Backlit

Nine plus one stories

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The Picture

At five-thirty, orange-gold light pours through Maria's window. It lasts until five-forty; she's been ready since five-fifteen. She has restraightened her hair and reglossed her lips. A tiny bead of gel atop a thin finger reslicked her eyebrows. Little earrings that glint cheap and plastic sit in a shallow cup, ready to be clipped on. The mirror confirms her preparations. Maria practices a three-quarters inhale that expands her ribcage and pushes out her chest. She tilts her head just barely off its spinal axis and tucks her chin just enough so that when she looks straight ahead, her eyes look fuller, rounder, and a little more inviting — not seductive, not cringe, just a little heavier, a little more open, a little deeper. A gummy, toothy smile is out of the question so she crinkles the corners of her mouth. *No good.* She resets. This time she protrudes her top lip an extra millimeter so that the flesh rests more casually instead of pulling inward on the sides. The left side always pulls up a little higher but this can be corrected for with neck yaw. She redoes the inhale, this time shallower so that the divot where the base of her neck meets her clavicles casts a more dramatic shadow. She catches an eyelash out of formation; her eyes flutter and she frowns as she coaxes it back into place with her pinky. No pimples. No visible pimples. She clips on the earrings, wincing. One more part of the hair: a gentle middle-plus-ring-finger sweep. The mirror has done its job — on to the execution stage, with six minutes of nice light left.

The phone sits between her thumb and her middle finger so that her index can tap the circle that captures her image. Her arm stretches out almost parallel to the soft rays of sunlight but offset enough that neither the phone nor her arm casts a shadow onto her face. The phonescreen automatically brightens to its maximum, harmonizing with the sunlight. Maria meets her own gaze and inhales. *Snap.* She envisions Christian Alvarez, the lanky eleventh grader with a deep voice and greasy hair. She inhales. *Snap.* She shakes her head with tight control so that a single lock of hair descends, crossing her eyebrow which subtends a cute angle with the neighboring lock. She inhales. *Snap.*

Five-and-a-half minutes remain. She pulls her phone to her nose and hunches over its screen to appraise the photos.

Ugh. Disgusting.

She swipes.

Ew.

She goes back to the first, hoping it seems better by comparison. It does not. She checks the third, about which she didn't feel great as she took it.

Literally so ugly.

She deems them all unsalvageable even with filters. Her phone thumps face down on her bed and she turns back to the mirror, pulling the corners of her eyebrows up and away in order to tighten the elastic in her skin, if only temporarily. She meanwhile scorns her own chin.

Four-and-a-half minutes remain. Arm out, phone balanced, lungs three-quarters full, Maria tries again. *Snap.* She takes just one then checks it right away. She swallows hard, disappointed again.

Maria crumples two tissues in each hand then stuffs her bra one

side at a time. Flat hands press down then release, testing the springiness of the crumples. The hands curl into half-fists with thumb and index outstretched to yank off the now-deemed-tacky earrings. Another pair clips on, triggering a choked-down moan of pain. *It's too late to redo my makeup,* she laments. She tries on a new expression conjuring a new mental image: herself, a few years older, at a professional magazine photoshoot, standing wide-legged in front of one of those long cascades of shiny paper, surrounded by tattooed photographers and doting staff. She inhales, stiffer, and sucks her neck in. *Snap.*

I look retarded.

Three minutes remain. Maria closes her eyes and paces. Tears begin to form behind her eyelids. But she has to try again. She repositions herself in the window-light's bath and exhales, opening her eyes, hoping that the half-tears offer her some glint without any redness. She cannot bear to look at herself in the phonescreen anymore. She blurs herself from her own perception, seeing instead only shadows: cast by her hair, beneath her chin, under her fake tissue-paper-breasts. She lets her teeth out for one smile but does not capture the image. Her eyes do look red; she needs a moment.

One minute remains. Maria cannot hold her inhale steady; her heart is beating too hard, reverberating up her arm, compromising her grip on the phone. In desperation, she goes for irony. She can lower her right eyebrow but keep her left raised and she can flop her tongue out of the side of her mouth without it looking too doggy. *Snap.* She can close her eyes while looking skyward and feign a dopey, pleased mouth, framed with the flat back of her left hand under her chin, purple fingernails drawing focus away from her awful nose, her awful chin, her unacceptable forehead. *Snap.*

The house across the street begins to eclipse the Sun. A blue-gray shroud descends over Maria, hunched over her phone, staring at pictures of herself, judging them at once as a boy with a crush, a

jealous friend, a cruel rival, and a domineering parent. Each filter she tries seems to serve one character or another; never are they all happy. Never is she happy either.

Delete.

Are you sure?

Delete.

Are you sure?

Delete.

Are you sure?

Delete.

Are you sure?

Delete.

Are you sure?

Delete.

Are you sure?

Delete.

Are you sure?

Maria hesitates; it's the last one, the only one left. She tabs over. Jessica Monfredo posted four minutes ago: she's in her bathroom and her hair's still wet, casually wet; her skin glows, almost with a halo; her breasts balloon, proud and huge — *fuck you* — but her ears are huge too, stupid-huge, elephant-huge; her pose is so forced; you can literally see smudges all over her mirror—

Whatever.

Back in the photos app, Maria, with the tip of a finger, places two tiny pink heart characters, one on each of her cheeks, beneath her closed eyes wet with secret tears, and types the caption

~golden hour~

then posts the picture.

Four likes arrive instantly; Maria flops supine onto her bed to wait for more. None do until three hours later when a boiled crustacean of a middle-aged pervert, incognito as a teenager named "Candy," locates askance through bifocals and then taps, with the numb tip of a bulbous finger, a little heart-shaped icon.

The Mouse

It doesn't rain much and the wind hardly ever picks up beyond a lazy breeze. And nobody swims in January so the surface of the apartment-complex pool gets just about zero stimulation for a long time. The exceptions are slight: a leaf or a tiny bug may alight by random chance, not even breaking the surface tension; a soccer ball, launched by a miraculous kick, the highlight of a down-the-street little boy's life, once made a splash then bobbed then floated on the restored equilibrium. Otherwise, nothing.

The inner guts of the poolwater churn, eddies and vortices stimulated by the scheduled filter, incomputable and invisible, but that energy never affects the surface. The overly cautious dose of chlorine makes life impossible in the pool so no being will ever perceive the churn of the guts. Like so many processes across the cosmos, it unfolds as would be described by geometrical differential equations but no description ever materializes; no describer ever materializes. What a waste!

God is nothing if not wasteful, thinks Luisa, flipping open the dumpster past the pool area and mashing her trashbag into the engorged pile so that the door closes all the way and the stench doesn't leak out. She doesn't know how many people live in the complex but she measures them by their trash output. It's huge, endless. She has never swum in the pool but she has appraised it at least twice a week for five years, every time she takes out her

trash. The pool never offers anything in return. All its random inner turmoil stays under the flat surface. Something would have to puncture the membrane.

Today's the day. Luisa blurts a guttural "oh!" and shivers with surprise a quarter-second after her eyes catch a mouse floating dead, face-down, limbs suspended, a rotting blemish on the surface of the otherwise formless pool. The shock aborts her walk back from the dumpster. She cannot bear to get closer nor farther away. The mouse is so cute— it would be so cute alive, she thinks. Can a dead thing be cute? And how can such a cute thing *die?*

Nobody else is around. Luisa blocks the midday sun with her hand and squats. Her eyes readjust. The mouse's slick fur frays out at its edges, terminating in hypnotic wisps. The insubstantial knuckles of its little paws neither strain nor flop; they are perfectly relaxed. Its tail traces out a loping sigmoid, oscillating slowly, without purpose. She can't see any blood or any broken bones. This little guy just drowned. He must have leaned in for a drink and slipped in, she imagines. He must have struggled then stopped struggling when he died. This mouse is some kind of aquatic, inverse Icarus. But mice have no myths. His story ends with a funeral for one.

For a fleeting moment, Luisa is once again a little girl who loves animals more than anything. She feels phantom braces on her teeth and remembers the feeling of pigtails pulling her scalp. "I have to do something" rots instantaneously into "something has to be done," her aloof adulthood choking out the flare-up of enthusiasm. Without standing from her squat, she hinges around her left foot and scuttles to the pool's edge, hoping that one final closer look will reveal what to do.

"Uhh," she bleats involuntarily.

"Sorry, little dude." On whose behalf she is apologizing she does not know.

I'm not going to bury you. In no universe is her uncovered hand

going to make contact with the chlorine-soaked mouse corpse. Leaves and bugs have a way of getting filtered by the, uh, filter, she reckons, but this animal seems too big, too significant, to fit under the "margin of error." It is a non-negligible death in the pool. "Someone has to do something" also sags into "something has to be done." Luisa looks over her shoulder to the fringe between the cement walking area and the fence from which a row of mediocre trees sprouts. None of the fallen leaves look robust enough to fashion into some grasping implement. It is not worth the risk of being spotted clutching a mouse-and-leaf taco in a public area. She looks the other direction. A net is propped up next to a door with no handle. *Am I allowed to use that net?* She imagines fishing out the mouse and flinging it into the dirt. *I don't want to contaminate the net.* She looks back at the mouse and decides on inaction.

Luisa calculates that the mouse's small departed soul deserves a small moment of silence, not a full weeping eulogy or a flag flown at half-mast. It has to be really silent, though; in a way, her whole life has been silent since she moved to the complex — silent but noisy. This innocent mouse deserves silence without noise. She shifts, settling in, balanced equally on both heels. She resets her hand-shade and focuses on the creature. The pump belches on the other side of the pool, releasing a bulbous wave that slinks towards the poor mouse. Kinetic energy bumps the mouse's body up then back down. The wave, half-dissipated, ricochets off the pool's wall and jiggles the mouse once more on the way back. Luisa does not react; she perceives the motion induced in the mouse and for the first time feels a tingle of the immense complexity of the system of chemical fluids contained in the pool's unfeeling cement.

The mouse is dead, she thinks, but it still has a mechanical essence. It can move in certain ways and not others, but it can no longer move on its own. It's the little liquid fluctuations that interact with its joints and its weight. As far as the mouse is concerned — well I guess the mouse is not concerned anymore — as far as the

mouse is concerned, its own body is animated by an indescribable mystery from way down below.

Luisa tries to look at the water through the water. She looks for motion, trying to trace a path from something happening in the liquid to a direct consequence that nudges the mouse. This is not possible. And yet she feels it. The pool holds a ton of energy. But nothing can organize that energy and unmire it from its entropic whirl. The dead mouse could not overcome it nor extract mercy from it before it died. The pool can't charge Luisa's phone nor can it even reveal anything about itself when she gazes into it. It's all just random. It can't bring the mouse back to life even as it cruelly simulates elements of that life. The pool serves up, without any consciousness, pre-killed prey to the first predator who'll take it. Does the chlorine make it unpalatable to a hawk? Luisa imagines that a noble predator would prefer to do its own killing and moreover to feast on unchlorinated mouse. This leads her to conclude that this death is meaningless, ripped out of the circle of life. It's just a body, unfulfilled, subject to random forces it cannot control let alone understand, floating, equivalent dead or alive, maybe perceived, maybe not.

The moment she gave the little soul expires. The mouse yaws a few degrees anticlockwise but does not roll. Luisa takes a last look then hoists herself up, pressing her hands into her knees, waiting for the dizziness to pass before she heads back inside. A fear bubbles up, that she is not so different from that mouse, but before it can breach the surface, she pushes it away by reaching for her phone.

The Cheese

At a quarter past eleven, Hector feels a hungry rumble. He knows he can wait because he has waited so many times before. One out of about every thirty squares of cheese at work is torn in half, rendered unusable. Some corporate manual probably indicates that such cheese squares *must* be disposed of in the food-waste-can but it would be easier to imagine Jesus Christ himself stopping in for a fish sandwich than it would be to imagine someone caring enough to stop Hector from just scarfing the torn cheeses. He eats the first five rejects of every shift then starts to pile them up in a lonely corner. When his shift is about to end, he makes a "burgadilla," squishing the gooey pile into a bun, impregnating it with a single pickle.

Today the cheese column looks different. Its orange seems less fluorescent, somehow milkier. Something about the engineering has changed: square after square peels off perfectly, never clinging to its neighbor. It is as if this new cheese were imbued with a sense of duty. Nobody would notice or care if Hector ate a flawless cheese but he can't compromise the one rule of his one game. Without this flickering mental evaluation he would turn into a true zombie slave, he thinks. He starts to count, estimating that he has already peeled something like seventy-five unripped cheeses. Soon enough, a hundred, plus or minus.

Every other action recedes into autopilot, even more than usual.

Two hundred indistinguishable cheeses, he counts. No blemish ever appeared. Clock-time evaporates; now time is measured in cheese. Hector blows through his usual break on the way to five hundred, a full packaged column, sometimes enough to last an entire day. He knows he will investigate as soon as the shift ends. *What did they do? How is this possible?*

"¿Quiere fumar, güey?" Juan asks as usual just before three o'clock.

"Not today. I'm ocupado." Hector doesn't even turn his head. Juan shrugs and saunters off.

He is now just creating a new stack from the old one, piling square after square of immaculate cheese, hardly breathing, his heartbeat in sync with the tangy *slap* of each new layer hitting the stack. At 3:03, he peels the penultimate cheese, revealing the final smiling cheese, the fulfillment of an impossibility. His gloved fingers pinch its corner. He holds it up to his nose and rotates it, triple-checking in vain for any break of its symmetry.

"Bro," he breathes to himself.

Hector calls over to Juan, who is engrossed in a pokerlike phone game.

"Watch my station. There's no one here. I'll be back in thirty seconds."

"OK."

Hector bolts to the ice-cold restock room. It always reminds him of his old school library. The shelves tower and the smells confuse. The long prisms of cheese come in every week; someone else files them away on the right side just behind the door.

Yeah, something's up. The packaging is different. *That's a different shade of red.* He flips the prism over and begins to read the

ingredients before realizing he has no idea what he would even be looking for. He takes a picture on his phone then hoists the plasticwrapped cheese under his arm and reemerges into the hot kitchen.

Juan gives Hector a nonplussed look.

“Hay un millón de quesos allí, güey.”

“I need to check something.”

Hector strides past Juan and tears open the fresh package. It takes him seventeen minutes to restack five hundred more perfect cheeses in an alternating one-eighth-rotation pattern. They glide as he peels them, never once resisting. Every cheese is every other cheese.

A twang of sadness hits Hector as he realizes his game is over. No more counting, no more waiting, no more munching, no more burgadillas. His hunger, so long ignored, shivers him. He turns toward the customer bathroom and grabs his backpack.

“Juan, uh, put that cheese back in the package. It’s right there.”

“¿Cómo?” Juan looks at Hector in disbelief.

Turning his head as he walks past Juan towards the exit, Hector appraises his tower and shakes his head.

He walks fast, tilted forward, double-gripping his backpack straps. He left work barely halfway through his shift but he intends to return soon, at least on some instinctual level. His head is empty, cleared out by the bigness of this deal.

The library is an eight-minute walk away. Between 2:30 and 5:00 it is at its busiest, about 30% full on an average weekday, with the highest ratio of children to homeless. Hector bursts in and heads straight for the row of computers. Four stinking men in petrified

jackets sit paralyzed in front of heinous pornography, breathing in irregular pulses. Hector passes them and sits at the last computer in the row.

He realizes he has no idea what to type.

cheese science

There's a blog run by some hobbyist in Lancashire, an article in a PopSci periodical, and printable activities for schoolteachers.

cheeseology

A shop in Tampa pops up. This is not the right name of the discipline, he thinks.

what are the components of cheese

Hector wonders if the miracle cheese is even cheese as defined by usdairy.com, having four ingredients: milk, salt, a bacterial culture, and an enzyme. He whips out his photo from earlier. A much-longer-than-four list of ingredients confronts him. Sodium citrate? Calcium phosphate? Is that what makes the difference? What the heck is natamycin?

Tabs accumulate on the local-government-issued computer. Hector loses himself to a damp bliss, ocean waves of information lapping at him but never penetrating. Five minutes turns into an hour. He ignores his phone exploding in his pocket.

donde estas

regresa aqui amigo !!!

estas bien??

He ignores his initial plan to return within half-an-hour. He ignores his growling hunger. He ignores the entire existence of his

job. His job is an unspoken agreement, sort-of protected by a paper contract, an exchange of time and life energy for numbers in an account, numbers he watches go down so that he can live indoors instead of outdoors, so that he can turn on lights at will, so that he can eat more than he can find in non-existent nature. His job is nothing at all. It has no substance and no essence. Cheese is the essence of substance. Its chaotic, probabilistic tendency to tear into an unpredictable shape at an unpredictable time imbues it with a sense of organic meaningfulness; now the will of mankind has scrubbed away its most endearing behavior besides melting.

"Oh God," mouths Hector. He thinks, *what if it melts in a perfect square too?*

The thought stabs him in the soul. He cannot bear the imagined loss of the random lactic variations that have amused him enough to drag his consciousness along and prevent time itself from becoming a uniform, uninflected circle. It tears and it melts, never twice the same way. It is the only Law of the Universe that has any contact with him. The others reach in other directions, towards scientists and artists, into the stars and into the particles that comprise them, not into the schedules of burgerworkers. If the Universe loses contact with him, is he even alive? Does he even exist? That his answer to those questions is not an immediate, emphatic "yes" shrivels his soul. He recoils from the screen, a portal to a realm of information he cannot grasp, whose existence nonetheless shreds him. His neck stiffens and his lips sag. Hector, as he knows himself, dies, silently, without disrupting his neighbor's masturbation.

If Hector had been a little more detail-oriented he would have eventually found Oberg et al's 2005 article on the influence of calcium on the protein matrix structure of nonfat mozzarella, a collaboration between the Microbiology Department of Weber State in Ogden, Utah, and Utah State's Department of Nutrition and Food Science's Western Dairy Center, with funding provided by Dairy Management Inc. based in Rosemont, Illinois. The article con-

trols for a narrow range of acidity and thus demonstrates that while 0.3% calcium nonfat mozzarella cheese has a more homogenous texture under electron microscope inspection, the additional folds and serum pockets in the protein matrix of 0.6% calcium nonfat mozzarella cheese make it less adhesive and prevent excess irregular flow when melted. This clue would have led Hector to investigate calcium levels in so-called American cheeses as purchased by multinational gigafranchises such as his employer, and although the findings of internal laboratory experiments are, in general, hidden from public view, a video of a presentation from a recent food science conference in St. Louis was never set to 'unlisted' and was indeed accessible using the keywords 'calcium,' 'American,' 'cheese,' 'adhesiveness,' and 'study,' or some other resonant list of keywords. The presentation, given by a bearded man with purple, blotchy skin, ends with a flamboyant demonstration of the uniform unstickiness of a new type of square American cheese slice in which the purple man haphazardly grabs square after square from a stack identical to the one Hector unwrapped, no square tearing even as the presenter flops them around, at one point even slapping the remaining stack with a single cheese over and over, proving that it will always release and never attach to its neighboring slice. In his closing remarks, the presenter explains that industrial capacity to deliver the new cheese formula to all franchises will ramp up by the third quarter of the following year, which is to say the exact week before Hector noticed a change. Instead, his life lost all meaning.

The Date

"Ooh, he's cute. How tall?"

"Six feet."

"OK even if he's five-foot-ten with tall shoes I say go for it. He looks like he takes care of himself."

Lina agrees and swipes right.

• • •

The inane podcast blaring from Joey's earbuds ducks in volume, making space for a blinging notification. He rinses his fingertips in the sink, wipes his hand on his shorts, and checks his phone.

You matched with Lina!

He sniffs an inhale and taps the notification to remind himself who Lina is out of the thousands of women on whom he auto-swiped.

Oh yeah.

He appraises her pictures. She looks good. She isn't fat and she doesn't look like she's going to steal money. That's enough.

• • •

“heyy”

“I knew you were going to match me,” texts Joey. He has learned to burn through the fuel of his confidence as fast as he can early in the conversation.

“oh ya?”

“yeah”

“how?”

“~~I just knew~~” Joey deletes the vague response and replaces it with, “because you saw the picture with my dog, he was irresistible”

“lol maybe ur right”

Come on, give me something, thinks Joey. At the same time, he crosses his fingers that he won’t have to explain the “was” in the story about the dog, not actually his, dying recently, tragically; as well as the lie works, it weighs on him every time he repeats it. He waits another second, hoping Lina will say anything that proves she is a living human being, but gets impatient and fires off another message.

“where’d you get that cocktail in your second picture? looks good” Joey cringes as he sends the message. Was it too obvious, too transparent a setup? *“looks good—”* so stupid, but maybe Lina is stupid. He fights off a fisherman’s worry.

Lina chases down her cat and forces him to swallow a pill. She plops in her armchair, ready to focus. She feels guilty that she was so unfocused for the opening messages but knows now that her distraction is through, she can appraise this guy for real.

“oh ya... goldstar lounge, its a cute place, the drinks are SO good

and not that expensive, it's like ten mins from me" Lina feels stupid. Even "focused" she is coming across as boring to herself. Why is she talking about how cheap the drinks are? It makes her herself seem cheap, she thinks.

"where do u live" Lina feels that she is asking a dumb question but cannot pinpoint what is dumb about it.

"oh lol I live really close to Goldstar, I just mapped it, but never even heard of it"

Joey splits his brain in half. One side keeps track of the conversation with Lina, if it has even risen to the level of "conversation"; the other half clicks through the online menu of the Goldstar Lounge, making sure her comment about the price was not some kind of reverse psychology to weed out all but the richest suitors. It looks fine: single-digit-dollars for beers and the fanciest cocktail comes out to seventeen. He tabs back to Lina. Three dots indicate she's typing. They disappear. Joey grimaces.

Lina is sick of the cycle. She's sick of herself. The coy, overly-metagamed back-and-forths that have made every man like every other man and every woman like every other woman sicken her. She understands that she has been a complicit player. She looks at men's heights before she looks at their pictures now. She looks at the pictures before she reads the text. She doesn't believe a single word of what's in her own bio and she doesn't feel like she looks like any of her own pictures. How many times is she going to do this? What is "this?" None of her girlhood stories felt anything like this. *It's not like I'm looking for Prince Charming or anything, but come on!* This is how people meet nowadays? Dry, calculated texts, one in a thousand is good at all, one in a million is worth dating? "Dating" — the same program, over and over: coffee on a Saturday afternoon, then something involving booze a week later, maybe dinner, maybe not; a hug that lingers, a kiss if he's ballsy; she blushes if he's tall enough and his forearm veins bulge enough; "when can I see you again?"; more booze next weekend, leading

to sex, finally, as if it weren't all so predictable, as if it weren't always worse than it seems like it should be; two dinners the week after; "come over to my place, let's watch a movie" — yeah, right, a movie; his place smells weird; she lets him anyway; now they have to talk about stuff; she feels dumb because she doesn't know anything; he seems dumb too, and possibly conservative, possibly racist; she doesn't like him anymore; the same breakup text every time: *"im not sure what im looking for right now, i just dont think its the right time for me"*; redownload the app — she didn't even delete it in the first place.

No more.

Lina sees herself from above, a labrat in a circular maze, and makes up her mind.

Enough.

She wells up with free will and types, "meet me there in 30 mins." Lina's phone is closed before Joey can type a response. She's going either way, she decides.

Lina flamingo-steps out of her unflattering shorts and pulls her tanktop off. She switches her bra out for one with thinner, more discreet straps then scans through a mental image of her closet as she heads to the bathroom. Her favorite lipstick slides easily, the weight balanced just so in her grip. Eyeliner wings come out perfect, emphasizing not-too-much, not-too-little shadow. *The green dress — obviously.* It smells fresh enough and fits great as always. The gold flats are sitting right there, beckoning to her, the only elegant shoes she owns in which she can survive more than a quarter-mile of walking. The dangly earrings, the cute bracelet, the elastic hair tie — Lina meets her own gaze in the mirror, a rockstar ready to rock in record time. She grabs her phone on her way out the door.

"I'll be there."

Yeah you will.

Lina strides into the Goldstar Lounge, hips lilting with the invigorated energy of a woman who is living a real life. She is going to pierce the veil and meet Joey on the other side. He will awaken with her from the hazy stupor that has leaked into every corner of life. He will look into her eyes and reassure her, let her know that he's real, he's for real, he's alive and so is she. He'll grip her shoulder in an uncreepy way, a warm way, and transport them as a pair beyond this realm of sludge, to the realm of truth and light where the body's senses are dialed all the way up and money doesn't exist anymore, where blood pumps and wine flows and hearts beat and eyes flutter, no more websites, no more calendars, time itself a singular point — now, nothing but now. Lina actualizes with every step. *There he is* — the only other person in the universe.

"Hey!"

He twists out of his stool, standing to behold her. She enters his personal space. He goes for the hug and she matches his boldness, wrapping her arms around his neck. Time itself gasps. They lock eyes and smile into each other's smiles.

"You look beautiful," he says without releasing his hands from her low back.

"Shut up," she giggles. Her eyes twinkle. Their arms intertwined around each other's bodies form a circuit through which energy flows. Their faces are the resistors that light up and project beams of the possibility of nascent love. His reflects hers and hers reflects his.

He swallows, half-afraid to end the moment, but then asks, "what do you want to drink?"

"Vodka cran."

He turns to the bartender and slides out the neighboring stool. “Two vodka cranberries.”

Seriously? What are you, a teenage girl? What self-respecting man—
Lina attempts to truncate her unfair thought, and although she manages to cork the flow of internal words, her radiant, affirmed disposition wilts in an instant, like an orchid uncared for. She looks at Joey. She doesn’t recognize him. How could she? She doesn’t know him. She never knew him. His sideburn comes down a little too low. His chin sort of slides into his neck, unsquare. She doesn’t think he’s actually six feet.

“Cheers,” he offers, extending his little glass.

“Cheers,” she mumbles, suddenly darkened.

“You looked great in your photos but even better in person.” He’s trying to recapture the eye contact he lost.

“Shut up,” she says once again, but without bright mirth as before.

His smile hangs as he tries to process if what he just heard was an actual request to shut up.

“Uh—”

Lina cuts him off before he can form a word, not even by speaking but by pulling out her phone. It illuminates in blue her pouting face which to him now looks like a lumpy fruit on its way to rotting. He pulls out his phone too.

The Startup

"Bro."

Two hands interlock with a slap. The boys smile in unison, uncontrollably giddy until they simultaneously realize how much manlier it would be to keep it cool. They glance at the stately lawyer across the desk.

The lawyer offers a curt smile. "Congratulations. You two are the official cofounders of Boingo AI as owned and managed by Boingo AI, LLC. Now is there anything else we can do for you?"

Roy looks at Parth. Parth looks at Roy, then at the lawyer.

"Uh, we're good."

"Excellent." The lawyer signals the end of the meeting as he always does with a double-handed slap of his desk after which he stands up and walks unhurriedly to the door.

"Call me if you need anything."

They shake his hand one-by-one, each undershooting the optimal tightness of grip then overcompensating, but not to the point of awkwardness.

Parth extends his arm to hold the door open for Roy but the lawyer is already holding the door. Roy exits. Parth releases then follows.

“You wanna call a car or should I?”

“I’m chill to do it.”

The boys stand on the curb, engrossed in phones. Roy drafts a post. Parth texts his mom. A bubble indicates that she read the message instantly and is typing her response.

Yay!

I always knew u would do something great

Come home this weekend and we will celebrate

OK

A notification descends from the top of Parth’s phone screen.

He chimes at Roy, “eleven minutes.”

“Bruh.”

The minutes pass. Roy switches from drafting to scrolling. Parth claims a daily reward.

As their summoned car pulls up to the curb, the lawyer breezes past them from behind on the way to his lunch break.

“You boys OK?”

“Yeah,” says Roy as he opens the door and flings himself inside.

“Thanks again,” echoes Parth.

The lawyer nods, looking more jolly than he did while they were

reviewing contracts. Parth buckles his seatbelt. Roy does not. Roy clears his throat then remarks conspicuously, "OK, so five investor calls this week and a few more next week. Even if one hits we will be so good for a while."

Parth nods with a closed-mouth grin. His eyes flash to the rearview mirror. The driver doesn't react at all.

"I'd do it even if the money doesn't come in for a year."

"OK, sure, but bro, don't talk like that." Roy is the more superstitious of the two.

"Uh huh."

• • •

They sit on Roy's couch, laptops open atop laps, working. Roy is auditioning color palettes. He asks a chatbot again and again for a list of four colors that represent "background," "highlight," "shadow," and "secondary," volleying a new adjective after each round.

more chill

Absolutely! Here's a list of four hex colors with a more chill vibe—if you like it, I can help you take next steps and build out a whole pitch deck using this color scheme. Just say the word.

Roy pastes the hexadecimal codes into another window and looks at the results for a few seconds.

more modern

Absolutely! Let's modernize these colors, so that your pitch deck will look sleek, elegant, professional—try these. When you're ready to move on to next steps, just say the word.

i like the light blue but make the dark blue darker

Absolutely! Here's a new version of the same color scheme with the "shadow" color darkened for a more muted but striking effect. When you're ready to move on to next steps, just say the word.

too dark

Parth glances over.

"That looks pretty good."

Roy replies, half-groaning, "yeah but it needs to be *perfect.* It needs to be, like, something you've never seen before."

"Uh huh."

Parth had glanced over in an idle moment while a new build of their app was deploying. Now it is just about ready to test; in particular, he is hoping that the brand-new "ethnicity" feature is going to work in time to show it on investor calls.

"It is live?" asks Roy, shutting his laptop.

"Should be."

Parth blazes through a few rote clicks, drags a couple sliders, and then makes a choice from a new dropdown menu.

"..." Parth's eyes widen, and just as he begins to turn towards his cofounder—

"Let's go!" bellows Roy.

"Wait" — Roy's eyes tinkle — "fuck this dropdown. Make it a fucking *world map,* dude."

"Yo that's lowkey genius." Parth can't contain his grin.

• • •

It's 7:20 AM in San Francisco, 10:20 in Miami, leaving ten minutes for final preparations. Roy skirts into the bathroom to set up his hair. Parth begins a backup videocall to nobody, double-checking the lighting and background proportions. It looks alright. The filter blurs his dark pimples. He cracks two capsule-bottles of nauseous caffeinated goop and pours their contents into two cups of overbrewed English Breakfast. The app is running a special local build that should be foolproof. It is one click away, ready to show off. In the bathroom, Roy leans over the sink, hair hanging in a crescent swoop. He flicks moisture towards his face hoping to achieve the perfect balance of sheen, volume, and casual curvature. *It's as good as it's going to get.* He spreads his eyelids with indexes and thumbs attempting to undo the puffy squintiness that afflicts him after a restless night.

"I look so fucking Chinese," he mutters subvocally.

His phone reads 7:27. Roy reaches into his pocket for his wallet. In its backmost slit lives a fading photo of his father as a young man, visiting Shanghai for the first time, smiling uncharacteristically — uncharacteristically relative to his son's image of him, at least. Roy smiles back with half the intensity.

From the other room, "Dude, it's time."

Roy cannonballs into the chair next to his best friend. He sweeps a single finger from the top left corner of his forehead, stimulating his hair one last time. Parth gulps his souped-up tea.

"Should I let him in?"

"Yeah."

"Aight." Parth clicks a button, releasing the investor from the digital waiting room.

“Gentlemen!” the man onscreen booms. He is a different kind of creature from the boys. He is meaty; he wears a bulky, jangly watch on the loosest setting and twirls a pen between turgid fingers; his blubbery lower lip hangs low so that his bottom teeth jut out when he talks, more tusk than fang. His skin is the color of boiled lobster and his hair looks like a skidmark.

“Hey there, David,” begins Roy.

“Dave’s fine.”

Parth swallows.

The big man continues, “So, Boingo AI. Nice name.”

“Th–”

“–What does it mean?”

Roy realizes he is going to have to lead. Parth is already exuding a clammy nervousness.

“We thought it would be a memorable name. And, uh, we like 80s music–”

“Oingo Boingo!” Dave’s cavernous chest resonates with the big open vowels. He begins to sing, tunelessly, “I love little girls!” then laughs a few times. “That’s from my era!”

“Good music is good music,” says Parth. *When in doubt, go for the tautology* — advice he heard in college from an older, more extraverted philosophy-major bro.

Dave cuts to the chase. “So let’s see it! We are all-in on AI here. I tell my wife, there’s nothing it can’t do.”

“Can you see this?” asks Parth as he broadcasts his computer screen.

"Yep."

Parth launches into a speech he has rehearsed a hundred times. Roy relaxes and reaches for his tea.

"What you're seeing here is the main screen of Boingo. It's a super minimal interface. We're all about functionality. As you know—"

Parth wonders if Dave knows, then discards the thought and presses on.

"—the dating market is basically, like, cooked for males. The average female can get twenty-five matches a day, up into the hundreds depending on various factors, but outside of the top five percent, males average zero-point-eight matches per day on dating apps, with a conversion rate of less than ten percent, meaning many males end up going on less than one date a month."

Dave nods along but his eyes go vacant. The word "female" strikes him as a strange choice but also triggers a memory of a drunken sexual encounter with a girl named Bess who cheerled his high school football team on which he played tight end. *She had a tight end,* he thinks to himself, recalling himself making that joke to his buddies nearly forty years ago.

Parth presses on with his rhetorical concoction.

"Male match rate is basically out of your control; it depends primarily on height but race and overall attractiveness are big factors too. However, conversion rate goes way up for males who can communicate well, and all the data points in the same direction: confidence."

"Mmhmm." Dave likes the word "confidence."

"But how do you build confidence?"

Roy likes the word “build.”

Parth answers his own question. “Practice.” He pauses for a beat, then transitions to the next phase of his pitch. “Imagine if you could practice talking to girls–”

Girls, not females, Dave thinks.

“–as much as you want, without any stakes, so you can try out anything and everything. Now imagine you could practice talking to *any type of girl.*”

Roy jumps in. “For instance, I love Japanese women and I’m super into movies. Check this out.”

Roy takes control of Parth’s computer. He slides a little bead to *5’2“* and another to *105 lbs.* A third remains at its default: *18 y/o.* In a little box, he types *movies.* Then he clicks an icon of a globe and a map of the world overtakes the screen. He clicks on Japan and the map minimizes, replacing the globe icon with the Japanese flag. Finally he drags another bead a little to the right, towards the ”extrovert“ side. A button branded *Start Chatting!* lights up. Roy clicks it.

The interface disappears and meaningless flavor text scrolls by in lieu of a progress bar.

Copying genetic code...

Working through childhood trauma...

Breaking hearts...

Aging gracefully...

Then, in an instant, a smooth render of a woman appears on the screen. She opens her eyes with a gentle smile and raises her right hand in a peace sign. Her underlying logic makes her sway

and blink to dispel the true illusion that she is not real. A speech bubble appears over her head.

“Hey, I’m Hikaru! ~ <3 ~”

“Hikaru” shrinks and settles in the corner. A text-message interface takes over the screen.

Roy tries to gauge a reaction. Dave’s hands are folded in front of his mouth, chin resting on fat thumbs. Roy continues, “So now I can chat with her, view pictures, and whenever I finish the chat, Boingo will grade my performance on an itemized one-to-ten scale. What should I say to break the ice?”

Dave puffs from his nose. Unearthing his chin from his hands, he offers, “Do you like movies?”

Roy types, “do u like movies”

A moment later, a bubble appears in response.

“OMG, yes! My favorite movies are American Beauty, The Devil Wears Prada, and I lowkey love Marvel.”

“Nice,” mutters Dave. An awkward pause elapses. Roy jumps in, typing back a response without consulting Dave.

“lol yeah marvel can be pretty fun.”

He accidentally hits ’Enter’ by reflex, sending the message before he can type the followup sentence.

The fake woman texts, “when I was growing up, I watched Japanese movies with my dad, even though I lowkey don’t know Japanese. They’re all about vibes, though, so it’s chill.”

For a moment, Roy forgets that he is pitching his new startup. He types, “lol i know what u mean i know chinese but–”

He stumbles as a thought of his father crosses his mind.

"–chinese movies are sooooo boring except for the fight scenes"

Roy's stumble reminds him of his mission. He explains to Dave, "So you basically go on like this with as many girls with different stats as you want. And after you've done a bunch you can generate a summary of your performance with tips on how to improve. Our pro tier integrates with all the apps and will make suggestions based on your past performance to actual, uh, girls, and we expect a 10x improvement in conversion rate after just one month of practice on Boingo."

Parth inhales, preparing to follow up; Roy flicks his leg to stop him.

"Wow," remarks Dave. He puffs air from his nose then sits back in his chair, wrangling his thoughts back towards financial matters. The wrangling fails. Three images confront him all at once: of the generated woman, at once accurate yet so obviously inhuman yet in a way that he cannot describe; of what feels like a thousand women he had propositioned over what feels like a thousand years, almost all propositions ending in failure but none so quantitative as what he sees before him; of the boys sitting in front of him, who have inherited a world he did not create nor want but nonetheless must invest in for that is what he does, who he is — an "investor." Dave fails to transpose the computer woman to his high school's football field, steaming after a won game. He fails to transpose these boys to the once-cheap bar in South Tampa where he had honed his game, testing shirts and jokes and affectations. That world and its game are gone. Something colder overtook it. Dave fails to expunge from his mind another image, one that creeps up to rehaunt him in weak moments: *"Stop it! You're hurting me!"* — her hands reaching to cover her face, his bigger hands grabbing hers to pin them back, *just one more—*

Shame electrifies Dave's flesh. That world needs to die, he thinks. It doesn't matter how fun it ever got nor how alien its offered

replacement seems to him. Look at what happened. Look at what happened to *her* and so many others like her.

Eleven seconds have elapsed. Roy and Parth have resisted the urge to look at each other. Dave has breathed, decelerating, four times all the way in and all the way out. Finally, he deinterlaces his fingers, lifts his elbows off his desk, and sits up. His first syllable catches in his throat before his voice kicks in.

"I'm in. I see it. This is going to be big."

The boys' eyes widen in unison.

Dave continues, gaining momentum, "I– So what are you guys looking for?"

Roy opens his mouth but then Dave just keeps going.

"I'll tell you. We've set aside one-point-five specifically for AI. We're looking for something that'll make a difference."

Roy slams his tongue into the roof of his mouth. Parth crunches his pelvic floor.

Dave wants to wrap the conversation up so that he can call his daughter to check in on her. He blurts, "So let's do it. This is it. I'm a believer. One-point-five for fifteen percent. You work out the kinks and get it on the market. I call on my contacts and we get this thing moving."

Parth ejaculates without missing a beat, "ten percent."

Roy bites his tongue and calls on every bit of strength he has not to recoil and scream.

"You know what?" Dave fires back, just as fast, "Fine. Yeah. Fine. I'm in."

Roy cracks open his mouth to reply but instead of words blood trickles out. Parth spots it in the front-facing camera, suppresses his horror, then says, ice-cold, “You aren’t going to regret this, Dave.”

“I sure hope not!” he bellows, followed by a laugh that pushes the brief tension into the past. “Alright. We’ll send you some details and some forms this afternoon. Love keepin’ it quick like this. But I know ’em when I see ’em. Be well, gentlemen.”

“Thanks Dave.”

Parth clicks a button to end the meeting and in the same motion of his arm spins to embrace Roy. Roy leans back to give his own arm enough space to interlock with Parth’s. He misjudges and they fumble for a second until their hands and eyes meet in triumph. Parth beams. Roy’s crimson smile leaks, blood oxygenating as it makes contact with the world outside of his head.

The Decision

Roxanne doesn't bother to lock the door as she exits her apartment. *Nothing to steal.* A compact green purse, exactly the dimensions of her phone plus a centimeter of padding, hangs from a thin strap thrown over her shoulder. She can mash her unimportant sunglasses and her cutest vape in there too. The walk to the café disappears in the blink of an eye now that it happens every day at the same time.

"Mmhmm," she nods as the barista gestures towards the espresso machine, preempting her usual order. The card sandwiched in the back of her phone case triggers a beep. Roxanne chooses "20%," the leftmost option, then slinks to the counter, awaiting her shallow cup.

Every day, the same little round table and endearingly wobbly chair welcome her back. Nobody else ever takes them. She stretches, her tailbone a fulcrum, legs out, back back, before sipping the identical-to-every-other espresso. It never gets any better but it triggers in her an impulse to work. "Work" has deteriorated into hopeless digital begging. A cold blue website glows from her phone, announcing zero followups and zero leads, let alone a job interview. No red bubble materializes to signal good news. Roxanne looks into her cup's residue; it spreads out aimlessly, randomly, in a way that reminds her of herself.

Arching back up she catches herself in the mirror, looking hunched and bony, almost serpentine — *surely unfeminine,* the thought crosses her mind until the ponytailed programmer's gaze flits across her view, reminding her that her own flesh still courses with life and blood and thus attracts predators. *This guy is such a creep,* she thinks with her tongue pressing into the back of her clenched teeth. He's there as often as she is but he radiates employment, which somehow stifles her willingness to get up and tell him to fuck off or at least turn the other way. According to numbers in a banking database, she is less than him, so today, she just leers. His eyes dart back to his giant screen. *It's more afraid of you than you are of it,* she recalls her dad remarking about a snake on a hike. The greasy programmer's elbows bend out in some perfect, researched, ergonomic angle, his spine an unbending pole, his wrists padded. His masters' masters rake in value by the minute and he gets to enjoy a drip of their ichors.

He is disgusting and yet he desires her in perfect, ironic opposition to every job-offer-gatekeeper. *I could do that, whatever "that" is* — Roxanne cannot imagine that this gelatinous man is so much smarter, so much more capable than she is while looking like that and acting like that. Her phone buzzes her out of her omnidirectional revulsion. She grabs it a little too quickly but then slams it back on its face without finishing reading the whole notification; the word "OVERDUE" tells her enough. She spurts an exhale and then leaves the café in another huff. The elbowed slime attempts to outthink her by drinking in a flash of her through a mirror but she was already glaring straight into it. The panic in his eyes energizes her as she bursts through the door.

The slight heels in Roxanne's shoes induce a little tension in her calf, lengthening and firming up her legs. By holding her purse's strap up with a thumb near her clavicle, she improves her posture. Her shoulders slide back and in towards each other, causing her chin to tuck ever-so-slightly and her breasts to sit on her ribs rather than hang off them. In order to pick up her pace, her hips need to sway a little more. At full walking speed she is no longer a

serpent; she is a woman and mistakable for nothing else.

“I’m not an idiot,” she utters subvocally. It’s the first internal thought of the day that breaches the membrane of her voicebox.

I’m not an idiot and I shouldn’t be broke—

Her thoughts dive back under the vocal surface and she truncates this one before the word “anymore” can come.

Roxanne flings open her apartment door and spits her built-up disgust into the kitchen sink. The glob, so similar to the man whose gaze it represents, lies in the sink, taunting her, resisting gravity’s pull towards the drain, defiant yet so shameful. Roxanne chooses not to pity the mucus in case it would cause her to pity the mucuslike man who ogled her for free.

For free!

It doesn’t have to be that way!

Roxanne always looks great in her bathroom mirror, wrapped in a cocoon of peeling walls and questionable powders, but today she looks amazing. Her hair lilts songlike and the crack of her lips casts a hooked line. She tilts her head forward but keeps her eyes fixed so that the bottom of her irises just barely kiss her lower lids, roundness within roundness softening her image. She twists her neck a sixteenth of a rotation, first anticlockwise then clockwise. Clockwise looks better because of the whorl of her hair. Without breaking eye-contact with herself, she reaches for her phone and lines up a mirror selfie. It comes out perfect. Even she cannot detect the usual little-girl terror in her own eyes.

She knows she will have to undergo an annoying and degrading logistical setup to take the next step but she pushes it off so as not to ruin the moment. A hesitation screams from within. She slays it. She unbuttons her blouse and lets it fall to the floor. Rather than hiding the towers of bathroom products, too domestic and too real

for a photoshoot, she exits the bathroom and reappraises herself in the long mirror tilted against the wall across from her bed. From this angle, from a slight downward tilt, she looks long and leggy. She experiments with the positioning of her phone in her right hand and unhooks her bra with her left. Four transmissions separate her from the image of herself she perceives: eye to phone to mirror to phone to eye. Her left hand pulls her skirt so that she can step out of it. Momentum carries her all the way: she wiggles her underwear to the ground and flicks it out of frame with her foot. Even her pubic hair seems to curl into the late-morning light.

Roxanne stands, taut with momentary confidence, in front of the mirror, more beautiful and more delicate than anything the slimy bottom-half men deserve to ever see, knowing nonetheless that they will pay. They will pay for what they have done; they will pay for what they will do; they will pay her specifically — *not specifically, I guess; a million other girls, too* — for what she is about to do. She swallows the image of a million terrible, short, pimply, balding, and weak men masturbating in shame, financial shame, refocusing on the legitimate, timeless beauty of her own form, a symphony of curvatures, unattainable except by a considerable sum, enough to get her back on track, enough to slow the "OVERDUE" notifications, enough to ask for some milk in the espresso and tip 30%, the rightmost option, enough to stop doing this thing she hasn't even quite yet done but is in the process of doing.

Roxanne snaps a series of pictures of herself, naked, tall, tongue-pressed-to-roof-of-mouth, twenty-one years old, alone, broke, desirable as validated by horrible strangers, sexy as long as no one asks her how she feels.

She falls backwards onto her bed with her knees bent and feet on the floor. Her phone is suspended above her in two hands and her elbows point outwards as she picks the five — no, three — best pictures. She chooses zero. Before getting back up she bites the bullet and sprints through a labyrinth of disclaimers and signup

procedures, getting her account ready to receive messages and, more importantly, money from strangers. She chooses a screenname and verifies her age. She types a meaningless and unfactual biography. All her energy is dedicated to pushing thoughts and feelings away. When she bounces back up, ready to try again, the sun has transited just so, so that the light coming through the window flatters her pale figure even more than before. Her tear ducts activate, despite the coldness for which she yearns, glistening her eyes with an otherworldly sheen that makes her even more beautiful than before, someone might think, she thinks, and the shadows cast by her breasts come out even more striking.

For all the difficulty of signup and setup, it is surprisingly easy to upload pictures. She organizes eight into an "album" and then presses a big blue button with a shaking thumb. She collapses onto her bed weeping. Roxanne heaves and heaves, each sob more painful than the last, missing the red bubbles that come in, seemingly instantaneously, notifying her of recent activity.

The Transaction

There's nothing left to do today. Cycles will reset tomorrow as they always do. Time cycles, numbers cycle, and biology cycles. No one can avoid it. Omar cannot avoid it but right now he floats in the little clipping of time at the end of the day where there's nothing left to do and the anxiety that looks ahead to tomorrow hasn't yet taken root. This little stretch of time is as long as his body as a fraction of the arc length of the rotation of the Earth around the Sun. His feet flop eastward towards the edge of his bed, poking out of the crumpled, lifeless blanket. After a year unwashed and unfluffed, the blanket is nothing more than the molted skin of a long-gone lizard. Omar wiggles. He has mastered this wiggle, which nudges the blanket as high as possible on his chest for maximum coverage but lets his arms pop out so that he can balance his phone on his left hand and swipe around with his right index finger. He has reached an agreement with the passage of time: every night, it will show him some mercy and pause its flow for him; in exchange, a little bit of his vitality, expressed as liquid, pumped into a tissue.

The time has come. Omar's right finger executes a preprogrammed series of little flicks. A private browser tab surfaces, dark gray, the color of privacy. This is the only URL he ever types anymore. He's not allowed to search for the name of the site. He has to type ".com;" he is not sure whether he has to type "www." but he always does. The infernal site confronts Omar with a resuscitation

of an otherwise-dead pursuit from the Victorian past: the impulse to categorize. Five generations ago, men with bushy mustaches and bizarre hats stitched together family trees of all of God's creations, from fish to rocks to orchids. They left men in Omar's time so little left to do, but the impulse remained.

Filter by:

Omar knows some ethnicities only through pornography. He stopped wondering long ago how it is that all these people ended up filming themselves having esoteric variants of sex. Does the demand lead the supply? Is there really a critical mass of people out there who want *that,* who yelled their unfulfilled preferences out into a market full of entrepreneurial ears, unscrupulous men with cameras fanning cash at destroyed young women, running through calculations about view counts and advertisements needed to make back their hideous investments? The answer must be "yes," Omar feels, somewhere subconscious. These questions have not been allowed to surface for years. The cruel outside world, the world of exchanging debasement for money, would seize on those questions like a cold, hungry squid. Omar cannot let this happen anymore.

The usual pathways spark no excitement. The grand splendor of every corner of human sexual depravity laid out in a digital tapestry leaves Omar cold. His lifeless penis sags, drained of the initial Pavlovian jolt that strikes when he sees dark gray. He drags his right arm back from under the covers and tabs over to a more neutral social network. He types in "Ch" then lets his phone's memory complete the rest. Her page loads. She was hot in high school and she's hot now. She looks hot at her graduation from nursing school. She looks hot after a round of tennis with her less-hot sister. A groan threatens to escape Omar's throat when he sees how hot she looks at the beach, tanline poking past the edge of her bikini, weight shifted onto one hip. But Omar can't bring himself to jerk off to a person he knows, or knew, in real life. "Real life," as in Algebra One, nine years ago.

He breathes for a moment then thinks of how to describe her. Into a dark gray box go the words *"busty young blonde nurse freckles"* — Omar deletes *young,* hesitating, hesitating again considering synonyms for *busty,* finally accepting his own query and pressing a "Send" button. A new tab overtakes: an advertisement displaying a smooth, uncanny, videogame elf-woman slobbering and heaving, eyes crossed. Omar scans for a tiny "x" and smashes it as soon as he finds it. An endless column of thumbnails unrolls down his phone screen. Some look computer-generated; some look real, even too real, too professional to be erotic; some look grainy and old. Every fourth video's thumbnail is punctuated with an advertisement.

Real girls, Real Sex

Make $$$ While You Sleep

2 inches in 2 weeks

Fuck Bitches 2Nite

Stop Jacking Off Alone!

If he had to, Omar could not describe his criteria for choosing a video to watch, one that would inspire proper masturbation. Still, none meet those criteria. He ventures to page 2 and keeps scrolling. Nothing hits. He releases a breath he had been holding for almost a minute.

An image halfway down page 3 grabs Omar's throat and wrests him erect, heavy eyes widened, sitting up then hunched over in an instant, rapt in disbelief. He extends his neck so that his eye is less than a centimeter from the tiny thumbnail, a box within a box within a box.

"No way" comes out as a breathless whisper. His heart thuds and his thumb lingers for half a moment before making contact with the screen. The thumbnail expands to the full width of the

screen. *It's her.* Chelsea, the real girl who had made Omar's Adam's apple lurch as a teenager, the real woman whom he ogles from a vast, disgraceful distance, wrapped in his crinkly blanket, rubs herself on camera on his screen, mouth agape, a mask of lust poorly concealing shame and desperation. The video paralyzes Omar. He had yearned, intermittently, for the reveal of this exact image for so long, and now that it appears, all erotic mystery vaporized, he feels nothing but disappointment with both himself and Chelsea.

"Chelsea—"

Of course the name "Chelsea" doesn't appear anywhere. A description beneath the video calls her "Lexxi" and announces a link to a site where lonely, desperate men can subscribe to "Lexxi" to view supposedly exclusive photos and videos, where she can moreover upsell them on private messages or even custom photos and videos. Omar has no agency left. He clicks like a zombie.

Everything's grayed out on her page because he's not a subscriber. He can read an "About" section that lists cold, quantitative measurements and obviously manufactured interests. Omar reads several acronyms he does not understand. He clicks another link, this one to a wishlist. Lingerie dominates Lexxi's wishlist. Omar imagines what Chelsea's wishlist would be. *How did she get here? Did something happen with the nursing gig? Family emergency? Maybe if you're hot you just make more money this way...?* Omar imagines Chelsea, alone and destitute, dribbling microwavable canned soup into tacky bowls, buckets catching rainwater leaks, an imagined grandmother thinning and rotting on a futon in a makeshift bedroom. He imagines her curvaceous figure hidden under cartoonish pajamas, her face dry and pimply without makeup, her hair tied back so that she can forget about it; then he imagines her transforming for the camera, slathering herself with cosmetic goop, hoisting synthetic strips of fabric between her buttcheeks, pulling her eyebags down and to the side, checking for pubic stubble in a too-brightly-lit mirror. In Omar's vision,

Chelsea as Lexxi is a damsel imprisoned by the tortured appetites of monstrous men everywhere. Money is the key to her cage.

Omar sheathes his penis through his underwear-flap and walks to the pair of sneakers where he keeps his wallet. He slips out his credit card then returns to bed. He can break this paradox, he thinks. She does for money what she can so that she never has to do it again; it should be a one-time trade: sexual integrity and privacy in exchange for a normal life. He can't blame her for the choice he imagines she has made.

The *Subscribe* button glows pink. He has to choose a tier. $5 per month gets you a continual drip of lewd photos, presumably filling the needs of the basic masturbator. $20 per month unlocks livestreamed videos every month where she will interact with you in a chatroom as she "tries on" swimsuits and lingerie. The advanced senior masturbator can pay $120 a month and guarantee himself a 30-minute one-on-one video call with Lexxi where she will utter his name and act as his puppet, within reason.

"Turn around," he could demand.

"Take it off. Slowly."

She would have to. That's the deal of the $120 tier.

Omar makes his selection and a new screen confronts him. He must create an account and set up a profile. He thinks to himself that it makes sense that they are asking for more details than usual; this must be how they weed out the creeps. He considers a fake name but chickens out when he realizes it wouldn't match the name on his card. He wouldn't want to trigger some kind of clerical friction that he'd have to scrub out later.

Click to verify your email.

He taps the button onscreen. The email doesn't come right away. He waits, unbreathing. He checks his Spam folder. There it

is. He verifies his email. He's back at the page confirming his subscription.

There was an error processing your request. Please try again.

A little banner drips down from the top of his phone screen.

CITY NATIONAL BANK FRAUD PROTECT™
Did you authorize a $120 purchase to CAMJUNGLE.COM, LLC at 11:19 PM on 10/18/25? Reply "YES" to confirm or "NO" to automatically lock your account and engage FRAUD PROTECT™.

Omar beams with righteous pride, knowing that he is making a difference, turning a damaged person's life around, scooping her dignity back to a kind of baseline, a moral equilibrium from which she can continue, unfettered by past stumblings, for which he expects no fanfare and no praise because he is doing it only out of a sense of rightness and duty, which will radiate from within when the time is right, surely detectable by the type of sensitive woman he will ultimately court, as he types "YES."

The Crash

A jagged red snake curls down an unwatched plane one tick at a time. Cold monitor glow dissipates before it can illuminate the face of a person no longer a boy but not yet a man. He will awaken in his chair to a disaster in the world of numbers but first he exits a dream, of a woman-colossus, reclined, staring askance at him, a bug at her feet.

He creaks awake. His knee, pressed into the edge of his desk, tingles with needles and his jaw resets after a night aslack. An instinctual flick of his right wrist resuscitates the monitor. The bad news glows.

It's all gone.

A chemical lightning bolt courses through his spine, shocking it erect. In a single reflexive action, he opens a new tab and presses the 'R' key, lets autocomplete guess the website he wants, then hits 'Enter.' Comment after cascading comment screams out the same message.

im gonna kms

it's literally so over

this is because i bought guys

FUUUUUUUUUUUUCK

He tabs back over. The screen spells out his demise as an absolute number, as a relative percentage, and as a graph. The red snake plummets, racing for Hell. It dynamically resizes in proportion to the stretching window that contains it, making room for the cascade of threads.

somebody tell me WHYYYYY?

bruh I was leveraged to the tits

does ANYONE know what is happening rn

A snarky genius attempts to ease the pain with an explanation:

more people are selling than buying.

Others cannot contain their pain:

bro I put EVERYTHING into this fucking coin. it had ALL the signs, we were going to the moon, if I had got in two fucking weeks earlier I'd be drowning in champagne, FML

literally my last shot. this has literally never happened before, not this bad.

The snake shoots down so fast that it triggers an automatic alert, a venomous hiss.

[*...down 75% in the last 24 hours*]
[Trade] [Hide]

A moment later, the same alert vibrates his phone, uncaring and redundant.

A tangled chain of impulses pulls his mind in every direction at once. He stares at a receding future where he is wealthy, where he

had reached escape velocity, where he moves out and sets himself up for good. He pictures his dad's grimace and the impossibility of explaining to him what any of it means. For the first time, he recasts his mother's loss against cancer as an expression of mercy. She would never see him like this. He gets to spare her the burden of loathing and disappointment. She smiles at him from another realm; he does not detect it.

Every comment is the same. Tens of thousands of traders scramble in vain, glued as one into a burbling mass, doomed to the permanent underclass. The "dead cat bounce" proves to be a myth. He wonders, *does this mean someone is making money? Or is everyone fucked? Someone has to be making money. My money went somewhere, right?* It isn't his money anymore. It was never his money. It was never anything but numbers stored redundantly in a million places on a million computers. Those numbers represent his fate, a die cast before he was even born. At any moment he could have opposed his fate; he could have sold before bed, or the night before, and been set for a month, just not a lifetime. No — otherwise it would not have been fate. Fate paralyzed him before he intervened, every time.

Fate releases its paralyzing grasp and leaves behind the stench of free will. He hardens closer to manhood but longs for boyhood. At least back then he could not read fate's numbers. They were hidden away, defanged. *Now is the time to act! Toughen up, sonny!* There is only one thing left to do.

[Buy/Sell]

[Sell]

[Maximum Amount]

[Are you sure?]

[*You're saving $0.13 on this trade!*]

One hundred twenty four dollars.

That's literally nothing.

A vapor of hope sublimates off him as he leans back into his chair. Half a dozen calculations begin only to be aborted a heartbeat later. A final flash of his dream's memory leaves him: the woman-colossus' foot, a breaching whale, slipping past him, too big to climb but too gentle to crush him, a downward slope, the shape of his life. Cold shame tightens his pores, imprisoning him within himself.

The terrible snake, exhausted, flicks its red tongue one last time then turns green as it begins to climb.

The Update

“Amelia!!!”

“Coming!”

Daphne balances her skull on her fist, her elbow a hinge holding stress and confusion. While she waits for her daughter she pretends to scan the screen in front of her.

“What happened?” Amelia leans over her mom’s red shoulder.

“It looks different,” spits Daphne like a pouty toddler.

“Oh yeah. It must have updated.”

“I didn’t touch anything.”

“I know. They just auto-update now.”

Amelia thinks for a second. Nothing arises.

“Let me see. Can I sit?”

“Go bring another chair. My knee is acting up with this rain.”

Amelia walks to the kitchen. In the eight-and-a-half seconds it

takes to get there, she unsheathes her phone and squeezes in flashes of five images:

1. Her friend Annie, head cocked, the backs of her hands under her chin, lit from behind on the beach;
2. An advertisement for shelf-stable guacamole;
3. A cartoon dog wearing a tiny cowboy hat, generated by a sophisticated computer program running trillions of matrix multiplications on vast quantities of image data obtained under gray legal provenance;
4. Her dad's former colleague Joe, grinning, gripping a big white mug emblazoned with the phrase "DON'T TALK TO ME UNTIL I'VE HAD MY MORNING JOE";
5. An advertisement for an app that lets you finance food delivery purchases, where you can knock down your interest rate by playing a pinball game that drains your phone's battery fast because of a background process that mines infinitesimal shards of a cryptocurrency that has climbed in value due to its popularity in parts of Ghana.

Amelia closes her phone and returns it to her pocket. She grabs the good kitchen chair and hauls it back to the other room.

"Scoot over."

Daphne groans as she makes a show of hoisting herself a centimeter off her rolling chair, fleshy arms straining, corklike toes nudging her mass to the left. Amelia mans the mouse.

"What were you trying to do?"

"I need to check my bank account."

"Check it for what?"

“I just need to check it.”

“OK. Where’s your Web browser?”

“I always just had it open.”

The screen displays a smooth high-definition image of an abstract 3D swirl, a blue lump of soft-serve over a background of a gradient scientifically proven to minimize eye strain in Americans over fifty-five. On the desktop sits a single icon, another abstract swirl labeled “Start.”

Amelia retreats into her memory, reaching for an idea of a keystroke or some other command. She grew up on this computer, once so proud, majestic even, now stumbling in pathetic bursts, unable to shoulder bloated modern software. A warm memory appears of an array of distinct skeuomorphic icons, a metropolis of worlds unto themselves, her own personal slice of the infinite possibilities that the computer offered an eleven-year-old in the new millennium. She recalls a virtual pet, Bucki, a fuchsia chimera of dog and shrimp, now twenty years unfed. She recalls waiting breathless for a high-resolution movie poster to download and render, one row of pixels at a time, the anticipation of airbrushed abdominal muscles widening her eyes and rocketing her pulse. She wonders when the last time she felt anything like that was.

No keystroke comes to her mind. Her memories retreat.

She double-clicks the “Start” icon. A white rectangle with rounded corners materializes then immediately disappears. She waits a breath.

Daphne exhales and asks, “what are you doing?”

“Mom. Hold on.”

Amelia clicks the icon again, just once this time. The round rectangle returns. It is a pure, hurtful white, with only a gray

wheel spinning in its center. Six seconds later, various bubble-shaped elements popcorn along the top of the window. Amelia finds what appears to be a search bar. She clicks.

A speech bubble appears, half-obscuring the search bar.

Hi! I'm here to help. What can we get started for you?

The words populate one character at a time at an irregular pace.

"Are we supposed to be hearing this? Mom, where's the volume control?"

Daphne's blank eyes give Amelia nothing. Amelia lets instinct take over. She reaches her right hand around the back of the monitor and gropes for buttons. She finds them in a long column like a dog's nipples. She fingers the lowest one. It mushes inward, unsatisfying. The monitor goes black half-a-second later.

"Now you've done it!" Daphne throws a hand into the air.

"Mom, it's fine! I'm turning it back on."

She mushes the button again. After a few moments, the monitor comes back to life and displays a login screen.

User:
[*DAPHNE*]

Password:
[ ]

"Oh, shit. Mom, please tell me you know your password."

"Of course," Daphne says indignantly. "It's my social."

"Seriously?"

Amelia thinks that this must be a bad idea but cannot articulate why.

“Uh, type it in.”

Daphne leans over with a groan and tilts her head back to engage her farsightedness, tapping number keys with pink, arthritic index fingers. Amelia presses “Enter” when she’s done. The password box shakes like a dog drying itself, casting off Daphne’s incorrect characters.

“Goddammit!”

“Try again.”

Daphne selects each key with just her right index, double-checking as she presses down. The box shakes again.

“Are you sure that’s your password?”

“Yes I’m sure! They ask you for it when you go to the bank in person now. Can you believe that?”

“What do you mean? This is your computer password, not your bank password.”

“Goddammit Amelia! Why didn’t you say that?”

Amelia stops herself before she retorts.

“Just type your computer password. Actually— Let me just do it for you.”

“I’ll do it,” says Daphne in a half-whisper, suddenly somber.

In 1972, Daphne, as a thirteen-year-old kid, spent a week with her semi-distant cousins at a fading summer camp in the Adirondacks. The camp had thrived in the 1950s and survived the 1960s but had

had no hope of seeing 1980 without a dramatic reinvention of itself and its economic configuration. In '72, the counselors worked as a favor to an image they upheld of an American Golden Age; they hadn't been teenagers in forever but nostalgia and loyalty kept the attrition rate low enough to cobble together something like a good experience for the youngest children of the most dedicated families. Daphne's cousins' mother, her own mother's sister, had married a mostly-secular Jew from New Jersey who, by some twist of circumstance, had come to own an Italian pork shop in Bergen County, which triggered endless shame-spraying and kvetching from his ancient Russian grandparents that could only be softened with a continual stream of donations and family-oriented events. The pork shop made a killing so by the time Daphne's cousins were old enough, they spent major chunks of their summers at that expensive time capsule of a camp, leaping from swinging ropes into a crystalline lake tucked away from the turmoil of the times. That year, young Daphne's parents drove from Delaware to New Jersey, dropped off their daughter, then continued on to Philadelphia to visit an uncle who had been isolated for too long. Quiet Daphne never saw eye-to-eye with her cousins; during the long drive to the Adirondacks she daydreamed, anticipating the idea of "summer camp." She envisioned basically the opposite of Wilmington, Delaware. Hard urban edges gave way, in her mental image, to the soft fractals of the forest; manmade grids gave way to the loping, tangled network of God's original creation. She imagined deer and trout and fireflies replacing cars and cockroaches and streetlights. She imagined most of all, though so privately as to be veiled even from herself, a boy, faceless, undiscovered, yet emanating cool strength and electric confidence. His strong legs grew out of his tall socks and led to narrow hips, from which his jagged abdomen sprouted. Arms hung from shoulders; a jaw hung from ears. James from Maine fulfilled her image, giving it a face and thus a hot reality. He was fourteen but born the same year. He thought school was a waste of time. He wished the counselors would let him keep his knife. Daphne can't remember saying a single word to him. Every memory is just a stammer surrounding a golden portrait, her looking up into him, pining to

taste his breath, leaning back and towards him at the same time, weak in the knees.

Daphne's knees are weak in another, sadder way now, calcified rather than aflutter. She elbows her daughter to the side and types

[19james72],

each character obscured behind a dot, the password hidden behind half a century of fermenting memories. She clicks an icon with a right-facing arrow and the login screen disappears.

[*Installing critical security update 1/8*]

"I thought you said it updated already."

"I don't know, Mom."

They sit. Daphne looks ahead at nothing. Amelia looks at the lying progress bar.

Amelia dreads the familiar dread of waiting for a computer to finish a so-called required task. *This will take an eternity on this thing.*

"Can we come back to this later?" Amelia asks, hoping to avoid an endless string of awkward and indignant interactions.

"..."

"Mom?"

"Yeah?" Daphne answers, looking over, jostled back to reality.

"Can we come back to this later? This is going to take a while."

"I'll wait here. I don't want to keep getting up with my knee like this."

“OK. I’ll come back in five minutes. I’m going to nuke some popcorn.”

Amelia stands and reaches for her phone, flipping it open and scrolling past an advertisement for a one-size-fits-all knee brace.

The End

A germ of the apocalypse unfolding halfway across the world crashed and took root at the end of 1941 on America's edge. So sealed were the fates of countless boys to be made men only in death. Premonitions of the reaper made it even to Southern California, paradise on Earth.

"Roll the dice, young man! No — we'll roll them for you!" Uncle Sam's wicked countenance bellowed. If you wanted to amount to anything more than a ghost, you had to get to work and that meant you had to find a girl and make her yours. "Make her yours so she can make yours," some wiseguy quipped.

Millions of men departed after cold, paralyzed non-goodbyes, their fates and the fates of their bloodlines undetermined. So gestated a new generation beginning in 1942. For the price of millions of their fathers they went on to rule the world.

A girl in paradise carried one of the first boomers. Her belly manifested as a bulge of shame, enough to kick her out of paradise.

"I can't. I can't," she sobbed.

A local woman, childless and rational, hushed to her, "listen to me. There's a doctor in town who came here from Kansas years ago. He knows how to take care of this."

"..." the girl's face glistened with mucus and salty tears.

"Tell him I sent you. He will know what that means."

• • •

The doctor sat in a hard chair frowning. He was at once a lump of pudding and a grisly oak, outside of time, larger than fate itself and ready to pull its levers.

"How far along are you, dear?"

She hesitated. "I'm not... I'm not sure."

"Take a guess."

"Six months."

The doctor shifted. His chair creaked and so did he.

Without breaking his frown, he spoke straight into her.

"Listen to me. That's a baby now. I–"

He froze for a moment, gears turning.

"–do you have somewhere you can stay?"

"My daddy kicked me out but he would take me back."

"You sure?"

"No." She began to weep.

The doctor had trained himself not to react to patients' outbursts of emotions. He preoccupied himself with a calculation: his own age, his wife's, his future as it would be seen by his past, and the problem sitting in front of him, the problem of life itself. The

decision came to him as if from far away in the sky.

"Here's what we can do: stay with my wife and me for a couple of months and I'll deliver your baby when it's time. We will raise it as ours and as soon as you are back to full health and ready, you can return to your life. You can tell your mommy and daddy if you want. That's your decision." He paused for a shallow breath. "It's all going to be alright."

As cold as the words came out, and they were delivered matter-of-factly, without self-conscious emotion, the girl realized in an instant the magnitude of the warmth and compassion she was being shown, and realized moreover that she would never be shown anything like this for the rest of her life. She nodded, unable to speak.

That girl became a ghost to her baby just as the baby's father had. The doctor delivered what became his daughter, fulfilling, in a roundabout way, his promise to keep the will of his life pumping, his promise not to be forgotten as a ghost.

• • •

Three years later, the apocalypse brought about its own end. The devil shot himself in the head and the impossible force of man ripping God's perfect creation in half vaporized two hundred thousand at the speed of light. Certainty returned to paradise; even the waves of the Pacific relaxed as they kissed the Californian shore. The saved baby grew. She would be too young to remember the war and so inherited a promise of a future that could only be better. Her survival and then birth had been a primordial display of her will; that will never slowed. She defeated the boys in school. She practiced the piano at six in the morning, unwilling to take anything less than gold at the talent show. She stacked three books on the seat of her father's automobile so that she could see over the wheel and drove with adult competence as a disguise. Algebra and geometry yielded to her efforts, shaking the misogynistic worldview of her ancient teacher who had no choice but to award her

an *A,* his first ever to a girl. She graduated as the class of 1960's valedictorian, described in the yearbook as having "a tongue like a scalpel." The University of California system, growing in prestige and power in parallel with all of society, gave her another chance to prove herself. She took it. Chemistry, botany, and zoology yielded. Differential calculus and spherical astronomy yielded. She absorbed a survey of Scandinavian languages and the principles of history and criticism of art. She stayed out of trouble and rose to the top, filtering out students who couldn't keep up with her but attracting those who could. They came from all over the state: Rebecca, whose grandparents left the Pale of Settlement, descended from an endless line of Talmudic commentators; Floyd, the son of a housebuilder who could decompose any gadget into its elemental, even abstract pieces; Gloria, who picked up French, German, Italian, Latin, and even some Ancient Greek on top of her California English and at-home Spanish; and Harry, tall and wiry, shy but hilarious every time he spoke, a young man with a gift for simplification, his mind a pot that boiled ideas down to their essences, his voice a whisper that conveyed only the truth, even if the truth was cynical or ironic. Harry had moved to California from New Jersey as a teenager. His father, from Glasgow, covered up an ancient sadness, a black shard borne of the Highlands, a sense that time only meandered and did not progress, with humor. His mother, a bitter and skeptical Polish-Ukrainian, suspected no good; everyone was up to something all the time. They packed up for sunshine, intending to leave behind the dim drizzle of the East Coast. Deep darknesses do not fade away so easily, so it turned out. Harry, the oldest child, defeated school by melting and boiling it in his mind, never showing any particular standout talent but rather rising to each challenge as it came.

Gloria had swooned to her friend, "you're going to love him. He's tall and handsome and he's funny just like you are. Just come. Come on."

"I don't know."

"Just come!" She grabbed her arm and they walked over to the soda shop where little kids bounced around in front and college students mingled deeper inside, along the walls.

Harry sat in a corner, leaned over a cup of coffee, blowing it cooler, looking like a wire hanger missing its coat. As the two girls approached he tilted his head up but did not fix his posture.

Gloria pulled out a chair and thrust her partner into it.

"I'll be right back," she giggled as she spun around.

"Hi," Harry offered.

"Hi."

"Harry."

"Sandra."

Harry, quickly, asked, "does anyone ever call you Sandy?"

Sandy laughed. Everyone called her Sandy. She introduced herself as "Sandra" only to people she had never met in an attempt to seem slightly more sophisticated.

"Yeah. Does anyone ever call *you* Sandy?" she fired back, with an impish smile.

The corners of Harry's eyes crinkled as he laughed. "Not yet."

Once or twice in your life, the realization strikes you that you are, right now, meeting a person that you were always supposed to meet. In the fleetingly rare instances where such a realization happens in both directions at once, time, in rare mercy, shows some patience and does not turn up the silent heat of awkwardness at least until both predestined friends-or-maybe-lovers have had a chance to soak in the moment.

Sandy twisted in her chair. “Where did Gloria go?”

Harry smirked. “I’m starting to suspect this was a–”

Sandy blushed. She cursed Gloria, nowhere to be found, in her head.

“You want a coke? This coffee is terrible.”

“Alright.”

• • •

They graduated in ’64. Harry decided to pursue medicine: it matched his general, across-the-board competence and he knew he could keep a steady hand and push away the passions that would ruin a surgery. Sandy had earned pocket money as a nanny and learned that she was great with kids, so she figured she could be a teacher, which would make use of her talent, keep her sharp mind sharpened, and get some revenge on the grouchy bygone fools who domineered her own schooling, whom she had to defeat. It was a plan in a world where all you needed was a plan. They married at a hotel by the beach. Her father, the old doctor, by then almost petrified, breathed an ultimate sigh of relief at passing the girl he saved into the arms of a worthy man, a soon-to-be doctor, no less. He readied himself to die.

Harry’s residency began up the coast in San Francisco. He let her drive; she was better. Sandy spent half-days in experimental classrooms that flirted with revolutionary yet unsticky ideas in education. Harry, risk-averse, wanted to insure his future which was now their future. He enlisted in the Air Force, thinking that it was the best branch in which to be a medic: in the Army you’d see blood and guts, blown-off limbs, gangrene, and crushed bones; the maritime branches’d make him seasick; but pilots stayed basically healthy and if they crashed there was nothing he could do for them as a doctor. A couple years of service and he’d earn the prestige and security of a veteran. But that meant they’d have to

move around. A long, pregnant drive took them to New Orleans, Louisiana. Their newborn daughter drank in music carried on steamy air. Cheyenne, Wyoming, a place devoid, with nothing to slow the cold, saw another daughter born. Baltimore, Maryland became a black city while they lived there, but black patients bleed red too and black kids read the same letters and count the same numbers as any other. Sandy and Harry neither undertook nor underwent the sixties. They observed and they served: she, those early in life, accumulating more of it; he, those drained of it, clawing it back as best they could.

The last kid, a son, was born at the dawn of a new decade in an old place. Los Angeles in the 1970s, plagued by a blanket of smog, ushered an aging cohort of stars and geniuses into comfortable, poolside final chapters. The city worked, but not too hard. Neighborhoods came into their own, kids on bikes and in trees and swimming in pools, parents tired after a decade of inflamed unrest, the television the altar of every home now, World War II a memory just beginning to fade, the new war pushed to the fringes of thought no matter how bloody and how meaningless it got.

Four-hundred miles up the coast, undying embers of big, revolutionary ideas found their kindling in another world, a world yawning awake beyond soil and trees and ocean waves. The world of bits, silicon gates through which electrons passed, found its gods: cold men who could whisper down to the metal. The C programming language, then Unix, then miracle-machines like the Apple II let there be a new kind of light, no longer a basement-sized abstraction but now a full-powered beam, right in your house, right on your desk. Sandy had been watching her own kids' eyes fill with light. She recalled mastering Euclid's realm of geometry and Bach's realm of counterpoint. Deep down, subconsciously, she remembered willing herself into existence, aborting her own abortion. The computer was going to be important — she just knew — and she would master it too.

A summer workshop on programming in COBOL gave her the

basic vocabulary and thought patterns to mount her case. “What could elementary schoolers possibly do with a computer?” — she could hear the objections already. But she had built a reputation as the most competent and most progressive teacher at Franklin Ave. Elementary, thirty-five years old, ready to teach for thirty-five more.

“The budget people will never go for this—”

“Can I talk to them?” Sandy fired back immediately. She always called bluffs.

“I don’t—”

“You don’t what?”

“...”

After a month of pressing, she persuaded L.A. Unified to buy a personal computer for her classroom. The kids huddled, drawn into the green, otherworldly glow. You could type and remove characters without an eraser or gooey whiteout! $4{,}761 \times 9{,}997$ in a heartbeat! A speck, envisioned as a turtle, could trace its path on the screen, following instructions in the language of elementary-school-friendly geometry. A whole universe of universes materialized solely by the will of the intellect.

Sandy kept up with the times. She bought a digital camera and learned to see in pixels. She installed a CD player in her classroom. Hers was the only class that produced a movie, cut to VHS, at the end of every school year. She was the first person she knew to behold the bewildering, occult sound of a dial-up modem connecting to the Internet. No setup difficulty was too great; Sandy felt a moral imperative to follow the edge of the frontier. Her father was a farmer from nineteenth-century Kansas, a distant universe, and she was born into a world killing itself. She knew as deep as anyone could know anything that her brain was her ticket into the future. The future came; it was now, and with it came a license

to shed the desiccated exoskeleton of a failed past. The stupid prescriptions of old-world femininity, dresses and gloves to the elbows, could die. Authority based on no more than age could itself age away into irrelevance. She recalled the yellowed letters she had found tucked away in a box way back in a closet, letters she couldn't understand, from her father to a woman not her mother but to whom he wrote "your daughter," seeds of evidence dug up of her own adoption, to be detangled and reckoned with years and years later; the totalizing force of new, laser-cut technology and in particular the miracle of computation promised to illuminate every world hidden from her, to shrink the globe to a point you could hold in your hand, that you could shape yourself with metaphor and control with the strength of your mind, every picture ever taken fossilized in silicon amber inside a sleek little prism, every piece of music rendered as numbers rendered as infinitesimal cuts on a round sheet of glass, every ghost brought back to life.

At fifty-four years old, she saw time fold into a loop rather than progress as a line: her first child gave birth to her first child. Sandy was around the age her father was when he rescued her. This suspended her at a point halfway between past and future, the high noon of her whole life. When she had been born, the Allies, which is to say, millions of young men equivalent to her ghost of a biological father, raged in two theaters while the world's brightest minds dedicated themselves to decoding and then unleashing the power of the Sun as a bomb so that the God of America could slay all others. Her grandson took his first breath in a world atop a substrate of computation, where America's last rival had fallen and war was, if you were protected by the American empire, nothing more than a matter of numbers in financial databases. The moral imperative to transcend and replace the fleshy real world of real violence and real disease and real hunger had seen its greatest realization yet: a little squad of math geniuses programmed first-person three-dimensional computer gameworlds that executed geometry and linear algebra so fast that you could run and jump and, more importantly, *exist* in them, these worlds, some horrific and alien, others bright and cartoonish, all so important, the obvious future

of the species, needing only time to gestate. She'd make sure he, her grandson, her representative, so she felt, wasn't left behind.

He learned to read on a GameBoy. She listened to him explain the numerical ins-and-outs of Pokémon. She bought a *Zelda* game that transported him to yet another world, an opera of mystery, shifting topology, and the dance between action and puzzle. She taught him to multiply. She impressed upon him a sense of respect by forcing him to wash his hands every time before he sat at her own mother's piano, his great-grandmother's, built a century before, a contraption somehow both parallel and dual to the desktop computer she taught him to use. The landscape of computer metaphors came so naturally to him as compared to her — that was the whole point! Window, menu, file; click, drag, drop; the mouse; keyboard shortcuts. So too the structure of music: octaves, fifths, counting off-by-one; two types of thirds and their inversions, sixths; scales as rulers; intervals as compasses. The geometry of harmony and rhythm blossomed subvisually meanwhile pixelsung melodies leapt across glowing screens; *Super Mario* a ballet; Gruntilda's Lair in *Banjo-Kazooie* itself an instrument, played in computed space, rendered by cathode-ray tube onto a bulging screen; he told her everything every time, spitting with excitement.

He got serious about music so she called on her student from twenty years past to teach him clarinet and how to improvise. When your favorite teacher calls on you to become her grandson's favorite teacher, you rush over. She talked shop with his middle school math teacher. His first iPod was a birthday gift from her and she let him use her iMac to import CD after CD, stars in a constellation by which to navigate. She taught him to teach too, putting her word on the line with neighborhood kids who needed math tutoring — "He can do it. I know they're the same age but he can do it." They sat at her desk practicing how to write upside-down like any good tutor should be able to.

What she gave him became his whole life. His inner monologue

turned into music, his free time was computer games, and his pocket money was all from math tutoring. She held back tears when he left for college, to New Jersey of all places, where his grandpa'd been born. Did she do her job too well? Would he have stayed local if his applications were a little weaker? Her knees gave out. It would be hard to visit. A lifetime of believing in the food of the future, engineered rather than cooked — McDonald's, Diet Coke, Skittles — had taken its toll on her heart and lungs. He didn't forget to call but she wanted to go see him. She wanted to loop back on her own time matriculating into the class of 1964 with revolutionary fervor vibrating in the air. The class of 2016 would inherit cyberspace. "Giga" was the new prefix. Everyone was a little cartoon now, a face in Facebook's book. She quieted her mind when fear of the new grabbed her or when she yearned for the new-plastic utopia of the fifties. *This is the world now. Keep up. This is where it had to go.* And in fact, the instantaneousness of online communication proved especially beneficial to old farts with mobility challenges. Plusses like this staved off looming dread pre-lamenting an atomized society. *This can't be right.* Everyone's necks just tilted into the phones now. *I used to know my neighbors.* Sandy had always been all-in on the future, all-in on the tech, as open-minded as anyone could be, but she couldn't lie to herself about what she saw: fire extinguished from young eyes, politics nothing more than absurd screaming, Byzantine computer systems worse than any COBOL flowchart just to get a damn cheeseburger! Her younger grandkids mumbled into big glowing rectangles. To pay a bill was to juggle a bunch of secret codes until you got on the phone with a person who hates you. How could it end up like this? Californian elegance and optimism had delivered that first Apple computer but now Sandy found herself imprisoned rather than liberated, longing for her early life when California was still a secret and not yet the bulging eye at the center of an empire. The digital labyrinth became colder and crueler every year, always further betraying its original promise.

• • •

Sandy's numb, bloodless finger jammed at an unresponsive touch-screen. Her "God dammit!" aroused Harry, asleep, leaned over in his heavy chair. It took eight shallow breaths to calm down and try again.

"There we go!" she relaxed as the call went through. Her grandson picked up within the second ring.

"Good morning!" He sounded energized.

"Well, I wish," she grumbled, calling on her sarcastic 1940s-movie schtick.

"What's up?"

"The damn computer isn't working."

"What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'm *trying*—" she overenunciated, "—to look at Facebook."

"Not loading?"

"No."

"What do you see on the screen?"

"It's blank."

"OK. Uhh—" her grandson thought for a second, calculating. He knew this was going to be something stupid. Since he moved back he was the first line of offense against the technology. His grandma was eighty-one now; a stupid reason to see her was nonetheless a reason.

"—can I come over in like an hour?" he asked.

"That'd be great." A stupid reason to summon him was a reason nonetheless.

Sandy sat, inert, receding from herself. She was once so active, such a force of will. Now time passed around her like a river around a stone. There was nothing to do — nothing to grab, nothing to cut, nothing to examine. Her body had deteriorated: a betrayal. Her beloved technology collapsed in on itself so that it was now just another obstacle: a betrayal. Only her tongue and her mind remained, but even then, with so little energy day-to-day, her sharpness, indeed her identity, had become blunt. Early memories of the beach and of those little books evaporated, leaving behind as residue second- or third-order memories of memories. Books of photos looked concerningly fresh — *when was that?* — and worst of all, memories of feeling any different, any better, dropped like overripened fruits from a sagging tree. *It used to be different,* but she could not say how.

A minute or an hour passed. A knock at the door then her grandson's figure, towering and unwilted, appeared.

"Hey!"

"Oh!" Her mild look of shock concerned her grandson but he hid it away.

"I'm here!"

"Yes you are," she said, long, as if to invite a "because."

"The computer."

"Oh yes! That's right." She remembered now.

He was already leaned over in front of the screen, mouse in hand, squinting.

“WiFi’s been OK?”

“I guess so.” She didn’t know how she would know if it hadn’t been.

He grumbled something under his breath.

“So, how are you today?” She wanted to talk about anything but the computer.

“Pretty good.” He was distracted trying to help her.

CNN blared across from her husband, who was folded in half.

“Turn that off!” she protested. He reacted in slow motion, reaching for the remote like a sloth.

“Is it hot out there today?” Sandy continued.

“It’s not too bad.” He was still clicking through window after window, earnestly trying to diagnose her Facebook problem.

A heavy and unwieldy sadness leaked onto Sandy from above. Years of slow withering lay beneath the bitter irony of what was happening: the computer, the technological promise of a strong, open, extended life, now the opposite, sludge and malaise, was taking the attention of her grandson away from her as the clock spun on and on, taunting all who dare look at it. She felt a deep confusion, as if the ground ceased to be but she did not fall.

“Forget it!” she yelped.

He turned to look at her, feeling that he had failed. He had, doubly: gone were the days where just by being a young person he could surmount any computer challenge; and worse, he was missing the whole point of the whole thing — human connection. Software had once again bared its jailcell-bar teeth, quietly imprisoning people just trying to get something done. Never before had he

detected the terror of confusion in his grandmother's eyes; never had she seemed so small. A breath stabbed him and he froze for a moment, then sat down.

"I'll, uh, try again before I go."

She just looked at him.

He changed the subject, "can I get you something to drink?"

"Diet Coke, lots of ice."

The answer, same as it ever was, comforted them both.

• • •

Sandy had to time her words against the outflows of oxygen tubes, each shallow inhale affording three or four syllables to ride a labored exhale. Her tongue lived this dark rhythm.

"Can you call—"

"..."

"—the nurse?"

Her daughter and her daughter's son both reached for the button at the same time.

"What do you need?" asked her grandson.

"Bring her some water," his mother suggested.

He hovered a plastic cup by his grandmother's face. She did not react.

"I'm putting it right here," he enunciated.

“Ice—” she breathed.

“Here, Mom.” Her daughter cupped her hand and jangled a few chips of ice into her hung-open mouth, ready to pounce in case she choked.

A nurse walked in, expressionless.

“Yes, Mrs. Campbell?” she chimed.

“We tried to give her some water but she only took a little ice.”

The nurse took an automatic glance at the tower of medical machines and registered nothing worth reporting. She took a step closer and tried again.

“What do you need, Mrs. Campbell?”

She timed the oxygen-rhythm, “call—”

“...”

“—my father.”

Her daughter and her grandson shot each other equivalent glances, wincing. Then the nurse looked at all three of them in sequence, half-calculating ages. The daughter shook her head at the nurse.

“Mom, we can’t call him right now.”

She swallowed then continued, “but I am here and so is Jacob.”

A “hi” barely escaped Jacob’s lumped throat.

“Oh—”

“...”

“—Jacob?”

“I’m right here.”

Sandy didn’t seem to hear him.

“...”

“Call Jacob.”

She reached out for a phone that wasn’t there.

Jacob stood up right beside his grandmother and met her hand with his.

“I’m right here.”

“...”

“—OK.”

Sandy drifted back into a drugged sleep. Her grandson grimaced at the nurse to signal that she could go. She understood and left the room, looking down at the floor, building up momentum as she left.

Sandy’s daughter and her grandson resumed a hushed conversation that had been unfolding at varying levels of seriousness and intensity for months now.

“What about bank stuff?” he asked, not coming up with a better description.

“I think I can handle it all because I’m the executor.”

“But like, passwords and that kind of thing?”

“There’s a paper in the blue folder that has a lot of them written

down."

"From when?"

"No idea. We just have to try them."

"Here — let me keep working on the emails."

She handed him his grandmother's phone. He scrolled through emails, flagging anything that could be construed as important or worth keeping, setting them up for a grand export. He kept talking as he worked.

"What about, like, subscriptions?"

"You'll have to handle that. I don't know anything about that."

"OK."

So they went back and forth, trying as a pair to thread their way to the exit of a labyrinth deep within which their beloved matriarch had been locked. Layers of software security measures stood as cold obstacles to their dreaded project. Why couldn't it just be done? No one was there to say what was legal or not, what was gray, what was necessary, or what could be let go with some grace and dignity. When you stop watering a plant it dies in its own beautiful way. Software, by contrast, thrashes around in rigor mortis, yelling warnings and shutting doors, unaware of its purpose in the world of flesh and spirit. How can money, nothing more than numbers, be so inert and fearful? Why can it not simply flow to where it is supposed to end up?

• • •

"We're going to need to see the death certificate," mumbled an underpaid teenager in a corporate office half a world away.

"She's not dead yet."

“Oh — can you have her call? Then we can begin the transfer process. Please have your account number ready.”

“She’s about to die.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, ma’am. If you can put her on the—”

• • •

“Is there someone we have to call first?” Jacob asked his mother.

“Just—”

She stammered for a second.

“—just— We’ll figure it out.”

He understood and quieted.

A minute elapsed. Sandy, her daughter, and her grandson all breathed in interlocking polyrhythms, creating warm, silent waves. Her husband back home broadcasted on another faint psychic oscillator the hope that she’d come back from the hospital. Her great-granddaughter, just months old, had always smiled when she saw her great-grandmother but would never get a chance to form a conscious memory of her, just a bone-memory. Her heart beat faster and brighter than anyone else’s, adding a sparkle to the spectrum of the waves.

Sandy dreamed through the morphinated fog. The Californian Pacific Ocean heaved in and out, salting the air and shaping the sand. There she stood, an embryo, water pulling the backs of her heels, the ocean a huge lung, rhythm and geometry made real in liquid matter, the source of all life, the arena of ancient chemistry, the clock beneath all music. She looked out to the horizon and saw its nothing, a line at infinity curving if you looked real close; closeness, the opposite of the horizon; see nothing but sea...; *sí;* Control–C; C–D–E–F–G–A–B–C; CA, 90278. Electrons swirl in

California's silicon ocean; Apples fall, drag and drop; windows open with a click. Her ocean could never freeze but this false one did, a prison of ice; *digital* — of the fingers, but unresponsive now to their tips, cold blood useless against ice; flowcharts clogged. *I will miss you.* Wavelengths and amplitudes summed across every moment of every day, every student, every teacher, every file, every folder, every child, grandchild, and great-grandchild, into one chord, crossing the circle, less than π-r-squared due to the curvature of the Replogle Globe, the chord the tongue's scalpel, cutting the loop, rending it, ending it, forward now, no more endlessness. The End.