Fixed: a story cycle in six parts

Ryan Swartz

Iowa State University

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Fixed:

A story cycle in six parts

by

Ryan Swartz

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
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José Amaya
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This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Ryan Swartz

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program
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Sunday, April 17th
7:30 p.m.

Dr. Eugene Haliford is sitting in his silver 2002 BMW, under an awning at an unmanned toll booth on the George Washington Bridge, when he decides that he’s going to serve Marianna with divorce papers. He’s stopped here because some mechanical failure caused his wiper blades to stop working half a mile ago, and Haliford is a cautious man. Yet he knows he is also often impatient, and when these two ideals clash, some men might be unfortunate enough to make a rash decision without thinking clearly. However, neither the lack of any human presence in the toll booth, nor the hard April rain which coats the road ahead and behind Haliford as it continues to beat at the highway while his car idles, have led to this.

Haliford knows that divorce is not a choice to be made lightly, so as he gazes into the bits of metal and mesh that beg for his three dollars (no bills, please), he begins to rationalize his decision. He is returning from a three-day conference in Newark, and has not spoken to his wife since he left on Friday morning, though he’s made several attempts. The first was Friday afternoon, when he arrived at the Sheraton Airport Hotel, a massive structure that reaches thirty stories into the sky, and is shaped like a giant U, its wings extending out on
either side toward the interstate. Marianna did not answer her cellular phone, nor did she answer Friday evening when he tried again. Nor Saturday evening, nor this morning, when he made one more attempt before retrieving his car from the tuxedoed valet.

The bridge is unusually barren, even for a late Sunday afternoon. Most of the weekend traffic has already passed through and exited in South Jersey, so the cars that pass through the adjacent toll lanes are few and sporadic, at best. Haliford reaches across the empty passenger seat and pulls the car’s visor down over the window to block the early evening sun, which peeks through the clouds that toss rain down upon his car. He picks his phone up from the seat and again dials Marianna, not to tell her that he wishes to end their marriage, but simply to let her know that traffic on the Turnpike has set him back nearly an hour, and he’ll be later than he anticipated in returning to his suburban four-bedroom/two-bath outside Baltimore. The phone rings five times, and he hears a voice—"You’ve reached Marianna Haliford, I can’t get to my phone right now, so leave a message. Thanks."

Beep.

He is not surprised, and ends the call before dropping the phone back on the seat next to him. This weekend’s unanswered calls have not been an exception to the norm, but rather the norm itself. Marianna hardly ever answers her cell. She doesn’t answer it when he calls from his office to let her know that he has a late surgery scheduled and she’ll need to make sure Matthew has completed his spelling homework before reading him a story at bedtime. She doesn’t answer when he calls from the market to ask if she’d prefer ground beef or sausage for the spaghetti sauce. She doesn’t answer when he calls just to tell her he’s thinking about her. Marianna does not keep her phone on her person, and when Haliford returns home, he
usually finds it turned off, resting on its charger on the nightstand next to her side of their bed. He does not understand why she refuses to carry the phone with her, as this, he feels, defeats the whole purpose of owning one.

Marianna simply does not take common sense into account when going about her day, and though this is a seemingly insignificant example, he feels it best represents the reasons he’s given himself as to why he cannot remain married to her. This is enough of a justification for him. She is not stupid, nor is she incompetent. She’s done an excellent job in helping raise their son into a normal, well-adjusted nine-year-old boy. She does not forget to turn her curling iron off, and she always makes the bed up while he’s showering in the morning. Yet, little things like the cell phone, and the fact that she cannot parallel-park a car simply because she refuses to take the time to learn, irk him. He does not like this, in the sense that he doesn’t like to be annoyed. If he could just turn these feelings off and focus his attention on her positive traits, he would.

Haliford rolls the wipers’ on/off switch between his thumbs, more out of habit than the belief that they’ll magically start working again. Sighing, he places his hand on the gear shifter and pushes it up, setting the car’s transmission to “park.” He lifts his foot from the brake and unhooks his seat belt, which has been cutting deep into his hip since he left the hotel.

As Haliford slides his ashtray out and begins to fish through the loose change therein, he thinks about how his life will be different without Marianna around to anchor him to the things he’s grown dissatisfied with. He finds pennies and nickels, but few quarters. He begins to realize that he may not have enough change to pay the toll.
He could put the car into reverse and go through one of the manual tolls, offering up a few bills to pay his way into Delaware, but Haliford would prefer to keep moving forward. This is, he assumes, a residual effect from his job. As a cosmetic surgeon, one might think Dr. Haliford is in the business of “turning back the clock” and returning patients to a youth they’ve long since passed, but he prefers to think of his duty, his gift, as one which pushes patients forward with their lives. The impression of youth which he creates is merely the method. It’s the means to an end.

Haliford considers this as he continues to search the car for change. The floor of the car is clean, vacuumed and shampooed regularly. He does not like a dirty car. The floor of Marianna’s Chrysler, which is probably sitting in their garage and likely hasn’t moved since she returned home from work on Friday at 2:00, is almost certainly filthy. Marianna gives piano lessons to children in the neighborhood, but despite her wealth of free time, she rarely tends to the inner appearance of her car, a car which, really, she doesn’t even have much use for. The Halifords do not need extra money, but he often wishes that Marianna would take on a job with more responsibility, something more time-consuming. Mare’s biggest problem, he feels, is that she’s become so accustomed to doing next-to-nothing that she knows no different. He doesn’t think she’s lazy, but does wish she would get herself out of the house on a regular basis. She enjoys writing poetry, but does not try to publish (and just as well – most of her work is pretty on the surface, but lacks any real substance or depth). She is acquainted with several of Haliford’s business associates’ wives, but does not see them socially. She is not moving forward – she is standing still.
Haliford, too, is motionless at the moment, as he excavates the glove box for any extra change that might be lying around. Were it not for the crossbar in front of him, he could ignore the toll completely and just keep driving. Rumors of closed-circuit cameras and cops watching from the middle of the bridge are urban myths. He's not being watched, he knows that. But Haliford will not pass the toll without paying, because he feels a sense of obligation to the country's interstate system, which he uses frequently. He has to pay this toll, because everybody else has to pay this toll. He is not above anybody else.

Except, maybe, Marianna.

Haliford loves his wife, in the domestic sense. But he feels her flaws are too much, and he can no longer love her with his full self. Because of this, he knows it will be better to let her go. And, he's curious. He has always been a curious man, a trait he's passed on to his son. His love for Matthew is different than his love for his wife, because Matthew has a reason to be childlike. Marianna, Haliford sometimes thinks, simply never had time to grow up. She's still a dependent teenager inside a 41-year-old woman's body.

The toll booths are again deserted. In his mind, Haliford imagines a tumbleweed struggling to drift across the sopping road, and the thought amuses him. He laughs silently. The rain is now coming down in solid sheets, and Haliford has difficulty making out the common features of the highway ahead of him. Perhaps it's best, he thinks, if he just waits here for the shower to pass.

Haliford opens the car door and steps outside and inhales deeply to purify his lungs of the stale car air he's been breathing for the past several hours. He drops down on his haunches and begins to scour the area around the toll receptacle for any loose change. He is
careful to not let the cuffs of his pants or the hem of his coat fall into the water, and thus feels the ground out with his fingertips more than he actually looks at it. He finds some nickels and three quarters — ninety-five cents total. He is close, half a dollar short of being able to pay the toll and continue on.

Haliford feels a presence, another human being behind him, and twists his neck to see an elderly man, probably in his 60’s, standing over him with a flashlight and a slick orange raincoat.

“Everything alright there, son?” the man asks.

“Yeah,” Haliford says as he stands up and flicks at his shoulders. “Wipers stopped working, I’m just trying to find some change for the toll.”

“The rain’s gonna let up in a few minutes, least that’s what the radio says,” the man offers. Haliford notices an ID badge on the man’s lapel which identifies him as an official employee of the Delaware State Transit Authority. A toll-boother. Probably worked here his whole life. Or, maybe he took this job after he retired as a way to keep himself busy — gardening and daytime television only go so far. The man motions to a red brick structure at the west end of the line of booths. “Come inside, I got coffee in there to keep your bones warm until the storm passes. Shouldn’t be too long, but there’s no sense in waiting out here in the rain.”

Haliford thanks the man, who returns to his office. The crossbar lifts, and Haliford drives his car across three lanes and parks it behind the station. He retrieves his cell phone and enters the building through its solitary glass door that faces opposite the interstate.
The man introduces himself as Albert, and pours Haliford a cup of coffee from a white thermos into a short Styrofoam cup. “Weatherman says the worst of it’s passing overhead right now. Nothing serious, but you’re best off waiting it out here for a few minutes. Let it pass.”

Rainwater beats down on the station’s roof. “I’d like to be a weatherman,” Haliford says. “They get paid an awful lot to be wrong half the time.”

Albert chuckles and passes the coffee cup to Haliford. “You got that right.”

Energetic jazz music rises up from the radio on Albert’s desk, and Haliford closes his eyes and listens as its melody weaves through the air. He’s made several attempts to educate and refine Marianna, to get her to listen to something like jazz, perhaps – something besides her old Captain and Tennille and Barry Manilow albums from high school – but his efforts have always failed. She is a simple woman; if she were more complex, if she was layered and more interesting, he might not want a divorce. “Ever been married?” he asks Albert. The words croak from his mouth without much thought.

“Yep,” Albert replies. “Darn near fifty years now. Married straight out of high school. Should probably call her and let her know I’m gonna wait the storm out.”

“What does she do?”

“My wife? She’s retired, used to work in a law office. Now she waits tables at a little diner downtown five days a week over the noon hour. Keeps her busy, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah,” Haliford says as Albert picks up the station’s phone and calls his wife. Perhaps, Haliford thinks, he could try to find a hobby for Marianna. But what? Haliford is aware that he hasn’t really known Marianna as well as he should have for several years, but
has only recently begun to consider the possibility that this is only because there’s not much
to know. When Albert hangs up the phone, Haliford tells him that he needs to call his wife
as well, and pulls his cell from his pocket to dial.

It rings four times before Marianna picks up. “Hello?”

Haliford does not speak. He didn’t expect her to actually answer her phone.

“Hello?” she says again, slightly agitated this time.

Haliford tries to speak, but can only produce empty air.

“Who is this?” Marianna asks.

“Mare? Hey.”

“Oh! Gene, hi! Sorry I missed your calls. I had the phone off for lessons on Friday, I must have forgotten to turn it back on. I saw you’d tried to call. I’m sorry, honey. How did the conference go?”

“Did you think maybe you should have called me back?”

“I guess I figured that you would have left a message if anything was urgent.”

Haliford rolls his eyes, though Marianna can obviously not see this. “What were you doing all weekend?”

“I don’t want to fight right now.”

“Well, then you should have called back when you finally turned your damn phone on. That’s common sense, Mare.” Haliford catches Albert’s questioning eye, and realizes he’s raised his voice. “I’m sorry for yelling,” he says to her as he looks at Albert and shrugs. “But I’ve told you a dozen times to keep your phone on. Especially when I’m out of town. What if something had happened and I needed to get ahold of you?”
“Did something happen?” Marianna asks. “Are you okay, Gene?”

“I’m fine.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about. Where are you right now?”

He should be asking the questions.

“I saw on the news that there’s a big storm up north,” she says. “Did you drive through it?”

“No, I’m at the toll booth station on the George Washington.” Haliford does not like the biting tone of his voice, but Marianna often needs to be scolded. “I’m going to wait the rain out, or at least until it lets up a bit. It’s coming down pretty hard.”

“So are you.”

“Cute.”

“I’m sorry for leaving the phone off, Gene. I’m forgetful, you know that.”

Haliford wonders if admitting to your faults is enough to absolve you of them.

“I’m sorry,” Marianna repeats.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Do you want me to make something for dinner for you when you get home?”

Marianna asks, though Haliford knows she doesn’t really wish to.

“What are you having?”

“I think I’m just going to make an egg sandwich. I’m pretty tired.”

“What did you do today?”

Marianna is silent for a moment. “Not much. I probably slept too much, so I’m tired because I got too much rest.”
Haliford struggles to keep from hating his wife. “Fine. Has Matthew had anything?”

“He’s been over at Bridget’s all day. They’ll probably feed him.”

“Do you want to find out?”

“I can.”

“Do that,” he says.

“Okay. Come home as soon as you can, okay?”

“Fine.”

“See you soon. I love you.”

Haliford pauses. Though Albert has only heard one end of his conversation with Marianna, he suspects the old man has followed along well enough. “Love you too.”

“Bye.”

Haliford places the phone back in the pocket of his coat. He again feels Albert’s glare.

“Shouldn’t yell at your wife like that,” Albert says. “A good woman is the foundation of every good man.”

Haliford thinks of all the good women he’ll be able to meet without Marianna around.

“I think I’m going to brave the weather,” he says defiantly as he stands up and finishes the last sip of his coffee.

“Alright then, that’s your business. Be careful, though. Can’t be too sure of what’s out there ahead of you.”
Haliford is silent for a moment, reflecting on Albert’s words and thinking about how Marianna is going to react to his news, whenever he gets around to telling her. “You got that right,” he says. “Thanks for the coffee.”
Friday, May 7th
7:45 a.m.

Haliford secures his necktie in front of the bureau mirror his grandmother left him in her will, his hand guiding the forest green tie in and out of itself, leaving a perfect Windsor knot at his neck. Droplets of hairspray and perfume have found their way onto the glass, and Haliford makes a mental note to remind Marianna to wipe it down before the kids start coming by for lessons. Marianna has never been a particularly great piano player – those who stick with her for a lengthy amount of time usually end up better players than she. But, he figures that this is the normal order of things, that those who study under a mediocre teacher are bound to ultimately become better than their instructors.

Haliford takes a step back and studies his reflection. He likes to do this every morning before breakfast, but finds it increasingly difficult with the unnatural buildup of grime on the glass. The image reflected, Haliford thinks, looks more like some abstract painting than Dr. Eugene Haliford, M.D. In front of Marianna’s jewelry box and under her bottle of Red Door sits the latest issue of *Baseball Weekly*. Haliford sees nothing wrong with stealing this from his office; the magazine isn’t particularly popular with the majority of his
patients, and nobody’s noticed or said a word since he started taking it, so he continues, snatching it out from the pile of mail every Monday morning. He pushes the perfume aside and flips to the inside cover, to the yellow Post-It he placed inside yesterday before he left work. The words on the note are scribbled in his own slapdash handwriting:

"It isn't for the moment you are stuck that you need courage, but for the long uphill battle to faith, sanity, and security."
- Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Haliford looks back at himself in the mirror, then down to the note, and again at his smudged mug. He’s proud of himself, he found this quote online yesterday, without Alison’s help. He slides his finger under the knot, undoes the top button of his shirt, and loosens the necktie slightly. This looks better, he thinks to himself. More casual. More comfortable. He mouths the words to himself. Casual. Comfortable.

He lifts the note from the magazine, and mouths a few more words to himself as he rereads it. Courage. Long uphill battle. Faith, sanity, and security. Sanity. Sanity. Sanity.

**********
7:55 a.m.

“How many breasts do you think you work on?” Marianna asks.

“I don’t know. A week, a month, a year?” Haliford responds through a mouthful of wheat toast. He vaguely remembers having this conversation before and feels no need to look up from the evening’s TV schedule.

“Let’s say a month,” says Marianna. “How many?”

“Depends on the month.” The Orioles’ series opener against Boston starts at 7:30 tonight, and A&E has a Biography on Lorne Michaels at 8. He’ll have to watch the game and Tivo the doc. “This time of year, maybe twenty or thirty. Less in the fall, though.”

“Do you think I need one?”

“Do I think you need one what?” Apocalypse Now is on at 8, too, but he can put that in whenever he wants. It’s one of his favorite movies, though he’s never been the type to name a single film as his “all-time favorite” or “the best ever” as so many other people do. Haliford does get a kick out of watching movies on basic cable, though. He likes to see what they cut out for broadcast television. It seems so unnecessary sometimes – would a little spattering of blood really bother anyone who sits down to watch a movie about Vietnam? What exactly do they expect to see, anyway? He figures he’s probably seen at least three or four different cuts of Apocalypse Now, as it seems every station has different standards, different things their corporate suits would prefer not represent the network’s good name. He once saw a version that completely cut out all of Capt. Willard’s voice-overs, presumably so they could squeeze the central plot into a three-hour timeframe, including commercials.

“Gene?” Marianna says.
Haliford looks away from the newspaper. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“A breast enhancement. Do you think I need one?”

He folds the paper and sets it on his lap. “Nobody really needs one, honey.”

Marianna’s face turns sour, as though she’s disappointed to hear this. “What if they’re too big? Women can have back problems if their breasts are too big,” she says defensively. “Dr. DeMatto said that happened to her a few years ago, she was developing osteoporosis and had to get a reduction.”

“I’m glad your relationship with your therapist is at the point where you can comfortably discuss her tits during your appointments. That’s certainly worth two hundred an hour.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call them that.”

“It’s easier if I do,” Haliford replies. “So… what? Are you asking me if your breasts are too big?”

“No,” Marianna says as she stands up from the table and takes her coffee cup, the one Matthew gave her last Mother’s Day – “#1 Mom,” it says in big, blue calligraphic print – to the sink to rinse it out. Haliford wonders if the mug’s proclamation is a bit of a stretch. “I’m asking if they’re too small,” she continues. “What if I told you I wanted one?”

“Do you?”

“I did the pencil test this morning,” Marianna says over running water, “before I got in the shower.”

Haliford has heard of this, but he wants to be sure for himself. “What’s the pencil test?”
"You take a pencil," she says as she closes the faucet and turns around to face her husband, "you lift up your breast and you put a pencil under it, lengthwise." Over her blouse, Marianna cups the bottom of her right breast and raises it slightly. "If the pencil stays, then you're ample. If it falls, they're too small."

"And if you were to grade yourself, how would you say you did?" Haliford takes his empty plate to the sink.

"A 'C'," she says as she releases her breast. "But that's mostly for effort."

"If you had a C, you'd get an 'A,' you know."

"And because I have an A, I get a 'C.' How ironic," she answers, though her voice lacks any irony.

"Actually, that's not what the pencil test is for. If the pencil stays, if your breast is low enough to hold the pencil in place, it means they're beginning to sag. You're much better off if the pencil falls."

Haliford finishes rinsing off his plate and stacks it in the sink, next to a butter knife and a half-empty glass of grape juice. He returns to the table to finish his coffee. "Just because I work on tits all day doesn't mean I feel anything less about yours," he says, picking up the sports section.

Marianna turns around and rests her weight on the edge of the sink. "Why is it easier," she begins, her voice quickly growing louder, "to call them... that?"

"Well," Haliford says, "it makes them seem more like objects." His eyes quickly scan the lineup for tonight's game. "Yes, the end result usually looks nice enough, but when you consider the process..." Baltimore went 40-40 at home last season, but they looked good
enough in spring training and were already second in the division. Tonight’s game, he thinks, shouldn’t give the team too much to worry about. “If you’re shredding and reconstructing somebody’s nose, or calves or... breasts... it’s just easier to think of that body part as independent of the whole. It’s easier to talk about the liposuction instead of Ms. Sanchez’s liposuction.” This is true, a sort of unwritten rule around Haliford’s office, and, he presumes, most others: surgeries are generally spoken of by body part or time of appointment only, the exception being, of course, the regulars.

“That seems a little impersonal.”

“That’s the point,” Haliford says, his eyes alternating between Marianna’s breasts—she has called attention to them, after all, and after a decade of marriage most men wouldn’t even pay them the attention they deserve—and the photo of Clint Riley on the front page of the sports. “Like I said, it’s not wise to make a deep, personal connection with these people. It’s an unnecessary burden. That’s what physicians are for.” Why are they starting Riley? He gave up three home runs in six innings to Martinez last week. Haliford wishes they’d send him back to Sarasota to work on his drop.

“It’s cold.”

“It has to be. I prefer it that way, at least. Besides, do you really want me to get emotionally attached to every person that comes into my office?”

“No.” Marianna stands up from the table, goes back to the sink, places her hands around the steel rim and rests her weight on them. “I think the one time was enough.”

“Mare, please...”
Marianna stands motionless at the sink. Haliford watches her mouth as it slowly falls open, as if to say something, but no sound comes out. As he stands up, she finally speaks. “I know,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

Haliford meets her at the sink. He puts his arms around her waist, and her hand meets his.

“Dr. DeMatto says it’s not good to ignore it,” says Marianna.

“You think DeMatto thinks it’s good breakfast conversation?”

Marianna turns to face her husband, her brown eyes glistening with the dampness of tears almost formed. “Sorry.”

“It’s alright,” he says, and kisses her on the forehead. Her skin is rough, she had an acne problem as a child. “It’s over now, I told you that. I’m not going to see her again. I promise.”

“I believe you. And I’ve forgiven you.” She pulls away from him, and they stand side-by-side at the sink. “It’s just something we have to work through. We can’t pretend it’s not there.”

“I know,” he says. It would be a lot easier, he thinks, if they could wipe their minds of her. He’d like it that way. “I don’t want to just forget about it, either. I mean, I do, but I don’t, you know what I mean?” he asks.

She nods, and places her hand just below her nose. “Yes.”

“All ready!” Matthew bounces into the kitchen with all the fervor a fourth grader ought to have on his last day of school. His arms envelop his parents’ waists, pulling them back together.
“All set for today?” Haliford releases Marianna and bends down to Matthew.

“That’s what I just said,” Matthew replies, rolling his eyes.

Haliford tugs on the brim of Matthew’s baseball cap. “So how are you wrapping up the fourth grade?”

“Probably watching a movie,” Matthew says. “Last year we watched Shrek. I thought it was kinda stupid.”

“You used to love that!” Marianna says. Haliford watches as she holds her face up, hiding her misery from Matthew. He wishes she wouldn’t. He feels that his son ought to know what’s going on between his parents. Kids deserve to know those things, Haliford thinks. Don’t they?

“It’s a kid’s movie, Mom!”

“Oh, so you’re not a kid anymore? You’re not an adult yet,” she says over a barely audible snifflle.

“No...”

“What are you, then?” Marianna asks. She kneels and looks at her son, then licks her thumb. “You’ve got toothpaste on your face. Adults don’t do that. But y’know who does?” she asks.

“Who?” says Matthew, as his mother wipes her thumb across his bottom lip. Matthew squirms.

Marianna reaches up to the countertop and pulls down a paper lunch sack. She hands it to Matthew. “Boys who still like Mom to put extra honey on their sandwiches, that’s who!” She hugs their son tightly. “You’d better get going. You’re going to miss your bus.”
"You’re not a little boy, are you, Matthew?” Haliford asks.

Marianna looks up at him with displeased eyes as she walks to the refrigerator.

"Your father’s a bad influence, Matthew, you know that?"

Haliford looks over his shoulder, then back down at his son. “She doesn’t get it,” he whispers. “It’s a guy thing.”

“I’m not taking the bus today,” Matthew says to his mother. “Bridget and I are gonna walk to school this morning.”

“Well then,” Haliford says, “you need to get over to her house. Let me tell you something about girls, Matthew, they hate when you’re late. They always want you to be on time. When you get to Bridget’s house, she’ll still be up in her room getting ready, but she won’t come down until you’re there. It’s okay if they’re late, but if you’re late, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“Don’t use that kind of language in front of him,” Marianna says quietly. She bends down and gives Matthew another hug. “Have a good day at school. Be safe. Tell Bridget hi. Love you.”

“Love you too, Mom,” Matthew says as he hugs his mom back.

Haliford looks down at his son and winks again. “Be safe,” he says.

Matthew runs out the front door and slams it shut.

“I wish you wouldn’t try to undermine me like that in front of him,” Marianna says.

“What?”

“Don’t put those ideas into his head. He’s going to grow up hating women if you tell him things like that. Bridget’s nine years old, she’s a kid. And so is he.”
“It’s obvious,” Haliford says under his breath, “from the way you talk to him.”

“Beg your pardon?” Marianna says. She’s heard every word he said – she’s just doing this to piss him off.

“You talk to him like he’s still a kid.”

“He is still a kid, Gene. What’s wrong with talking to your nine-year-old like a nine-year-old?”

“Nothing,” Haliford says. He reaches into his pocket and clutches the note. “But I wonder what’s going to happen when he’s fifteen and you’re still treating him like a child. You have to let him grow up, Mare.”

“He’s nine,” Marianna says. “We’ll worry about that when he’s fifteen, okay?”

“Fine. I need to get going, too.”

Marianna puts her arms around Haliford’s waist and buries her head deep into his shoulder, and he can’t help but think that she’s hugging him the same way she hugs their son.

“Okay,” she says. “Have a good day at work.” She kisses him.

***********

8:58 a.m.

Every morning before Haliford gets to his office, Alison puts the day’s schedule on his desk, often with an affirmation attached on a Post-it. She takes these, Haliford guesses, from the calendar with pictures of rainbows and sunflowers she keeps on her desk in the lobby. They’re sometimes work-related, like yesterday’s – “Attempt the impossible in order to
improve your work,” Bette Davis. Other times, they’re just for a laugh – “What do you call people who are afraid of Santa Claus? Claustrophobic,” she’d written last Christmas Eve. Today’s, like that one, has no author – “My work and skill bring money for my needs, my love of what I do brings me success.” Haliford pulls the yellow square from his schedule and sticks it to the desk top. He opens a drawer, pulls out a small red notebook, and rewrites the quote, as he does most days, on a blank page. Those with no citation, like today’s, he usually attributes to “Ali.” He returns the notebook to its place, and as his eyes scan today’s appointments, she appears leaning against the cherry oak frame of his doorway.

“And a good morning to you, Doctor,” Alison says. She has an unflattering joy about her, something Haliford would probably find irritating if she wasn’t so genuine about it. He thinks that if he was ever sued for malpractice, or his mother passed, he’d want Alison to break the news.

“So this is what’s on the slab?” Haliford asks, looking down at the schedule on his desk.

“That’s all,” Alison replies as she brushes her thick strawberry-blonde hair, with its golden highlights streaked from her scalp to the tips of her follicles, out of her face. “A transplant consultation at 9:30, abdominoplasty at 11:00, and a D. I. Rottwood is here to see you at 4.” She lifts her eyebrows. “Rottwood. That name sounds familiar.”

“I send him clients sometimes. Nothing else for today, then?”

“Like I said, that’s all.”

“Slow news day.”
“Good for a Friday. Oh, Jack’s coming by around 10:00 to help you with navel reassignment on the tuck.” Alison turns her head down and looks at her shoes.

“What is it?” Haliford loves that Alison is so easy to read. He can always tell when she has something she wants to share, some bit of news about her and Jack, or that she just found out her sister is having a baby, anything like that.

Alison looks back up at Haliford. Her eyes are green, but he’s sure she wears tinted contacts. “I think Jack’s gonna do it tonight.” She grins.

Haliford smiles back at her. “What makes you think that?”

“Dunno.” Alison inhales. “Woman’s intuition, I guess. He’s taking me to Chiapparelli’s at the Harbor. I hear it’s a good spot.”

Haliford asked Marianna to marry him years ago in the same restaurant. “It is,” he says. He thinks back on that day, how Marianna had such a pleasant disposition back then.

“Actually, I was thinking of trying to get in there on Sunday evening, for Mother’s Day.”

“Who’s watching Matthew?”

“You are.”

“Hey, Dr. Haliford,” Alison says with a furtive smile, “do you need me to watch Matthew on Sunday evening so you can take his mother out for Mother’s Day?”

“Would you?”

“As always,” she says, smiling. “So he’s not going with, then?”

“No, just me and Mare. We’re all going to a movie in the afternoon, so it’ll just be for a few hours. We just haven’t had a nice dinner together in a while, you know?”

“I’ll call and see if I can get you a reservation.”
“Thanks.”

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9:30 a.m.

The morning consultation with Mr. Wolfe proves to be a bust. This is the most common rejection Haliford encounters – jilted middle-agers who want to make a statement to their wives. The prospective, a 41-year-old high school math teacher wants plugs because his wife, he suspects, is having an affair with the football coach. Haliford is halfway through the standard speech, that cosmetic surgery is not intended to be therapeutic, when the man with the twinkling forehead simply walks out. The doctor doesn’t even get to the part where he recommends a counselor as an alternative. That’s his favorite component of the speech, actually. At the same seminar where he’d met Jack, Haliford heard somebody mention that surgeons, lawyers, and therapists formed a Holy Trinity for middle-aged men. This is exactly the kind of person Haliford might send to Rottwood, if he didn’t already have his own personal business to tend to with the lawyer.

**********

11:00 a.m.

Haliford makes a small incision into Ms. Sanchez’s left hip, followed by a matching cut on her right. He slowly drags the scalpel across her lower abdomen, just above the ridge of her pubic area, which she has, as per his request, shaved before arriving this morning. Ms.
Sanchez is genetically a rather hairy woman, which often makes work on her difficult. He routinely has to remind her to pluck her unibrow before her monthly Botox injections.

“Hold, please,” says Haliford, his voice muffled under a blue surgical mask.

Jack reaches across the table and holds Ms. Sanchez’s skin in place. Even in peach latex gloves, Jack’s hands look delicate to Haliford. Jack has the mind and skill for this work, and a graceful hand is good for a surgeon, but Haliford often wonders if Jack’s palms are too delicate. He wonders how Jack’s hands feel on Alison’s skin.

“Freeing the navel,” Haliford says. Jack moves his hands to Ms. Sanchez’s hips, still holding her flesh down, as Haliford slides his palms under her belly and severs her belly button from inside. A bit of blood seeps out and pools at the middle of the first cut. Haliford places his scalpel at this collecting, and pulls it up toward her sternum. “Any plans for the weekend?” he asks, his eyes still fixed on his blade.

“Alison and I are going to Chiapparelli’s tonight,” says Jack.

Haliford finds the lift in Jack’s voice when he names the restaurant rather telling. He tilts his head as Ms. Sanchez’s navel splits in half with a hushed snap. “Chiapparelli’s? That’s going to cost you—”

“—an arm and a leg?”

Haliford’s blade stops, and he looks up at Jack’s beaming blue eyes. “I can sew them back on Monday morning, if you like.”

“If it’s so expensive,” Jack begins, “you could give me a raise, Doctor.” Haliford hears Jack smiling under his mask.
The muscles in Ms. Sanchez’s abdomen slowly start to pulsate as Haliford’s knife resumes its trek toward the center of her ribcage. “It’ll be worth it, Jack. It’s a great feeling.”

“What is?”

Haliford pulls his scalpel from Ms. Sanchez’s flesh, just below her breastbone. Again, blood begins to collect at the edge of the incision, and Jack places a small cloth at the seam. “The feeling you get,” he says, “when you ask her to marry you. You can just sit back and look into her eyes. You can see it. Literally see it.”

“See what?”

Haliford dabs his blade on the cloth to wipe it clean of blood.

“Security. She’ll be relieved to know you’re in it for the long haul.”

“How did you know?” asks Jack.

The scalpel makes tinny sound as Haliford sets it in its pan and lifts his head. “I’ve been in your place, Jack. Trust me, times change, but emotions do not. Tonight’s going to be the happiest night of your life. Just don’t pay too much attention to yourself. It’s for both of you, true, but the night you actually ask her and commit to this, it’s all about her. You enjoy it this afternoon. Let her enjoy it tonight.”

“No,” Jack said as he passed Haliford a fresh, sterile scalpel, “I mean, how did you know I was going to ask her tonight?”

Haliford shrugs, takes the knife, and plunges it into Ms. Sanchez’s left vertical muscles. “Woman’s intuition, I guess.
3:45 p.m.
After Haliford has sewn up Ms. Sanchez and left her in the recovery room to regain consciousness, he returns to his office to find a tanned man with a brown briefcase and overly-visible pores sitting behind his desk, plucking at the Bonsai tree Alison gave him for his last birthday. “Well, by all means, make yourself comfortable,” Haliford says dryly.

The porous man stands up and makes his way to the conference chair opposite Haliford’s desk, the same chair that the Mr. Wolfe sat in hours earlier. He kneels down and examines the tree, running its thin branches through his fingers. “This is pre-bonsai. Most of the ones you buy today in nurseries and floral shops are. You have to nurture it into a true bonsai, if that’s your goal.”

“I am good with my hands,” says Haliford, as he walks around the desk and sits in his chair.

“Do you enjoy playing God, Dr. Haliford?” the man asks.

“Do you enjoy destroying people’s marriages?”

The man cracks a knuckle in his thumb. “At least I admit to it,” he says, smiling a half-crescent as he snaps the tip of a branch from the tree. He holds it between his fingers like a cigarette and extends a hand to the doctor. “Good to see you again, Haliford.”

“Likewise.”

David Ivan Rottwood removes his grey twill blazer and hangs it over the back of the chair. He sits down and pulls his briefcase to his lap. “How’ve you been? Good? I’ve been
good enough. Tired. Had a 7:30 this morning, this guy with an oversized forehead thinks his wife is cheating on him, wants to know his options. I told him to get some proof and come back, you can’t divorce somebody because you *assume* they’re banging somebody else.”

“I think I saw the same man this morning,” Haliford says. He eases back into his chair and puts his arms up behind his neck. “Did it twinkle?”

“I’d say it was more of a gleam than a twinkle. Too many around these days to tell the difference, really. They all look the same to me.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“That one you’ve got in the foyer, she’s a piece of ass. She new?”

“It’s a lobby, not a foyer. She’s been here two years, next month. Sweet girl, loves Matthew.”

“Matthew,” Rottwood says, his eyes wandering around the room, to the window, the bonsai, the books behind Haliford. “How old is he now?”

“Almost ten,” says Haliford.

“How’s he doing?”

“Fine for now. Graduates from tee-ball to the pitching machine next week.”

Rottwood groans as he smacks his forehead with his palm. “They haven’t outlawed those things yet? I almost got killed by one when I was a kid, swear to God, the thing hurls the ball straight at your head. I’m surprised there aren’t lawsuits yet.”

“I’d rather not make with the small talk, if it’s all the same to you. I don’t need to know the legal ramifications of the pitching machine.”
Rottwood opens his briefcase and pulls out a short stack of papers. He sets them down on Haliford’s desk and removes a pen and pair of plastic-framed glasses from his shirt pocket. He places the glasses just below the bridge of his nose and clicks the pen twice.

“Everything’s in order here. I don’t usually make house calls like this, y’know, you’re lucky I like you.”

“One of the few.”

“Oh, come on now, Haliford,” Rottwood says as he rolls his eyes. “You know better than anyone that it’s not good to get attached to your clients. This is a favor, a thank-you, for all the business you’ve sent my way over the years. I owe you. Besides, I’d be offended if you’d gone to anybody else.”

“Does that mean this one’s on the house?”

“I don’t do pro bono work. I’ve got habits and pleasures to support.” Rottwood scribbles his signature at the bottom of the top page on Haliford’s desk. “So when are you doing it?”

“Sunday night. I think Alison’s making us a reservation down at that Italian place down by the harbor.”

“Ooh,” Rottwood says with a sardonic tone, “I hear that’s a good place. Big crowds, less chance of her making a spectacle. You’re playing this well.”

“Yeah…” says Haliford. He takes the papers from Rottwood and begins to read through the top page.

“Before you sign that, Gene, I just need to ask you one thing.” Rottwood raises his hands defensively. “I don’t want to pry, but you know I have to ask this.”
“Shoot,” says Haliford.

“Is she gone? Not Marianna, the other one. You’re done with her, right? Because if you’re not, you need to be before you sign your life over to me there.”

“It’s taken care of, don’t worry,” Haliford says as he reads:

We the undersigned do request, from the state of Maryland, a dissolution of marriage based on the following grounds:

Under this are a series of boxes. Rottwood has been kind enough to already check “Irreconcilable differences.”

“Get rid of her.”

“I have. I will.”

“No,” Rottwood says, snatching the papers away. “You’re lying, don’t lie to me. If you’ve had an affair, that’s one thing. That’s forgivable, it might cost you custody and the house, but at least you’ll retain your own assets. But if you’re still with her when the proceedings begin, you’re going to lose everything, Gene. I’m not even fucking with you on this. You’ll lose your bank account, this business, everything. I don’t care how you do it, you can talk to her and let her down easy, or just change your number... fuck, you can bash her head in with a brick and dump her in the harbor, I don’t care. Whatever, just don’t tell me how you do it, and don’t have her in the picture the next time I see you, okay?”

“Fine,” Haliford says. Rottwood gives the papers back to him. At the bottom of the page are three lines, one with Rottwood’s fresh signature. The others are indicated in subscript – Eugene Scott Haliford, Marianna Rose Haliford.
Haliford goes to the recovery room to check on Ms. Sanchez. She’s awake, propped up in the bed, watching *All in the Family* on TV Land. Haliford has had most of the cable channels blocked, leaving only those that might give patients something friendly and prudent to watch as they return to a state of consciousness. The last thing he needs is a patient recovering from a facelift watching some fabricated news report on the dangers of cosmetic surgery.

“This Archie Bunker is funny,” Ms. Sanchez says as Haliford steps into the room. The floors are covered in a light blue carpet, the walls painted a soft yellow, adorned with paintings of white gardenias and colorful fruit bowls. “He’s so ignorant sometimes!”

“Yes he is, Ms. Sanchez,” says Haliford. He chuckles quietly. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, very good, Dr. Haliford. Thank you.”

Haliford pulls a chair up next to the bed and sits down. He takes a pad from his shirt pocket and begins jotting down some notes. “This is a prescription for Vicodin, you’ll take one tablet twice a day for ten days.”

“Is that safe?” Mrs. Sanchez asks.

“Yes, but it’s habit-forming, so don’t take more than the bottle says, okay?” He finishes writing and lays the prescription down on the end table that sits next to the bed. “It has the same medicine in it as Tylenol, so you can take a few of those during the day if you need, but don’t mix it with Aspirin or Advil or anything else.”
"Okay, Dr. Haliford," says Ms. Sanchez. She’s still in somewhat of a dream state.

"You’re not going to feel like walking tomorrow, but it’s important to get up and do so as soon as possible, even if it’s just around your living room for a few minutes. Is somebody coming to pick you up?"

"I have a cab coming to get me at 5. Is he here yet?" Ms. Sanchez tugs on her white gown. She pulls it up over her bare legs and waist, and begins to pick at her stitches. Haliford quickly takes the gown in his hand and replaces it around her legs. "My new belly looks so beautiful, Dr. Haliford," Ms. Sanchez says with wonder. "Thank you so much."

"You’re welcome," Haliford says with a bit of pride. Her stomach doesn’t look beautiful at all, he thinks, but it will after she’s healed. He pushes a small red button on the rail of Mrs. Sanchez’s bed. "Alison?"

"Yes, Dr. Haliford?" Alison replies through the bed’s monitor.

"Is Mrs. Sanchez’s cab here yet?"

"Still waiting, Doctor."

"Thanks." He releases the intercom and turns back to Mrs. Sanchez. "It should be here soon. Are you sure there’s nobody else to call, your husband or daughter or somebody?"

"Oh no," Mrs. Sanchez says with a wince that’s to be expected from somebody fresh out of the operating room. "My husband, he works late."

"Well then, I’ll go check on your cab. On Monday, when you’re feeling better, call my secretary and set up an appointment to get those stitches taken out. But for now, just stay here and rest, okay?"
“Okay,” Mrs. Sanchez replies, her hands still rubbing her stomach over the gown with fascination.

Haliford steps out of the room and back into his office. He takes Rottwood’s papers in his hands and begins to read them again. After a few lines, he opens his desk drawer and pulls out the notebook of Alison’s quotes. He writes.

For the long uphill battle
to faith, sanity, and security.

Haliford sets the papers in the drawer and places the notebook back on top of them. He closes the desk ceremoniously, and walks out to the front office. Alison is looking at next week’s appointment schedule, killing time until 5:00.

“Get out of here,” Haliford says warmly. “Don’t you have more important things to worry about?”

“I’m just doing my job!” she says with a smile.

“Aren’t we all,” Haliford mumbles. He tilts his head toward the office’s front door.

“Seriously, Alison, I can wait for the cab. You go, go home and get ready for tonight. Make yourself all pretty for Jack.”

“What, I’m not pretty enough as it is?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I know,” Alison says as she stands. “Just teasing, that’s all.”

After Alison leaves, Haliford sits down on the soft leather couch in the reception area, where patients wait before meeting with him, and waits for Mrs. Sanchez’s cab. He takes a moment to soak up his surroundings – the artificial shrubs on either side of the couch, the
stack of magazines sitting on an end table, *Time, Redbook, Vogue*. He holds his breath and listens to the music Alison’s left playing, soft classical music, comfort music for the patients and prospectives. What it must be like, he thinks, to sit here and wait, knowing that a good number of people who try to relax on this couch, with that magazine, with this music, are coming in for repair. What it must be like to take in your environment for the last time before he alters you, changes you. Your last moments of solace before becoming a new you.
Three

Fix

Tuesday, June 1st
8:00 p.m.

It doesn’t happen. Nothing happens, actually. Nothing that he expects, anyway. Paige takes
in a quick, sharp breath through her nose, so he knows that she’s heard him, but she doesn’t
say anything. She doesn’t swallow her gum, she doesn’t curse the day he entered her life,
and she doesn’t slap him. Instead, she reaches into her black suede purse, which rests on the
car seat between them. He can’t bring himself to look up at her, because he knows how she’s
going to react, and it’s not going to be nearly as pretty as she is, as he’s made her. She pulls
her empty hand out almost as quickly as she inserted it.

“I think I left my wallet at home,” she says. “Do you think you can pay this time?
I’ll owe you.” He pulls the wallet from his coat pocket, though he wishes she’d ask about
what he just told her. He holds out a twenty, which she takes and folds up into her hand.

Haliford and Paige are in the drive-thru lane at Long John Silver’s. A warm June
breeze flows through the car’s open windows, mixing the sweet, pleasant odor of the wharf
with the stale stench of three-day-old fish sticks. Paige gives the money to the cashier and
hands Haliford their bag of food. She receives his change, and drops it into her purse.
"I never intended to cheat on my wife, Paige," Haliford says. "I want to make that very clear to you."

"I don’t feel like eating while I’m driving," she replies, still looking ahead. She pulls the car around the drive-thru lane and parks it in a stall facing the restaurant. He takes his sandwich and Coke from the bag and gives her the rest of the food, which she grabs with her left hand as her right turns the ignition back and unbuckles her seat belt.

"Can we at least talk about this?" he asks.

Paige pulls a small container of shrimp out of the bag and drops one into her mouth. "Can I at least eat before we talk about this?" she says in a tone that mocks his. "You want to break up with me, fine. But don’t do it while I’m eating. Have some fucking courtesy about it. This is not a conversation you have while you’re eating drive-thru, Haliford. Jesus, you’ve never done this before, have you?" Paige asks through a mouthful of shrimp. I mean, you’ve never even broken up with a girl before, have you? Every person you’ve ever dated broke up with you, didn’t they? Am I right?"

"That’s really pretty irrelevant."

"No!" Paige shouts, and a speckle of food splats against the windshield. "You wanted to talk, so let’s talk. Let’s have a discussion, Haliford."

"You’re over-reacting."

A sarcastic laugh rises up from Paige’s throat, and Haliford knows this was not the right thing to say. "You try to dump me in the drive-thru, and now you think I’m just over-reacting? I know you didn’t plan, this, Haliford." She takes a sip of her Coke and reaches across the seat, her fingertips resting on his knee. She lightly drags her nails up to the middle
of his thigh. "You can’t tell me, Haliford, that in all of your years, with every woman who’s come into your office, every stomach you’ve grafted, every pair of lips you’ve injected, that you’ve never thought about acting on your basest male impulses. You’re surrounded by perfectly-constructed boobs five days a week."

"Thought about it? Of course. But I’ve never acted on it," he says.

"And you’re not denying that you’ve never actually ended a relationship before."

"I’m in the process of ending two right now."

Paige pauses, and swallows another sip of Coke.

"Two?"

"I’m divorcing Marianna. I served her the papers two weeks ago."

Paige throws her head back into the car’s headrest. “And you’re breaking up with me now?"

**********

The first consultation determines whether or not the patient is a good candidate for surgery. Half of the people Haliford sees don’t even make it past round one. Paige seemed right, though – her problem was a familiar one. She was never an ugly girl, not even before her surgeries. She was actually quite attractive – thick, blonde hair, bright and wide blue eyes, soft skin, the traditional standard of beauty. Unfortunately, she’d been a Fat Girl (her words, not Haliford’s) when she was younger, and her body had taken several years between puberty and high school graduation to adjust and grow into itself. Women who lose weight rapidly
can develop premature tracks where the outer membrane has been stretched and subsequently loosened. Paige, at 24, simply had too much skin.

She lay on the examination table in a standard paper hospital gown as Haliford studied the marks on her upper arms. “What we’re looking at,” he said as he slipped on a pair of latex gloves, “is a basic skin removal and graft. Can you lift the gown please?”

Paige did as she was told, and let the gown rest just below the tops of her thighs.

“Higher, please,” he said as he pulled a marker from his coat pocket.

She giggled. “I’m sorry, Doctor Haliford. I’m just... a little nervous, you know?”

He smiled at her. “I understand, Ms. Acker. You can trust me, I’m your doctor.”

She lifted the gown farther, bunching it up at the bottom of her ribcage. Her stomach and thighs were lined with neat, evenly-spaced stretch marks. “How bad is it?” she asked.

“Not nearly as bad as I’ve seen,” he said warmly. “This is very common, actually.” Haliford drew two blue lines, an inch and a half apart, from the crease between her pelvis and thigh to her left kneecap. “We cut here, and here, remove the skin and sew you back up.”

He drew another line across her abdomen. “Same thing here, and the same between either shoulder and elbow. Very routine, Ms. Acker.”

“Please, Dr. Haliford,” she said. “You’ve seen more of me than most people. Call me Paige.” She held her hand out to him.

“Paige.” They shook. “Call me Haliford.”

**********
8:15 p.m.

Any moment now, he fears that she’s going to start crying, or throw a fit, or make a scene for everybody inside the restaurant and parking lot to see, He doesn’t look at her, and hasn’t, really, – no eye contact, at least – because if he doesn’t see her doing these things, he’ll eventually be able to convince himself that they never happened.

He sits silently as they finish eating, Paige coolly licking her fingers. She wipes her mouth, and checks to see if she’s accidentally smeared her lipstick. She hasn’t.

“What do you want? Honestly, what do you want from me right now, Haliford?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Stop staring at me then,” she says, and tosses her head to the side, her hair drifting over her shoulder. “You’re making me uncomfortable.”

“I can’t see you anymore, Paige. That’s all there is to it.”

“You’ve already said that, Haliford. We’re not making any progress here.”

“Throw the soda in my face.”

“What?” she asks. For the first time tonight, he’s actually caught her off-guard.

“Just take your Coke and throw it in my face.”

“Why?” she asks, her nose upturned.

“Because!” Haliford says in a hushed shout. “That’s the way this is supposed to happen! I tell you I’m breaking it off, you get pissed, throw something at me and storm out of the car in a rage. Everybody inside sees us and stares. You want to know what I want from you? That’s what I want. I want this to happen the way it’s supposed to.”
“No, usually it happens inside the restaurant. That’s how it happens in movies, which I’d guess is where your ideas are coming from. But there’s no right or wrong way to do this, Haliford.” There’s a certain calmness in her voice. She’s talking to him, he thinks, the way Marianna talks to Matthew. “We’re not inside the restaurant where I can make a big scene, where you’ll tell me to calm down because people are staring. We’re in this car, Haliford, alone. I’m not going to yell at you because I don’t have any reason to. Regardless of whether or not you want me to.” She pauses. “So there,” she says with a smile between her lips that’s obvious enough for him to notice, but too slight to tell if it’s authentic. “Are you happy now?” Paige picks the empty dinner sack up from the floor of the car and throws it into the backseat. “What do you really want from me, Haliford?” she asks, vexed. “Just tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“I want you to react,” Haliford says. “I want you to do something, to say something to me. I want this to be a normal break-up. Tell me it’s okay. Tell me it’s not okay. You slept with me because I was there. I was in the right place at the right time. I could have been anyone. Tell me this was never about me, so I can make a clean break of this.”

“Where are all these rules written down? Can you get me the book, because the next time I get dumped like this, I’d like to have an outline of what I’m supposed to do.” She turns the ignition back on and begins to pull the car out of the parking lot. “Do you even realize how humiliating that would be? Having wine thrown in your face or being slapped with a white satin glove is one thing, but a Coke? I don’t think you’ve earned excessive degradation like that yet.”
Paige drives away from the restaurant and toward the interstate, stopping the car at the on-ramp. "It’s okay," she says flatly. "It’s not okay." She folds her hands in her lap. "I slept with you because you were there." She reaches her foot across the floor of the car and places the toe of her shoe on his ankle. "You were in the right place at the right time. You could have been anyone." She places her hand on his leg again. He doesn’t move it this time. "This was never about you. Now you can make a clean break of it." 

**********

On the morning of the day Haliford first kissed Paige, he had a fight with Marianna at home. She would be picking Matthew up at school, and she needed him to get his son’s birthday cake from Vaccaro’s. "They close at four," Marianna told him, so he’d have to get there early. Haliford tried to explain, as best he could, that he might not be able to leave the office, which escalated into the usual fight about not spending enough time at home, working too much, and the other common complaints he’d been hearing for what seemed like forever.

Paige appeared in the doorway of Haliford’s office on this Friday afternoon, three months after her first surgery. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a baby blue tank-top. He was flattered by this – she was showing off her new body to the world. Virtually all traces of her scars were gone, and she walked into the office and stood in front of his desk.

"Paige, good to see you again," he said cordially, and extended a hand to her as he slid the Sporting News to the side of his desk. She smiled ecstatically and raised her arms, stretching her palms as far as they could extend.
“Look at me! I look so... normal!” she shouted. Haliford walked around the desk to get a closer look at her. “I was running some errands in the neighborhood and thought I’d just stop by.” She pointed to her tight biceps, her seamless deltoids. “See the scar?”

Haliford squinted.

“You don’t, because there’s none there!”

He took her arm in his hand and studied his handiwork. “I guess you’re right. Wow, you’ve healed up quicker than most patients.”

“Or maybe you just did a better job on me than you do on most patients,” Paige said with a wink.

Haliford sat back down and took a sip of water from the mug on his desk.

“Okay, I wasn’t exactly in the neighborhood,” she began as she too sat, “but I was out. And I thought, maybe I’d just stop by to say thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said modestly, “I just did my job, that’s all.”

“But...” she began as she folded her arms across her ribs, “I’ve been so self-conscious my whole life, y’know? About my body, I mean.” She looked down. “Like you’ve never heard that before, every person who comes in here probably says that. Not that you’re allowed to talk about that, I mean, I know there’s confidentiality issues so you can’t really confirm that...” She was babbling - nervous, most likely. Paige rubbed her upper arms as their eyes met. A warm sensation fell across Haliford’s face, and he felt like he might be blushing.

“There’s really no need to thank me, though I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, but if you got really good service at a restaurant, you’d give a big tip, right?”
“I suppose, yes.”

“And if a clerk at the market went out of his way to order some special item for you, you might write a letter to his manager or something like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Some might, I suppose.”

“Well,” Paige began, “I would. So, I just wanted to come by to say thanks.” She paused. “So, thanks.”

“I think you’re the first patient I’ve ever had who did that.”

“Who thanked you?” she asked.

“Who went out of their way to do so. I’ll get a card or a basket of fresh fruit during the holidays from some of my regulars, but—”

“You have regulars?”

“Yeah,” Haliford said, wondering if he should discuss this with another patient, but not afraid of the consequences – why was that? “There are people who keep coming back, month after month, asking me to do more work. I guess I should be grateful, really. To tell you the truth, I get a lot of repeat business.” Haliford wondered if he was rambling, too.

“How much?”

“Probably forty percent.”

“Wow,” Paige said with a scowl.

“I’m not complaining, like I said, I’m not here to judge. I’m just here to do the work, assuming a patient’s qualified.”

“Do you think I’m qualified for more?”

Haliford was taken back a bit by this. “What do you mean?”
"I mean..." Paige looked back at her arms and smiled. "This has changed my life. I know that sounds sort of clichéd, but it really has. I'm dating somebody right now. A guy picked me up in the video store about six weeks ago. Do you know that I've never been in a serious relationship before?"

"Well," Haliford began as he squirmed in his chair, "that's not really my business—"

"—but it is, because I have you to thank for that. I mean, let's face it, Haliford, every good thing that's happened in my life in the past three months has been because you've given me something that I didn't have before. You..." She stands. "You made me feel really special when I was in here. You made me feel unique. You treated me with a lot of respect and care."

"I treated you objectively. Like I treat all my patients."

"Then maybe more of your patients should show their gratitude better." Paige held her arms out in front of her, as if asking Haliford for a hug. Unsure of how to respond, he went with his instincts, crossed over to her, and gave her a one-armed hug — affectionate, but distant.

So, when she kissed him on the cheek, and held it for a few seconds longer than natural, he had no response but to again go with what his gut told him to do. There was something appealing about placing his lips on the face of this woman, this woman he'd been able to perform a service for, a patient he'd already seen at her most vulnerable.

Their mouths parted. Paige kissed differently than Marianna, Haliford thought. Maybe it was the sensuality of youth, or maybe it was the fact that married couples kiss like, well, married couples. It was refreshing, satisfying.
“Oh fuck,” Paige said, covering her mouth. “I’m sorry.”

Before Haliford could respond, before his impulses could bring him to kiss her again, to tell her not to apologize, she was scuttling toward the door.

Vaccaro’s was closed when Haliford got there. He made it up to Matthew, though, by making him a cake from scratch. Marianna thought it was sweet, that he’d take the time to do this. She thought he was apologizing for being late.

**********

8:48 p.m.

They don’t speak during the entire car ride. Paige rests her left arm on the driver’s side window, intentionally holding her body against the door. Sitting as far away from him as possible, he thinks. Gum wrappers, the sack in the backseat, empty water bottles, and other trash are strewn about the auto. “The aesthetic of your car leaves something to be desired,” he says.

“What does that mean? That doesn’t even mean anything.”

“Look at you, Paige. You’ve had so much work done, and you look good, don’t get me wrong, but... look around you. This car’s a mess.”

“Do you really care what my car looks like?”

“Yes! Can’t you even take care of something as simple as the inside of this machine?”
“Well,” she says, her eyes still fixed on the road ahead, “maybe there’s somebody I can go to to help me with that. Since you’ve already done such a world of good for me.”

“Look, I’m not trying to pick a fight here—”

“Yes you are.”

“But maybe, maybe you should tend to your car the same way you tend to your body.”

“Where is this coming from?” she asks. “This is what you do, Haliford, you needle at one area when the real problem is something else entirely. So tell me,” she says, flustered, “tell me, what is it you’re really trying to say about me? What’s your real problem with me?”

“Just take me back to my car. This is done, Paige, this is over, I’m done with you.”

“No you’re not.”

“Because, obviously, you’d know better than I do,” he says sarcastically.

“I know you better than you know yourself, Haliford. Jesus, do you even know who you are? If you’d wanted to end this, to just end this, you’d have done it in your office or over the phone. You met me out tonight because you need to be with me one more time. You need to fuck me one more time, Haliford, it’s just the way you are. In your little fucked-up mind, that gives you some impression of closure. We’re going to go to a motel, not a fancy one, but something cheap and efficient, and we’re going to fuck, and in the morning I’m going to leave. Your time to manipulate this relationship is over.”
On the passenger door, barely hanging in place, is a rusty pull-out ashtray. Haliford takes it gently in his right hand and works it back onto its hinges. Paige looks at him – he doesn’t see her, but he can feel her look – and laughs.

“You can fix anything, can’t you?”

**********

Three weeks after the kiss, Paige came back to Haliford’s office for a chin augmentation. This is common for patients whose chin is too small for their face, and though he didn’t view it as a necessary surgery, Paige had the money, and he didn’t see any reason why she shouldn’t have what she wanted.

And, he told her as much that day. “I’d typically have some reservations against this type of surgery,” he told her.

“Why?”

“Well, because it’s superfluous. You look beaut—” He stopped, catching himself saying something that may have been inappropriate. “There’s nothing wrong with your chin, is what I’m saying. You look fine. Great, really.”

“I know,” she said with determination. “But I just think about what you did for me last time, and what a difference it made. Did you know that I was a virgin before I met you?”

Haliford had no idea how to respond. Either answer, a yes or a no, would border on offensive. “Really?” There, he thought, that was safe.
“People don’t look at me the way they used to, Haliford. They say I’m pretty. I give
guy my number and he actually calls me.”

He operated the following Monday afternoon. Six weeks later, he removed her
stitches. They spent that night at the Radisson Plaza by the harbor. She reserved the room
under the name “Frank Stein.” Her idea of a joke.

“Thanks for the fix,” she called from bed as Haliford stood in front of the toilet.

“I didn’t ‘fix’ you,” he said from the bathroom. “I mean, there was nothing wrong
with you. You just had some imperfections.”

“Always room for improvement, though?”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

Paige turned the television off, met Haliford in the bathroom and undressed him.

They stepped into the shower.

“So you dumped what’s-his-name?” Haliford asked as he lathered soap over the
curves and creases of her body. She told him that she had. He wondered who the other
person might have been. He was probably nobody – at least, nobody to her. She was new,
she was rejuvenated, and she was probably just out exploring the world in a way she’d been
unable to before. Yet, the idea that Paige was sleeping with more than one person bothered
Haliford. He wanted to be the one to fulfill her needs.

She returned every few months – a forehead lift to emphasize her eyes, followed by a
full rhytidectomy to bring the rest of her face up, otoplasty because, though her ears certainly
didn’t protrude, the less visible the better. Always just looking for a fix. A few weeks after
each surgery, after the scars had begun to heal, they’d meet at the Holiday Inn. It wasn’t as
nice as the Radisson, but it served its purpose, and it was out of the way.

And every morning after, he’d feel the pangs of guilt that he assumed were a common
residual effect of infidelity. Marianna never questioned his excuses – too tired to drive
home, going to sleep at the office; overnight conference in Pittsburgh, be back in the
morning. But he was more upset by the fact that she took his word at face value than the fact
that he was cheating. Wouldn’t a rational person at least be suspicious?

For a while, Haliford and Paige didn’t see each other on a regular basis. She never
called his office unless it was to schedule another surgery, and she never tried to intrude on
his home life. Haliford appreciated this. He told himself that they were simply carrying on a
business relationship. There were no emotions involved, no heartache if they didn’t see each
other for a month or so at a time. It was, he assumed, the type of relationship every person
wanted. Passionate sex with none of the hindrances that come from dating or marriage. He
knew this was a shallow way to think of a person, but because she never seemed bothered by
the idea, he didn’t let it get to him. Over time, Haliford recreated Paige’s face perfectly –
every feature was exactly as they’d envisioned it, from her pert nose to her slightly-raised
eyebrows and plump, collagened lips.

She came into his office while he was going through a preliminary stat check,
planning the upcoming season’s fantasy team. She didn’t have an appointment, or maybe
Alison had just forgotten to tell him. Or maybe Alison was perceptive enough to know that
Paige wasn’t there on business.
Haliford closed the magazine and leaned back in his chair. “Okay. What is it this time? Don’t even ask me to augment your breasts, because that’s one thing I’m not going to change.” He was surprised at the forwardness of his own words.

Paige pointed a finger at him. “Just you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m just here for you.”

Paige turned around and latched the lock on Haliford’s office door. She was wearing a blue jean skirt, which she pulled up around her hips as she walked toward him. He stiffened instantly, not only at the site of her nakedness, but also at the potential risk involved in giving it to her right here, in the middle of the afternoon in his office. The danger. Aroused by the threat that Alison might try to page him or, better yet, walk right in during it. Paige sat on his lap and slipped her fingers into his mouth. And yet, as he entered her, he felt an unwelcome sense of panic. This would go against all the rules they’d silently agreed upon.

After they finished, she sat on the edge of his desk and started to pull her panties back on.

“This isn’t going to end well, Paige. You know that. Sooner or later, we’re going to have to stop.” He pulled himself from the sticky sweat on his chair, walked to the side of the desk on which she sat, and put his hands on her cheeks. He kissed her. “Sooner than later.”

“I know. But can’t we just have fun, in the meantime?” she asked. She leaned her head into his shoulder and placed her lips on it.
9:15 p.m.
Paige takes the key from the front desk, and Haliford follows her up to the room. Once inside, she immediately pulls on the collar of his shirt, flinging button after button across the green carpet, and he makes love to her for what he knows will be the last time, on the floor of the hotel room.

"You have to let me go now," she says as she digs her hips into him.

He runs his lips across her body, kissing her neck, her collarbone, her armpits, her ribcage, then back to her face. The scars are long gone. "I wanted to let you go in the car," he says.

"You weren’t ready, Haliford. You needed this first. You wouldn’t have let me bring you here if you didn’t."

Haliford and Paige come together. To his knowledge, they’ve never done this before. She pulls her body off his and crawls into bed. He goes to the bathroom to take a shower, to wash whatever’s left of her off him. He scrubs hotel soap over his body, thickens hotel shampoo through his hair. He lathers. He rinses. He repeats.

As Haliford dries his body off with a puffy white hotel towel, he hears Paige snoring. He looks at the hotel room door, at its hotel room lock and hotel room chain, and wonders what would happen if he put his clothes back on and just snuck out. Just left, and let her sleep. He slips his pants back on, throws his shirt over his shoulders, and touches the brass lock, twisting it back and forth, open and closed. Finally, he relocks the door and lies down
next to her. He is fully clothed over the covers, and she is naked under them. He kisses her eyelids. She awakens and turns her nose up at him.

“You’re still holding on,” she says, her eyes still closed.

“How many men have you been with since we started this?” he asks.

“What?”

“The first time we slept together, you told me you’d only been with two others, both since your first procedure. How many have you been with since then?”

“Haven’t we already talked about this?” she asks. She sighs, sleepily, “I don’t remember. I don’t keep track anymore. Some. Some guys. I don’t want to be the couple that has this conversation.”

“Couple?”

“Go to sleep, Haliford,” she says.

He awakens in the morning to the sound of the shower running in the bathroom. Paige isn’t in bed, so he pulls off the sheets and goes to bathe with her. But the shower is empty, and the room is filling up with a thick steam.

He props the bathroom door open to let the steam dissipate. He closes the lid on the toilet and sits down on it. Vapor clouds and condensation quickly roll out into the hotel bedroom, and Paige’s lipstick message on the mirror reveals itself.

Haliford,

Thanks. Miss you.

Love, Paige
Haliford is on the couch in his living room of his new apartment, his bare feet docked on the table between the harbor of his wireless telephone and its corresponding bill, watching the game on Channel 7. Second game in a double-header against the White Sox, a make-up from the rain delay three weeks ago. Haliford enjoys two back-to-back ballgames, since they provide an excellent distraction for an entire afternoon. He is, however, distrustful of the rain delays which often cause a double-header. He doesn’t understand why the umpires, not the players, should get to decide whether or not a game continues. Do the umps have the well-being of the teams in mind when they make this decision? It seems reasonable, but then again, more than a few games have probably been called early because some ump’s socks are getting wet and he just wants to go back to the hotel bar. Of course, this is something that’s just accepted - the umpires have had the final say for over a century, and nobody’s about to challenge that now. It’s a sort of injustice, or potential injustice, and a fan has to accept if he’s to enjoy the sport.
Never mind the fact that Haliford has $50 on the Orioles winning the second game by at least four runs.

The telephone hasn’t been on its charger since Sunday, so Haliford is a bit surprised when it rings. It probably shouldn’t have any power left at this point, but apparently it does, so he picks it up and answers.

“Haliford here.”

“Genie?” says a croaky voice on the other end.

Haliford clears his throat and drops his feet to the floor, as if the voice can see him and disapproves of feet up on the couch. “Yeah... yes, this is Dr. Haliford.”

“Genie! It’s Blue Renhold, how you doin’?”

Haliford sits up a bit straighter. “What’s going on, Blue? How did you get my number?”

“Funny story ’bout that. Got a body. White woman, looks like she’s in her 40’s or so.” Blue Renhold pauses for a moment. “Cops pulled her outta the harbor a few hours ago. Guess she’s probably been dead since morning. I’m on night watch tonight, coroner’s coming in tomorrow do the autopsy. Don’t know if it was an accident, or a suicide, or a murder or what. I just gotta get an ID on the body.”

Haliford says nothing as “Santa” Sanford drops what should have been an effortless pop-fly to give the Orioles their first error of the day, and Chicago a lead of 2-0. Haliford relaxes back into the soft hug of his couch and crosses a bare foot up to his knee. Baltimore’s starting right fielder went down with what looked like a sprained ankle in the first game, and Santa was never much to brag about in Triple-A, but at this point, he’s all the
Orioles have. Channel 7’s color commentator says something about karma and the luck. Haliford feels neither term has any place in a sports broadcaster’s vocabulary, because they’re easy fallbacks and often keep people from getting to the real heart of a problem. It’s a lot easier to blame a few errors on bad luck than to admit that you brought a player up too early, that he needs to finish the season out in the farm system before he’s going to be ready for the majors.

“So what’s the story, then?”

“Story?”

“You said it was an interesting story, how you got my number.”

“Getting’ to it, Genie.” Haliford imagines Blue Renhold raising an eyebrow at him.

“Damn, you’re impatient tonight.”

“Sorry. Santa just let Chicago score.”

“Kid’s too green for the majors, anybody can see that. Anyways, like I was saying... before you butted in like that...” Blue Renhold chuckles. “A body came in. I found your business card in the pocket of her dress, tried the office but you ain’t there. So I look you up in the white pages. Figure, she got your card in her pocket, you probably the one to call, right?”

Haliford picks at a small callous on the back of his heel as he absorbs this information. “What does she look like?” The wound could probably use some ointment. Or maybe he just needs to stop picking at it.
"Brown hair, looks like a perm, but she been in the water so long it’s hard to tell. Average size, I guess, not big not small. Kinda plain looking, to be honest. Don’t know how to describe her, really. Like I said, she had your card, I figure she’s a patient of yours.”

“And she doesn’t have any other identification on her?”

“None. They’re still draggin’ the harbor for a purse or a wallet. It ain’t like I wanted to call you, Genie. But, like I said—”

“Fine, fine,” Haliford says as he pulls a pair of sandals out from under the coffee table. “I’ll be there whenever I can.”

“Hurry your ass up, then. I wanna get home and see if Santa fucks this thing up even more.”

**********

7:08 p.m.

The only major obstacle between Haliford’s apartment and the University of Maryland Medical Center morgue is Sweety’s Arcade on West Franklin. It’s always a temptation, a quick time killer that reminds him of nights spent playing video games during medical school. As he passes the arcade’s parking lot and bright neon marquee advertising “DDR Tournaments Every Saturday Night!” he sees a group of teens, the same band of dispossessed youth that usually hangs out across the street at the 7-11. They’re probably not actually homeless, but they clearly have nothing to go home to, or for. He watches as they crowd around a Tommie Lopez, a regular at the arcade, eleven years old but short for his age. The
other kids poke at his shoulders and forehead, pushing him around the circle they’ve formed to surround him.

Haliford jerks the steering wheel to the right and pulls his car into the arcade’s lot. He throws the door open and walks toward the pack of young thugs.

“Leave him alone,” Haliford says.

The boys take a few steps away from Tommie. “What,” one of them begins, “you need this old man to stick up for you, Tommie?”

“He your daddy?” another sneers.

“Little baby, calling in back-up,” says a third.

Haliford arches his back and puffs his chest out toward the boys. “Maybe you didn’t hear me. I said, leave him alone.” He nods to the 7-11 across the street. “Get out of here.”

The boys shoot each other a few quick glances, then slowly start to walk away. One turns back as they near the edge of the parking lot and points at Tommie. “We’re watching you, Tommie. Fuckin’ baby.”

Haliford walks over to Tommie and puts a hand on his shoulder. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Tommie says. “Just some kids from school, I’m used to it enough. They just pick on me ’cuz I’m small. You coming in to play that crusty old Pac-Man game you’re always at?”

“Actually, I’m on my way to the hospital to see Blue. It’s work-related, he needs me to ID a body.”

“Shit, Haliford—”
“Dr. Haliford. I’ve told you before, you have to show respect when you’re talking to adults. Use their titles.”

“Well, shit, Dr. Haliford,” Tommie says, rolling his eyes. “It’s too late to be working. Just come in for a couple games. You know you wanna.”

Haliford looks at the watch on his left wrist, a white Rolex with a titanium band that Marianna purchased for their fifth wedding anniversary. He’s considered buying a new one, simply to rid himself of this constant reminder of her. But with their shared bank account, he’s long since realized that he probably paid for most of this watch himself. “Okay. One game,” he says.

“Three.”

“Two.”

“Two games then,” Tommie says as he opens the arcade’s door and motions Haliford inside.

“I would have played two anyway,” Haliford says.

“Wise-ass old man.”

Sweety’s has seen a slow degeneration into style over substance since Haliford’s days in medical school. It’s brighter. Flashier. Blinks more. The familiar bleeps and pings of the golden age of video games have been replaced with hyperactivity, though Haliford still enjoys the memories the place evokes. It was converted from an old movie house in the late 70’s, so it still retains the inner structure of a shoebox – a long, narrow corridor and high plaster-board ceilings for maximum acoustics. But in the switch, nobody took into account
that the sound of every lost life at the front would be heard by gamers in the deepest corners at the back.

Haliford and Tommie make their way past the upright machines lined up along the walls, tightly packed next to one another.

“So, El Azul’s working tonight?” Tommie asks as they pass the games, each less popular and older than the one before it.

“Well, he’s not here, is he?”

“No shit.”

“Watch your language.”

“Shit, shit, shit.” Tommie sticks out his tongue.

Haliford drags his feet on the scuffed carpeting of the arcade, his right hand digging around the jangle of his keys to fish out a few quarters. *Pac-Man*, still in the back corner, is the oldest game in the place. He doesn’t know why it’s still here; he’s never seen anyone else even acknowledge it, must less play it. His personal interest in the game lies somewhere between nostalgia, and pure amusement – it’s a fun game, simple as that. Haliford produces a handful of change from his pocket, and plucks in a quarter.

As he guides Pac-Man through his pre-determined maze, Haliford thinks of Marianna, and the next meeting at Rottwood’s office which looms over the upcoming weekend. Certain elements of *Pac-Man* bother Haliford, of course, but he appreciates its simplicity over the game he constantly finds himself playing with his soon-to-be ex-wife. He’ll take the television, she’ll take the DVD player. He’s already got the couch, she’s kept
the matching chairs. *Pac-Man*'s straightforwardness can be a hindrance, but it's also a welcome relief.

"Damn," Tommie says as a Pac-Man inverts and implodes into nothingness. "You're losing your touch at this game. Maybe you oughta play something else for a change."

His eyes still fixed on the screen, Haliford smiles. He enjoys the candor and honesty of youth. Children don't know how or when to censor themselves. "Picking on an old guy like me? That's really nice of you," he says.

Tommie gives Haliford a shrewd grin. "That's what the girls say. Say I'm cute, too."

"You're too young to be thinking about girls."

"Especially in a place like this. Nothing but a sausage fest in here." Tommie tugs at the collar of his shirt, slides his hand down the top of his buzzed hair and stands up straight. "But it keeps me off the streets, being in here. That's what mama says, anyway. I dunno what's on the streets that she's so scared of."

"Those guys in the parking lot have been giving you trouble, though."

"Pssshh," Tommie vocalizes with a dismissive wave. "Those guys ain't nothing. Just families with messed-up values. Don't wanna work, they're just killers and crooks. Steal their way to the top. They don't value nothing a person oughta, that's for sure."

As he devours the ghosts one-by-one, Haliford wonders what Inky, Blinky, Pinky and Clyde value. "Who says?"

"They."

"Who are 'they'?"
“Y’know,” Tommie says with a shrug. “People. A gang only cares about the material things, money and stuff like that. Family, they care about who you’re gonna be when you grow up.”

“Is that right?” Haliford asks, his eyes quickly shooting between *Pac-Man* and Tommie, Tommie and the Orioles game, the Orioles game and *Pac-Man*. “What about a baseball team? Are they a family?”

“Some are. Depends on the team, whether or not they’re out for themselves or the good of the club. Yankees have never been a family, they’re just nine guys that get paid to play. Others, depends on the year. But me telling you one way or another isn’t gonna get you back the money you’re losing on this game tonight.”

Haliford takes his last quarter from his pocket. He holds it to the coin slot, but hesitates and pulls it back out. “You’re pretty smart for your age, Tommie. You know that, right?”

“Yes I do.” Tommie smiles and gives Haliford a single nod. “There’s more time for chasing girls at college. For now, I’m just here to observe. Blue says I’m good at that, observing.”

“Blue says a lot, doesn’t he?”

“That he does.”

“So you’re going to be like Blue when you grow up, then?”

“Maybe. Don’t know if I wanna work with those bodies, though. That’s kinda creepy, y’know? But Blue’s a smart guy. I think he gets it from me.”

“I don’t know if Blue was this talkative when he was your age.”
“I bet he was.”

“You keep tabs on Blue. He’s a good role model for you.”

“Better than you, old man,” Tommie says.

As Haliford loses his final life, he places a quarter in Tommie’s palm. “You should learn how to play this game. The object is to collect—”

“I know how to play it, I’ve just never done it before. It’s an easy game. I’ve watched you enough, if you can do it, anybody can.”

“Well, make that quarter worth my investment, okay?”

**********

7:59 p.m.

Haliford has never seen Blue Renhold at work, but their conversations over sodas and skeeball at Sweety’s have cultivated in him a sort of fascination with the subject of the post-mortem. He looks down at the body on the silver metal table and massages her tepid cheek with a delicate hand.

Haliford has never seen the inside of a morgue, either, but he is surprised by how much the setting meets his expectations. The ever-present echo, the white noise and the buzz of the fluorescent lights above match up with how Haliford has imagined Blue Renhold’s workspace might sound. He notices too that the morgue doesn’t actually smell like anything as he thought it might. Probably, Haliford figures, this is because of the various chemicals
used to preserve the dead. He considers asking Blue Renhold about this, but instead continues studying the corpse.

"Know her?" Blue Renhold is gnawing on a piece of beef jerky as he asks this. He hovers over Haliford’s business card, crisply sitting atop the woman’s strappy sandals which rest on her neatly folded flower-print dress on another table. Next to this stack is a plastic baggie with her silver mini-hoop earrings and matching anklet.

"Yeah." Haliford lifts the woman’s left eyelid with his index finger. Again, he rubs her cheekbones in his palms.

"Quit playin’ with her face, Genie." Blue Renhold speaks with an odd drawl, a sort of hybrid of a gentlemanly Southern twang and a street-wise disregard for grammar, but Haliford barely hears his words. He touches the body’s stiff forehead with the tips of his fingers.

"So who is she?"

Haliford searches the names in his mental Rolodex. "Mrs. Dohmen. She was in my office on Monday."

"You work on her breasts or something?"

"Botox injections. Here," Haliford says as he lays his thumb on the anterior of Mrs. Dohmen’s left breast, just above her ribcage. He takes her wrist in his other hand and opens her armpit as far as rigor mortis will allow. "Another here," he says digging his index finger deep into the crevasse under her shoulder. "And here." He stretches his pinky out to touch the inside of her bicep. "Same on the other side."
“Botox in the armpits. Heh.” Blue Renhold laughs aloud, dried beef smacking between his teeth. “Shit’s getting outta hand, you ask me.”

“When you need that jerky siphoned off your ass, you come by my office,” Haliford says as Blue Renhold gulps down the last niblet of his snack.

“Ha. Who I got to impress around here? My fat ass still looks better than these people. Least I’m not dead.” Blue Renhold has a distant, playful sense of humor that Haliford thinks is probably necessary for a job where most of the people in your office are stored at thirty-three degrees.

Haliford lowers his face to Mrs. Dohmen’s corpse and sniffs her armpit. “It’s not uncommon. It costs around $400 per visit.” The absolution of death is not something Haliford often considers, nor is it something he wishes to dwell on. He’d prefer to think of Mrs. Dohmen as just another customer, still scheduled for her second round of injections in six days.

“Ain’t Botox supposed to be poison? I heard a report on TV about that awhile back.”

“Technically, yes. It’s low-grade botulism. But, in small doses, Botox injections to the armpit paralyze the eccrine glands – what makes you sweat. Over time, it neutralizes those glands so you don’t perspire.”

Blue Renhold takes Mrs. Dohmen’s dress from under the sandals and lifts it to his face. “You ain’t done a good job then. This bitch is sour.”

“Over time,” Haliford repeats. “The complete procedure takes about three months. Most patients see some change within the first few weeks, but it takes several months for full results. She just had her first set on Monday.”
Haliford pulls back and studies Mrs. Dohmen’s stiff, lifeless body. Her penciled-on eyebrows, her chestnut hair struggling to keep a few grays from exposure. Her freckled chest is a sign of imperfection, yet he sees something beautiful in her. It’s not that she fits an ideal profile of attractiveness, but the uniqueness of her features, and the conscious effort she’s obviously made to present herself as attractive despite her aging, is alluring to Haliford.

Heatspots drizzled along her breastbone and arms, probably from too much time spent in a tanning booth, give Mrs. Dohmen something different – she’s not the standard, but it works on her. *Worked* on her.

“So,” Blue Renhold begins, “you can properly identify this woman as...”

“Rosalyn. Rosalyn Dohmen. I can get a home address for you in the morning.”

“Ain’t necessary,” Blue Renhold says with a wave of his hand. “All I need’s a name. After that, she’s the county’s problem.”

The word “problem” doesn’t offend Haliford outright, but he certainly prefers others.

In the past months, he’s come to accept that his patients have first names, jobs and mortgages, hobbies and families that they love and loathe, usually in that order. Yet, he also finds that patients often fit into other outlines. This, perhaps, is also what fascinates Haliford about Mrs. Dohmen – he’s done very little work on defusing eccrine glands, so she’s still somewhat of a mystery.

“She got any family ought to be called?”

“I thought she was the county’s to deal with now.”
"She is. And the news, they been callin’ all night, wanna know what killed her. So they can put it on the news, I suppose. Must be a slow news day, if all they concerned about is some dead woman nobody even knows."

"It’s strange, isn’t it?"

"What’s that?"

"That right now, you and I are the only two people who know who this woman is."

"Strange? Not really. Guess I’m used to it. That’s what I do, Genie."

"I’ll admit, though, I’m curious myself," Haliford says. Blue Renhold hasn’t properly finished preparing the body for storage and dissection tomorrow – Mrs. Dohmen’s hazel eyes are still open, staring up as if to ask for the answer to a question Haliford can’t hear. He wonders if answers even exist to whatever questions Mrs. Dohmen might still pose.

"About what?"

"What killed her. How she died."

"Well," Blue Renhold says as he walks across the sterile, white tiled floor to his desk. "You a doctor. Can’t you tell?" Blue Renhold takes another piece of beef jerky from a plastic bag in his desk drawer. He holds the bag out and offers a piece to Haliford, who accepts. "Think she drowned herself?"

"Hard to say. If she was in the harbor all morning, the water might have seeped into her lungs." This is a delusion, Haliford knows that. Often, the best way to determine the source of a patient’s problem is to first rule out the obvious. One might wonder why a woman would want, for example, breast implants, but piecing her life together, figuring out her whole story and fitting her into a general profile often reveals an answer. If she’s not
married, you might look to her career. If she’s in the service industry — a waitress for example — she might be hoping that the extra tips she’ll make with a bigger bust will pay for the surgery in the long run. If she’s divorced, she’s probably hoping to lure in new suitors.

If Mrs. Dohmen wasn’t killed — and who would want to kill this woman, anyway? — this must have been a suicide. Yet, this raises another question — why would this woman want to kill herself? Haliford simply doesn’t know. “Have you weighed the body yet?” he asks with a mouthful of jerky grinding between his teeth.

Blue Renhold shakes his head. “I check ’em and get an ID, toss ’em in the fridge. After that, they somebody else’s to play with. That’s all part of the autopsy they doing in the A.M.”

Mrs. Rosalyn Dohmen weighed about 120 pounds last week. Perhaps the injections were simply to rid her of a discomfort. He again places a soft hand under her armpit. While Blue Renhold is jotting something on a clipboard, Haliford sniffs the air again. Mrs. Dohmen is sour. The damp odor loiters on his fingertips as he pulls his hands out and sniffs them, too. She was still using her old solid anti-persperant instead of the more effective roll-on he suggested. Forty percent of cosmetic surgeries are repeat customers, and this has put Haliford in a respectable tax bracket, but a part of him wishes these women would listen to the whole speech instead of tuning out after, “I have an opening this Thursday afternoon, Alison can schedule you on your way out.” A simple suggestion like switching deodorant brands, using a mud mask before bedtime, or getting your love handles off the couch and taking a walk around the neighborhood can help ensure the permanence of surgical procedures.
If Rosalyn Dohmen had just regarded his at-home remedy with some seriousness, Blue Renhold wouldn’t be mocking her corpse. If she’d taken better care of herself, mentally and physically, she wouldn’t be lying on a steel table in the basement of the Medical Center. She’d be pruning her garden and waking up tomorrow to greet the postman with a fully-extended, dry wave. But she’s not, and she won’t be. She’s dead.

Blue Renhold hooks the heels of Mrs. Dohmen’s sandals between his fingers and dangles them in front of his face. “How much you think these things go for?”

“I don’t know,” Haliford says as he takes the sheet at Mrs. Dohmen’s ankles in his hand. “Why, are you going to try to sell them? That seems a little heartless, don’t you think?”

“Nah,” Blue Renhold says, twisting his wrist back and forth to get a full view of the sandals. “I dunno where all this stuff goes, but it usually ain’t here the next day. But you look at what’s on a body when it comes in, you can start to figure the person out. Like, does she spend $400 on footwear, or are these the $20 Payless special? Little details like that help you fill in the holes.” Blue Renhold holds the shoes above Mrs. Dohmen’s naked hip and the full black bush of hair between her legs. “Nice footwear, but the woman ain’t taking care of things downstairs, you know what I mean?” he says, pointing to Mrs. Dohmen’s patch.

“That’s terrible.”

Blue Renhold returns the shoes to the other table, then draws the sheet back up and over Mrs. Dohmen’s body. “You keep ’em pretty while they’re breathing, I cover ’em up when they’re dead. You like your job, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Haliford answers without really thinking about the question.
“That’s a good thing,” Blue Renhold says as he wheels Mrs. Dohmen’s corpse across the floor to the refrigerators in the back corner of the morgue.

“Do you?” Haliford asks.

“Yeah. Why else do it? Money’s good, I guess. You’d be surprised how much they pay to watch dead bodies come in.”

“It supports your hobby, at least.”

“Sure enough. Keeps me occupied at Sweety’s for hours, though the wife wishes I was home a bit more. Most people ain’t got stomach for this job, though. I figure, a few hours after work at an arcade, I probably earn that. I do a job nobody else wants, that’s gotta earn a man the right to occupy a bit of his free time how he sees fit. A man’s gotta have a hobby.”

“That’s the truth,”

“But I guess you got more free time than a lot of the rest of us these days, huh Doc?”

“How do you think she died?” Haliford asks.

“Don’t know, Genie. Killed herself? Somebody killed her? Maybe it was just an accident.”

Haliford pulls the sheet back down to reveal Mrs. Dohmen’s eyes again. He lifts her lids open with his right hand and looks at her enlarged pupils. Do they tell a story? Do they offer any insight? Was Mrs. Dohmen unhappy with the lack of immediate results? Did this woman throw herself into the harbor because she wanted a quicker fix? He wants to think that she doesn’t have water in her lungs – he wants to think she was dead before she went into the water. That somebody did something to her, that at least her death wasn’t her choice.
As Haliford weaves through traffic on the drive home, his car’s visor doing little to keep the glowing burn of the setting sun from his eyes, he begins to piece together Mrs. Dohmen’s story as best he can. He frequently passes the time with this activity after his patients have left for the day, but this is the first time he’s done it after a patient has left his care.

Mrs. Dohmen didn’t wear any rings, so she’s not married. But she was — she still introduced herself as “Mrs. Rosalyn Dohmen” at her initial consultation. This, Haliford knows, means that she is unwilling, or unable — if a difference exists — to let this particular part of her past rest. Or perhaps it’s simply her identification, a tag or label. “I am the ex-Mrs. of a Mr. Dohmen.”

He wonders if Marianna still introduces herself as “Mrs. Haliford.” If she will when the divorce is finalized. If she should.

Once Haliford has a solid base to start a patient’s story from, the rest tends to come naturally. He thinks back to Blue Renhold’s words, about rewarding one’s self for a goal achieved, so he again diverts his car from its path to Franklin, toward Sweety’s. Mrs. Dohmen was a sweet woman, but she was also a simple woman. Her husband probably left her because he couldn’t deal with her naïveté. Before her death, her only attempts at happiness were on the surface — her made-up face with its long, wispy fake eyelashes, her perfectly rounded fingernails. But stripped to her barest, as Haliford had seen her this
evening, she was just a middle-aged single woman with the first purplish hinting of varicose veins in her upper thighs. This was the honesty, the truth of Mrs. Dohmen, and as Haliford considers his last thoughts of Mrs. Dohmen, before she went into the freezer, he begins to realize that perhaps she was not as attractive as he’d initially thought. On second consideration, her flaws become more apparent. Now fitting nicely into a previously established profile, her individuality fades into the background. He wants her to be special, but knows she’s not.

Haliford rolls his thumb over the radio tuner, trying to find a final score of the Orioles’ game, but only hears that they lost, and Coach Crowley is saying something about tonight “just not being their night.”

At least he didn’t blame it on fate.

Haliford doesn’t see the boy in the sleeveless Ravens’ jersey and the purple mesh shorts in the street outside Sweety’s until he’s twenty yards or so from his bumper, bending over in the middle of traffic to retrieve something from the ground, probably a quarter. The car skids to a stop two feet short of the boy, who straightens his back and slams the palm of his hand down on Haliford’s hood before continuing across the street to the 7-11, where the young louts who were picking on Tommie have quickly gathered under the glare of the lights above the fuel pumps, waving angry arms in Haliford’s direction and shouting curses at him. Haliford is trapped, worn-out buildings on either side of a crowd of dark youth – six, he can now see, not five. The boys begin to move toward his car in a straight line. They quickly surround his car, glaring in like posed action figures. They circle the car as they circled Tommie earlier, never taking their eyes off him, still shouting – “Watch where you’re going,
asshole,” and “Tommie’s old man come back for more, huh?” A few of them punch at the body of his automobile, taunting him, as if asking him to step out and own up to almost running down one of their own. He revs the car’s engine, and the boys mock fear as they begin to laugh at him. When he presses his thumbs to the steering wheel, the dissonance of a wimpy horn does little to intimidate the kids. One by one, they begin to point at the doctor, and their laughter grows louder, drowning out the baseball discussion on Haliford’s radio. A second honk incites more amusement, and they turn back toward the store, regrouping by the pay phone next to the 7-11’s glass entrance doors.

Haliford holds his foot to the brake and watches the kids leave, wishing he could have done more than just honk. A horn isn’t going to solve anything. People shouldn’t be allowed to torment motorists like this, though Haliford knows that there’s no reasoning with these kids. You have to meet them on their level, even if that means lowering yourself to shouting back or making threats. He’s safe in his car, but he wishes he’d had the gall to stand up to them.

Haliford kicks his foot back down to the gas pedal and speeds away.

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9:34 p.m.

Haliford finds the following note, penciled in animated cursive handwriting, hanging from the fridge with a piece of Scotch tape:
He opens the refrigerator door and takes out the small bundle wrapped in tin foil. He sets it on top of the stove and goes back inside the fridge to retrieve a bottle of beer. He takes a fork from the dishwasher – which Alison has kindly run for him – and goes to the couch to eat his dinner. Leftovers, particularly meats, are generally better cold anyway.

A quick look at the scroll on ESPN gives the final score – 7-2, in favor of Chicago. At this point, Haliford isn’t even concerned with the other particulars of the game. Tonight, he finally concedes, just wasn’t their night.

At 10:00, Haliford swishes the last bit of beer between his cheeks and switches to the Channel 7 news. He begins to drift off to sleep, but is stirred back awake by the voice of Baltimore’s #1 nightly news anchor: “The body of an unidentified middle-aged woman was pulled from the harbor late this morning,” Haliford hears. “No other details are being released, pending identification.”

Haliford feels a weight in his chest as he realizes that the kinship he felt with Blue Renhold in knowing a secret will soon be gone, whenever Channel 7 has enough information to publicize Rosalyn Dohmen’s full story. At the same time, though, he wishes they had more to tell, a file photo or some other image that might show Mrs. Dohmen for who she was years ago, before she stepped into his office, before he saw her wrapped up for the freezer in
the morgue. Were her eyebrows sleeker? Did she smile for pictures? Was she surrounded by loved ones?

But the newscast plows forward. “On a lighter note, expect showers early tomorrow morning, clearing up for a gorgeous afternoon with a high of 81 degrees and minimal humidity.”
Saturday, October 30th  
6:10 p.m.

When I was nine years old, I wanted to be Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* for Halloween. I blame Dad, really. Every September, when the trees started to dry up and turn from their lively summer greens to radiant reds and deep browns, he would read *Alice* to me, one chapter every night before I fell asleep. As I got older, the last year or two Dad was with us – and I don’t think he ever knew this – after he’d leave for the night, I’d flip on my lamp and read through the next few chapters. Adding together the times I read and the times I listened, I probably went through that whole book eight or nine times that year. But I always imagined Dad’s voice narrating the story, trying his best to sound like a precocious British girl as he always did just because he knew I got a kick out of it. Even when I read it today, I still hear him.

I don’t know if Mom was confused by my plans for Halloween, or if she was more disappointed. She certainly didn’t approve. “Why don’t you be one of the other characters from the book,” Mom suggested, “and your little girlfriend can be Alice.” Bridget, who lived
two houses down, wasn’t my girlfriend of course, but we spent enough time playing together that Mom didn’t really know the difference.

I was still upstairs in my bedroom getting ready that night, a Saturday, when Bridget came over. I guess it was around six – light enough for our parents to trust us to wander the neighborhood begging for sugar and chocolate treasures for the first time without supervision, but dark enough to give the sky out my window a graceful sense of mystery. I stood in front of the mirror next to my dresser and fiddled with my top hat, adjusting it to the left and then to the right, trying to get the Hatter’s impeccable look down. I’d asked Mom to let Dad come over and help me get dressed, but she reminded me that he wasn’t allowed in the house “unless absolutely necessary,” and apparently, my Halloween excursion wasn’t of any serious consequence to her.

Bridget knocked on my door twice, then turned the brass knob and entered. Early evening sunlight enveloped her as she appeared in the mirror behind me, wearing pointed white shoes, opaque stockings, and a poofy blue frock that bore the elegance of something homemade. I couldn’t really make out Bridget’s face, but I could see that her mother had dyed her rolling brunette locks to a livid blonde.

She flopped down, face first, onto the plaid comforter on my bed. “Would you hurry up? Everybody else is already out!” Her voice was muffled by the pillow her face had fallen into.

“Just wait a sec,” I said as I adjusted the collars of the topcoat and vest Mom had found for me at a second hand store.
“There’s not gonna be any candy left by the time we get out,” Bridget said as she rolled onto her back and dangled her glossy shoes over the foot of my bed.

“Okay. I think I’m ready,” I said, giving myself a final inspection. My tan vest and green jacket sat limply on top of a white button shirt Dad had given me the previous autumn for school pictures. I’d fashioned a sort of bowtie from an old scrap of silk I found in the attic. My pants, a bit tight around the waist and upper legs, were a pair of old brown corduroy church slacks. They were snug, but Mom wouldn’t let me wear a newer pair for fear I’d get them “dirty.”

Bridget hopped down from the bed and stood next to me in front of the mirror, where we continued adjusting the fringes of our sleeves and the edges of our collars. As I smoothed down the lapels of my jacket, Bridget grabbed my hand and marched me to my computer, which Dad had brought over and put in my room over the summer.

“Hold on,” she began, as she pointed and clicked away, “I wanna make sure we have this just right.” Within seconds, she’d brought up a full-color illustration of Alice at the Hatter’s tea party. She studied the image for a moment. “How do I look?”

I gave her a quick scan. “Fine.”

“Well, ‘fine’ isn’t good enough. We have to look perfect for tonight.”

I studied the picture she’d pulled up on the screen, and again looked Bridget over. “Okay. You look perfect then.”

“Good,” she said as she played with her dress a bit, then pushed at my hat to give it one last adjustment. “Now, so do you.”
The end of October was always hot, as if whoever was in control up above found it cruelly amusing to see kids running around in heavy Halloween costumes and sticky plastic masks. As we stepped off the front porch and walked down through the wooden gate that separated my yard from concrete sidewalk, the late October surge of heat permeated my clothes, and my coat felt like a million cockleburs desperately trying to pierce the shirt underneath. With each step across the lawns of our neighborhood, tiny pricks attacked my sweating arms.

After a few houses, we began to work up an act – Bridget would introduce herself as Alice, “a girl of extraordinary adventure,” pleading with whomever answered the door to offer whatever treats they might have to “soothe the mad psyche” of her “cohort, the Hatter.” Her voice was a lot more authentic than Dad’s, but I can’t say it didn’t seem like a sort of imitation-of-an-imitation at the same time.

She held my hand in hers and led me around the whole neighborhood, just like she always pulled me toward the monkey bars during recess and dragged me through the living room of her house every afternoon so we could get a good seat on the couch to watch television before her little brother beat us to it. Some of the other guys at school used to tease us about it – if she was sick, or we happened to not be together during a recess, they’d ask me where my girlfriend was, and I’d throw a tantrum – “She’s not my girlfriend!” Though apparently, my word did little to convince them. Or Mom.

Three blocks and six fun-size packets of Skittles later, I tried to fan myself with the top hat, but Bridget insisted that I not remove it during our quest. I finally convinced her that my headpiece would hold more candy than the plastic sacks we were carrying, and she conceded, calling it a “wonderfully clever point.” All of the houses on our block had paper
sacks with candles in them to illuminate the sidewalk for trick-or-treaters. I always thought this was a little bland, though. Every house really looked the same, save for the few random bags that older kids had kicked over.

We scurried around the neighborhood, hitting every house whether their lights were on or not. We even tried at Mrs. Rackin’s, who had been my Sunday School teacher until Dad left in June and Mom stopped taking me because the church frowned upon the idea of divorce. Mrs. Rackin didn’t answer, but she’d hung an envelope full of pamphlets outlining the Pagan history of Halloween from her mailbox. I took one and folded it into a paper airplane between the next few houses.

Within a few hours, we’d covered every residence in Cherry Hill, eight blocks west-to-east, five blocks north-to-south. We ran into dozens of other kids from school — some with their parents waiting in a car in the driveway, several who snickered and mumbled “attached at the hip” as they passed, and more than a few who were dressed up like superheroes, apparently a popular costume choice that year. We ended up on the North Side, where a wide creek acted as a border, not only between the smoldering industry of South Baltimore and the northern suburbs, but also between the people who lived in both.

Bridget and I rested on a metal bench facing the water. I held my hat, now overflowing with treasure, between my blistering corduroyed knees and began to separate her candy from mine.

“What do you think’s over there?” she asked, swinging her legs back and forth and dragging her shoes through a patch of weeds under the bench.
"I dunno," I said, using one hand to burrow through candy and the other to scratch at my itchy stomach. "Dad calls them 'less fortunate.' I think they're just people who work in the factories."

"I bet it'd be fun to work in a factory. My dad always has to wear a suit to work. I don't want to wear a suit to work when I grow up. I bet people who work in factories don't have to wear suits."

"Probably not," I said.

Bridget slumped back into the bench. "What time do you think it is?"

"Maybe eight or nine?" I looked up at the sky. Above and behind us was a dark evening blue, lighted only by the moon which cast a whiteish light across the top of the water, but on the other side of the creek, the last embers of sunlight cast a glimmer of pink on the tops of the factories that pumped steam and smoke up into the sky.

Bridget slumped back into the bench. "I'm not tired."

"Me neither."

"How did we do?" she asked as she pointed to the candy, her eyes still fixed on the trailer park across the creek.

"Better than last year," I said, pulling out a Milky Way we'd gotten from an elderly man on Erick Street. "We got a few big candy bars." One by one, I held up bubblegum lollipops, more Skittles, sugar wafers, and Tootsie Rolls, listing them off to Bridget as I continued to separate our take into two equal piles. "...and a popcorn ball," I finished as I held a wax-covered sphere up for her to see. "But we only got one." I waited for her to
respond. “Do you want it?” I unwrapped a candy bar and popped it in my mouth.

“Bridget?”

“Do you wanna go over there?” she asked, pointing.

“Not really,” I said through a morsel of chocolate.

“Why not? It’d be an adventure! I want an adventure tonight! It’s not like we’re going home soon, you just said you weren’t tired.”

“We’re not supposed to go to that side of the creek.”

“Says who?” Bridget asked.

“My dad told me so. He said there’s bad people over there, that it’s a bad part of town and it’s not safe.”

“He just wants to scare you. But being scared is fun sometimes,” Bridget said as she walked to the edge of the creek and lay down on her stomach. The bank sat a foot above the water’s surface, and Bridget rolled back one of her sleeves and dipped her hand down into it.

“I don’t like being scared. ‘Fun’ and ‘scared’ are completely different,” I said as I knelt down next to Bridget and stared at our reflections in the water. The movement of her hand made small ripples across our faces.

“Don’t you ever stay up and watch the scary movies they show really late at night on TV?”

“No,” I said, dragging my fingertips across the water and drawing circles around our faces. “Mom doesn’t let me. And Dad never did, either.”

“Jeez, Matthew,” Bridget said, “your dad isn’t here, is he?”
I pulled my hand up and placed it at my side. No, Dad wasn’t here. And he wasn’t at home.

“Sorry,” Bridget said after a moment of silence. “That’s not what I meant. I just mean, I think it’d be fun to see what the big deal is about that neighborhood over there. There’s nothing stopping us right now.”

“I know what you meant. I don’t care.”

“It’d be just like a scary movie. Or like when Alice goes into Looking-Glass Land. It’s scary at first, but then she figures out how everything’s backwards, and then she gets to be a Queen.”

“There’s a lot more to Alice than that.”

“Come on!” Bridget said as she stood and brushed dirt from her dress. “Can you honestly tell me that you don’t want to go over there?”

“How would we do it?”

“That’s easy,” she answered. Before I knew what was happening, Bridget had grabbed my hand again, and yanked me past her. My face hit the water first, then my hands, then the rest of me. The sting of murky water nipped at my eyes, but even underwater, as I tugged at my coat sleeves to pull the soggy coat from my arms, I heard Bridget giggling above me. I lifted my head out of the water and looked up at her.

The creek wasn’t deep, maybe four feet to the bottom. The toes of my shoes brushed against the sand and mud below my feet, and I tried to tread water, but my costume was saturated and the wet wool impeded my movement. “I can’t swim,” I said.
"Yes you can," Bridget said, stopping in mid-laugh to sigh, "we’ve taken swimming lessons together for the last four years. You know as well as I do that you can swim if you want."

"No, I mean, I can’t swim now," I said, swinging my arms back and forth slowly through the water. "My costume’s too heavy."

Bridget rolled her eyes, stooped down, and slapped the back of her hands on the water. "Take it off, then!"

The thought of Bridget seeing me without my costume, without my clothes, was something I’d never considered. I wondered what the guys at school would say. "I can’t," I said. "Mom’ll kill me if I come home without my costume."

Bridget stood up and looked back at me for a moment. She shrugged and stepped backward out of her other shoe, then began to tug at the collar of her soft blue dress, pulling it down over her shoulders, revealing the straps of a plain white A-shirt. She reached behind her head, held hair back with one hand, and drew her zipper down with the other. My stomach began to knot and swell up as her costume dropped to the grass.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Not getting my dress any dirtier than it already is."

Standing above the creek, stripped of her costume with her shirt running the length of her torso and halfway down lightly-pink thighs, Bridget was almost unrecognizable to me. To be honest, I preferred her in the dress — she was still Alice from the neck up, her blonde hair pulled over and behind her ears, an innocence on her face. But the starkness of her body, and the splinters of light shimmering off her legs — she was plain and naked, and it
bothered me that she didn’t seem to care. I turned around to the monochrome trailer park across the creek.

“You don’t have to look away, Matthew.” I looked back and saw her as she came barreling toward the water, her arms raised before tucking them under her knees in mid-jump. She came down on the creek with a hard cracking, splashing water over my face.

“Now let’s go over to the other side,” she said as she stood chest-deep in water.

I wiped the water away from my tingling eyes. “I told you, I can’t take my costume off.”

“You’re such a kid sometimes,” Bridget said. She reached to my chest and undid the top button of my jacket. “Fine, I’ll help you. We can just put it up next to my dress and get it when we come back.”

“What if we don’t come back?” I said, looking for any excuse to keep my outfit on.

“It’s not like we’re leaving forever, Matthew! We’ll come back for it.”

“But we don’t know what’s over there—”

“—Exactly! So the only way we’ll know is to just go over.”

As Bridget continued to undo my top coat and tie, I reached under the water’s surface and pulled off my shoes. She swam behind me and pulled the jacket off over my shoulders, wrung it between her hands above the water's surface, and threw it upon the bank. I unbuttoned my shirt and vest, and tossed them next to the rest of our clothes.

“There,” Bridget said. “Can you swim now?”

I moved a few feet farther from the bank where our clothes now rested. “I think so.”
“Are your pants going to slow you down? Because if they are, you might as well take them off now, too.”

“No,” I said quickly as my body shivered. “I can swim, let’s just…” I sighed. “Let’s just go over there. But we can’t be too long, okay?” I tried to look down at my legs below the water, but saw only my reflection looking back at me, like I had two heads and no body.

We swam. With each stroke, the trailer park became bigger and brighter, but no less dull – it was still the same neutral, colorless destination we’d seen when we first sat on the bench. Just a brighter dull, I guess. We didn’t say much as we made our way across the water – it’s hard to hold a conversation when you’re busy struggling to keep your lungs filled with air. But as I trudged forth, Bridget leading the way, I forgot about my naked torso, and the embarrassment I’d felt in seeing her closer to nude than I’d ever seen a girl, or anybody else for that matter. My heart began to thump rapidly. I was excited, in a way I’d never been with another person before. But I also sensed safety with Bridget. I was comfortable, like if harm did threaten us when we reached our destination across the creek, she’d protect me.

Soon, my feet began to touch gravel, and the floor of the creek sloped up to its bank, a gravel lot – the only obstacle left between us and the trailer park. We walked up out of the water and sat down on the gravel. The closest trailer was probably only twenty or so feet behind us.

“We’re here. Now what?” I asked, rocks digging into my already sore behind. I shifted my weight back and forth as Bridget looked over her shoulder.

“Now we go see the houses. I wonder if they have different kinds of candy over here. I bet it’s better.”
I looked back across the creek where we'd come from. "Can we just rest for a bit? I'm sorta tired from swimming." She said yes, and rested her head on my shoulder. Her thick blonde hair draped over my chest and back, river water slowly running down my body, beading up into tiny streams then trickling to my pants. I was exhausted, I was soaked, and I just wanted to catch my breath for a moment.

"You'd better hope nobody from school lives over here."

"Why not?"

"Because," she began through another giggle, "if somebody sees you with your girlfriend's head on your shoulder, they'll tease you even worse than usual."

"You're not my girlfriend, Bridget!"

"Am I a girl?"

"Yes—"

"Am I your friend?"

I squirmed a few inches away from her. "Shut up," I said. "That's not what girlfriend means."

Bridget yanked her head off my shoulder and kissed me. The safety I'd felt earlier bubbled up and burned the back of my throat. My eyes watered, my tongue seared with hot bile, but I swallowed and kept down what I was sure was going to be a mess of half-digested candy bars and other snacks. Bridget quickly lowered her head.

"What'd you do that for?" I asked.

"I wanted to."
My stomach still turned. I tried to think about what had just happened, and why it might have happened, but more than anything else I tried to figure out how I felt about it. I didn’t want to just say, “That was weird,” even though it was the only thing I could think of. My thoughts instead turned to what this might mean for us in the future. If she was my girlfriend, we’d surely get married when we were older. And if we got married, we’d surely break up sooner or later. And if we broke up, we’d end up hating each other, and she definitely wouldn’t be my best friend anymore, and I didn’t want that because Bridget was my safety net. But how could she still be that, how could things remain as they were if she liked me like that?

“That was weird,” I said.

“I don’t think it was.”

“Well, let’s just go look around like you wanted to.”

“Don’t you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“No.” I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want it to have happened, so I told her that. “Let’s just pretend that didn’t happen and go look around. We’ve made it this far.”

What if Dad came over and Mom tried to kiss him again like she used to? What would he do?

“You’re right, it was stupid,” she said. “Maybe we should just forget about it.” She had no reason to feel guilty, I thought, she was just acting on impulse. Of course I liked Bridget. I think every boy who grows up with a girl as his best friend inevitably ends up having feelings for her, though she was the first girl I’d ever thought of in a romantic way.
She reached down for my hand, and I gripped it tightly and pulled myself up. I put my other arm around her damp shoulder – she was shivering, though I don’t know if it was because of what had just happened between us, or if she was just cold and wet – and pulled her close to me, letting her lay her head back down on my shoulder as we stood. “It’s okay,” I said. “It didn’t even happen, okay?” Still, her eyes were fixed on the sandy gravel below us, so I pinched her fingers lightly. “Just don’t tell anybody.”

I felt her lips turn up into a smile on my shoulder. We turned and walked toward the trailer park.

I’d never seen a neighborhood quite like this one, at least not up close. All the houses looked the same, and they were all one level, not like the elaborate two- and three-storied homes that populated Cherry Hill. These homes looked gloomy, maybe because they were all the same dull color, or because they were all the same box-car shape. Most of them had a rickety wooden staircase leading up to the front door, and the streets and sidewalks in between each house were the same sand and gravel mixture that made up the bank of the creek. Bridget pointed to a clothesline with laundry flapping ominously in the wind. We grabbed a few oversized towels and wrapped them over our shoulders and around our bodies.

“So what do you want to do now?” I asked, looking around at the desolate trailer park. “This is your adventure, you tell me. Do you want to get more candy, or just look around and see what’s here, or what?” I felt like I was being too overbearing, like it was too obvious to her that I was trying to make her feel better, but that’s the only thing I really wanted to do.
“I’m cold,” she said with another shiver as she held the towel tightly around her body. “And I’m all wet, we’re both wet.” She wrung her hair through a hand as water flowed out and splashed against the ground. “I kinda feel like going home.”

“Isn’t this what those movies you watch are like?”

“Yeah,” she said, “but in the movies people get killed sometimes.”

“They’re just movies.”

“But this isn’t.”

We walked hand-in-hand, me leading her along the path that led down the middle of the rows of mobile homes. Some of the trailers had pumpkins on their porches. Others had paper skeletons dangling from their front doors. One even had a scarecrow hung from the lamp post at the edge of the yard. The breeze blew through it, rustling the arms and crackling straw against itself.

Bridget took in a deep breath. “This place is creepy.”

We stopped walking and ducked next to a house that was fully dressed in Halloween decorations – a jack-o-lantern in each window, orange lights wound around the porch railings, and a hockey mask hanging from the doorknob. Our hands parted, and we peeked in one of the trailer’s windows, where a woman stood in her living room, wearing a maroon bathrobe and her hair pulled back into a ponytail.

“She doesn’t look like she has any candy,” Bridget said. “I’m starting to think they don’t even give out candy in a place like this.”

I agreed, and as the woman manually turned on her television set and lay down on her couch, we crept across the brown, dried-up lawn to another house, this one with its front
porch light turned off. We peeked in an open window and found two older boys sleeping in a room that was virtually empty, save for bunk beds and a small lamp that sat on the bare hardwood floor.

"Lucky," Bridget mumbled.

"They don't even have any toys or books."

"Yeah, but at least they get to share a room. I wish I got to sleep in the same room with somebody else. Some nights when I can't sleep, it'd be cool to have somebody to talk to."

"Yeah." I brushed my hand across the back of Bridget's. She crossed her fingers in between mine. "I miss my dad being around at night sometimes."

One of the boys inside began snoring, and Bridget and I both gasped. I held my hand over my mouth to keep the noise inside, and she did the same. Then, silence, in the room and throughout the whole trailer park. We crouched below the window, inched away and tiptoed over to a different home, this one with just an uncarved pumpkin on its stoop. Inside, a man and a woman sat on a couch, their faces turned from us. This room was as plain as the other, with nothing but a full-length mirror on the wall across from the couch for decoration. Steam rose up from a cup in the woman's hand.

"Who drinks coffee this late?" I asked.

"Maybe these people sleep during the day and only come out at night."

"Not funny."

"I know." Bridget whispered.
Then, the woman looked up from her mug and stared into the mirror in front of her. She rubbed her eyes and shrieked, and I realized she’d seen my reflection hovering out the window. She dropped the mug. It clunked and sounded like it might have broken. I ducked, even though the woman had already seen me, but Bridget pressed her face harder against the glass.

“Uh-oh,” she said as she pointed into the house, and Dad looked out at us.

He said something I couldn’t hear to whoever he was with, then darted down the stairs and over to where Bridget and I stood. “Jesus... Get in the car.” Our car, Dad’s silver car that I’d ridden in during summer trips to Disney World and on Christmas excursions to Grandma’s place up in Albany, was parked behind the trailer.

Bridget opened the car’s back door, laid her towel down on the seat, and sat on it. I tried to climb in alongside her, but Dad put his hand around on my back and steered me into the front seat next to him instead. “Where are your clothes?” We told him, and he drove us to the other side of the creek where we retrieved them and I scooped all our candy back into the hat. Bridget slipped her dress back on over her damp undershirt.

Dad drove us back to our neighborhood, and parked the car on the street in front of our house – my house, I guess, mine and Mom’s now. He turned the lights off and spoke over the low, rumbling idle of the car. “Bridget, Matthew’s going to walk you home. Tell your parents that you were just playing down by the river and accidentally fell in. Okay?”

Bridget and I got out of the car and walked down the sidewalk, past paper bags that were now extinguished.
“You’re so gonna get grounded for this!” she whispered as we reached her front door.

“So are you,” I said.

Bridget knelt down and pulled a key out from under the doormat. “IM me when you get home.”

My arms quaked as I ambled back to where Dad was waiting, hoping I could think of some explanation, trying to figure out something I could say to keep him from getting mad.

“What were you two doing over there?” he asked as I got back into the car’s front seat.

“Am I gonna get grounded for this?”

“No… just… You know you’re not supposed to go over to that side of the creek. You’re not supposed to leave the neighborhood.”

“Why were you over there, then?”

“I was with a client. I have patients all over, you know that. I was just visiting with one of them on a consultation.” He wasn’t mad, I could gauge that much from his voice.

“Do you know what a consultation is?”

“Yeah. It means you just had to talk about work. Right?”

“Yes.” Dad smiled. “Yeah, you’re right. That’s what I was doing over there. But that’s different, because I’m an adult and it’s safer for me then it is for you.”

“I know. Sorry, Dad.”

“It’s okay. Does your mom know you went over there?”
I told him no, that Bridget and I were just out trick-or-treating, that she’d wanted to go see what was across the borders of our neighborhood. I didn’t want to put all the blame on her, obviously, but I didn’t want to say something to provoke his anger, either.

“Okay.” Dad put his hands on the steering wheel and faced forward. “Well, she doesn’t need to know, okay? You’re home safe, that’s what matters. If she asks why you’re wet, just tell her what Bridget’s going to tell her parents – you two were playing down by the creek and fell in.” He paused. “No, tell her that Bridget fell and you had to dive in to help her.”

“Isn’t that lying?”

Dad was quiet again for a moment, I guess he was thinking of how to respond. “Yes, Matthew, technically it is, but sometimes a lie is okay if you know that the truth is going to hurt somebody.”

“How?” I asked.

“Well,” Dad began with a deep inhale, “let’s say you borrowed a book from the library, but then you lost it. If you went and told the librarian what happened, she might be sad that you lost her book, so instead, you might take some of your allowance and go buy another copy of the book, and return that copy instead. The library has their book back and you don’t have to hurt anybody by telling them you accidentally misplaced it.”

“That’s not really a lie,” I said.

“Well, that’s the point. It’s not really a lie, it’s just skipping over some of the details. Mom just wants you to be home safe. She doesn’t need to know all the specifics.”
“So I shouldn’t tell her that you drove us home, either?” I wanted to ask him if he could come inside.

“No,” Dad said with a hint of pride in his voice. “Try not to wake her up when you go inside, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight,” he said as he depressed the brake and put the car into reverse.

“G’night, Dad.” I held the door handle up as I closed it to avoid any noise.

Mom stirred in bed in the room next to mine, so I changed into my pajamas as quietly as possible and sat down in front of the computer. I clicked on the instant messenger icon and began tapping away at the keys.

Mh21221: hey.
Alice8Bridge: what did your dad say?
Mh21221: not much
Alice8Bridge: oh
Alice8Bridge: theres a freddy movie on tv right now. its not that scary tho
Mh21221: no thanks
Alice8Bridge: sorry about earlier btw

I didn’t want her to be sorry.

Alice8Bridge: u still there?
Mh21221: its okay.
Mh21221: yeah im here
Alice8Bridge: did u like it?
I paused again, trying to think of a way to make her feel better about what happened earlier, since she was obviously still on her mind. Was this one of those situations Dad was talking about, where it’s better to withhold the truth and risk the guilt of telling a lie?

Mh21221: i guess.
AliceSBridge: want 2 go back over there sometime?
Mh21221: only during the day. and were not gonna swim next time
Mh21221: ;)
AliceSBridge: ;)

Whew.

AliceSBridge: k. gotta get to bed before mom and dad wake up.
Mh21221: me too
Mh21221: goodnight
AliceSBridge: come over tomorrow.
AliceSBridge: night
Mh21221: k night

I closed down the program, turned off the computer, and curled up under my blanket. The scent of Bridget’s hairspray still lingered on my pillow.
Friday, December 3rd
5:10 p.m.

Haliford rubs his hands together, then slips on a pair of wool gloves. The first light snow of
the season falls from the cloudy grey sky above the courthouse, as Haliford repeats the
judge’s last words in his head: “The marriage of Eugene Scott Haliford and Marianna Rose
Haliford is dissolved.”

“How does it feel?” Rottwood calls from the doorway.

Haliford has spent so much energy on the divorce during the past six months -
property division, custody hearings - that he’s barely had time to consider an answer to this
question. “I’m not sure,” he says as Rottwood joins him on the sidewalk. “How’s it
supposed to feel?”

“It’s a weight off your chest!” Rottwood says as he grips his client’s shoulder, then
raises his other to wave down a taxi. “It feels good, it feels refreshing. It’s a fresh start for
you. That part of your life is over, that god-forsaken woman is in your history now.”

“I know. I’m still trying to process that, though.” Calling her “god-forsaken” seems
a bit harsh, but Haliford offers no objection. “What does everybody else say it feels like?”
"When I got my first one, it was weird, I’ll give you that,” Rottwood says. "But think about this: Next time you feel like going to a late movie, you just go. Want some pancakes afterwards? Then get some. What this is for you is freedom. And that’s how you’ve got to think about it, because you don’t need to find a babysitter anymore, and you don’t have to worry about getting bitched at for being out too late. When she calls, you don’t even have to pick up the phone. It’s pretty easy, Haliford. You just cut that part of your old life out. The difference between the past six months and the next fifty years is that it’s officially over now."

Flecks of snow have left the ground wet, and a cab splashes water onto the curb as it slows to a stop. Rottwood opens the door and leans in. "Just start the meter,” he tells the cabbie, then turns back around. "You drive?"

Haliford points to his car at the end of the block.

"Look,” Rottwood says as he sets his briefcase down on the cab’s floor, "Come out tonight. Call your friends, we’ll have a little celebration of sorts for your first night back. Have some drinks, get you used to the idea of being single again."

"Most of my friends are our friends,” Haliford says. "Legally, yes, it’s over, but there’s still the issue of... well, of things like that."

"You can have your own friends now. You just have to start seeing things through your eyes, and your eyes alone. Forget hers. Tell the husbands to leave their wives home for the night."

"I’m sure that’ll go over well."
Rottwood sighs. “You think entirely too much about this, Haliford. Trust me, the wives already think you’re a piece of shit for divorcing her in the first place. Fuck them, and fuck whoever else sees it that way. There’s this new club up on North Point I want you to check out.”

“Aren’t we a little old to be going to a club?”

Rottwood groans as he sits down in the cab. “It’s not that kind of club, it’s a fucking strip joint. Jesus, you’ve been out of it for too long. I’ll pick you up at eight, be waiting outside.”

“You’ve got my address?”

“It’s on every piece of paper in this briefcase. Stop thinking, Haliford. Just let me take care of things.”

The taxi pulls away, and Haliford begins a slow walk toward his car, Rottwood’s words mashing with the judge’s — “Marriage is dissolved. Take care of things. Court rules. Single.” His head begins to throb.

The streets are alive with commuters, people rushing to catch suburb-bound trains and busses as Baltimore begins to shift from work to weekend. Department stores close their doors as bars open. Women in business suits exit cabs, replaced by kids from the University looking to get an early start on their evening. Orange lights flash against the sides of a corner market – construction that’ll have to wait until Monday. Haliford slows down for a red light up ahead and fixes his gaze on three young men stumbling along the sidewalk, none wearing jackets even though the flurries have chilled the city. The light turns green and Haliford’s car creeps forward, keeping pace with the three men, who stop momentarily to make a
presumably lewd comment to a young woman walking in the opposite direction with a large brown department store bag hanging from her wrist.

Haliford brakes behind a stalled city bus as one of the men – the shortest, wearing a stylish black fedora, a collared bowling-style shirt and an obvious goatee – sprints toward a parking meter and hops over it. A few passersby stop to look as another boy hurdles the meter. The third follows, but as he leaps, he catches the crotch of his pants and crashes to the sidewalk. The first two kneel to check on their friend, but their alarm quickly turns to shortles and guffaws as the downed one stands and sticks his fist down the hole he’s torn in his jeans.

Haliford accelerates, and Rottwood’s suggestion to “call his friends” lingers in his mind. Marianna and Matthew have been his only real companions, his closest friends, for nearly a decade. Who else is there to call? He wonders what’s worse – being unhappy in a stable relationship, or trying to be happy in an unfamiliar world?

He’s relieved, then, to pass Sweety’s Arcade and see Blue Renhold’s truck in the parking lot.

7:58 p.m.

As Haliford picks his cell phone up from the kitchen counter, he sees that Marianna called three times while was in the shower. He flips the phone open and the flashing “new message” screen stares up at him, begging him to call her back. Does she have some made-
up problem, a leaky faucet or a flat tire or something else she can easily handle herself? Or is it more, an urgent message she needs to deliver? A year ago, he'd have been happy to get three calls from her – at least he'd have known she understood how to use the damn phone. He feels sorry for her, in a way – she's been completely reliant on him, she's been so needy for so long, that he wonders how she'll manage on her own. But it's not enough to make him call her back, and he ultimately puts the phone into his pocket as the elevator takes him downstairs.

"So how many times did she try to call you?" Rottwood asks as he and Blue Renhold shift to allow Haliford room to slip into the taxicab waiting in front of his building.

"You're good," Haliford says. "Three."

"You pick up?"

Haliford shakes his head.

"She's going to keep calling. Know that. If it's going to be a problem, just give me your phone now," Rottwood says with a bit of a slur that tells Haliford he's already had several cocktails since the hearing.

"Ain't nothing wrong with a woman wants to talk to her husband," Blue Renhold says.

"Ex-husband," Rottwood replies.
8:25 p.m.

The pink neon radiance of the sign at Dreamers lights up the entire block, and as the trio exits the taxi, Haliford begins to feel queasy.

"Look," he begins, "I'm not sure about this." Rottwood reaches for his wallet as Blue Renhold stares up at the building like a tourist.

"What did I tell you earlier?" Rottwood asks, handing a small wad of bills to a thick bald man in black slacks, a black shirt, black necktie and mirrored sunglasses at the door. "You're along for the ride, Haliford."

"Yeah," Blue Renhold says as the trio files past the doorman. "Don't let yourself feel outta place. Go with the flow. You're just like everybody else in here, y'know?"

"That's what I'm unsure about." He wonders what Matthew would think of his father hanging out at a place where objectification of women is served right up alongside cold draft beer.

Inside, they're patted down by an equally stout man dressed in the same attire as the one outside. The club is layered with processed, electronic dance music and the faint odor of vanilla perfume, and the stage in the center of the room is dark, save for a single spotlight illuminating a tanned, well-toned girl who sweeps her jet-black hair across a brass pole.

Blue Renhold offers to buy the first round of drinks, and heads for the bar as Haliford and Rottwood find a table.

The dancer removes her top. "You like?" Rottwood asks.

"It's different."
“Any girl you want, she’s yours tonight. On me. She on you, on me!” Rottwood hoots.

“Do you take a lot of your clients out after you’ve severed their marriages?”

Rottwood laughs. “Only the ones I like, Haliford. Only the ones I like.”

The girl on stage gyrates in the face of the one man sitting by the stage. Haliford feels a bit sad for this pathetic guy alone in a club that’s far from empty. Every table has a group of men talking, some the dancer, some being propositioned by the other girls who wander about the place. The ill feeling in Haliford’s stomach doesn’t ebb, but at least he’s with other people.

“Look at that poor bastard,” Rottwood says, pointing. “All by himself in sniffer’s row. We ought to give him some company, you think?” He elbows Haliford.

“Go ahead. I’ll wait for the drinks.”

“If the man says so, then the man says so. Bring me my beer when your friend comes back.”

“Will do,” Haliford says with a half-hearted salute. He pulls out the cell phone after Rottwood leaves. Marianna hasn’t called again, which is good. Haliford lets his eyes drift around the club. The game playing on the television behind the bar is probably the same game playing in any bar around the city. Every guy at every tightly crowded table looks identical – they have varying styles, of course, but each one seems to have been cast from the same generic alpha-male mold, chugging drinks as he spansk dancers that walk by. Tapered, razor cut, bangs twisted up, or covered with a baseball cap, they’ve got the same trendily-nondescript hairstyles. Collar up, collar down, or no collar at all, shirt buttoned or shirt open,
they’re all wearing the same basic clothes. Because they’re all here for the same thing, an evening surrounded by sex and a story to rehash to each other every time they grab dinner at the same fast-food joint. Haliford looks down at the table top. It appears marbled, though anybody can see it’s just a paint job. Who knows what sorts of things get spilled on tables in a dump like this?

Blue Renhold returns with three bottles of beer. On stage, the dancer repeats her tease, this time for Rottwood who produces a dollar bill and holds it between his teeth. She blows him a kiss as she drops the money at her feet, forcing her to pick it up herself.

“Do you think she gets off on this, or is she just acting?” Haliford asks.

“They’re all actin’, Genie. Working, making money. You gotta see this place for what it is, and it’s just a business. Just a place where they perform a service, y’know?”

The dancer bends over and spreads her legs in front of Rottwood, sliding her hands up the length of her thighs as he drops another bill on the stage.

Haliford takes a sip from his beer. “I feel sick.”

The girl finishes her dance, then kneels and whispers something into Rottwood’s ear. The lawyer smiles and slaps her behind before she exits the stage to scattered applause.

“Do you think he knows he’s an asshole?” Haliford asks.

“I figure as much. But there’s something admirable in that. At least he’s comfortable with himself.”

“You’ve known him for less than an hour.”

Blue Renhold shrugs. “Nobody can’t say I’m not a good judge of character, and I’d say you’re a guy who needs to shut the power switch on his brain to ‘off’ and enjoy a night
out with the boys. That asshole up there, he likes you, Genie, and I like you. We’re your friends, that’s why we’re here with you tonight, tryin’ to help you get through this. Rottwood’s right, you worry too much. That’s what’s causing that ache in your stomach. Relax, man. Just coast tonight, have a good time.”

Rottwood returns. “That’s what a single man does, Haliford. He lets women dance naked in front of him. Think you can handle it?”

Before he can answer, the black-haired girl has scuttled up next to Rottwood, who puts his arm around her waist. Her breasts are exposed through the sheer robe she’s covered herself with, and she kisses Haliford on the cheek.

“David says you could use a private dance?”

Haliford looks to Rottwood, who grins and takes a drink from one of the beers on the table. He looks to Blue Renhold, who shrugs. He looks to the phone in his pocket, expecting it to vibrate at any moment. Maybe Marianna hasn’t been calling him at all – could it be Matthew?

“Let the girl dance for you, Genie,” Blue Renhold says.

The black-haired dancer escorts Haliford through the club to a doorway in the back where another bouncer pulls away the pink beaded curtain. The room is empty and small – a triangle with two leather couches on either side, a matching chair in the corner, and a large mirror with the letters “V.I.P.” scrawled in red lipstick. He wonders how Very Important she’ll make him believe he is.
She grabs his collar, pushes him toward the chair. “Good,” she says. “We’ll be alone back here.”

“You don’t have to put on the act,” he says.

She smiles. “The act is the fun part.”

He sits deep in the chair, his arms on the soft, moist armrests – probably just sweat, he tells himself – and spreads his legs. She slowly rocks her hips in time with the music, pushes her breasts together with her elbows and mouths along with the music – “I put a spell on you,” curling her finger at him. “Because you’re mine.”

For the first time, Haliford has a chance to see the girl’s face in the glow of a blacklight overhead. Her eyes are narrow, balanced perfectly on either side of her nose, which comes to a subtle, rounded tip. Her bottom lip is a bit fuller than her top, giving her a constant, crafty pout. She droops her shoulders and the robe cascades to the floor, revealing pointed breasts. He likes that her chest is smaller. Her nipples stiffen as she places a gentle knee in between his legs, and he feels her thigh pulsate against his penis. She tosses her head forward, her black hair draping her face. Her hands around his neck, she strokes his chin lightly with her thumbs, back and forth across his twelve-hour stubble.

“My name’s Raven,” she says in a hushed voice. Her breath is warm and damp on his ear. “And you’re Haliford. David told me.” Raven pulls her knee away and stands, squeezing her breasts back together with her hands to create the illusion of cleavage, spreading her fingers to allow nipples to show through. She drops her hands to the tops of her legs and rubs them – “I can’t stand the things that you do,” she sings. Brushes his knees with her fingertips and closes his legs.
Raven straddles Haliford and pulls his head between her breasts, her nipples tickling the sides of his face. He opens his mouth to breathe, and inadvertently kisses her chest. She pulls back with serious eyes. “No kissing.”

“Accident.”

Raven smiles, her teeth glow in the blacklight. “First time here?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“There are three rules. First, no kissing. Second, you can touch above the waist.” She tugs at the strings on her bikini bottom. “Anything covered down here, you can’t touch. That’s third. ’K?”

“I can handle that.”

Raven grinds her pelvis into his, and he feels himself stiffen as she sings, running her hands through his hair—“I don’t care if you don’t want me.” She props herself up on his waist, then slides down and kneels on the floor in front of the chair, bobbing her head inches away from the straining fabric of his jeans. She wraps her fingers around him, around it. “Cause I’m yours, yours, yours, anyhow,” she says, letting out a quiet moan. She lifts her head and drags the hair out of her eyes, leaning back and massaging her other hand between her own legs. “Do you want to touch me here?” Before Haliford can answer, she raises her eyebrows. “Well, you still can’t. Life’s a bitch, right?”

“I suppose.”

She puts a finger to his nose. “You’re funny, Haliford,” she says. “Shy, but funny. And cute.”

“I bet you say that to all the people you bring back here.”
“Only the ones I like.” Raven stands, turns around and sits in his lap. She leans forward, arches her spine, throws her head back. Haliford wonders how many other people have touched this woman. Slowly he lifts his hands from the armrests and feels her shoulders, her sides, her waist. Digs his fingers into her tight stomach. She squirms a bit. “That tickles.” His palms slither up her body and cup her breasts. She leans back, her cheek next to his, flicks her tongue out. “Leave them there.” She grabs the back of his head and again moans quietly, “When you’re foolin’ around.” He shivers as her fingernails claw into the base of his neck. She licks his earlobe and sings – “If I can’t have you, no one will.”

The beads on the entrance curtain slap against each other, and another girl backs into the room, this one with faux fur lining the edges of a red nightgown, a bright Santa-style hat on her head. She pulls Rottwood in by the lapel of his jacket and spins him around, throwing him down on the couch as the bouncer leans in to eye them. Rottwood plays with the fringes of his girl’s outfit, she sits next to him and lays her legs across his lap, cuddling into him.

“Doctor Haliford!” Rottwood shouts. “What the fuck are you doing in here?”

Haliford releases Raven’s breasts. “A marriage counselor and a surgeon,” she says.

“Not a counselor. He’s my divorce lawyer.”

“Ooh, he said he was a counselor. A lawyer and a surgeon. Sexy...”

Rottwood’s girl rubs his head and giggles, while Raven contorts her stomach muscles, and her skin rolls between Haliford’s hands. She scratches his thighs. “Where were we before we got interrupted?”

“Just stay right there.”
Raven rocks on his lap, and he wraps his arms tightly around her waist, pulling her closer. She turns to him and bites her bottom lip. “You’re vibrating.”

“Don’t talk.”

Raven draws her hand up to his pocket. “Your phone. It’s going off.” She swivels, straddling him again, and reaches in to pull the cell out. She looks at the name blinking on the phone’s face and frowns. “Who’s Marianna?”

Haliford grabs for it as the song swells to a frantic chant of “I love you, I love you, I love you,” but Raven holds the phone beyond his reach and flicks her wrist to open it.

“Hello?” she yells over the music. “No. What? He can’t talk right now.” She laughs.

“He’s having too much fun.” Her smile straightens and her laughter subsides. “Call him later.” She flips the phone shut as the music fades out and a new song begins.

Haliford clutches Raven’s elbows. She shrieks as the bouncer lunges toward them.

“What did you do that for?” he shouts.

The bouncer grasps Haliford’s wrist, but Raven jerks her head around. “It’s under control,” she says. He raises an eyebrow, but Raven waves him off, and he returns to his post by the curtain. “Oh, c’mon,” she says to Haliford in a calming voice. “It was just fun. You’re here to have fun, right?”

“That’s my wife. My ex-wife.”

“It’s not like she can do anything about it now.

Haliford takes a deep breath and relaxes his tense body. “Maybe, but—”

Raven puts a finger to his lips and hushes him. “It’s okay. You want to keep going?”

He shakes his head.
Finally, Raven stands, scoops up her robe. “Twenty,” she says, and Haliford reaches into his back pocket. “Look, I’m really sorry about that. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.”

“It’s been a rough day.” Haliford gives Raven a bill, which she tucks into her bikini bottom.

She takes his hand and leads him out of the V.I.P. room.

“I’ve been a husband and a father for ten years, and now I’m not.”

“You’re still a father,” Raven says. She pinches his cheek. “Tell her it was a wrong number. Or at least tell her that Raven offers a most heartfelt apology, okay.”

“What’s your real name?”

She smiles, cups her hand around his ear, and whispers. “It’s Lisa.”

Haliford extends his hand. “Thanks, Lisa.” They shake.

“And now, a question for you.” Lisa opens her robe and lifts her breasts. “Do you think I need implants?”

“Are you happy with the way you look?”

Lisa pauses for a moment. “Yeah, I think I am.”

He gently closes her robe. “Then no.”

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“Good time?” Blue Renhold asks as Haliford strides past the table.

“I’ll be right back.”

“I ain’t going nowhere.”
Haliford exits the club and steps into the cold air outside. Up the block, a lone saxophonist plays Christmas tunes. Haliford walks ducks into the doorway of a closed coffee shop and dials Marianna’s number.

“Gene?”

“Hi,” he says.

“I’m not even going to ask who that was.” She sniffs into the phone, and Haliford wonders if it’s genuine. “I’m really trying not to care.”

“Rottwood wanted to take me out. We’re at a bar, that’s all.”

“Fine. That’s fine. Did you get my messages?”

“No.”

“Oh... Well, I just wanted to talk. Matthew’s sick.”

Haliford’s heart jump-starts. “Is he okay? Where are you?”

“Calm down,” Marianna says. “It’s just a cold. He picked it up at school. His head’s stuffy and his nose has been running, but he’ll probably be fine by tomorrow. Bridget’s mother is supposed to take them to see the shark exhibit at the aquarium.”

Haliford exhales. “Do you think this is just a game? Jesus Christ!”

“I’m sorry, Gene, okay? If I’d known you were going to fly off the handle like this... maybe I shouldn’t have called.”

“Why did you?”

“I just told you!”
“If he’s got pneumonia, he’s throwing up and you’re taking him to the emergency room, then you say ‘he’s sick.’ It’s a cold, Mare. You have to learn to handle these things on your own.”

“Today is different, Gene.”

“Why? How is it different? We haven’t lived together for six months.” He balls his fist, wanting to punch something – a wall, a window, a passerby, anything, but he refrains, and instead stamps his foot. “Let me talk to Matthew.”

“It’s late! He’s asleep!”

“Wake him up.”

“I’m not going to wake up our son when he’s not feeling well! Is this how things are going to be now? I’m not as dumb as you think I am. I just... God, I just thought you’d want to know. That’s all.”

Haliford breathes into the phone.

“Are you still there?” she asks.

“No. I’m already gone.”

He snaps the phone shut, winds back, and hurls it across above the cars in the street. It cracks against the curb on the other side and explodes.