to the eyepiece. “Quick! You’ll miss it!”

“There we are. Now take a look, chief,” Tom Dorry said to Keith, who gave a long *whoa* in awe.

“Voilà!” Tom Dorry said. “Jupiter.” He gave Wayne one last look before turning back toward the trailer, and Wayne fantasized briefly about leaping on the bastard’s back and bringing him to the ground, saying something vague and inspiring about children being the future, about preserving their wonder as long as possible while also knowing when to let go. During the speech, the woman from the animal presentation was within earshot, and this time her smile was genuine, this time she seemed pleased at his valiant act.

Silhouette Through Frosted Glass

They hadn't said a word to each other the entire drive home. No radio, either, but there may as well have been.

They spent the evening occupying separate rooms, hardly crossing paths: she in the kitchen, he in the living room; he in the kitchen, she in the bathroom; he in the bathroom, she in the bedroom. They were, tonight, new people, strangers, yet with an intimate knowledge of the other. Neither knew how to act and so didn't. They brushed their teeth at different times and slept with their backs to each other, for a discussion involving the fold-out would have involved breaking the silence.

Tanya lay awake in the dark as he flung his corner of the sheets over to her side and, in nothing but faded paisley boxer shorts, climbed out of bed and stomped down the hallway—he had never been light on his feet even before he'd started putting on the weight. He disappeared through the doorway and she knew what came next: the sound of a stream, the flush, more stomping, and then distant activity from the kitchen. He would go first to the freezer, standing before the puff of cold that escaped as the light came on, in search of ice cream or cookies. Failing that, it was over to the pantry where he'd raid the cupboards in search of something with sugar, something chocolate or frosted or glazed (his parents must've done a number on him was her own personal opinion) and settling for a bowl of the sugariest cereal washed down (and here was the kicker) with a separate glass of milk.

The Old Problem now had a New Ingredient.

They'd tried talking. He just wished she'd try harder and she just wished he could understand the difficulty of pitting herself against her body's androgen assault. As though there were a nationally recognized *quota*, for God's sake.

It was like a service, he'd told their marriage counselor, Dr. Evans. Like traveling through an automated car wash, motionless yet propelled along and deposited out the other side. "It's just so *mechanical*," he'd explained, though he made sure to stress that he did not fault her for it, that he was aware it's just how her body *is*. Which, great. She was a defective model and this was an issue of customer satisfaction. That cleared things right up. As a bank teller, her entire working life was transaction after transaction. It hurt to think of her marriage that way, too.

It was perhaps no surprise that, along with being unable to turn on, neither could she turn off in such a way as to allow herself to fall asleep. She had to be assisted into it, like an elderly resident into a dining hall chair. 1 mg Melatonin, then another, then a third. Meanwhile Marco, having returned from his midnight sugar tryst and now sleeping the sleep of the innocent, the undamaged, beside her. Sex, sleep, these functions meant to be innate felt to her like trying to still her ceiling fan's whirring blade without the aid of light switch or drawstring, eyes homed on a single blade's rotation, readying oneself to at last just do it, just reach in there and grab it already, initially allowing its momentum to lead for several revolutions before finally applying incremental resistance. But it was the moment immediately preceding action, in which the whole point was to convince oneself, repeating almost as a mantra, *Now. No, OK. Now. No, OK. Now.*

Another mantra trailed her, being a question she desperately wanted an answer to without it having to be asked: *Why would you want me to touch you if you know I don't mean it?*

So instead she talked around it.

“You asleep?” Hearing nothing, she continued. “You’re doing it again.”

Without so much as a word he scooped over, away from her.

“No. The snacking.”

He said nothing, didn’t even move.

“Honey?”

A low utterance. He was listening at least. She continued.

“Is it because of what happened?”

Something, muffled by pillows.

“Hm?”

He sighed, made a show of turning over and resting on his forearm.

“It’s *not you*,” he said, and collapsed onto his back, turning away again.

“Then what?”

He half rolled over, back onto his back, staring up at the ceiling.

“Am I not allowed to do as I please in my own house? Don’t think I don’t know about your secret stash you keep from me. Those hundred-calorie packs *waaay* in the back of the fridge, in the vegetable crisper because oh, dumb old Marco would never think to look there.”

“If I didn’t hide them they’d be gone in a night. One of anything’s never enough for you.”

“Fine. You’re right. You win. Good *night*.”

Oh, sure, she thought. Great night. Helluva night.

It isn't incredibly common, her condition, but neither is it rare. A little more hair in places, a wildly irregular and often infrequent cycle. Something like ten percent of women, what? Have it? Are affected? Suffer from it? Certainly there was suffering on her part. In her own head. But her case was comparatively mild. That wasn't nothing. Still, when the tension it created between them would reach its peak every few weeks, as it invariably would, and it mounted until it was nearly cumulous, she grew so sad that 'sad' seemed too small a word to contain the feeling, as though it were overflowing with itself. But she wouldn't cry and, somehow, that made it even worse.

In lighter moods, she often joked about being a robot, programmed without the circuitry for sentiment, but now the joke felt less funny than just raw, and she could only lament the fact that her programmers had failed to include in her one other important piece of coding, one whose absence seemed to be slowly sapping her marriage of its strength. She couldn't help but think: *I deserve to be alone*. She was, in her mind, cursed to forever be a sad person leading a happy life.

Dealing with the hormonal disorder had been confusing, even with Marco's initial support. In those first weeks, after much research, she had been compelled to start on a new canvas, something she hadn't done since college. She had always been artistically inclined, but hadn't kept it up much post-graduation and had instead funneled those impulses into decorating her apartment and, later, their new home. The change from studio apartment to three-bedroom granted her the luxury of decorating rooms on the basis of themes. The kitchen, for instance, had been transformed into a beach scene: the

cottony heat of the oven transposed to warm, healthy sunshine; the narrow walls expanded to a clean, limitless, tropical summer sky; the refrigerator reduced to a cooler chilling bottles of water, beer, and drinks served with a little parasol; the low rumble of the dishwasher the roll of a high tide. There were shells along countertops, framed sepia photographs of shells above each doorframe, craft fair bottles filled with sand and shells. Shells seemed, in this new wife's estimation, a 1:1 representation of serenity. These sorts of projects tended to suffice; the drawings and collages and paintings were typically reserved for periods of intense frustration, helplessness, or anger, a kind of solitary psychotherapy, and typically only ever occurred to her while her husband was away. This new one was to be a self-portrait, but that piece of information would likely be known to her alone. To anyone else—her husband, for instance—it would be a visual interrogative entitled “Is It a She?” in which there appeared a figure, gender indeterminate, eyes two hazy bulbs, trapped behind a pane of frosted glass.

“I wish you'd just consider it,” she said. They were in bed, facing opposite directions, back before therapy had been considered and then agreed upon, still trying to self-medicate, self-correct.

“I've told you. I don't *want* to consider it. It's not an option *to* consider.”

“I really wouldn't feel bad. I'd be OK with it. Really.”

“First of all, no you wouldn't. I wouldn't. And second, I love *you*. I want *you*. I don't want someone else.”

“I love you, too. You know that, right? Sometimes I just wonder if ... is that enough?”

He always went quiet at this question.

“I’m sorry,” she said, burrowing her face under her pillow until her dark muss of hair was indistinguishable from the sheets.

Lacking seniority at Union Pacific meant Marco’s weekly schedule was irregular. Whether gone for an eight- or twelve-hour shift or a two-days-on/two-days-off trip where he’d be put up at a hotel, this time apart, time *off*, as she privately thought of it, was for her hours and days of replenishment, which harked back to the time before Marco when she hadn’t felt the pressure of her disorder at all, much less how it affected another person, the person she loved. In that solitude, the pressure was lifted, and she enjoyed the rare pleasure of following her own whims and impulses without the fear that she may be disappointing him. She thought he thought about it too often, but maybe that was normal. She, after all, wasn’t. Maybe it wouldn’t seem so daunting if she were. But, from all the consultations and the things she’d read on the *Soul Cysters* discussion forums, she would likely never know. Others had it worse. These people poured out their pain in post after post with subjects like Help me! and What can I do?! She certainly felt helpless, but not to the point of broadcasting it to the world.

Not that she didn’t entertain the notion, though, sometimes, clinging to the false hope that an easy answer might be out there somewhere, as though a fellow soul cyster might reply with a simple: oysters are a natural aphrodisiac. worked 4 me! She typically wavered between hope and shame at such a thought. There were no easy answers. It would always be difficult.

#

She sat at the kitchen table, awaiting his return. Their latest session had produced what their therapist called a “revelation” but what each of them had considered a calamity. Reduced to tears, she had finally confessed to the feeling that for so long she had sought to conceal for how awful and not-quite-accurate it sounded. But, to her, all the times she allowed it to happen despite her body being hormonally opposed felt—and she had tried to put it as delicately as she could, hadn’t known how else to explain it—“kind of rapey.” The air in the office immediately following the word’s deployment was thick with horror. And then that same air had traveled with them on the drive home. They hadn’t spoken, but perhaps that was more out of the fear that, because it felt so viscous, they might open their mouths to speak and find their lungs flooded. The air depressurized the farther apart they kept, hence the separate rooms. And then he had been called to work in the early hours of the morning.

She had, as so many times before, been overwhelmed with guilt. Everything was her fault. And from guilt came desperation, a futile desire to find some shortcut back to normalcy, or at least blissful ignorance. And so, storing the canvas in a little-used corner of the garage, she’d decided once again that seduction, that personal Hail Mary, might help repair whatever damage her earlier admission had wreaked. But why should she feel guilty for simply expressing how she felt? Why couldn’t she simply state it in the most precise terms possible? Why did she have to hide her painting from him? She pushed these thoughts to the back of her mind—she had become good at this form of triage—and took to creating an atmosphere of romance, of intimacy.

A trail of candles along the table and countertop gave the room the ambience of a séance, some attempt at communion with something long dead. His look contained both

the surprise of a routine slightly altered and the anticipation of some previously unsought reward.

“What’s this?” he asked, barely in the door and already kicking off his boots.

“Thought it’d be romantic. Come sit with me.” She slid a chair out from the table with her foot.

He lingered a second, processing, before moving onto his socks. Finally, he spoke: “How will I know it’s consensual?”

She winced, didn’t answer. There was no answer, so she sat there, with her husband but also stranded on some uninhabited island. She looked at him, gazing back at her indignantly but also expectantly.

Within minutes his overalls were around his ankles and he was pressing her into the cold of the tile countertop. She tried to focus. First on the area where the sensation should be, then on the countertop and how the cold was initially too much but gradually became tolerable. She thought that if she focused, that maybe she could be eased into it, but still feeling nothing, decided any sort of focus was at odds with getting through this experience. She let her mind drift, let it ebb and flow without impulse or instinct like the room’s implied tide. She thought about shells. Marco’s breathing became the roar of the surf. It was growing more labored, crashing violently against the beach; a storm was imminent. She reminded herself she was doing this for him. For them. Which is why she couldn’t be there in the kitchen, during. Which is why she was far, far away.

Afterward, they extinguished the candles, moved to the bedroom, and didn’t talk much. His contentment was readily apparent, even in darkness, in silence. He did not turn away from her, as was his usual method of symbolic protest. She lay there, a martyr to

her marriage, staring up at the barely perceptible ceiling fan that had gradually reduced its revolution once the lights went out until it had stilled completely. Or had it? Maybe it was whirring steadily and so gave the illusion of stillness, and that only to reach up and touch its blade would she know for sure.

Now, she thought. No, OK. Now.

Never No Lament

The thing he liked the least was for me to see him when he didn't have his teeth in. Which is why when I rolled down the passenger-side window and shouted his name, Dale only nodded and held up the stack of mail he'd come outside to get.

"We're going to dinner. You coming?" I asked.

He hunched down to peer in the window. Tanner, in the driver's seat, gave a half-hearted wave. Dale made a sour face and then shook his head, watching as we drove away.

"Your old-man boyfriend's so in love with you," Tanner laughed.

"He is not. He's just lonely," I said.

"Sure, Suz. That's why he's not coming with us now but needs like eight haircuts a month."

I was in cosmetology school and had started cutting Tanner's hair first, to practice, moving on to my dad, who liked that he didn't have to leave the house or pay, even if he was always unhappy he never came out looking like 90's Val Kilmer, his ideal. Then I offered to some of our family friends and neighbors who were more than happy to pay, even tip. Dale had started talking to my parents whenever they were outside. I think he started timing it so he'd be out for the paper just as my mom went for her zombie walk—clearly, I'm not a morning person—or in his garage just as my dad was leaving for work. Then he started coming over to say hi or to ask for help with something around his house. Once a day, every day. Then twice. Soon it was three, four times a day. He'd ring the doorbell the way a child does. I'd be upstairs in my room, hear that frantic chime, and roll

my eyes because I knew. It would only be a moment sitting downstairs with my parents, making small talk, before he'd suddenly shout upstairs, at me, "Hey, come socialize!" I was always having to come socialize. Except when Tanner's car was parked out front. He'd never come over if he saw Tanner was over. Or he'd leave as soon as Tanner showed up. But so it meant I couldn't ever really be by myself. If I wasn't in the mood to see Dale, I could keep him away with Tanner. But if I wasn't in the mood to see Tanner, that meant any minute, I could hear that doorbell. Any minute I'd have to drop whatever I'm doing to babysit Dale.

I could never tell either of them this, but spending time with Dale wasn't really that different from being with Tanner. I don't mean this in a mean way, but they both feel like children. Both want the same sad things. Sometimes when Tanner gets really frustrated he even complains that I'm better to my old-man boyfriend than to him, my actual one. All I have to do is say, "Tanner, seriously? He's eighty!"

When people see me, see my sleeves-in-progress and my Miley Cyrus haircut, my lip ring, they probably assume things about me. The usual things. Even if they're wrong. So I wonder what those same people think when I'm helping Dale down a flight of stairs or sitting across from him at a café: *Though that young woman has done some questionable things to her body, she is so very well behaved! An entire meal with her grandfather and she hasn't checked her phone once!*

Actually, though, Dale had never seen my tattoos, which even my mom, searching for something to say when I first came home with my first one, could say only that they were "so big." It was clear she would've said the same thing if I had changed my mind after the needle first made contact, leaving only an artificial freckle. On the inside of each

forearm is a shear that goes not quite from wrist to elbow. The left one's in front of clouds and the right one's in front of sunflowers. There're also hearts and stars. Then, as now, only the shears were colored in but eventually everything will be. Because it was still winter – well, Southern California winter – I'd been wearing a lot of sweaters. I'd already been hiding my tattoos from my grandma, who was always sending me blankets knitted with Bible verses, thinking I was always so cold since I wore cardigans even when she visited in July.

“I don't know why you bother,” Tanner was saying for the hundredth time. “Just say you're busy.”

“Do we have to talk about this now? Can't we just eat? It's a real turn-off to see you jealous of an eighty-year-old man. Is that what the big truck is for?”

“What do you get out of it, though? Answer me that and I'll drop it.”

“You're right. Nothing. But it's not about me. Is that so hard for you to get?”

“Yes. Why spend time with someone—”

“If you don't get anything out of them? Do you hear how you sound?”

He raised his beer to his lips but brought it back down to the table. “Are you friends then? I mean, what's the relationship? There's no label for it.”

“It's the same as if I were at dinner with a friend of my grandpa's,” I said.

He looked both bewildered and redeemed. “That's not a thing that happens. Ever. Which is my point.”

“Fine. We're friends. What does it matter? He has nobody.”

“So it's out of guilt then,” Tanner concluded more than asked.

“Think how you’d feel,” I said. “To have absolutely no one. It’s not guilt. He needs someone.”

“He has a daughter. You make him out to be this Boo Radley character.”

“Wow, a literary reference. I’m impressed,” I said, heavy with sarcasm.

“I know who Boo Radley is, Suz. I’ve been to high school.”

“No, of course you do. Big truck, big mind, *tiny*—”

“Jesus, Suzi. Why’re you being such a bitch? It’s ‘cause you know I’m right. There’s no reason for you to spend time with this creepy old guy. Admit it.”

“Do you mind if we skip dessert? I want to save room for a second dinner with Dale.”

“Maybe you two deserve each other,” Tanner said angrily. “I should just step aside and let you go all reverse *Harold and Maude* like you clearly want to.”

“Ooh, and a classic film reference. Two points for Tanner,” I said, taking a gulp of wine.

“Whatever. Enjoy his shriveled raisin dick. So gross.”

By this point I was beyond feeling like I had to defend myself, so I thought I’d have a little fun with it. I leaned across the table to be closer to him. “You wanna know the worst part?” I asked, swiping a fry from his plate and bringing it to my lips seductively, letting it glide along and even toying the tip with my tongue before biting it in half. “When Dale and I are together, we *never* talk about you.”

#

“The boyfriend left pretty late last night,” Dale said. We were in my backyard. He was in a lawn chair with a haircutting cape draped over him. Under our patio awning, my MacBook played my music on shuffle.

“First of all, you know his name. And second, it wasn’t even late. How do you even know?”

“I hear his truck when I’m trying to sleep. How could I not? Bet even the Orientals in China hear it.”

I said nothing, feigning concentration. Snip. Snip snip.

“Cold out here,” he said, looking up at the darkening sky.

“Keep your head still.”

“You hungry? You want to get something to eat after this?” he asked.

“Already ate,” I lied.

“Me too,” he said. “But I’d’a gone with you. Kept you company.”

I didn’t want to keep talking about this. “What’d you have?” I asked.

“Little bit of spaghetti. What else, right?” he laughed.

“Amy’s not home?” When his daughter was traveling, he had pasta, which meant he had a lot of pasta.

He shrugged. “She’s in Paris. Some premiere, promotion, I don’t know.” The only thing he seemed to know – and tell me repeatedly – was that her position meant she could get the two of us in to Disneyland for free. I always changed the subject, though, because I never knew what we’d do once we were there.

“Paris. That’s exciting,” I said.

He shook his head and smiled. “Ooh la la. No one to tell me to take my pills. Every day, it’s ‘you take your pills? Take your pills yet?’ That’s all she says to me.”

“Someone has to watch you. If she let you eat the way I do, you’d lose all your toes.”

He laughed, coughed, laughed.

We were at our best when falling into these rhythms, inventing scenarios and riffing on them.

“But you better not tell on me,” I said, angling my shears at him in a mock threat. He flapped about beneath the cape to free his hand, brought it to his mouth, and moved his finger and thumb along his mouth like a zipper. It was quiet a moment as I combed the wisps of his hair and took the uneven ends in my finger. Then, as though continuing a conversation out loud that he’d been having with himself, he shook his head and said, “Eight hundred dollar scissors.”

“These? Hardly,” I said, not following.

“The scissors you showed me. The expensive ones. Think I ought to get them for you.”

“I’m saving up for them,” I said.

“Save for something else. Our honeymoon.”

“No, Dale. If I won’t let Tanner buy them for me I certainly won’t let you.”

“What if they were to appear on your doorstep one day? An anonymous donation?”

“They better not,” I tried to say as firmly as I could.

“Why not? I got all this money and no one to spend it on.”

“Spend it on your kids. Your grandkids.”

“Yeah,” he said in a way that sounded like no. He’d recently told me that Amy had taken him to the mall to pick out an iPod for his youngest grandson who lived in Seattle even though he complained to me again and again that they never called to thank him.

“Spend it on yourself, then,” I urged.

“Nothing I need,” he said. “Get my haircuts for free.”

“I don’t want you buying me things, Dale,” I said as gentle drops landed on my neck, cheek. Dale squinted and looked up.

“Uh-oh,” he said. “Rain.”

“Might have to take a break and go inside,” I said.

“Good,” he said, “that way we can smooch.”

The thing about Dale is sometimes he says stuff like this. Weird stuff. Uncomfortable stuff. And, like the honeymoon thing, usually I can ignore it. It’s harmless and I know he doesn’t mean it, or that it doesn’t mean what he thinks it does. Most times I can just let it go, but then sometimes I twist the knife and mention Tanner.

“Who? Oh, right. The monster truck driver. Vroom vroom.” He gave a little laugh. “What’s with this music?”

“You don’t like it?”

“I don’t like the black woman’s voice.”

This is another thing about Dale: Inadvertently racist. Or more kindly: of a different generation.

“I don’t know what you mean and, besides, it’s a man,” I said.

“That’s a man? No. It’s so girly,” he said.

“It’s the Ink Spots,” I told him. He listened as the song ended, the man-Dale-was-convicted-was-a-woman repeating the title, “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore,” several times backed by close harmonies.

“Should be ‘Can’t Get Around Much Anymore,’” he said. “Then it’d be my theme song.”

“OK, Dale,” I said, “think you’re all set.”

“I can go home,” he said, more to himself. It was just after eight, which was late for him to be out. He rose slowly but determinedly, looking for a way out of the cape.

I unfixed the Velcro and folded up the cape, first into rectangles and then into a tight square, and led him out the door and down the porch steps. He took them sideways, as he always does, as he has to, clinging tightly to my arm. We crossed the lawn and when we reached the sidewalk, I told him I’d see him soon. He wanted a day. I said it was going to be a busy week. He started in the direction of his house but then stopped, craned his neck to see that I was still looking, and, out of nowhere, began shaking his fist in a *Gitoff my lawn!* way.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“You were in my dream last night,” he said.

I suddenly felt that weird warmth of fear and surprise, like he might say absolutely anything next. He lowered his fist, looking at me, and then told me everything in three words.

“You said no.”

I looked away, confused and, for some reason, upset. When I looked back, he was motioning for me to come closer. When I did, he reached for my wrist. I pulled it away. He reached for the other.

“What’re you doing?” I asked, masking concern with a laugh.

“Give it here,” and he took my arm by my sweater’s sleeve and tried to guide my hand into his jacket pocket, which, as you can probably guess, I resisted fiercely.

“Fine,” he said, and let me loose. He reached into his pocket and removed an envelope whose front featured the Magic Castle.

“What’s this?” I asked, though I already knew.

“Go on. Open it,” he said.

Inside were two day passes, and then I could picture it: the two of us seated across from each other in the imitation outdoors of the Blue Bayou. He would order the most extravagant thing on the menu, the jambalaya or filet mignon, and as long as it took him to finish his meal, diners around us would see a man with his granddaughter and would think, *Isn’t that nice? And her not even on her phone. You just don’t see that anymore.*

There were other flashes, too. Us in line at the Haunted Mansion. Him trying to get me to share a funnel cake or lingering in the gift shop’s jewelry section a little too long. Us on a bench, him nodding off now and again, me finally on my phone. I could see it all, which is why I couldn’t see it ever happening.

But then he said:

“Only thing is, the boyfriend, whatshisname, might have to cover parking. Amy didn’t include a pass.”

And then it was Tanner sitting across from me. He would definitely order the filet mignon. Would turn down my offer to taste my gumbo. No one would think to remark on us as a couple. It was normal, expected.

Nor was he one to ride rides. What would we do there?

“You shouldn’t be doing this,” was all I could say.

“Amy gets a deep discount,” he said.

“I shouldn’t accept them,” I said, before remembering he’d said they’d be free and calling him on it.

“Course they were. Gratis. Amy’s practically president by now.”

“You *just* said—”

But he only smiled. “Bring me back some of that fudge they got there. God knows Amy won’t. Now come on over for a second. I got something to show you.”

Another thing I hated about Dale: you could never say no to him. Wouldn't take the necklace back, wouldn't let me leave. So I walked with him across the street. Even with all the ways he made me uncomfortable, I wasn't afraid of him. And I realized as he fumbled for his keys that I'd never been inside his house. The first thing I noticed was the smell, which was like him, musty, but everywhere. Then I saw the mess. Not *Hoarders* level stuff—it was clear Amy had a hand in keeping things clean—but just piles of who knows what. Stacks of papers, bills, open envelopes everywhere. There were Persian rugs pinned to the walls, which looked really tacky.

“Rugs on the walls?” I asked.

“Her idea,” he said, disappearing down the hall. But the way he said it, I knew he didn’t mean Amy.

His wife had battled cancer in the years before my family met him, and her death had left him alone—apart from Amy—for a few years, which is sad in the abstract, of course, but also almost impossible for me to imagine in the day-to-day. Wake up, OK. And then what?

I glanced at some of the papers on the entryway table. On top were bank statements. Part of me knew I shouldn’t look but the rest of me was already scanning the columns out of curiosity. A checking account with three-hundred-thousand something, another with four-hundred-, and still another also with three-hundred-. He hadn’t been kidding. All the times he’d mentioned his money, I hadn’t known how much he really had. I wondered if this should change how I felt about the necklace. Then I thought briefly about how I’d feel if he really did buy me those shears.

He returned with two sepia 8x10’s, one his wedding photo and the other a portrait of his wife.

“I have this reunion coming up. Need prints of these two. Got the scanner in the other room.”

I checked the time on my phone. “Right now? I really can’t, Dale, I have to go. Can I do it later? When’s the reunion?”

“September sometime.” He stared at the photo of his wife. “You know, you look just like her,” he said, still looking down.

I already didn’t want to be there and this certainly wasn’t helping.

“I’d better get home. Tanner’ll be—”

“Tanner’s mean,” he said suddenly. He was hanging his head, his arms at his side. He’d sounded like a child talking about a cruel older sibling. This was something he actually thought about? I couldn’t think of a thing to say. “You deserve better than him.”

“Like who? You, Dale? I could be one of your grandkids,” I said, with a harshness I regretted.

He looked again at the picture in his hand. A look of humiliation flashed across his face, as though he had betrayed her. Without waiting for a response, I turned around to leave.

Poor Dale, I thought as I reached his front door. Dale, Tanner, Dad. All of them children. All of them eyes and stomachs and mouths, awful mouths.

The Residency

People who look like caricatures of themselves are talking and smoking along the curb, their faces bathed in the relentless neon of NUDE GIRLS across the street. Ben walks up to the gate, mentions he's on the list, lets Michael the doorman stamp his hand – usually it's the left, but Ben doesn't know better – and walks into the open-air courtyard. The Little Room, on his right, seats 65 and houses the venue's bar – though they serve hard stuff next door at Yes I Said Yes I Will Yes, which everyone just calls The Yes because (a) it's a literary reference and (b) this is Los Angeles. There's a DJ at the booth, spinning and sampling, a show in its own right, but he wants so badly to see inside so he moves quickly through the lobby, passing the tables along the wall beneath framed photos of the club's regulars.

Then he's in the theater. The same olive seats that Chaplin and Orson Welles once occupied. The Coronet Theater's a Los Angeles institution, having been the venue of choice for world and West Coast premieres since its inaugural curtain lifted on Bertolt Brecht's "Galileo" in 1947. Even The Little Room was the site of the original Troubadour, meaning guys like Woody Guthrie have graced that very stage. Nearly fifty years later, it was bought and refurbished, and now, a decade after that, Flanny managed to talk developers out of leveling the landmark – which was on track to become, of all things, an Urban Outfitters – and purchased it as the site of the relocated and expanded Residency, which he moved from its original location just a block west on Fairfax. Gone are the intimate tables for meals, melting the butter over the candle-in-a-Mason-jar's flame, and, instead, the shows happen the way Flanny always saw it in his head: in a

proper theater, everyone facing forward, attention undivided. The room holds 280 at capacity, meaning performers can move in front of the wedge monitors, and, singing a cappella or even over acoustic accompaniment, reach the back row without amplification. It looks like Old Hollywood. It looks perfect.

Hardly anyone comes alone, Ben notices, watching groups stroll in and take their seats. He feels a little foolish for it, but who would he have brought? His seat's along the back wall, but even from that vantage point he's aware he'll be able to make out the facial expressions of the performers just fine. No wonder they do comedy here, too.

Eventually, the overhead lights go down with the house music, a darkness unbroken by the bluewhite glow of any phone. The red velvet curtains part and it's a stage like any other, set tonight for Jon Bosch's Friday night spot. An upright piano and mic far left and one Unidyne mic at center. Drums at the back. More guitars than can possibly be needed. Twin projector screens on either side of the kit. And some kind of setup beside the piano, which Ben later wants to get a closer look at. Michael appears slightly out of breath in the doorframe – his in-need-of-a-tailor navy blazer over ratty T-shirt isn't fooling Ben; he's clearly apart from the world of the performers, a wage slave, something like Residency groundskeeper or super – and, for the benefit of any newcomers, runs through Residency policy – *please no talking, no photography, and no recording of any kind*, he states and repeats – and then Mark Flanagan, whom everyone just calls Flanny whether they know him or only know of him, ambles out to the mic in jeans, sneakers, and a track jacket – he has the build of an ex-rugby player whom you'd suspect thought art girly – and, in a thick Galway accent, welcomes everyone to his club with, “Friday, am I right?” before introducing Jon as the night's act.

No opener. No fanfare. Jon walks on, a Guinness in each hand, takes to the mic but doesn't speak. A quick bow as welcome and thank you. He's thin, especially passing and embracing Flanny, and has the ghostly pallor of someone who spends all his time inside. The pint glasses go atop the piano – Ben pictures several sets of Olympic ring stains up there – and the suit jacket comes off instantly. He's humming to himself, something indistinct. He pushes play on an old tape recorder and a male voice begins speaking. He lets the tape run for a minute; no one knows what's happening, what'll happen next. *In the past five years there has been increasing interest among the public and the scientific community in the Transcendental Meditation program as taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.* He takes a seat at the piano, playing the opening chords of The Beatles' "Sexy Sadie," with the man – Ben guesses Timothy Leary – still lecturing underneath.

"Slap, please," he requests, short for slapback delay, Lennon's signature vocal sound, itself borrowed/stolen from Elvis. Ben looks above and behind him. The sound engineer is upstairs in an iso booth behind the theater's back wall, separated by a glass partition.

Ben and the other 279 in attendance are attentive enough that he can hear the labored breathing of the man sharing his armrest. Stillness settles into the hush of reverence. There's no bar, no waitresses up and down the aisles, no baskets of breadsticks or flickering flames in Mason jars to compete for anyone's attention. Those doors close, everyone's facing forward, and the stage is all that's lit, seems all there is.

Part of the charm of these Friday nights is Jon has an open door policy – whoever's in town is welcome to drop in. Part of the reason for the sold-out crowd, Ben

realized, wasn't just Jon, although he could certainly sell the place out on a weekly basis given that he famously has no set list and takes requests (even fusing multiple requests into a medley or honoring in-the-style-ofs), but for who might show up unannounced to guest on a song, do a few duets, or even stick around and improvise with Jon the entire set. Sometimes he and a guest or two will even take to The Little Room after his show's over for an even more anything goes performance to the first 65 people to meet him over there, playing into the early hours of the night. The sense is this is the sort of thing he'd be doing anyway, whether or not people had paid to watch.

"Sexy Sadie"'s wah-wah-wahs blended seamlessly – but still surprisingly – into Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody: "Nothing really matters / Anyone can see / Nothing really matters to me" and its delicate tinkling coda is met with great applause. Then he leans into the mic, pauses, says only, "Riley?"

The applause grows. Ben hears an "oh, shit!" or "no shit!" Riley Geare walks out wholly unassumingly, doesn't seem to know where to stand. He goes to the mic, says nothing, begins biting his nails before brightening at the sight of Jon's guitar rack just behind him. He examines them individually, a prolonged "um" as he paces its length, settles on an acoustic, and then scours the stage for a stray cord.

Ben experiences a pang of secondhand embarrassment. Riley still hasn't said hello. Jon, improvising at the piano, still hasn't introduced him.

"Whatever you feel like," Jon says finally, which also functions well as the only rule for his shows.

“I just chose a guitar. Don’t make me choose something else so soon,” Riley says. The crowd laughs but to Ben it’s odd – it didn’t seem directed at them; he was just being sincere.

In response, Jon begins the instantly recognizable intro of Riley’s recent hit, adding, “Hope you brought your Grammy.” Riley had won one a few months back, in February, while Jon, twice nominated – and for his film soundtrack work – has yet to win, though there’s no spite in it.

Riley starts to sing, as softly as his speaking voice. The first line’s about feeling like a fraud, which in this setting registers as real. When Ben had watched the telecast of Riley performing the song during the Grammys, he thought it was strange to have this deeply personal confession so out there, between cutaways to Johnny Depp or Meryl Streep acting interested.

And they’re just about into the second verse when, abruptly, Riley stops strumming, stops singing, and it takes a minute for Jon to catch on, not until he hears Riley telling him to wait, wait, wait, stop. Hang on.

Riley’s shaking his head, staring at the Persian rug beneath his feet. “I just can’t – I can’t do this song, I’ve played it *too* many times. I’ve just played it hundreds of times and I’m just sick of it, and I just can’t play it. I’m sorry.” Then a reluctant smile, again not directed at the audience so that it’s piercing in its authenticity.

Ben gets the sense that there’s nothing Jon wouldn’t be able to roll with, and the show goes on. Later, while Jon’s soliciting requests, someone half-jokingly shouts out the name of the earlier abandoned number. Riley asks that for the rest of the night, they just pretend that whole thing never happened. “Literally any other song, I’ll do,” he bargains,

and treats the audience to a very specifically Riley Geare interpretation of “All My Rowdy Friends Have Settled Down.”

After the show, Ben remained seated as the determined rushed to secure a spot in line while the rest, having risen tentatively once the house lights came up still awaiting an encore, made their way out the twin exits and into the courtyard to resume talking and smoking.

“Ben?” and he looked up startled. It was Flanny, hands in his jacket pockets. “Mr. Golden Voice himself, eh? Flanny. Pleasure.”

The Golden Voice thing was comforting. It was true that he could sing. Angelic was a term that listeners back home used, and there were sometimes Jeff Buckley comparisons, since he could, like the late singer-songwriter, captivate a room with nothing more than an acoustic guitar and that voice of his. When Flanny had put on his demo last month, culled from the slush pile, he’d found himself muttering, “Christ, the pipes on this kid” and quickly got in touch. Ben had left North Dakota that week with a hastily packed suitcase and his Martin acoustic/electric. Not hastily packed like good riddance; more like he expected to return to The Forks all too quickly. He waited for Flanny to extend a hand but instead was clapped on the back.

The brevity in Flanny’s introduction wasn’t an act; he seemed to spare everyone the details. After a cursory glance to the stage and an ominous, “How bout Mr Grammy Award up there tonight? Christ,” Flanny had motioned for him to follow and they exited the theater into the courtyard and headed up a flight of stairs deemed off limits by the flimsiest of ribbons, which Flanny unhooked and allowed Ben through. They came to the

end of a long walkway – “Ready to join the afterparty?” Flanny hollered behind him – and he flung open a door and waved him inside.

The conversations that were happening continued happening.

“But it’s so bourgeois!” Alison Lewis was saying, pronouncing it like *boo-jee*, clearly amused in the same way as her comic persona onstage. There was something satisfying in the person matching the persona so neatly. That her on stage was just her on stage. “You must just feel so...*mmm*...pleased with yourself” – here she brought her arms in tight, fists to her chest, and shivered as though very cozy – “and you get in your little Prius and you motor on over to Whole Foods, canvas bags under your arm—”

“I’m just saying, it’s better is all,” Jackson Phillips, a singer-songwriter Ben admired, and the target of whatever Alison’s accusation, interrupted.

"*Bullshit!*" Alison laughed, less vicious than just cute. And then, still smiling, she spotted Flanny out of the corner of her eye, but seemed to regard Ben as she would Michael or Scott the sound guy, as just someone with a job to do. "Flanny, help me out here: dark chocolate or milk chocolate?" she asked.

"Fuck chocolate. Milk stout," Flanny said, and everyone, even Jackson, laughed. Ben admired and also slightly feared Flanny’s ability to schmooze, to juggle several different priorities at once the way you have to if you run a club, which, creativity or no, is really just another business.

"No, no, come on. Mister NPR tote bag over here" – her thumb out toward Jackson – "honestly thinks he prefers *dark* chocolate."

Flanny waved away the suggestion. "Eh, I feel you, Jackson. Really, I do. I prefer to have exercised, too, but you won't fuckin walk down Santa Monica and find me in the window of 24 Hour Fitness."

"*Thank* you," Alison said, basically resting her case. "Flanny gets it. You don't get points just for adding those Bergman films to your Netflix queue, you actually have to—" but she stopped, registering Ben's presence.

"Cute new guy," she said as though that were Ben's full legal name. "Milk chocolate or dark chocolate? And don't fuck up my super scientific poll."

"Oh, actually, I really don't—" Ben began.

"*Milk* chocolate," she stressed in dulcet tones, nodding emphatically, "or" – looking vaguely nauseated – "dark chocolate?"

Ben stared at Alison hoping she wouldn't press him further, but she raised her eyebrows expectantly. He looked to Flanny, who shrugged. "The hazing process begins," he said, again short on the details.

Somehow Ben should've known better than to expect formal introductions. The extent of his initiation involved weighing in on cacao percentage. Of course that's what went on up here.

Which is also why he was out of there as soon as humanly possible. Flanny began taking post-show drink orders so Ben volunteered to bring them from the bar. This led to his sneaking backstage, snapping a photo of the sign hanging above the doorway leading to the stage that advised LIMIT ONE PUMPKIN PER CHILD PLEASE and then working up the courage to step out onstage as though it were a lake that'd frozen over, and he was examining the aftermath of Jon's performance when he caught sight of Riley out of the

corner of his eye, hovering in the wings near the PUMPKIN sign. When he looked over, though, he'd already wandered off elsewhere. Even just doing nothing, Ben somehow felt like an imposition. Partly because he knew, or assumed he knew, what he was hoping for, and how he'd unintentionally thwarted that hope just by having been there when he wasn't meant to.

He finished examining Jon's looping station – he didn't know what half o the stuff was; he'd have to ask him – and, ready to make his way backstage again, casually glanced around for any signs of life, wondering where Riley had gone after he'd interrupted his after-hours rehearsal, and what he was doing now. Partly, he wanted to run into him again, with the hope that maybe this time would be different, but, more so, he hoped he didn't; he didn't want to upset him further.

No one was around so Ben figured where's the harm. He moved around the stage with the childlike glee that Jon had earlier, thinking, *What'll it be? What first?* At the sight of the Rickenbacker, his mind went to The Beatles:

Living is easy with eyes closed

Misunderstanding all you see

It's getting hard to be someone but it all works out

It doesn't matter much to me

And on that last line, a gorgeous, ghostly harmony had drifted to the stage. He looked up, his fear of being caught trumping his ability to recognize Riley's distinctive voice. He, too, loved The Beatles, Ben knew. He'd said as much in interviews.

"Sorry," Riley said softly, stepping closer, the same anxious pacing as when he first walked onstage. "Couldn't resist."

“I’m not even really supposed to be here.”

“That was great,” he said, unfazed. “You were doing his home recording version, from *Anthology*. I love that one. That’s usually the way I do it, too, though I haven’t found a way to make it work well enough to do it on stage yet.”

“No, I know what you mean. It doesn’t really work that way, which is probably why John struggled with it,” wincing at the gamble of using first names for dead celebrities.

“How cahn ah do it; how *cahn ah* do it?” Riley intoned in his best Liverpool accent, mimicking John as the *Anthology* take breaks down. He laughed nervously. “You don’t—” Ben hesitated. “You don’t think Jon’d mind, do you?” he asked, suddenly worried that this would somehow get back to him. *That new guy? He was wailing away on your Rickenbacker. What else does he do when he’s alone after hours like that? Might want to double-check your daisy chain, see if all your pedals are still intact.*

“You’re not the regular sound guy,” Riley said in a way that was more about noticing than accusing.

“I’m—I might play here. I mean, maybe.”

“Oh,” Riley said, suddenly more interested, until it seemed to click. “The folk singer. Voice of honey. That you? Flanny’s sure been swooning over your demo.”

“He doesn’t strike me as the swooning type.”

A childish laugh, two short syllables. “Means you must be good.”

But before Ben could wave the compliment away, Riley continued: “Perfect timing, too. You can fill in for me.”

#

Flanny had found an ad in the *Recycler* for an old upright and asked Jon if he'd go check it out, so the next morning Jon and Riley traveled to Culver City to survey it – its aesthetic, its condition, whether it'd be able to withstand one Friday night with Jon let alone every.

St. Agatha's was just off Adams and La Brea, and when they pulled into the lot there were parishioners everywhere conversing, shaking hands.

“Saturday service?” He paused, laughed. “Clearly, I'm going to Hell.”

A plump older man with rosy features who might not be out of place in stained glass came out to meet them, introduced himself, and led them inside and down into the basement to survey the piano. Its cover was down.

“We've just freshly painted it,” Father Axe said with pride. It looked too ragged for it to be a new coat.

Jon stepped closer, lifted the cover, and started to play before the pastor could signal for him not to. His fingerprints were imprinted on the keys, a tutorial for E Major.

Father Axe said only, “Still needs to dry.”

Eye-level with the ivory, Jon examined the black keys. “Accidentals, too,” he marveled. “What is that, acrylic?”

“Oils,” said the priest. “We thought if we're going to be selling it, we should spring for the best. You should've seen it before. It really does look lovely now.”

“I know I shouldn't be, but I'm sold. Let me check with Flanny first,” Jon said, pulling out a phone and stepping away, leaving Riley alone with Father Axe.

“So are you two in a group?” he asked Riley.

Riley, who'd been staring at the piano, startled. "Oh. No. I don't play. He's the genius," he said, pointing in the direction of Jon without looking at him. Then the pastor endured a long silence broken only by Jon's return.

"Good news. We'll be happy to take it off your hands. How much?"

"Oh, well, a small donation to the church would be beneficial," he replied.

"You just made one little family of musicians very happy," Jon said, motioning to Riley and himself.

The priest looked pleased but also confused.

Aside from the braided strands of icicles hanging atop the curtain adorning the back and edge of the stage, the only lights were two soft spotlights, one illuminating Jon seated at the old upright piano stage left – crowned with its Viking helmet, its cover removed to reveal its innards – and one on Riley casting him, in his all-white three-piece suit, as dangerously close to the angels of popular imagination, only in place of a harp, he strums his acoustic slung snugly around his shoulder while whisper-singing in that tongue-against-teeth way he has into the Unidyne mic at stage's center.

It's an intimacy you're unlikely to find in any other club in the city anymore. Those doors close – one set at front leading to the courtyard and another at back that takes you out through the lobby – and the room enters a collective dream. That maybe sounds silly, or pretentious, or like the all-or-nothing hyperbole that masquerades as criticism. But then you've never felt it, you've never been. In two hours' time the house lights will unmute and staff will fling the doors open, propping them wide, and everyone will trickle out in handholding pairs or fractured groups discussing particular moments of

resonance – still swaddled in the dream now fiercely evaporating – before their eyes refocus and they return to more practical matters: *one more for the road? A quick smoke? Are we on the street or in the lot?* Later, in the courtyard, on the drive home, several different men in blazers and skinny jeans and probably scarves will turn to their significant others and ask with urgency, “What was that joke? The one about...” and will trail off, and all that anyone will remember will be that when they were in that seat, in the dark, they’d witnessed something unique. They were, though, however imperceptibly, changed.

But right now that loss is still hours from being felt. Right now the room is alive, 280 sets of eyes – some behind John Lennon wire frames, others Buddy Holly horn-rimmed ones, though the actual number of such frames housing prescription lenses to forever elude us – watching two longtime friends work off of their own surprising impulses and each other’s energy and even at times audience suggestion but never a set list. See Paul McCartney on tour at the Staples Center in March and you’ll be treated to a career’s worth of gems, both music and banter. But see him again in November and you’ll suffer a sad *déjà vu*: the same songs in the same order punctuated by the same stories with the same punch lines. A production of that caliber is a highly structured event, and has to be. There are a staggering number of lighting and pyrotechnic cues; there are instrument changes, e.g., a piano must be brought on and off stage somehow, which, if you’re Paul McCartney, will somehow of course be: let it rise and retreat from a retractable square on stage, as though the man who penned “Yesterday” possesses or inherited the ability to simply conjure quality instruments from the earth itself. But The Residency is the antithesis of that kind of replicable process. It’s a lab – with a few

exceptions, little that happens on that stage leaves the theater except in audience members' recollections – and one that is forever unstable. The instability means you might leave feeling the performance unpolished – and maybe you'll wish for the sheen of a Paul McCartney live number – but, even more likely, it means you'll leave wishing you could somehow recreate that thing you saw, because it was so great but now it's gone. You'll go your whole life never hearing that song in that way, with that same feeling, again. It's expression once its guard is let down, which is really just another way to say art.

The amateur mistake is to have one foot in the room and the other in tomorrow's retelling. To be watching Jon and Riley doing a version of “Tainted Love” as a Scott Joplin rag, and to think, “I've got to remember this. How to capture what I'm hearing?” and to drift from the collective dream. The Residency's built around the idea of staying in the room.

There was a party upstairs the following night to watch Riley on TV on one of those fake-seeming award shows. Guinness, Harp, Jameson, and champagne flowed freely, and everyone was in good spirits, ready to see him hobnobbing with Academy Award- and Grammy- winners. It was exciting, but not in the way of *one of our own made it*, the way alumni magazines often proclaim their breakout stars and milk the association for all it's worth: *wouldn't be where he is today! The institution at which she got her start!* It was just, *he deserves this*.

They weren't yet aware that it had the capacity to break him.

But once the curtain rose and the spotlight brought him from silhouette to illuminated, his discomfort was clear to all of us who knew him. We knew his discomfort intimately, and saw it broadcast. Just him in all his fragility, alone, lit on that stage the way he'd been here so many nights, before a microphone, whisper-singing the opening verse over his signature Travis picking, felt like one of the most naked moments we'd ever witnessed on national television. Proops, the Residency's scathing satirist, wondered aloud what the notoriously unresponsive Tommy Lee Jones must be making of this, but he was the only one to breach the silence, and, as if gauging its reception, didn't attempt any further comments. Instead, everyone in the room looked on in a kind of reverence as the lights behind him came up in synch with the quartet that joins in midway through the verse. The orchestral coloring no longer made Riley seem so naked, so exposed, but it was still so intimate. There was an authenticity about him that couldn't be faked, couldn't, despite the best wishes of several of the people in that room and even with all the advancements in record production techniques, be manufactured.

Ben was the person in the room who knew him the least, but even he felt deeply connected to the performance, and imagined he would have even had he not been granted this prolonged peek behind the curtain into his process and, unfortunately, his flaws. It looked like The Residency up there, and it was strange. It didn't quite translate. He considered whether what he was feeling could be merely territorial, that below-the-radar idea that *this is mine; this is our secret*. It was clear why Flanny had made it a point to make The Residency a place bereft of that Hollywood facade. This is what his vision culminates in: attention to and reverence for the performance, this fleeting thing that each audience would share and that, very soon, would vanish into the ether. And maybe, Ben

thought, that was another cringeworthy factor about the Riley on TV development: that this was an intimate moment in a non-intimate venue. That as they watched, people were commenting on and critiquing and being snarky about Riley online in real-time and, mere seconds after the curtain concealed him, the performance would be uploaded and catalogued all over the web, would be removed for violating copyright, would be reuploaded, would appear on torrent sites and mirrors, and would exist in some form, in various myriad forms for those wanting to seek it out, longer than anyone watching it live. And would, tragically, far outlive its star. When a Residency show ends, something more ends. Something is gone which can't be retrieved, downloaded, replicated ad infinitum. Here, though, the experience shared by those in the room at the Nokia Theater as well as upstairs at The Residency and beamed into rooms all over the city, country, and world via TV, laptop, phone, and tablet screens was devalued. If you miss something, you've missed nothing. There's no reason to pay attention.

Ben found out the next night, nearly out the door. Via text. The raw shock of grief, the *this can't be happening* feeling was enough to force him to enact the cliché and sit down. There was a fraction of his reaction that was pretty selfish and repulsive, likely equally typical but far less underreported, the underbelly of grief: that he wouldn't get to hear his next record; that he wouldn't get to *contribute* to his next record; that he might've inadvertently struck journalistic gold. These things went through his mind; how could they not? They sickened him, but that disgust didn't seem to quell their frequency, their urgency. He tried to will himself to focus on the loss itself, of Riley, this likeminded guy who'd opened up to him and made him feel a little less alone, a little more OK,

something near normal. Or at least a little better equipped to face each day. He was doing everything Ben aspired to do and from the same, or nearly the same, vantage point. But that led Ben to fear that either Riley's vantage point was far darker, far more debilitating than he'd understood, or else Ben's wasn't nearly as weighted as his and his "struggle," such as it was, was probably even more infuriating when witnessed from the outside. Was way less important than he walked around believing it to be. He thought he may just be another self-involved entitled twenty-two-year-old without any real problems and without any real substance. Too busy being self-deprecating and self-absorbed and just generally inwardly-directed to ever really see or help anybody else. Which led him to wonder: Could he have helped him? Could he have talked him out of it? Made *him* feel less alone? Could it have worked both ways?

Ben made it to The Residency despite it mostly being a haze. When he got there, everyone else was equally cloudy. Jon had retreated to his upstairs studio, and Flanny tried to make clear indirectly that Jon had all but requested some time alone. "It's not that any of us expected this, obviously. Had we, we'd've done things differently. But I get the feeling looking at Jon that he feels like he did expect it, or should have." He sighed, slapped his hands against his thighs. "Fuckin' ell," he said, a distance in his eyes, "what a fuckin' tragedy."

And then all Ben could think about was Riley's last night running parallel with his own.

Riley knew she was hesitant to leave. In her mind, she was already out the door, but she was still sensing whether or not it would be OK. Whether he would be OK.

She hadn't left the house in nine days. Not even for work. His mood had been improving, though, and he knew she saw that it would probably be OK. That he would probably be OK.

She wouldn't be long, she reasoned, after he suggested she go. You *should* go, he insisted. You need to.

She kissed him on each cheek, on the forehead, on the lips. She held his face in her hands and he looked at her like, *I'm fine*. She smiled, and disappeared into the bedroom to gather her things.

No sooner had the lock clicked into its groove than he began his preparations. The garden hose, still in its plastic bag with receipt, was in the trunk of his car. He'd need something to tie it to the exhaust pipe, and so rifled through his closet for that damn white suit. He found it, yanked the jacket off the hanger with such force that the hanger caromed off the back wall, came free, and, like a coin steadying itself, came to rest on the floor near his feet. He also took a CD, sans case, of Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*.

There was the question of whether or not he ought to write something. His penultimate creative act. If not, he wondered what that he'd already done would be, but gave no time to following that line of inquiry. Some stupid song, probably. No, one of his gratitude lists. The idea seemed morbid and then sad. Had Renée been on that list? He hoped so, for her sake. Rather than return to that notebook, wherever it was, he found a blank sheet of paper and a Bic, and scribbled the barest of farewells, signed it, and made for his car.

He stepped out the apartment's back door, shut it behind him, and the garage light blinked awake.

“Why do you care so much?” Jon asked Ben point blank, his gaze down at his fingers traveling a lazy route along a minor-key melody on the piano.

Ben was at his side, helping get his looping station set up, and was caught off guard. Not only for the abruptness, but for the ambiguity. He could've meant any number of things, and Ben was well aware this was no time for sitcom-style misunderstanding. He knew he'd have to tread lightly until he could be sure what it was he allegedly cared so much about.

“Should I not?” he asked, also not looking up, continuing to turn dials more or less at random. He was no engineer; he'd just asked to learn, which, with Jon, meant the opportunity to fiddle with it until he taught himself – this was how Jon had learned everything and now, handed an obscure instrument, he'd be playing you a tune on it in under three minutes. Ben could see how such an approach made him so attractive a producer to the artists themselves but not to the labels footing the studio bill. He brought an encyclopedic knowledge of music history both pop and classical. But what surely sealed the deal with musicians was his dedicated but hands-off approach. He wouldn't try to alter your style, but just work really, really hard to ensure it was being broadcast at its highest possible fidelity.

He seemed to disregard Ben's question by accelerating the speed of his lazy melody. Ben found even just his noodling hypnotizing. It was clear music was the frequency on which his whole life vibrated. His melody returned to its original tempo,

and he walked it up an octave. Now, instead of the rich midrange, it tinkled like a music box.

“This place is just one of a bunch of alt rooms in this city,” he said finally. “Not to mention there’s a whole country out there. I’m lucky; I can just play here. Maybe a weekend or two a year in Chicago or Boston. But musicians like you, just starting out, don’t have that luxury. You shouldn’t expect that you can just make it here and you’ll be set.”

Ben didn’t get at the time that he was obviously unloading about Riley’s death. All he could think in that moment was that he was being harsh, mean, a way he’d never been before. Like a parent finally cutting off their twentysomething aimless child. Ben certainly wasn’t thinking about his *career*, he still hadn’t even played The Little Room yet, and wondered, with what all had happened, whether he ever would.

Instead of the usual icicle lights strung across curtain’s top and stage’s edge, the area just in front of the wedge monitors is adorned with a row of tealight candles like runway lights.

His live-in girlfriend, Renée, is two seats to Ben’s right, and next to her is Flanny. Jon’s onstage, hosting. It isn’t his usual show, and the anything goes spirit he carries onstage with him along with a pint of Guinness in each hand may or may not return two nights from now. Fridays, the twin projectors at each side of the stage function as just another instrument, which he may use to project a series of unrelated clips as accompaniment or score a Felix the Cat animated short in real-time. Tonight, though, they’re static, the one stage left and nearest the piano displaying a large, black-and-white

portrait of Riley, expressionless, shaggy hair nearly in his eyes which're staring almost through you. The other screen's black with a line of text in white, like a title card in a Woody Allen film: "*But it's all right, some enchanted night, I'll be with you.*" And underneath it: – *Riley Geare, 1976-2008.*

The show had opened with Jon stepping out from the wings and going straight to the microphone, beside which a music stand had been placed. On any other night, the music stand functioned as something of a sight gag, given The Residency's long-established ambience of improvisation and experimentation, a safe space that encourages spontaneity made safer by its not allowing devices that might otherwise record those moments for posterity – a stage on which a family of performers worked out new material and chased inspiration and there was no guarantee anything would add up to anything. There would never be sheet music needed onstage, meaning the stand was typically co-opted, tilted until its usual 30° was made nearly horizontal so that drinks could be balanced precariously upon it. But tonight, as Jon welcomed friends, relatives, and admirers of Riley's to the stage to speak, reminisce, or perform in tribute, the stand was operational, holding prepared remarks, even as grief would often cause a speaker to deviate from those prepared remarks into something even more pure and raw and cathartic for everyone in attendance.

"I'm sure you're all thinking the same thing," he'd said solemnly, letting the suggestion hang in the air for a long, silent moment. "This is not the way this was supposed to go." He turned slightly to gaze at Riley's enlarged image, then, as if impelled, "I sure never wanted to share the stage *this* way, damn you." You don't expect anger to accompany a memorial service, even one as intimate as this, but somehow, too,

you're not surprised. Nor does it seem in poor taste. Damn you, he was in essence saying, for being so good while you were here.

He'd then related an anecdote about a night at The Residency's old, even more intimate location on Fairfax, where, rather than theater seating, it'd been fifty or so small tables crammed into the tiny room so that the "front row," such as it was, nearly abutted the "stage," such as it, too, was (really more of a raised platform). There, the bar had been in the back, meaning a particularly soft moment dynamically could easily be drowned out by the blender or the repeated clamor of ice being sloshed around in a tumbler, and meaning also that the audience had the option of ordering and enjoying drinks during the show. Flanny's license for the place had also stipulated that he needed to serve more food than drinks, meaning it operated under the loose guise of restaurant – "the bane of my existence," he summed it up now – so whole portions of even the most mesmerizing show could be lost when interrupted by the ceremonial dropping-off of the bill, the dividing up of tabs among larger reservations, the calculating of and potential coordinating of the tip, etc. etc. But Jon had told of how one night, after even the last lingering fans had shuffled out of the club, Riley had offered an alternative that would please him more than the club's current setup: that there be a giant curtain that veiled the stage so that he might perform as usual, but behind it, while couples and groups enjoyed their dinner and the pleasant cabaret atmosphere but without his having to banter between songs, or see the silhouetted suggestions of an audience, or be seen at all. "That was Riley's dream," Jon had said, "to essentially be the musical Wizard of Oz." Like most of the anecdotes that evening, it was funny because it was sad and it was sad because it was true. Another hindsight moment, that maybe this evening's mourning could've been

prevented. And in some sense, we could feel the tension in realizing Riley had gotten his wish after all: a roomful of people had gathered to hear him, and he didn't even have to be there. Should we consider this some kind of silver lining? Jon then used that as a springboard into Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," which he noted had been a favorite of Riley's, and that one night at the old Residency, Riley had come in after hours, put that record on and listened to it on repeat for nearly three hours before composing what had in the last year become his signature song, which personified loneliness as his only companion to whom he promised some enchanted future night when all would be well.

And it was the kind of story those in attendance would hear variations of throughout the night, producing a collective smile at how endearing this particular quirk of his was but also how it hinted at what eventually gathered us all in the room to have to hear it. Because that quirk, that mannerism that was oh so Riley and could've been seen as cute and charming, also offered part of the explanation about how he could do such a thing. It was his weird, horrible way of getting his wish. But even as everyone in the theater struggled with it in that moment, none were able to come to any conclusions about whether to feel relief for him, whether this should be seen as any kind of success. Because of what that would mean for them once the show was over.