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Power Negotiations: A Fiction Collection

Kyra Kondis
kkondis@smu.edu

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I.  \textit{The First Two}

Gerald couldn’t sleep again, so he drove. His car floated down the road, past skeletal cement plants and dark fields cleared for construction. Moisture gathered in his stinging, unblinking eyes. What sign had he just passed? The exit for McKinney? He couldn’t tell. Everything on either side of Interstate 75 was pitch-black and flat; the only sub-city lights in view were from a Race-Trac station, miles behind him, a red fleck in the distance. Was he that far from Dallas already?

And there was the grey pullover, carefully folded in the back seat. Joanna would be glad he had not wrinkled it. Gerald smiled, just slightly. He liked that the shirt was in his possession. Alone on the road, he exited 75 and drove until the feeder road became a dirt road, which became the muddy side of a lake, eclipsed partially by woodland. It was quiet here, but with enough noise that he wasn’t alone with his thoughts. The occasional car horn sounded from the distance over the hum of crickets; toads groaned in low, rumbling croaks. Gerald parked at the end of the dirt road, stumbled into a grassy clearing in the trees, and gingerly lay on his back with his hands folded under his neck. Here, he was not Gerald. He was a stranger.

But still, here, as he lay with his eyes closed, hoping the drone of the mosquitoes might overtake the noise of his swarming thoughts, he couldn’t think about anything but her. What was she doing right now? A few weeks before, she called Gerald \textit{insensitive}, and Gerald said nothing in response. Well, nothing as bad as \textit{insensitive}. Not that \textit{insensitive} was inherently the worst thing in the world, but it was a lie, and Gerald couldn’t stand lies.

The growing clusters of swollen, pink skin on Gerald’s legs began to itch. Fuck the bugs, all the bugs and their stupid, sneaky masses. And to think, Joanna loved them—\textit{Look at them on}
your window, she’d say when she came over to Gerald’s apartment, which suffered a ladybug infestation every November. They look like jewels. Once, she’d collected a few in a jar and painted a still-life. A big, bright painting, on a canvas and everything. Then she set them free, back on his damn window. Why’d you paint that? Gerald had asked when she whipped the final product out from under a sheet. Apparently, Joanna did not think this was the correct response, so Gerald bought her flowers and took her to a community center painting class where a real artist showed people how to paint real things, things that people actually liked to look at, like hot air balloons and sunsets. They’d had fun there, playfully wiping paint on each other’s cheeks and giggling about the ruddy woman in the front whose balloon came out very phallic. God, they’d been so good together, he and Joanna.

But bugs, bugs were stupid and small. Gerald lay flat on his back and stared at the sky, wondering where it stopped being sky and just became empty. Beyond the stars, probably, that were sprayed across the blueblack stretch of space. Out there, nothing mattered like it did on earth. But then again, the earth was just out there too. Maybe that was why some people did the things they did, without worrying about the consequences. Like Joanna. How lonely she would be, now, without Gerald.

A twig snapped somewhere behind him. Gerald froze. His heartbeat quickened, and goosebumps sprouted across his arms, raising his hair on end. What kinds of animals were out in a place like this? Was the sound even an animal? Squinting into the dark, he inched quietly back towards his car. A small figure with no discernable shape began to materialize at the edge of the clearing, moving closer as Gerald moved away. Should he run? Search the ground for sharp branches or rocks? He glanced down at his feet, at the earth under him.
But when he looked back up, the figure took the vague form of a child. No—two children. Two heads, two sets of feet, feeble mouth-breathing. Gerald relaxed, nearly collapsing back onto the ground, but he couldn’t shake the coiling sensation in his gut. What could a couple of kids be doing out here? He squinted at them as they trudged closer, and his stomach dropped. They were kids, but they were covered in blood.

Gerald began to back away from the scene as a distant, static buzz crept between his ears. But when he blinked, he saw in front of him, fully emerged from the heaviest of the shadows, just two young, small, muddy children. He blinked again. Mud, yes. One boy, looking a little bit scared and a little bit ridiculous in a monochromatic ensemble of an orange T-shirt and shorts, and one girl, slightly older, with tangled platinum hair and a Snoopy nightshirt that hung to her knees, continued to approach. They looked down at their feet, unaware of his presence, trudging over brambles, puddles, and dead leaves.

“What are we gonna do, Allen?” hissed the girl. She reached over to wipe some of the mud off the boy’s arm. “If we’re this dirty when we get back, Mom is gonna”—

The boy had stopped walking and was gazing at Gerald through wide, shocked eyes. The girl, too, halted and looked up. Both children stared expectantly for a moment. The girl stepped ever-so-slightly in front of the boy.

Gerald cleared his throat. What the hell was he supposed to say to two lost kids? Tell them that they were idiots for going out alone in the woods at night? No, no… you couldn’t talk to a kid that way. They’d cry, or something.

“Kids,” Gerald finally said with a single nod. Jesus. He had to have something more than that. He should be nice. “Hello,” he continued.
“We lost our tent!” the boy cried, poking his head out from behind the girl’s shoulder. A slight whistle escaped his lips on the s sound. “Our mom’s tent. And then we fell.”

“Allen!” the girl gasped.

“I’m sorry,” Gerald said. He remained quiet for a moment, then squatted down so he was level with the boy’s face. “Good thing tents are pretty big, right?” he smiled. “Should be able to spot it when the sun comes up?”

“W—we’re going to die out here!” the little boy wailed.

“Okay, ssh, don’t say that,” Gerald added hastily, glancing around the clearing. “No one is going to die. Maybe I can help.” There. This was fine.

“No,” the girl said. “You’re a stranger.” She took a couple of steps backwards, steering her brother alongside her.

“But we’re lost, Sarah,” the boy sniffed, his lip trembling.

Gerald knew he couldn’t leave them here. What if something happened to them? And more importantly, what if someone had seen him drive to the campground? What if he wasn’t alone here? Well, obviously he wasn’t. So, what if something happened to these kids and someone knew that Gerald had been here, and the only logical explanation was that Gerald was at fault? His life would be ruined. He would have to take on a new identity, or rot in jail. Joanna would never come back to him.

“Here,” Gerald said, pulling out his wallet. “This is a picture of my family. I, uh, have parents, too. Just like you. And here’s my student ID, I graduated college last year, and… I have a car, so, we can look for your tent with, er, the headlights.”

The girl looked at the boy and crossed her arms. “I’m older, and I say no.”
The boy sniffed. “I wanna find it. *I’m going.* You can come, or leave me.” He wriggled out of his sister’s grip and took a step towards Gerald. Surely the girl wasn’t stupid enough to let the boy go alone; Gerald took his car keys from his pocket and raised his eyebrows.

The girl looked back and forth between them for a moment. “Fine,” she said. “But I’m telling Mom it was your idea to leave in the first place.”

“I wanted to find night bugs!” the boy cried.

The kids sat in the backseat of Gerald’s car, packed together next to Joanna’s sweatshirt. Clouds of steam appeared on the back windows as the boy pressed his grubby cheeks into the glass. Gerald wanted to tell him that physical contact with the window did not really improve his vantage point, but stayed silent. Should he make small talk? Did children understand small talk?

“So… how long were you out in the woods?” he asked, glancing back behind him.

“Ten hours,” the boy sniffed. “Twelve.”

“It wasn’t *that* long, Allen,” the girl snapped. The boy squished his face flatter against the window.

“The woods aren’t really safe,” Gerald said, his gaze darting back and forth between the road and the children’s reflection in his rearview mirror. “Especially at night. You never know what you might run into out there.”

The girl straightened up behind him. “Good thing we’re really loud,” she said.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Gerald chuckled.

“I’m just saying that if we screamed,” the girl continued, “everyone would hear us. *Everyone.*”

“Do you think screaming would help you, in a place like this?” Gerald asked. He enjoyed the way the girl eyed the back of his head nervously while she talked.
“There are people here who’d hear,” the girl said, but her face softened like she wasn’t sure.

“That’s a good thing to have faith in,” Gerald replied. The girl didn’t say anything else. Glancing back, he noticed her hand squeezing the door handle. Why? There was no point, really, when he could have locked the door if he’d wanted to, from the front seat.

“That’s it!” the boy suddenly squealed. Before Gerald could even hit his brakes, the girl yanked open her door and tumbled down the dewy incline beside the road, pulling her brother alongside her. She pushed him into the pale blue tent and peeked over her shoulder at Gerald before stepping into the tent herself, fumbling to zip the slippery fabric.

Gerald sat in his car for a moment, looking at the regained stillness of the forest. Had the children woken up their mother? Did she know they’d been gone? Would the children tell her about Gerald? He began to take his foot off the brake, but hesitated, still looking at the tent. Was that it?

A minute later, the tent flaps unzipped and a woman poked her head out, so Gerald rolled down his window. “Thank you!” the woman exclaimed, massaging her temples. “Thank you so much, I can’t believe they snuck off like that, I didn’t hear a thing…”

“It was no problem, ma’am,” Gerald called out the window. “Wouldn’t want anything dangerous to happen.”

The woman put a hand to her heart. “I can only imagine,” she said. “We’re so grateful, I wish there was some way to repay you…”

“I just figured I should do it,” Gerald replied.

“No, really,” the woman said earnestly, rifling through a small green backpack. “I think I have some cash somewhere in here, let me see… I have a few dollars, for sure…”
Gerald laughed. “I don’t really need a few dollars.”

The woman stopped rummaging through her bag and looked back at Gerald. Some things Gerald could not make out fell from the open backpack pocket, but the woman did not bend down to retrieve them.

“Oh… er, well, okay,” the woman said, still looking at Gerald. “I really wish there was something I could do, though. I can make you a tea? For the road?”

“Tea?” Gerald guffawed, raising his eyebrows. “Your kids are worth a tea?”

The woman opened her mouth, frowned, and closed it again, her hand hovering over her bag.

“But I guess my mouth is kind of dry,” Gerald added, putting his car in park. He thought he noticed the woman’s eyebrows lift just slightly, but it was dark, so it was hard to tell. He was miffed, really, that her gratefulness seemed to deteriorate, as if he hadn’t just saved her children. As if there wouldn’t have been consequences if he hadn’t.

“Of—of course,” the woman finally said. “I did offer.”

Gerald got out of his car and shuffled down the slope into the campsite.

“I hope you don’t mind,” the woman said, glancing into the tent, and then at Gerald, “I’m just going to make you a thermos right outside so the kids can go ahead and get some sleep. They’re already out like lights.”

“I don’t mind,” Gerald said. He spread his jacket out on the damp grass and sat.

The woman emerged through the tent flaps, busying herself with a camp stove and a lantern. Up close, Gerald saw she was a thin, young mom, with coffee-colored hair and just a few light wrinkles. She was wearing a cotton tank top, and her upper arms were taut, like maybe
she did yoga or something. She smiled at him when she turned around with the box of tea bags, and the lines at the corners of her eyes deepened.

“What brings you out here at this time of night?” she asked while Gerald fished around for a chamomile or an oolong.

“Not much,” he answered, rubbing at the bags under his eyes. “I’m just having a disagreement with my girlfriend.”

“Your girlfriend, eh?” the woman said, turning up the heat on the burner. “Love is tough sometimes.”

Gerald nodded. “We don’t always see eye to eye,” he said. “She’s very irrational.”

“All right.” The woman chuckled. “I’m sure you’ll work it out if you both want to.”

“Oh, we do,” Gerald said. “I don’t think she really wants to lose what we have.” He paused, waiting for the woman to advise him somehow.

The woman just grunted as she poured boiling water into a thermos and dropped a tea bag into it. She was not wearing a ring. “Mhm. Well, tea’s ready.”

Gerald cupped the thermos in one hand and prodded the tea bag with his fingertip, forgetting the hot water would sear his skin. Why didn’t the woman want to know more about this kind Samaritan who’d saved her children? Where was her grateful breathlessness? Gerald continued to jab at his tea bag, wondering if she might offer him a spoon. “Your husband doesn’t like to camp?”

The woman busied herself with packing up the camp stove. “Isn’t that a little personal?”

“I’m not a complete stranger, now,” Gerald said, “so maybe not.” The woman just looked at him. “For the record,” he continued, “I think single parenting is perfectly respectable.”
The woman unzipped the tent. “Great,” she said flatly, dropping the tea supplies inside and sliding through the door. “Thank you again for bringing my kids back.”

She was going back inside so soon? “I don’t want to take your things,” Gerald said, holding up the thermos.

“Keep it,” the woman said with a quick, small smile before zipping the tent the rest of the way. Gerald downed the scalding tea in a few gulps and left the thermos by the corner of the tent. Blisters began to creep up his throat as he fumbled for his keys.

It was funny, really, how isolated from Gerald the woman must have thought she’d become after she receded back into her tent. It was only fabric. He wondered if she had the fancy, thermal, waterproof kind of tent, or if it was just a run-of-the-mill windbreaker type. Was she new at camping? Or experienced? She owned a camp stove, so maybe the latter. But her kids had run off, which gave Gerald the vague sense that she wasn’t quite as smart as she should be. Really, it was a good thing Gerald had been there. The family was lucky—after all, what were the odds of this potentially life-saving encounter? What would have happened if she’d lost her kids for good?

But it was not his responsibility to make the woman care about consequences, was it. Gerald got back into his car and began to drive home, his eyes stinging as though they needed to close. When he reached his apartment, he fell onto the couch in an inexplicably easy stupor. Somehow, Joanna was absent from his mind. She was just out there.

Dusty sunlight awoke Gerald the next morning as it streamed through the blinds he’d forgotten to close the day before. The morning news was on, as apparently he’d never turned off his TV, either. He happily listened to the anchor talk about droughts and murders and robberies and politics for a bit while he blinked and gathered his thoughts. Really, he felt pleased with
himself for helping out that family. He imagined reporters coming to his house for a news segment: *local student helps children reunite with mother.*

His empty stomach gurgling, Gerald shuffled into the kitchen and took a package of instant oatmeal from his recently abandoned pantry. While he waited for the microwave, he wondered if he should get groceries. Was it trash day? Had he put out his trash bags? He looked out, but could not see his doorstep. In the way, collecting reliably on his window in little scarlet clumps, were the ladybugs, bunching together on the glass. He thought of Joanna. She would probably call him soon. Gingerly, he opened the window, careful not to scare away the clotted bugs on the other side of the pane. As the purr of suburban traffic wafted into the room, Gerald reached through the window and up, skimming the outside of the glass with his fingertips. A couple of the bugs flew away when he reached them. Their backs were hard and smooth. Gerald’s hand hovered, for a moment, over one of the bugs, quivering on the outskirts of the pack. He pushed down on it, just slightly, with his finger, then slightly more, until it fell with an easy, satisfying crunch. In its wake was only a smudge of blackish goo. He touched another. The slick armor of its shell was thin, no match for even his finger. Gerald pushed down, harder this time, and the bug crumbled.

Smiling, Gerald turned around to retrieve his oatmeal. There were many more untouched ladybugs on the window behind him, but he was in no rush.
II. The Way Things Are

I show the scars to Jason. “Do you understand?” I ask. “Does it make sense?”

It’s Sunday. I’ve finally stopped putting off telling him, now that we’re getting serious. He is sitting across from me, at my kitchen table, tousling his bedhead. We squint through the morning sun, ignoring the half-cantaloupe untouched between us. “No,” he says. He’s looking at me like he’s never seen me before. I’m nursing a sliced thumb, which I’ve just cut at the sink, rinsing the melon knife. The dishwater turned pink, like clouds in a sunset. Jason noticed and grabbed my hand. “You’re bleeding, bad!” he gasped, looking down at the floor, at the trail of red scattered across the tile like breadcrumbs.

“I can feel pain,” I explain again, sticking a fork in the cantaloupe and leaving it there. “But it’s like a pressure. It doesn’t hurt. So I don’t—can’t—really care about it.”

“Like that guy from The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo?” Jason asks. He stares down at my fingertips, my thumb, frowning.

“No,” I reply. “That guy, that character, he couldn’t feel pain at all. Me, I feel it. It just doesn’t hurt. Asymbolia.”

“I don’t get how that’s possible.” Jason exhales, dropping his head into his hands. I want to tell him that I don’t either, really. I was just born with it. But it’s my body, so I’m responsible for it. I’m supposed to understand it when other people don’t, and explain it to them.

“Well, pain has a sensory component,” I say. “And an affective one. One that makes you feel, one that makes you react. I don’t have the second one.”

Jason peers at me through his fingers. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. So that’s not even, like, a bad thing.”
I wish it weren’t a bad thing. To someone who’s experienced it, I imagine, it’s nice to think of a life without *hurting*. Hurting makes people squirm, makes them uncomfortable, makes them cry. That’s all I can really gather from what my mother, my childhood friends, my exes, and my doctors have explained to me. From what I see. Sometimes I close my eyes and try to imagine what it’s like, but I can’t.

“Kind of,” I tell Jason. “It’s nice, I guess, not being bothered by small cuts and things like that. But it’s dangerous, too. I could puncture a lung or something, and not even realize it.”

“But if you feel a sensation in your lungs, wouldn’t you know?” Jason asks.

“It’s a feeling, yes, but it’s like a touch, or a tickle.” I graze his arm with my hand. “Like that. It doesn’t feel *bad*, so my brain doesn’t know that something bad has happened to my body. For all I know, it’s a hiccup.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” he sighs, lifting his head from his hands.

“It’s hard for people to wrap their heads around.” I look down at the tougher, stiffer skin on five of my fingers, trying to remember what it looked like before. Jason reaches across the table and takes my hand in his. I don’t know what’s coming. Did I wait too long? Six months? Men have broken up with me over this before; *it’s too weird*, they say. They’re right. Pain, and hurting from pain, is normal, and being immune is not. It’s un-human. Knowing this, I think, is the closest to hurting I’ll get.

I wait for the breakup speech, but it doesn’t come. “Don’t worry,” Jason whispers, gripping my hand. “It doesn’t change the way I see you.” I know he’s squeezing me hard, watching me carefully for my reaction, but it doesn’t bother me. It’s new to him, all of it, and he hasn’t left yet, not like the others have.
We go to Great Falls around one, just to walk. It smells like rainwater. The trees along the path aren’t yellow anymore, and brown leaves are clumped in slippery piles on the dirt.

“You’d make the best MMA fighter,” Jason says, kicking a rock along the path with his foot.

“No pain aversion. Superhuman stamina.”

I cannot blame him for wanting to talk about it. “I know it seems really interesting,” I say, “but it’s really just healthiest for me to live normally.” Whatever normal is; if you can be normal without hurting.

“What about emotional pain?” he asks. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes, I can feel it all, remember? I can be upset. I just don’t get bothered by the… physical manifestations.” I think of how Dad died. I was five, barely old enough to understand that cancer wasn’t an illness you could fix with Tylenol and soup. Once I realized I’d never see him again, I cried until I couldn’t cry anymore, and then I stopped eating. Mom begged me to eat, cooked me waffles and spaghetti and all the things I liked best, but I refused. The pain of the emptiness in my furiously growling stomach didn’t bother me, so I didn’t have to give in to it. The counselors said I was just grieving. I lost five pounds.

We walk quietly for a few minutes, and then Jason stops abruptly. “So, do you flinch, ever?” he asks. His brow is furrowed.

“Not really,” I answer. “I don’t hurt, which means I don’t anticipate harm.”

“So the whole point of hurting is your body telling you there’s harm?”


“This could be like a superpower. You could do so much stuff without hurt holding you back.”

The only thing I can think of to say is, “Yeah.” Jason takes my hand and we continue to walk down the path. I do like being outside, outside with him. It wasn’t until I left home, a
couple of years after graduating college, that I got to roam freely. Mom kept me close after Dad died, after we learned I was asymbolic. She was afraid I’d be careless, get hit by a bus, and die—when you aren’t bothered by pain, you have no reason to avoid things that could give you pain. I used to chew through my lower lip with my teeth and pick the skin off of my knees until they bled. When the doctors finally figured it out, Mom made me flashcards so I would learn normal causes of danger, things to avoid or run away from, things that I wouldn’t know intuitively. There were over a hundred of them, printed on index cards. The backs contained photos gathered from newspapers, magazines, and library computers, all depicting horrific accident scenes: a fiery car crash on the shoulder of the highway. A woman’s leg, badly broken, the bone protruding from the thigh, after a bike collision. Bloody knuckles and a mouthful of broken teeth. Sometimes, when I’m on my own, I stay indoors anyway. To be preventative.

“I can’t believe I never noticed,” Jason mutters, shaking his head.

“I don’t really broadcast it. I try to be cautious.” When I drive, I am slow and defensive, unwilling to take risks. I look both ways, twice, before crossing the street.

Jason picks up a twig and twirls it between his fingers. “I wish I knew what it was like for you.”

I like that Jason is a curious person. We met at Roots, the ultra-organic hippie grocery store downtown, when I worked there over the summer for extra cash. He was new to the city, having just signed to do PR for Georgetown Athletics, and didn’t know where to get cheaper, less exotic groceries. At checkout, he laid a deluge of items onto the belt I’d never seen before. Taro cubes, tiger nuts, green spirals of romanesco cauliflower. “I don’t know what any of this stuff is,” he grinned as he took his credit card out of his wallet. “I just want to try.”
Now, I think of my mother again, telling me to be careful. I wonder how we would have spent our afternoons when I was younger if we hadn’t spent them memorizing the flashcards. “I wish I knew what it was like for you, too.”

Jason peels some of the smaller fibers off of the twig before dropping it on the ground. “I don’t think you’d like it any better,” he chuckles. He points at a rockier path, off to the side of the main path. “Want to take the Billy Goat trail?”

My shoes don’t have much grip on them, but Jason is already walking towards the trail marker. “Wait, Jason!” I start to say, looking down at my beat-up Nikes. They’re made for going to the gym, for easy walking.

“It’ll be fine!” Jason says, nodding his head in the direction of the trail. He’s already excited. “I’ll help you.”

When we first started dating—after Jason admitted that the reason he started shopping at Roots every other day wasn’t that he needed groceries—we went bowling, indoor rock climbing, even waterskiing, once. “You’re seriously ride or die,” he told me while we wriggled out of our sweaty life jackets. “Like, down for anything. I love it.” I glowed under the praise, and Jason chattered about future adventures on the drive home while I happily picked at a splinter I got on the dock. Now, I look between the trees, at the land between them. The trail isn’t that steep, and the orange markers don’t say anything about hazards. What’s the worst that could happen?

I manage to steer the conversation away from me, onto other things, as we ascend the thin, rocky path overlooking the Potomac. While we chat about reruns of *The Office*, I focus on my balance, picturing what it would be like to fall a hundred feet down, into the river. The image reminds me to be careful, to step only where the rocks are steady. Despite the difficulty of the land, I feel more at ease here, talking about television, than I did on the main path; discussing my
asymbolia tends to make me think of Dad and wonder whether the cancer was painful at the end. Maybe, if he’d been like me, dying would have been easier on him. I wish the asymbolia were something I could trade away, to people who actually need it.

We’re almost done with the loop within an hour and a half. Jason is fast, and I feel my feet sliding on the damp rocks as I widen my steps to keep up. The final stretch of the trail is steep, and Jason shuffles down on his thick-soled boots, clinging with his hands to crags in the adjacent rocks. They are too far for me to reach. I start to just slide down after him, but I stop, thinking again of the flat, slippery shoes on my feet. Thinking of the flashcards. I do not know how dangerous it would be to tumble down fifteen feet of rocky, 70-degree-angle earth, but I don’t want Jason to have to clean up my mess. I imagine trying to get to the car, dripping blood, with bone sticking out of my skin.

“I don’t know if I can do it without falling,” I call after Jason. He’s waiting for me at the bottom of the incline. “I need a hand.”

He looks up at me for a moment, picking at some dirt on his jeans. “You totally can do it,” he says. There’s a slight, eager smile to his eyes. “If anyone can, it’s you.”

I wiggle my feet in place, just slightly. They slide with ease on the wet mud. “I can, I guess, but I’d really rather just have help.” Jason looks up at me. Maybe the smile had been a trick of the light. I feel high-maintenance, needy. “Or I’ll just sit down and slide down it like that,” I offer.

“No, no,” Jason sighs, “you’ll track mud in the car.” He plants his feet in a lunge and leans towards me, into the middle of the path. I take his hand and inch down the incline until I’m closer to level ground and he lets go. We’re quiet as we walk to the car, and I fiddle with my jacket to avoid looking up, hoping the silence isn’t an angry one.
The fender-bender happens on our way home. Jason’s driving. My frustration in myself has passed, Jason is talkative again, and we chat about fun, stupid things, like Marvel movies and Twitter and how to pronounce the word *isthmus*. The roads are still slippery, and a white sedan catches water as it merges, briefly grazing the front passenger side of Jason’s Acura with a crunch like chewing toffee. The Acura skids for a moment as Jason hits the brakes, then it is steady. We pull over to look at the damage, but the sedan doesn’t stop and instead speeds onto the loop for the Barton Parkway. Jason fumbles with his phone, trying to catch the sedan’s license plate on camera.

“Shit,” he says. The photos are blurry. “What were those numbers again? After the Q?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know, I’m sorry.”

Jason rubs his neck, wincing. “God, I’m stiff. I don’t want to deal with this. I don’t have time to deal with this. I have work tomorrow, I can’t take my car in.”

I nod sympathetically. “But at least no one was injured,” I say.

Jason turns away from the road, towards me. “Why didn’t you tell me that guy was merging? He was on your side.” His voice is steady, quiet, and calm.

“You were driving, Jason,” I reply. “Not me.” I cast my eyes down and see that Jason’s fists are clenched, his knuckles white, almost green. He puts them in his pockets when I look.

“Are you sure,” he asks, “that you didn’t just notice, and not care enough to say anything?”

“What?” I feel the blood rush to my face. My cheeks tingle, pink in the cold air.

“You knew you wouldn’t get hurt, right?” Jason continues. “So, no trigger.”
Did I see the white Sedan coming up on us? “I wasn’t driving, Jason,” I say. “The passenger doesn’t check the mirrors every minute.” As the words leave my mouth, I’m not sure whether or not they’re true.

“So it’s my fault that guy is a dipshit?” Jason takes a step towards me. His neck is red, but his voice is still even.

“N-no,” I stammer. “It’s his fault he hit you, not yours, but also not mine.” I’ve never seen Jason angry. Maybe I deserve it—maybe someone more vigilant about harm would have noticed the other car. Maybe it is my fault. I grit my teeth, hard, wishing I knew if I was clenching my jaw enough to damage it.

Jason takes another step closer to me. “You don’t even flinch,” he says. “Ever. You’re not scared.”

“Of what, Jason? The other car is gone. We aren’t seriously injured.”

He laughs and steps closer to me again. “It’s ridiculous,” he says softly. “Do you see that?”

I don’t know what to make of his laughter. What is ridiculous—me? I back away, towards the car, just so he isn’t standing on top of me, inside my space. He’s so close I can feel his breath graze the top of my head. I frown up at him, waiting for him to take another step. Is he going to touch me? I try to feel afraid, to feel some sort of fight-or-flight response, to feel if I have anything to worry about, but I can’t. People are more complicated than tragedies on flashcards. My pulse beats against my skin as I wrack my brain, frantic, for the right response, for the response Jason is looking for. The normal response.

But he does not touch me. He relaxes, just a little. “You’re breathing heavy,” he says, and I realize I’m panting, exhausted from confusion. To Jason, it must look like fear. The heat begins
to drain out of his neck as he watches me struggle to catch my breath. He clears his throat. “Let’s just get back in the car. It’s driveable, and that jerk isn’t coming back.”

I stay standing where I am as Jason gets in, letting the chilly breeze strike my cheeks. The dent on my side of the car is shallow and long, tinged with streaks of white paint from the sedan. The moment in which I think I should have felt fear—just maybe—is gone, like perhaps it never existed at all. Maybe the hike, the talk, and the recollection of the flashcards made me paranoid.

Jason takes my hand when I slide into the car. “I’m sorry I upset you. It’s not really your fault.” His eyes are wide staring into mine, and I nod and try to smile. “I just am trying to process all of this,” he says. He squeezes my hand again, softer this time, I think.

“It’s okay,” I say, looking down at the scars, at the fingertips of my left hand. I was six when I stuck the needles in them, deep. I took them from my mother’s sewing kit, which had been left out on the coffee table, and jammed them into my skin, one by one, until blood trickled down my arm and soaked into the carpet, leaving behind a blackish stain. Only the very tops of the needles stuck out, five silver dots protruding from a fleshy red mess. I giggled as I ran the fingers of my other hand across the wounds, skimming them like a sickening braille. My mother shrieked and went pale when she found me, and I just smiled up at her, thinking my fingers looked pretty, like her earlobes, like jewelry. She asked me a lot of questions and took me to the hospital and cried, and I cried because she was crying, but not because I was hurting. Never because I was hurting.

Jason smiles and puts his hand back on the steering wheel. The heaviness of the confusion filling my chest begins to evaporate. Jason isn’t mad, and nothing has changed between us, not really. A fluttering feeling grows in my stomach as we merge off of the shoulder
and back onto the highway, and I know it could be something else, but I conclude it’s probably just affection.
III. The Gallery

Here is what Ben said when he called you from a new phone number six days ago:

*Hey—Denise—okay—look—I’m sorry. I really need to see—talk to—you. I know you don’t want to talk to me. But please, think about it.*

You hung up. And then you threw up.

Here is what you decided to reply, over text, after three days of taking off sick from work, binge-watching *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and having street ramen delivered to you in bed:

*Fine.*

Now you’re here, at a bar in Adams Morgan, waiting. You purposely missed the first two trains and stalled on the Woodley Park escalator, but you are still here before Ben. So you cannot look at him from across the room as you approach, slowly, acclimating to whatever it is that he looks like now.

You chug half your Shiner.

*Before we do this,* he’d texted you back last Friday, because you did not answer any more of his calls, *I just think you should probably know—I’m blind now.*

That time, you did not throw up, and you could not skip work because you were already there, but your whole body got cold and your chest heaved and you forgot to send six faxes through to marketing. And of course, the worst part of it all was:

You weren’t even that surprised by the news.

You drag your finger through some beer you’ve spilled on the bar top. Maybe you should go home and come up with a cheap excuse. But then he is there, leaning against the bar two stools down from you, taking out his phone. You could still leave, though. Couldn’t you—or can he sense you? He’s wearing a shirt you recognize, one of his old favorites—a standard button-
down with short sleeves, covered in tiny orange flamingoes. Does he even know he’s wearing that shirt?

“Ben,” you say after a moment. “Hi.” You look down at your hands, at the egg-shaped sweat stains your palms are leaving on your skirt.

“Denise!” he says, turning to face you. He’s holding a cane limply at his side. Dark glasses shield his eyes. You’re not sure if his eyeballs are still behind them; he didn’t say. “I was just about to text you I was here.”

You used to come to this bar when you were still together. Once, nearly four years ago, you met a group of friends here, mostly yours, from college. They weren’t in town often and you didn’t see them much. When they got there they told you about their divorces and asked you to take a lot of pictures of them by the big neon Dos Equis sign on the window. Ben complained of headaches after an hour so you left, apologizing over your shoulder as he stifled whimpers until you got to the stairs down to the street. They didn’t call you next time they were in town. Ben said they were bad friends but you remembered them as good friends, friends you partied with after graduation and brunched with and set up with rich kids from your business classes. They only broke ties with you because your boyfriend couldn’t hang—because he whined, and nobody likes someone who whines—you were sure, and you told this to Ben, loudly, dumping his cold compresses and extra aspirin in the garbage. *Nobody our age needs this much goddamn aspirin.*

You squirm on your stool. Ben has his head turned in your direction, but not quite to you. He is playing with his phone in his hands, rotating it between his index finger and thumb.

“Do they still have my usual?” he asks. You nod and flag down the bartender.

Ben orders a Lucky Man. “What are you doing these days?” he asks. “Did you get an agency job?”
“Yes.” You do not mention that you are the receptionist.

“Congrats!” Ben says. “I always knew you’d go all ‘Mad Men’ on us.”

But—did he? “Thanks.”

“I guess you’re probably wondering…” Ben gestures towards his glasses with his hands.

“I suppose,” you say. “But I kind of gathered. From the migraines, you know.”

“No, Denise,” Ben says, leaning forward and lowering his voice into a more somber tone. “It wasn’t migraines. It was worse than we ever could have thought. Intraocular lymphoma.” He nods his head along to each syllable of the words as he says them, but he does not look upset. His forehead is smooth, free of tension.

“I’m—I’m so sorry,” you splutter, even though you want to scream. You think of the time, two and a half years prior, when Ben quit his office administration job because the floaters in his vision were starting to make staring at faxes and receipts too painful. Like a knife through the front of my brain, he’d said. You, having already had a bad week filled with two missed agency jobs and the start of a new birth control prescription that bloated you like a whale, lost your temper. This is what you’re doing to us, you yelled as you poured still-good milk into the garbage disposal and dumped half of your produce into the trash while Ben stood by, watching. Throwing everything away because we have no fucking income now.

To think, he stayed for a full year after that. He should have left you sooner. At least you nursed him, when he was feeling his worst. Never mind that you hated it.

“I’ll be right back,” you say. “Just a second.” Before Ben can respond, you careen into the bathroom, lean over a toilet without closing the stall door, and vomit up your single beer.

“Sorry,” you apologize when you return to the bar. “I just had to pee. Sorry. Wow. TMI.”
Ben chuckles and dips his finger into the froth of his untouched Lucky Man before taking a sip. “Or are you sure you didn’t put back a few extra drinks before I got here?”

You blush, but Ben is grinning—he’s needling you. He licks white foam from his top lip. “Remember the time you got really drunk bar-hopping on DuPont?” he asks.

You snort. “God, that was so embarrassing. I haven’t done St. Patty’s day properly since.”

“No, it was cute—you kept on crying and telling me how nice I was and... stuff.”

And stuff—and how much you loved him. “You were nice,” you say, and for a moment, you wish Ben could see you. “You carried me to the train on your back and bought me French fries from that greasy stand that sets up when Shake Shack closes. And you held my hair back over the toilet and told me about the time you got really drunk on Thanksgiving because your younger brothers snuck Everclear into your wine. Which actually kind of made me throw up more.”

Ben is laughing a big, shaky laugh that seizes his whole body. “It was supposed to make you feel better! But it got you to purge the alcohol, so, it all worked out anyway.”

It all worked out.

“You really were nice, always,” you say quietly. Your most recent memory of Ben, before this meeting but well after barhops and long, loving nights, isn’t representative of who he really is; somewhere in you, you know that.

“Denise?” Ben has stopped laughing and is looking at you—if only he could look at you—with his whole face, his hands clasped in front of him, his beer empty now. “I’m really sorry about how things ended. That was, well, it was so wrong of me. To fly off the handle that way.”
“It’s okay,” you croak. The apology that, God, you’ve wanted for the whole two years since Ben moved out, all in one night that was a swirl of tears and bruises and misplaced belongings, only makes you feel worse. Your head, cloudy.

Ben shakes his head. “It’s not,” he says. “It was horrible. I want to make it up to you.”

You are shaking again. Ben is dead calm. He closes both of your tabs and signs the receipt with relative ease, running his fingers along the edges of the paper to estimate where the blank is.

“You don’t have to make anything up to me,” you say. “It’s been enough time.” You press your fingers to your collarbone, to the spot where a dark plum bruise bloomed when Ben’s elbow connected with you, accidentally, but with force. Knocking you into the doorway on his way to the bedroom, where he began to stuff clothes and socks and shoes into the first duffel bags he could find. He did not even realize yet what he had done, he was so wild and distracted and numb, and you slumped against the doorframe, clutching your neck and sucking in great, raspy breaths. He would notice the bruise on his way out the front door of the townhouse with you trailing him like snail sludge. His duffels, trash bags, and grocery bags of stuff all loaded in the back of his car. Did you do that to yourself too, he spat, to try and make me feel bad enough to stay? And you’d just looked up at him, silent, with tears pooling in your eyes, and watched the knowledge seep into his face. Then he drove away without a word.

The collarbone was fractured down the middle. Ironically: a clean break.

“I was angry,” Ben says. “I should have at least helped you pay the medical bills.”

“My parents helped me.”

“Denise, I loved you—I have no excuse. It was an accident. I was angry,” Ben echoes. “Not even at you. But at myself, my body. It was failing me.”
This feels like a lie. How could Ben not have been angry at you—you, who clearly resented him for not knowing what professional career he wanted, for always being sick, for being in pain. You, who urged him not to go to the doctor, because neither of you had insurance anymore. You could get a fucking job, too, he hollered the night he left, just minutes before the peak of the fight. If you weren’t psychotic, you could stop reaching for an agency job you’re not qualified for with your zero experience and just get a fucking day job.

The subject makes your belly ache. You search for speech, but nothing comes out.

“I want you to know,” Ben says after a dense minute of silence, “that I found my calling, finally. Like you did. I have an art gallery now.”

“Oh?” You are surprised. You have not seen anything about it anywhere. “When did you realize this?”

“Not long after… everything. I’d always done sketches and stuff around the house”—you flinch, remembering how Ben’s doodles on your meager grocery lists used to annoy you, how you used to smudge the pencil lines with your thumb—“but when I got diagnosed, I realized that I needed to create. I don’t know why. When I started losing my own vision, I guess I wanted to make something for other people to see.”

There is no contempt in his voice, no anger. “Wow,” is all you can think of to say.

“I was wondering, actually,” he says, “if you wanted to see the gallery. I owe so much of it to our relationship. To you.”

You’re gawking at him now, so indiscreetly it is a relief he cannot see you. “To—me?”

Ben nods. “You helped me learn who I really was.”

And suddenly, you can picture it, like a dark, fucked-up rom-com, if such a thing exists: after two years of carrying the weight of knowing that you probably should have sucked it up
and let Ben see a doctor—you could have scraped by on savings—everything turns out strange in
the end, but turns out okay, and you end up together, because only you can heal each other of the
pain you’ve caused. Or something like that.

You will be cautious, though. You didn’t go through nine months of post-breakup
therapy and squat in your cousin’s studio for half a year for nothing.

“Yes, I’m saying. The words sound like just the echo of his voice, bouncing in
your fuzzy head. “I think it will be good for us both.”

Here is what you think to yourself:

*I’m sorry that I caused this life for you and I want to be the one fix it.*

Here is what you tell him:

“Okay.”

You leave the bar together, like old times, but not really. The gallery is only two blocks
away. Ben walks with his cane out in front of him, panning the pavement. You offer to hold his
arm and lead him, but he shakes his head, and his determination to be self-sufficient fills you
with a burst of long-awaited pride.

“My latest series is doing really well,” he says. “Buyers are clamoring for them—can you
believe? I did them all from memory, too.” His chatter is bright, excited.

“I can’t wait to see,” you say.

“I can’t wait for you to see, too.”

The outside of the gallery is pristine; clean red brick, built into a row of artsy shops that
used to all be townhouse apartments, like the one you lived in with Ben. It’s called The
DuPontiac. “I thought it would be funny,” Ben says, “since it isn’t actually in DuPont, but
everyone loves DuPont.”
“You and I sure did,” you quip, smiling a little. You wonder if he thought of you when he named it.

Ben hands you a keyring. “The only gold-ish one,” he says.

You unlock the door and hold it open for Ben, who leads you into the gallery and puts his cane against the wall. “I know the place by heart,” he explains. The gallery is made up of two rooms, one in the front and one in the back, behind a curtain. “We leave that open when we have private exhibition nights,” Ben says. “It’s where the good stuff is, the stuff that really sells. But we can’t open it to the public right now—it’s all kind of done under the table.”

The front room is beautiful, and your breath sticks in your throat as you rotate, slowly, steeping yourself in each canvas hanging from the walls. The pieces are multi-media; painted, collaged, and some even have half-sculptures protruding from them. All of the canvasses have holes in them. The biggest painting, occupying one entire wall, is a field of local wildflowers: Queen Anne’s lace. Trillium. Black-eyed Susans. The largest flower, a big, bright black-eyed Susan in the middle of the scene, has an enormous, gaping hole where the center should be, torn right through the middle of the canvas. Behind it, a black emptiness. Around it, real yellow flower petals, stuck in the silvery wind with clear sealant.

“These are amazing,” you breathe. “Ben, I—I’m sorry I never knew you loved this stuff so much.”

For a second, you think Ben’s face hardens, but it must be a trick of the flickering gallery lights. “It’s okay,” he says calmly. “There was a lot you didn’t know.”

“You can do all of this,” you say, “without seeing it... it’s just... breathtaking.”

Ben stands, his face pointed in the same direction as yours, with his hands clasped behind his back. “Sometimes I wonder what all I could have done if I’d caught it sooner, you know?”
Your chest floods with guilt. “Ben—times were so tough, you know—and the stress—
I’m just”—

“I know,” Ben says. He holds out his hand to you, and you take it. “You know, I miss you a lot.”

“Really?”

“Remember when we did long-distance for a few months, back in the first year we were dating?” Ben asks.

“Yes! Way back in college. When I was trying to decide if I transfer to school in Ohio.”

“Do you remember how we used to talk at night? How fun we were?”

Your face reddens, and the cool room feels warmer. You and Ben, hot and heavy in the blissful stages of a young relationship, had kept the sparks in the air even hundreds of miles apart. Before anything was wrong with Ben’s eyes, and he could still stare at a phone, you’d FaceTime for hours, watching every Tarantino movie and commenting on them together, comparing the merit of the different snacks you were eating—you, Goldfish, Ben, Cheetos—and talking about all the things you would do when you were together in the same place again. When both of you were near-dizzy from sleep deprivation and hot from missing one another, you’d send each other provocative photos, reminders of what was waiting for you on the other side of the space.

You deleted all of them, of course, after the breakup. But now, with Ben next to you, showing you his lifelong passion, the memory feels comfortable, like it could all happen again tomorrow.

“I remember,” you say quietly.
Ben beams, and you want to tell him that you’re smiling back at him, but you cannot find a way that doesn’t sound stupid. He leads you by the hand towards the curtain, into the next gallery. You’re expecting this room to be even better than the last; the art in the front room has filled you with such a sad kind of joy—a reminder of the beauty in the world, but through a tragic vision.

Behind the curtain, Ben lets go of your hand. Your insides clench in horror.

“What the hell, Ben,” you whisper. “This is”—

“You, yes.”

There are six paintings, each more recognizable than the last. The first could pass as just a mess of brush strokes in flesh tones: peach, tan, grey, pink. The next, if you squinted, might depict just a couple of pale octopus tentacles, a strange tangle of skin stretched across a red background. The sixth, however—you recognize the curves of the flesh, the mole on what is most definitely one of two inner thighs, the shape between them, which is obstructed by, again, a hole torn through the canvas. Behind it, red, so dark it is almost black.

Ben is turned fully towards you now, his expression indiscernible. “Do you like it?” he asks.

“What? No—this is gruesome—this is—where did this come from? Why didn’t you ask me?”

Ben shrugs. “It’s the pictures, Denise. I remembered all of them. Six years of seeing someone every day makes their image pretty easy.”

He points to a stack of papers in the corner. You rush to it; it’s the intimate photos you sent him, years ago, hundreds of them. Tiny like business cards. Cropped close-up to your body, your face missing.
“Don’t worry,” Ben says. “It’s an age-restricted exhibit.”

“Ben, why do you have all of these here?” Your voice shakes. You sift through the photos like sand.

“I’ll scatter them along the floor before shows,” Ben says. “My business partner thinks it’s going to make for a more immersive experience. And it’s impressive that I could replicate the images so well, you know, without vision.”

*Without vision.* Your abdomen tightens. “Ben, you can’t really do this, though. It’s—it’s private. I don’t—I don’t”—

“I know I can’t,” Ben says. He’s smiling now, just slightly. “Not without your consent. Legally.” He reaches out as if to take your hand, but he is off by a few inches and winds up grasping for air. You back away from him. He follows. “You see,” he continues, “I can’t sell these, officially, until I’ve put them up for exhibition. And I’ve got buyers on the down low who are very interested. The sale could really make life a whole lot… easier.”

You imagine these canvases hanging on the walls of some old man’s home somewhere, perhaps in his bedroom, perhaps in his living room, seen by dozens of eyes, seen through open windows from the street outside. Your breath curdles in your throat. No one would know it is you—right? Does that make it any better?

Ben has taken a piece of paper out of his pocket now, crisply folded into fourths, and a pen. There is a blank spot amidst the text on the page, for a signature. Bold writing at the top reads *The Denise Series.*

You are out of things to say. Here is what you tell Ben:

“You broke my collarbone.”
Ben is quiet, but remains smiling, a detached smile, basically just stretched lips. You wait for his mouth to move, but it doesn’t. After a moment, you add, “my heart, too.”

Here is what Ben finally replies:

“I’m blind, Denise.”

He hands you the paper and pen.
IV. The 33rd Annual 4th Grade Musical Awards

The show’s final number ended to roaring applause. The curtains closed and all of the guests began filing out of the auditorium to meet the cast at the gymnasium, where there would be an after-party to recognize them with trophies from Party City, Trojan horses made out of pretzel sticks, and chocolate Calypso cupcakes. The musical version of *The Odyssey* had been a huge hit; at least twelve parents videotaped the whole thing—not even just the parts their kids were in, but the whole, entire thing.

Karen, the head of the PTA, led the charge into the gymnasium. “He was a perfect Odysseus,” she gushed to her husband about their son. “I’m feeling really good about his chances tonight.” Her husband nodded and continued to work on the photo he was editing to post on Facebook. It was of the entire fourth grade class, bowing in their costumes onstage. The whole photo was black and white except for Odysseus, who was in color (with the saturation increased by 8%). “He’s just such a star, Alan,” Karen sighed. Alan captioned the Facebook post *our son is a star!*

In the gymnasium, the children were still in character, seated around the tables closest to the stage, which the janitor had installed the night prior and decorated with silver glow-in-the-dark stars. After the parents found their spots, the rest of the guest list began to file in as *I Gotta Feeling* by the Black Eyed Peas blasted from six 10-foot speakers, and two cannons shot glitter into the air at the doorway.

“You’ve really outdone yourself this year, Frank,” Karen said, grinning like an alligator at the tuxedo-clad janitor as he passed her table with a trio of waiters, handing out ice water. Without his mop cart, he was awfully poised. “But—I have to say—really? You put Brad and Jen at the same table? And where is Angelina?”
Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston sat at table seven, avoiding eye contact.

Frank shrugged. “I thought it’d help them work out their differences.” He pointed the waiters in the direction of table nine. “Don’t forget,” he murmured to them, “Beyoncé likes the watermelon infused one, not the orange.” He nodded once at Karen and continued to weave between the many tables, surveying the buzzing crowd.

“Last year they had the *hors d’oeuvres* out already by this point,” Karen muttered to Alan. “Where are the little Trojan horses? I should have had the PTA take over the event. Frank is great, but he’s losing his touch.”

Alan grunted his agreement and checked Facebook. *All the kids did so great!* read someone’s comment on his photo. *Yes, they were a wonderful supporting cast to our little James Dean,* Alan replied.

Principal Dunn took the stage and the gymnasium rumbled with applause. “Hello,” she said, “and welcome to the biggest event of the semester. This year, I am pleased to introduce you to my co-host, and fellow parent, like most of you: Tina Fey!”

She held out the mic for Tina, who came jogging out from the wings of the stage (which were clearly just deconstructed cardboard boxes from Home Depot), while the audience applauded once more. “Thanks for having me,” Tina said. “My only complaint is that there’s not enough cheese on the menu, and it’s past my bedtime!”

The audience laughed wildly. At table two, Calypso and Telemachus laughed so hard that chocolate milk came out their noses—an adult, with a bedtime!

“Now, to present the first award, please welcome my dear friend, Ben Stiller.”

More applause. Ben Stiller took the mic from Tina and put it back on its stand. “Wow,” he said, “great crowd tonight. You Fockers are in for a real treat.”
All the parents laughed. The cast pretended to laugh, but looked at each other confusedly. The Back Half of Odysseus’ Ship tumbled out of his chair and had to be rescued by Poseidon, whose beard fell off when he bent over.

“The first award of the night is a very coveted one,” Ben continued, ignoring the commotion at Odysseus’ ship’s table like a true professional. “It goes to the actor or group of actors with the best costume. This year, I am proud to present the best costume award to… the naiads!”

Karen snorted. “Wow,” she said, not bothering to keep her voice down. “Way to snub the gladiators.” She looked around and crossed her arms. Achilles’ mom nodded and crossed her arms, too. Karen smiled. Her son was friends with Achilles.

Table three was giggling and clapping their hands, preparing to collect their winnings. All six of them were wearing mermaid tails made out of Lycra and sequins, so they had to bunny-hop onstage. Naiad Number Four wiped out on the stairs and stood up to encouraging applause from all the tables (except for six, because the parents at six did not like the parents of Naiad Number Four, and table five, because Karen and the parents of the gladiators did not agree with the results). Ben Stiller handed each child a soccer or bowling trophy while their parents filtered onstage to join them.

“My daughter worked so hard to make this costume shine,” Alice Rogers said into the mic, a tear running down her cheek.

Fred Jones gently pushed his way in front of her. “And mine added that extra glitter makeup, which really set the group apart,” he said. “Honey, if you’re watching this, it’s past your bedtime!”
His daughter, standing with the other naiads a few feet away, frowned at him while he laughed at his own joke. The parents at tables nine and ten and Meryl Streep chuckled along politely, even though Tina’s bedtime joke was better.

“Okay,” Tina Fey said, “thank you guys, and congratulations to our winners.”

Karen tuned out most of the night after that and read Yahoo articles on her phone, because this thing was definitely rigged. About twenty minutes later, when the kids were starting to squirm in their seats and make napkin spitballs, she put her phone away and sat up straighter, going over her speech in her head. He’s just always been a standout. He was born for the spotlight. We are all so proud.

“Our last award,” Tina said as Principal Dunn nodded solemnly next to her, “is perhaps the most prestigious of the night. Frank paid me extra to make sure I mentioned that.” She paused for laughter, and after a minute of tittering, a hush wafted through the gymnasium.

“Presenting this award for best performer,” Principal Dunn said, “is none other than our very own director, Mr. Katz.”

Mr. Katz smoothed his canary yellow tie and glided to the stage. “You the man!” Ashton Kutcher yelled from somewhere. Karen pursed her lips, annoyed that someone so low-profile could be allowed to present the most coveted award.

“The recipient of this award,” Mr. Katz said to a rapt audience and four tables of children blowing bubbles in their milk, “really brought it this year. Their poise and quiet confidence brought out their character’s strength and cunning in a way that Homer himself would be proud of. Congratulations to Odysseus’…”

Karen began to stand up. Alan opened his camera app.

“…wife, Penelope!”
Karen was three strides from her chair when she realized that Alan was tugging on her skirt, hissing, “Come back!” Onstage, the little girl playing Penelope was collecting a basketball trophy while her mother and father hugged each other and took the mic from Mr. Katz.

Karen ignored Alan, stormed onstage, and whisked the mic back onto its stand. “I just want to say, as the president of the PTA,” she said, “that Penelope is great—don’t get me wrong—but I have to mention, I just have to, that this play wouldn’t exist without Odysseus. There is no Odyssey without Odysseus.”

Tina Fey’s mouth dropped open. Alan and the gladiators’ parents hooted and clapped. Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston exchanged an appalled glance. Frank hooted and clapped too, because he thought maybe this meant Brad and Jen were at least friends again. Odysseus blew a napkin spitball at Hector and Zeus’s understudy.

“All right,” Karen said, “we’re really proud of our child, and we think that, just like Brokeback Mountain, everyone will remember him even more because of this snub. Also congrats Penelope but this whole thing is rigged.” She pushed the mic stand towards Penelope’s parents and it fell over, sending a deafening screech over the ten-foot speakers.

“I don’t know,” Alec Baldwin murmured to Halle Berry as Karen descended the stage stairs. “I liked Crash better.”

Karen collected her things while Penelope’s parents made their stupid speech. Alan grabbed their son and the three of them exited the gymnasium together.

“I should have known it was going to be a flop this year when George Clooney didn’t show up,” Karen huffed on the way to the car. “Honey, what do you think of acting classes, every Thursday night? After lacrosse practice?”

Alan nodded and loosened his tie. “That’s a great idea.”
“You got the whole thing on video, right?” Karen asked. “We need to review the footage and figure out exactly what went wrong.”

“I did get it. I think that Penelope girl improvised a little right before intermission and it went over really well.”

“Maybe we should be trying improv classes, then.”

Karen and Alan got into their minivan. Karen started the engine and Alan Googled Best improv classes for young actors on his phone. They pulled out of the parking lot and headed towards their neighborhood without noticing that Odysseus was still out by the entrance of the school, struggling to untangle his toga from the door handle.