

AFTER DINNER Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Literary Magazine



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ADC52

- P.05 Must you accept what you cannot change?
- P.27 Are we our opinions? Can opinions be changed by facts?
- P.43 When do your children get decision autonomy?
- P.60 Are we required to grieve dead family members?

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After Dinner Conversation *Magazine* — October 2024

This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

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After Dinner Conversation believes humanity is improved by ethics and morals grounded in philosophical truth and that philosophical truth is discovered through intentional reflection and respectful debate. In order to facilitate that process, we have created a growing series of short stories across genres, a monthly magazine, and two podcasts. These accessible examples of abstract ethical and philosophical ideas are intended to draw out deeper discussions with friends, family, and students.

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From the Editor

The stories we publish are sugar and medicine. By that, I mean the fictional story is the sugar, the medicine is the hard thing the stories makes you think about. This is, in my opinion, what all “great books” do; they make you think hard thoughts.

I mention this because a few of the stories in this issue have some challenging medicine-sugar ratios and beg to be read with a highlighter in hand. Maybe even read twice.

The point is, personal growth sometimes requires focus; it’s not reality television. So, if you are struggling, be kind to yourself, go ahead to the next story, and come back to it later with a clear head and a cup of tea or coffee.

I was in a bookstore not long ago looking at the magazine rack and, no joke, thirty percent of the magazines had Taylor Swift on the cover. Another fifteen percent were about getting a better body.

The world needs what we do. The world needs (at least one) literary magazine that stretches your mind, that makes you think hard thoughts. And, candidly, we aren’t going to apologize for being the magazine that fills that niche.

Okay, old man yelling at the kids to get off the lawn rant over. Grab a highlighter. Grab a beverage. Find a comfortable chair and get to thinking thoughts you haven’t been forced to think before. You, and the world, are a better place for your devotion to the craft of being human.

Kolby Granville – Editor

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'K. Granville', with a long, sweeping underline.

We Are Here

Harley Carnell

* * *

Content Disclosure: Mild Language; Horror Elements

* * *

The bedroom was unfamiliar, and the night was forgotten. My memory was murky. The sheets next to me were cold. I retrieved my clothes from the floor. Scouring the room with my eyes, I saw no note. My phone was dead.

Confused, I left the bedroom, headed downstairs, and exited the house. Once outside, I was refreshed by a deluge of fresh air. I was on a street I had no memory of coming to, even though I must have.

My phone was no help, and I realized how helpless I was without it. Perhaps if I kept on walking, I would know where to walk. I walked left and did so for some time. “Some time” was all I could commit to—again; I was completely groundless without my phone. Whatever time it was, I soon found I was back at the house.

I had read once about deserts. You walked in what you

thought was a straight line only to eventually meet your footprints again. Perhaps this was some urban equivalent.

I decided to turn right but once again ended up at the house. I took off a few more times in differing directions, only to come back to the house each time.

There are different ways to measure time, and the stomach is one of them. I left the house with no thought of food, but after my fruitless walking could now think of nothing else. It would do no harm to go back into the house and ask for directions away from it and toward somewhere I could get something to eat.

I was about to knock on the door when I saw it was already open. I crept cautiously through. The house was now full, a highway of people threading in and out of rooms.

“Sorry,” I said, “I’m just—”

“—in time for breakfast,” a woman said to me.

I followed her into a large kitchen and dining room combined into one. The room was mostly consumed by a large table, at which sat ten people. Not just ten people but a strange assortment of people. The youngest was a man either in his early twenties or his late teens; the oldest a woman who had to be in her seventies. It looked like something from a commercial.

All my questions dispersed when the food arrived. For the next ten minutes, I ate ravenously. It was only when I was stuffed with food that my thirst for knowledge returned. I turned to the woman next to me—who I knew now as Olivia—and asked her where I was.

“Sorry?” she said, her mouth half-full.

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “I just wanted to know where we are.”

“We’re in the house,” she said.

“What house?” I asked.

Olivia gave another smile, although this time it was directed to her neighbor, a man in his thirties called Malik.

“I dunno,” she said, “it’s just the house.”

I was going to ask for more information when I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the young man: Alan.

“Right, that’s enough chitchat; it’s our turn to clean up.” He stood up and began stacking plates. I was not sure how it could be my turn to clean up, but then I supposed I was a guest here. Perhaps the rule was that guests had to clean up, even if they had no memory of being guests in the first place.

Over the next few minutes, we were too busy cleaning up for me to ask anything. When we began washing up, I asked about the house again. Alan, who attended to his washing up with the meticulousness of a jeweler inspecting a diamond, gave a similar answer to Olivia.

“My phone doesn’t work,” I then said. “I can’t call a cab or anything.”

“Oh yeah, they’ll do that. Or not do that, I suppose,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, “but how do I get out, then? How do I leave? Is there a route to town?”

“Would someone be able to drive me?”

He seemed deeply perplexed by my question. As if I had not asked him a question he didn’t know the answer to, but for the question to an answer he didn’t know.

“Leave?” he said.

“Yeah, leave. How do I get out?”

He looked at me for a few seconds and then shook his head in frustration.

“We need to get this done before they come in to make lunch. Come on.”

* * *

If no one was going to help me, I'd just have to leave on my own. I finished the washing up with Alan and then headed toward the front door. I had a brief worry that it might be locked, but it wasn't. Nor did anyone try to stop me, although I did get some odd looks as I walked by.

As I headed out, I felt better. My head was clearer and I was a lot more energized—if a little lethargic—after the breakfast. I also felt more resilient. So when I came back to the house again, I was not perturbed. I took out my phone to note which turns I'd taken before remembering it was dead. Instead, I noted them in my head. When I came to the house again, I remained unconcerned. I would get out at some point; it would just take time.

I was not sure at what point this nonchalance disappeared. All I do know was that it was a rapid transition from being unbothered to concerned to outright disturbed. It did not matter how long I walked; it did not matter in what direction; it did not matter how many unfamiliar roads I took—I always ended up back at the house.

Eventually, I became resolved. I would get one of them to either tell me how to get back to town or drive me. As I approached the house, I realized how dark it was. Was this premature night, or was my memory disoriented like a compass in a magnetic field? I marched into the house. The first person I saw was a man in his thirties, who I remembered as Mike. I was about to demand he tell me where I was, when he commanded me to the kitchen.

“We’ve all been waiting for you,” he said on the way.

He shepherded me into the kitchen, where there was a pile of potatoes on the table.

“We need them peeled for the cottage pie,” he said and then walked out of the room. Two of the other residents—the woman in her seventies (Esther) and Alan—stood stirring at the stove.

“Excuse me,” I said to either/both of them, but they ignored me.

“Excuse me,” I repeated.

Alan muttered something, but I couldn’t hear him.

“What?” I said.

“Potatoes!” Alan shouted at me without turning.

I didn’t know why I was expected to peel the potatoes, yet I felt strangely responsible for them. I sighed and began peeling.

* * *

When I was done with the potatoes, I felt oddly proud and explicably hungry. Alan said I could go and rest before dinner, and I did. I was tired and hungry, I told myself. There was no harm in having a little sleep and a nice meal before I left.

After dinner, Olivia said to me:

“You’ve done all your chores for the day, so the evening’s yours! You can do whatever you like.”

“Well, that’s the thing. I was actually wondering about leaving. Could someone drive me?

“Or walk me down to the station?”

Although I had been speaking to her, I noticed everyone was looking at me. They all alternated between concern, confusion, and irritation.

“Where is it you’re going?” Malik asked.

“Nowhere,” I said. “I mean, I don’t have anywhere specific in mind. I just want to leave.”

“But you can’t leave?” Olivia said, her voice so suffused with confusion it sounded like a question.

“Why not?” I said. “What will happen if I do?”

“Err, nothing will happen,” Malik said. “You just can’t leave. It’s like... it’s like asking what would happen if you began walking upward. You just can’t.”

“Look,” I said, struggling to keep the frustration out of my voice, “I don’t know if you’re all too busy to take me, or you just can’t be bothered. In any case, I don’t care. If you’re not willing to take me, could you at least give me directions?”

Although people looked on the verge of speaking, no one did. I sighed and then stood up.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll just go myself.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” said a man in his forties, whose name I didn’t know yet.

“Why not?”

“You’re just going to wander around, making yourself all tired. And you’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“A big day. Why?”

“It’s laundry day,” he said in a tone that indicated I should know this.

“And?”

“*And*, it’s your turn. Tomorrow’s always the day when we do everyone’s laundry.”

“And what day is tomorrow?”

“Laundry day,” he said.

I laughed incredulously.

“You know what,” I said. “I can’t tire myself out because

I'm already tired. I don't know what's up with you all, but I'm done. I'll just find the way out myself. I'll walk all night if I have to."

* * *

In the end, it wasn't quite all night. But it was certainly deep enough into the night that it had to almost be morning. At some point, I lost hope and gave up. Yet I continued walking and running long after that. Eventually, I returned to the house. I fell asleep immediately after lurching into bed.

What felt like a few minutes later I was snatched from sleep by the man in his forties—his name was Jerome. I was so sleep-deprived I sleepwalked through most of the morning, barely able to feel anything. Only after I was folding the third load of sheets and the deluge of coffee I'd ingested had successfully suffused my bloodstream did I begin to ask questions, culminating in:

"I haven't given any dirty clothes yet, so why should I have to do laundry?"

"Well, you're in the house," Jerome said. "Of course you have to do laundry if you're in the house. Everyone has to do it at some point."

"I get that," I said, "but I never asked to be in the house."

As always when I spoke about the house with the others, I was met with confusion. I tried a different approach.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

Jerome paused his folding and looked wistfully off into the distance.

"You know," he said, "I don't know. I can't actually remember." Then, he gave a small chuckle. "Funny that, isn't it?"

"What's funny?"

“How in the end you never remember when you came here. Or being anywhere before here. There’s a time when you do, and you try and hold onto it, but eventually it just gets away from you.” He chuckled again.

“I remember,” I said. “It was yesterday, and I want to leave.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No,” I said. “Or, well, it’s not a case of liking it or not liking it. It’s just that I never wanted to be here. I want to leave.”

“But this is the house,” Jerome said.

I was about to respond, but there was a mound of laundry in front of me and a long time until lunchtime. I was also beginning to get frustrated. These conversations were as circuitous as my walks and would only serve to stress me out. For the next ten minutes, Jerome and I folded laundry in silence.

* * *

By the time we were finished, it was dinnertime, and I was exhausted. After dinner, I was about ready to go to sleep, but I had to focus my energy on leaving. I asked Malik for a pen and some paper. He took me to a room that looked like a small office. It had a little desk with a computer on it and a window looking out into the house’s tiny garden. There was a bookcase beside a small armchair, in which a woman named Susan currently sat reading.

Next to the desk was a neatly arranged stationery shelf with paper.

“It’s nice in here,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s very peaceful. I like to come up here when I have my free time. You’re of course more than welcome to as well.”

“Thank you, but I’m leaving tonight.”

Malik looked like he was about to say something but restrained himself. Instead, he gave me a small smile and handed me the paper and pen.

* * *

Back on the streets, I noted down each turn I took, turning the paper into a map. Each time I returned to the house, the map grew. Knowing that with each return I was eliminating an incorrect route and approaching my escape, I was buoyed. Eventually, there would be one final elimination and I would be away from the house forever.

However, I soon found all that happened was my map kept getting bigger. I began to wonder just how large this town was. Then, I got a strange sensation. It seemed as if some of my map was somehow disappearing. I seemed to be walking down streets I had told myself not to walk down. Also, it may have just been the dark or the streetlights playing havoc with my eyesight, but it was as though streets were in different places. Roads were appearing and disappearing; turnings were turning into straight lines; exits were born in dead ends. At one point, the ink began to bleed. I thought I might have been crying but quickly realized it was raining. With a shocking rapidity, rain began to pour as if it had been doing so all night. Furious and soaked, I threw the sodden paper to the ground and stormed back to the house.

* * *

The next day was a free day. This was good, as I was exhausted. A combination of the physical exertion of the laundry and the mental strain of my failed attempts to leave left me barely able to get out of bed. I only did so because I was summoned for breakfast. After, Olivia asked if I wanted to play

tennis. “We need an extra so we can do doubles.”

From the little I had seen of the garden in flashes from windows, I was not sure how it could accommodate table tennis, let alone actual tennis. But once I got outside the garden revealed itself to be park-like in length. That this could happen seemed nonsensical, but I supposed I was not in a position to dismiss nonsense.

I enjoyed the tennis. A lot of my tension began to dissipate and, despite engaging in strenuous sport, I felt oddly relaxed. However, I soon began to get a sense that I should not be enjoying myself. It was as though by having fun I was somehow accepting or resigning myself to the idea of being in the house. I tried to ignore this thought. Of course I was going to leave—I was just having a little fun first. But I could not overcome this sensation and stopped having fun. When Olivia and I—who were playing against Malik and a woman in her thirties called Stephanie—ended up losing, I found I didn’t care.

* * *

I returned to the house.

It was as I did so that something occurred to me. If the people in the house weren’t going to help me, that didn’t mean those in others wouldn’t. I walked up to a random house and knocked. Despite lights being on, there was no answer. I tried the house next to it. The lights were also off, but my knock engendered shuffling in the shadows behind the curtains. I was hopeful, but once more there was no answer.

Every house I went to, there was no answer. I questioned whether to continue but knew of nothing else to do. I knocked on every door until my numb knuckles no longer belonged to me. People seemed to be becoming aware of me. Lights turned

off as I approached houses; locks clicked as I ran up walkways. Even the streetlights seemed to be colluding in this shunning, shutting off as I approached so that I was soon walking in near-total darkness. But in this darkness and in the distance, I saw a single light. I brightened at this and ran toward it.

When I knocked, it was answered immediately as if the person had always been expecting me. It was a man, who appeared to be in his sixties. He was well-dressed, looking like he had just come from a night out. His smile was kind.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” I said, my words staccato through rapid breaths. “But I’ve been looking all night for a way to get out.”

“To get out of where?”

“Here,” I said. “I’m in a house; I’ve been trying to get out. I mean, I have got out—how else would I be talking to you! But I need to get out of this town. I’ve been getting lost; it’s like a labyrinth. Is there a bus stop or a train station or something? Or would you be able to drive me?”

The man smiled again, although it was tinged with sadness.

“That’s not how it works, I’m afraid.”

“What?”

“You can’t just leave.”

My heart sank. After the long night and long succession of such nights, after his light being on, his kind smile, his opening the door. All that, only for him to say what everyone else had been saying.

“You won’t help me,” I said, not asked.

“I can’t help you where there is no help to be had,” he said with an infuriating kindness.

“Tell me, then. If you won’t help me, just tell me how to leave. Please. What route do I take? Or let me use your phone—I’ll call a cab.”

“I’m very sorry,” the man said, giving me a final smile and then turning around. He closed the door behind him and shut off the light.

At that point, I lost it. I began pounding on the door with my fists and arms.

“Open the door! Open the fucking door!”

The man did, a few seconds later, but it was not him who greeted me. Instead, the largest dog I ever remembered or could ever conceive came snarling out at me. I could see a leash restraining him, but the man was too far back in the dark for me to see him holding it. I backed away, walking quickly rather than running for fear he would chase me if I did.

Only when I was well past the gate did I finally run.

* * *

“You should really eat something,” Stephanie said to me.

“I’m not hungry,” I said dully. Not only was I not hungry, but I was so mired in misery I could not imagine being hungry for some time. I had only managed to haul myself out of bed because I needed the toilet; without that, I would still be in there now, slaloming in and out of the dreams where I either managed to escape the house or had never been in it in the first place.

“It’s a big day for you,” said Frank, sitting next to me.

“Why’s that?” I said, barely opening my mouth to talk.

“It’s your day to clean out the basement,” said Stephanie.

Frank and Stephanie explained the basement was cleared out once a month, and this month it was my turn.

“I’m not doing it,” I said. I know I sounded surly or rude,

but I didn't care.

"Don't be like that," said Stephanie, sighing. "Remember the tennis? And anyway, it's your turn."

"I haven't used the basement. I didn't even realize you had one."

"You might not have used the basement," said Stephanie, "but you need it to be cleaned."

There was something about her phrasing that caught my attention.

"Why would *I* need it cleaned?"

"You're scared of spiders, aren't you?"

"Erm, yeah I am. Terrified actually, but what's that got to do with anything?"

"Well," said Frank, no longer able to disguise his irritation. "This house is filled with very poisonous spiders, as well as less poisonous ones that are indistinguishable in terms of appearance. Whether you're scared of spiders or not I'd imagine you'd not want to run into one or have one fall on you or climb up you when you're using the bathroom or whatever. Over the month, they collect down in the basement, ready to make their way up into the main house. So once a month we go down there, where there's a massive hole, and sweep them away."

"Wait," I said, standing up. "You want me to go down there and clear out the spiders?"

"Now he gets it," said Frank sarcastically.

"No," I said. "No, I'm not doing that."

"I'm sorry," said Stephanie, "but I'm afraid you have to. It's your turn."

All of my surliness washed away. I began to panic. When I spoke, my voice had regressed to how I imagined it would have

been when I was a child.

“No, no, please. I’m sorry, okay. I don’t know if this is some kind of punishment for my attitude or whatever. But please. I’ll do the laundry every week. I’ll do the dishes every day. I’ll do the toilets. But please don’t make me do that.”

“All right, fuck this,” said Frank, standing up. “He’s giving me a headache. Malik, Alan, come help me, please.”

Before I knew what was happening, the three guys had hauled me out of my chair and were dragging me toward the basement, my feet tapdancing on the floor as I tried to resist. Olivia ran after us. I thought she was coming to rescue me, but instead, she slid some large gardening gloves onto my hands.

“Do not take these off for any reason,” she said. “Also, tuck your trousers into your socks.”

At the thought of the spiders trying to crawl up my legs, I began to scream. Although there were three guys holding me, and all were individually stronger than I was, I almost managed to pull free. But they held on in the end. When we reached the basement, they all but threw me in.

“Broom’s on your right, light’s on your left,” said Malik, as they closed and locked the door behind me. I began kicking and punching at the door. My hardest blows did not even rattle it in its frame. It was so thick I imagined my screams were inaudible. Yet I continued to scream, these screams scraping my throat so much that eventually they were silent. I then began to cry, pounding on the door, kicking at the keyhole.

“Please. Please let me out,” I said, with a final exhausted cry.

It was at this point, I felt a tickling on my skin. Instinctively I rushed my hand to my shoulder and felt a

carousel of legs trickling through my fingers. I screamed and smacked my hand with my other hand. I killed the spider but was in agony from the blow I'd inflicted on myself. I remembered what Malik had said about the light and hit the wall next to me until I found it. When I did, I awoke a nightmare.

In front of me, there were what had to be thousands of spiders. Some were prostrate in webs; others dangled from the ceiling; some chorused on the floor. Everywhere I looked, and everywhere I could look, there were spiders. Everywhere, including me. There were spiders crawling on my legs, some high enough they were almost at my shirt. I panicked and grabbed the broom. It took all my resolve to hold onto it when I saw its red and brown top was in fact a large spider that had coiled itself around it. I resisted the urge to scream again as another spider was close to my mouth and would climb in were I to do so. Then, despite my terror, I was suddenly overcome with a strange feeling. A sense of resolve. Whether I liked it or not, I was in the basement. I would not be able to leave until it was cleared. All of my inclinations to remain where I was, to continue trying to escape, to pass out, disappeared. The only way I was going to leave was by evicting the spiders.

Over the next ten minutes, I furiously swept the spiders. Most scurried away from me, and I was able to shepherd them toward the hole. There were a few that were bolder and tried to attack me. Every instinct I had was telling me to run, but I fought against them. Whenever a spider landed on me, I swatted it with the broom. When the more tenacious ones clung to my trousers, I picked them up with the gloves and flung them into the hole.

I began to feel a little thrilled. My life before the house was cloudy and becoming murkier by the day, but I knew I had

always been terrified of spiders. Yet the longer I spent in the basement, the less scary they became. They were becoming mundane, almost, and I was becoming bold. I began proactively approaching the spiders, creeping in the corners to find them. In one, I found a bulging and pulsing egg sac. It was still repulsive, I was still terrified, but I picked it up. Even as it beat in my hands, threatening to pop and pollinate me with its horrific arachnid litter, I held onto it and launched it into the hole.

Then, suddenly, the spiders began to flee all at once. They were emerging from corners, bungeeing down from the ceiling, climbing off my body, all headed for the hole. They were clearly terrified of my lack of fear. The final dregs of my fear were dissipating. I was beginning to feel cocky. I was almost tempted to chase after the spiders. I smiled smugly. Then, I heard a noise behind me. It was the sound of someone treading on leaves or a small twig breaking. Frowning, I turned around and saw the largest spider I had ever seen in my life. The size of a small dog, and perhaps, even some big ones.

As the spiders continued to disperse around me, I felt all of my confidence drain. I was breathing heavily, and the only thing that stopped me from charging at the door and begging to be let out again was that the spider was between the door and me. It was too big to sweep. If I tried, its weight would break the broom's bristles. It was at this point I noticed that the top of the broom was not rounded or flat, but pointed to an almost knife-like sharpness.

I was terrified, and as I flipped the broom around, my hand was trembling. The spider made a sudden lurch forward, and without thinking I thrust the broom at it. Without effort, the

spider bit down on it and snapped it into dust.

At this point, my fight had flown, and my flight took over. I could not run forward, so I tottered backward. The spider chased me. I continued to back away, and the spider continued to chase me. I knew it would catch up with me and attack me until—

I suddenly remembered the hole. Just as the spider leapt at me, I dodged out of the way, and it fell into it. After this, I lay by the hole, curled into myself like a spider playing dead. Then, I began to scream again. I continued to do so unrelentingly as the basement door opened and Malik and Mike gently lifted me up and took me back upstairs.

* * *

For the next three days, I was in bed. Olivia, who said she thought she might once have been in medicine, gave me something to help me sleep. I don't know what I would have done without it. Not well, if the few times when I was fully conscious were anything to go by. In these brief moments of lucidity, I would be constantly scratching at myself, convinced I was covered in spiders, even though I knew they were all gone for the month. I had to sleep with the light on, as whenever I heard a slight noise in the room, I'd think it was the big spider crawled out of the hole and seeking its revenge. At such moments, Olivia would return and give me more medicine.

After these days, I was gradually weaned off the medicine and back into life. On the fifth, I was roused from my sleep because I had some chores to do. I was initially reluctant to leave, but Malik said it was good for me. He was right, as the monotony of the vacuuming and dusting distracted me from my feelings.

* * *

In many ways, the basement changed me. It was as if I had taken a small part of myself and thrown it down the hole with those spiders. One way this manifested was in my attempts to leave. I continued to make them, but I was beginning to accept that I may not be able to leave the house. Of course, I did not fully give up hope. I knew the day I did that definitively and finally would be a very dark one. But I did begin to accept there was a distinct likelihood I would be staying. I wasn't sure why what happened in the basement should imbue me with that sense, but it did.

When not escaping, I began to settle into the rhythm of the house. I did my chores; I read in the study; I played tennis with the guys or watched their games.

While I was miserable for the most part, I tried to enjoy these times, and make the most of them.

* * *

I'd been up all night because I was feeling down, and eventually resigned myself to sleeplessness. I went downstairs to grab a drink and could see a light on in the kitchen.

Esther was sitting at the table with a near-empty cup of tea.

"Couldn't sleep?" I asked her as I turned on the kettle.

"I often don't," she said. "You?"

"I usually sleep well. It's all that keeps me going sometimes, the thought of sleep. But I couldn't tonight."

After I made my tea, I sat down opposite her. For the next few minutes, we spoke politely and perfunctorily about mundane topics.

"And how are you finding everything?" she asked me at

one point. Because we didn't know each other that well, I thought about giving a standard "everything's fine." But then again, Esther was the oldest in the house, and I assumed had been in it for the longest. Despite not knowing her, one thing that had always struck me about her was how calm she seemed. And not only calm but... contented.

"How do you cope with it, being here?" I asked her tentatively. "You must have had a life before this. Do you not want to get out?"

If only because it was unexpected, I expected the question to faze her, to at least warrant a little thought. But as if she had expected it, as if it was inevitable that I was going to say it, she responded immediately.

"What you have to understand is you will always be here. Until you accept that, you will never be happy."

"But surely there has to be—"

"You can try as many times as you like to leave. You can walk as far as you want. It doesn't matter: you are here, and you will always be here."

Although I felt as if I had to ask the question, I now wished I hadn't. I wished there was a way to go back and snatch it from my mouth. Because I realized now just how large the gulf was between being almost certain I would never leave and knowing it definitively.

Then, Esther leaned forward and touched my hand.

"Look," she said. "I know it's hard, and it will take a long time to get used to. Do not expect that will happen quickly because it will not. For some people, it takes years. But you will come to accept it, I promise you that."

"But how can you?" I said angrily almost petulantly. "I

don't want to be here. I want to get out. It's not fair that I'm here."

She gave my hand a little squeeze before letting it go.

"Do you think that fairness exists? Do you think something is fair or unfair, and there are distinctions between the two? Or do you not just think there are things that exist and that happen, and things that don't exist and don't happen? But whether it's fair or not, whether fair even exists or not, you are here. You are here, I am here, we are all here, and that is all there is to it.

"But, there are two ways to be here. You can be here and be happy. This place is not perfect, and maybe there are better places out there. And maybe there is something worse too. But it is enough, I think, you can be happy here and have a good time."

"But I really can't leave?" I said, realizing now that I was beginning to cry. "There really is no way out for me?"

Esther stood up and sat on the seat next to me. She took my hand in hers.

"The other way you can be here is to be unhappy. To never enjoy yourself. To spend all your energy and all your hope on trying to leave and thinking you can have something else. You can keep doing this until you drive yourself mad. Now, I can't tell you what to do or how to feel. All I can say is that, of the two, surely the first is better. Surely, it's better to accept that you're here and try to be happy and try to make the most of it. Because if you do, you can be happy and you can have a good life and you can enjoy yourself. Now, could you do me a favor?"

"What?" I said, wiping at my eye.

"I want you to say 'I am here.'"

"Sorry?" I said.

“Please,” said Esther, patiently. “Please, just say it. ‘I am here.’”

“No,” I said. “I can’t do that.”

“Please.”

“No,” I said, sniffing. “No, I can’t.”

“Just say it,” she said. “It means the world to say it.”

I did not for a long time, mostly because my tears were making it difficult to speak, but also because I did not want to. I believed Esther when she said it meant the world to say it. Those three words seemed to have such gravity to them that elevated them above mere words. They were not words that could simply be said or said simply.

I was convinced I was not going to say them. I’d do everything but say them. But then I turned to Esther. I saw her looking at me, saw how kind she was. I thought about what she had said: that no matter what I did or how often I asked, I would never leave.

Then, continuing to cry, I said silently:

“I am here.”

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think are the point, the symbolism, and the metaphors this story is trying to convey? What message is the story trying to convey?
2. What would be an example in your real life that feels like the metaphorical example in the story? Would the situation be helped by saying out loud, “I am here”?
3. What do you think the daily chores and the spider basement are meant to represent? What do they represent in the situation of your own life that is like this story?
4. Is the narrator saying, “I am here” and accepting his situation a good thing because it gives him comfort or a bad thing because it takes away his willingness to change his situation?
5. Are there ever situations that have to be accepted because they can never change? Are all situations, even those that *seem* permanent, actually temporary?

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S y n t h e t i c C e r t a i n t y

Earl Smith

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Content Disclosure: None

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After the students had filed out, Professor Matthew Gault decided he needed a drink and headed for the Tombs, a dimly lit tavern in a basement below a five-star restaurant. The faculty called it the scruffy underpinnings of the elegant. It was sure to be thinly populated this time of day. A perfect place to think.

His plan was scuppered as soon as he entered. In a booth at the back, two old friends were engaged in animated conversation. Tom Bollon was a political operative. A dogmatic agnostic. An old hand at the game of politics. Short, balding, with intense gray eyes and a sharp nose, he was a veteran of many campaigns on both sides of the aisle. He preferred moderates. Centrists.

Sidney Plover was a lobbyist with a taste for lost causes. Her latest was climate change. Her current favorite documentary was *The Age of Stupid*. “We knew what was

happening. Why didn't we save ourselves?" was her new constant question. Now in her late sixties, she was that perfect combination of wisdom and fire that often serves as the foundation for stimulating conversations. She looked up as Matthew approached.

"What the hell happened to you?" she asked. "You look like death eatin' a cracker." She patted the seat beside her and said, "Sit down. Tell Mama your troubles."

Gault slid in beside her. "It's been a rough morning. My seminar blew up. Headed over here to be alone. I'm glad to find the two of you. Distract me. What were you talking about? Looked like you were having fun. I could use some fun right now."

"We were talking Kipling," Tom replied. "The whole thing started with a discussion of the difference between good and perfect and whether the idea of perfect is useful or destructive. We ended up with "The Conundrum of the Workshops." Kipling, you know. Just got to one of the last verses. Sidney, you do it better than me."

She smiled and began to recite. "When the flicker of London's sun falls faint on the club-room's green and gold, the sons of Adam sit them down and scratch with their pens in the mold. They scratch with their pens in the mold of their graves, and the ink and the anguish start when the Devil mutters behind the leaves: "It's pretty, but is it art?""

"I was just thinking about that poem," Gault said. "I read it regularly to remind myself not to let perfect become the enemy of good. But what use does a political operative and a lobbyist have for Kipling?"

"We were discussing what happens when opinion

becomes enshrined as fact,” Tom replied. “It’s a form of synthetic perfection. Self-certifying absolution from error. There’s another verse from that poem. Let me see if I can do this one.” He glanced upward and began to recite slowly.

“For each man knows ere his lip-thatch grows he is master of Art and Truth; and each man hears as the twilight nears, to the beat of his dying heart, the Devil drum on the darkened pane: “You did it, but was it Art?”” Kipling considered aging a journey to realization, reason, and wisdom. But what if contemporary humans are taking the reverse course—becoming increasingly self-delusional?”

“Now, that’s a dark cloud for a sunny day,” Gault said. “What’s it got to do with either politics or lobbying? Or are you two just on vacation?”

“Wish we were on vacation,” Sidney said. “We both have the same problem. When dogma supplants reason, when opinion becomes enshrined as fact, we are no longer dealing with rational human beings, but religious fanatics. Kurt Andersen had it right in *Fantasyland*. Americans have become the most anti-rational people on the planet.”

Matthew smiled and shook his head. “Were you guys auditing my seminar?”

“You too?” Tom asked. He winked at Sidney. “I suppose we’re about to discover the source of young Matt’s funk. Come on son, lay it on us elders.”

“Today’s seminar didn’t just go off the rails,” Gault began. “It descended into irrationality. I don’t understand why. It started with a very simple question. What is the relationship between the right to have an opinion, and the right to have that opinion taken seriously? At the beginning, everybody agreed.

All were entitled to their opinions. I thought the session was going to be dull. Then it shifted. I suggested that opinions backed by sound arguments, supported by established facts, and demonstrated through logical reasoning are more appropriately taken seriously. Conversely, opinions lacking these qualities should be summarily dismissed. The seminar really headed south when one of the doctoral assistants told a graduate student, ‘...you have a right to your opinion, but you do not have a right to have me take it seriously.’ Agreement morphed into animosity. Respectful discussion into confrontation.”

They sat for a while in silence. Finally, Sidney said, “It went off the rails when the discussion moved from the generic to the personal, right?”

“Predictable,” Tom quickly added. “Self-certification is the unstable foundation of synthetic certainty.” They both stared at him and grinned. “I read that on a cereal box once,” Tom continued. “But seriously, by holding their opinions as facts, they justify their own existence synthetically. When self-certification is challenged, the entire edifice becomes vulnerable.”

“Are you suggesting my students experienced an existential crisis?” Matthew responded.

“In a way,” Sidney replied. “Intellectualized generic concepts are easy to get agreement on. The rub comes when they are applied in real time, by real people, to real-life situations. What happens when a person holds their opinions as facts? And most of them don’t even realize they’re doing that until they’re called out. Those opinions become the foundation for a rigid belief system. A religion-of-one.”

Gault sat back and smiled ruefully. “Taking opinions as

facts is a theological statement?”

“Something like that,” Tom offered. “Religious fanatics, individuals who hold their opinions as unimpeachable facts, have an unwavering conviction in the absolute truth of their beliefs. They consider them unchallengeable. They reflexively dismiss out of hand any opposing views, or evidence, that contradicts their theological presumption of facticity.”

Matthew leaned forward. “A kind of faux-theological thinking parading as rational thought, if I’m following you.”

“Precisely,” Sidney interjected. “Just as religious individuals base their beliefs on faith, rather than empirical evidence, those who declare their opinions as facts rely on personal conviction rather than objective reasoning. They don’t require evidence to support their opinions. Most accept that belief is the true foundation of facticity.”

“Self-certification,” Tom offered, “is foundational to the avoidance of critical examination. Your seminar challenged those foundational assumptions. The response was predictable. They found critical analysis of their beliefs threatening. Felt exposed and vulnerable. Remember Socrates and how he ended up?”

“I’ll buy all of that, but why did this topic trigger such a response?”

“At the center of each of their worlds is a sense of moral and intellectual righteousness,” Sidney replied. “People who hold their opinions as facts are like religious followers who perceive their faith as superior to other belief systems. Christians are particularly adept at this charade. Remember the first commandment? I am the Lord thy God! Thou shalt have no other Gods before me! That means the gods of all other

peoples are demons. Evangelical Christian narcissism routinely disregards, or belittles, differing opinions, defining itself as the sole possessor of eternal truth.”

Tom leaned in. “How would such a vision impact identity?”

“Religious beliefs contribute to an individual’s sense of identity and worldview,” Matthew responded. “But you guys are talking about something far more extreme. Holding nonfactual opinions as facts would form the core of a secular virtual identity. A tribe with only one member,” Gault observed. “But my students divide into cliques. Don’t they?”

“Only ritualistically,” Tom offered. “Religious practices often involve rituals and ceremonies that express, and reinforce, belief. In a religion-of-one, an individual may engage in habitual behaviors or repetitive actions to reinforce a fiction.”

“And what’s the fiction they are reinforcing?” Gault asked.

“That they are part of something they call the human race,” Tom responded. “A religion-of-one is a temple in which its architect is the god sitting on a throne of self-proclaimed omnipotence. All others must be seen as heretics. There is nothing meaningfully true for them beyond the boundaries of the throne.”

“Let’s get back to your seminar,” Sidney suggested. “You arranged a gathering of participants, each covertly taking their opinions as facts. Then your doctoral assistant turned up the heat. The group, under threat of mass exposure, became volatile. Any willingness to consider different viewpoints evaporated in defense of each individual’s synthetic certainty.

“What was lost was the flow of soft confirmation, independent certification, which allows individuals to maintain

their personal fictions,” Sidney continued. “When individuals don’t receive the necessary external confirmations for their beliefs, they are thrown back onto their own self-certification.”

“And that leads to a destruction of constructive dialogue,” Matthew offered. “As their opinions became defined as merely that, my students retreated into increasingly rigid and dogmatic positions. An open exchange, or exploration of ideas, is poison in such a situation, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Tom observed. “Critical thinking is a mortal threat to a religion-of-one. It’s an ugly reminder that self-certification is delusional. They default to emotional responses, or fallacious arguments, rather than engaging in logical analysis or evidence-based reasoning. What happens when pressure drives everyone to that extreme?”

“Nobody sees anybody else,” Sidney replied. “Your students lost track of each other and circled the wagons. With each wagon forming its own circle, defending itself against all other wagons.”

“What’s the antidote?” Gault said with some frustration. “How do I foster an environment that encourages open-mindedness, respectful dialogue, and the willingness to critically examine one’s own beliefs? How do I teach them to welcome the introduction of diverse perspectives, relish evidence-based discussions, and promote constructive engagement?”

Sidney turned to Matthew. “Some questions have no answers. Some are not even worth considering as questions. Let’s try it from a different direction. How many opinions do you express during a month?”

“In the course of a month? You mean all my opinions on things big and small? It must be thousands. Every time I decide,

advise, or opine, it involves at least one opinion—that my facts, and my understanding of them, are correct. Every time I engage in a discussion, or an argument, it’s the same.”

“And how many of those opinions have an actual impact?” Sidney asked impishly. “How many, from among all of them, have any potency?”

“I think she means, how many of them are actually worth having,” Tom suggested.

“Close, but no cigar,” Sidney said with a grin. “A fact is only potent if it has an impact beyond merely being a fact. That’s the same with an opinion. Let’s say you argue for a curriculum change based on your opinions, and that suggested change is accepted. It’s fair to say those opinions have had an impact beyond simply being opinions.”

“If you put it that way,” Gault said, “I would guess only one or two of all the opinions I might hold and/or express during a month might be potent. The rest are simply opinions that I hold.

“I think I know where you’re going with this,” Gault continued. “And I don’t much like it. You’re suggesting I become a devil’s advocate. Instead of standing on the sidelines as an observer, focusing on teaching students about the true foundations of their identities. Is that right?”

“Give that man a quasi-cigar for a fair attempt at diversion!” Sidney said with a chuckle. “You’re treating the wrong patient. It was Thomas Paine who said the first half of it particularly well. ‘To argue with a person who has renounced the use of reason is like administering medicine to the dead.’ The other half comes from Dirty Harry in the movie *Magnum Force*. ‘A man’s got to know his limitations.’”

“That’s not particularly helpful,” Gault grumbled.

“It’s the best I can do,” Sidney replied. “Presumption is the enemy of comprehension.”

“That’s harsh,” Matt objected.

“Maybe so,” Sidney responded. “But suppose your number was zero? What if you were forced to the realization that none of your opinions mattered? That all your so-called facts were impotent? And, by derivation, that you were meaningless? It’s senseless to administer pharmaceuticals to the dead, Matt. You only embarrass the infirmed by exposing their infirmity.”

“Sid gave you all you need. It’s just hard to come down to it. This might help,” Tom offered. “Think of yourself as a mosquito, floating down the river on your back, with an erection, and calling for them to raise the drawbridge.” There was a brief stunned silence then Sidney and Matt burst out laughing.

After things settled down, a broadly grinning Matt asked, “So, you’re accusing me of overestimating my prowess?”

“No reflection on your manhood, son. It’s just that most of us make two big mistakes when thinking about things like this. We think we are watching from the outside and we lose track of what’s important about what’s going on.”

“I’m still back at the drawbridge,” Sidney said with a broad grin. “But I think I’m catching up with you. Fold it back against itself. Right, Tommy boy?”

“Yep,” Tom said. “That’s the ticket.” He shifted his gaze to Matt. “What makes you think you’re above it all? Not making the same mistake your students made? There are no sidelines, son! Ever thought of that? What are you professing, professor?”

Gault paused before asking, “Are you saying I’m a charlatan? The one whose opinions about facts can generate the delusion that only my opinions held as facts have the same potency as established facts because they are my opinions?”

“Wow,” said Sidney. “That’s enough to cross a rabbi’s eyes. But there’s a hard center to it. Charlatans are inherently narcissistic,” Sidney offered. “And, inherently antisocial. Narcissists always tango alone. There’s something of the charlatan in all of us.”

“Now I’m the bad guy?” Matthew asked incredulously. “What, the seminar exposed my fiction?”

“Easy now, remember we’re on your side,” Sidney responded. “But the direct answer, friend to friend, is that, for you, that’s the only important thing that happened. Look at it this way, when you take your opinions to be facts, none of them can be successfully challenged because that challenges the entire synthetic certainty—your synthetic certainty. You accept, as a matter of fact, that you are better than them. More competent. More experienced. But what if that competence and experience are not enough to keep you from falling into the same hole?”

“Look,” Tom offered, “we’re not just talking about you. That tendency was the focus of our discussions before you arrived. We live in a world that brings the same vulnerabilities to all of us.” He paused and then continued, “But let’s get back to your students. Why do you think they are so active on social media? Let’s look at that question through the lens of addiction. The algorithms are designed to reinforce their belief that their opinions should be taken as facts. Confirmation bias is the soul food of self-certification. Such confirmation can come from bots or troll farms. The source is irrelevant. It’s the sweetly

addictive foundation of their delusions.”

“So, virtual reality redefines reality?” Gault asked.

“No, virtuality becomes reality. And virtual reality has no non-virtual foundation except the addiction to it. It’s like fentanyl,” Tom replied. “The algorithms supply confirmation on demand. Algorithms automatically prescreen who you interact with, and that supercharges the flow of confirmation and limits the likelihood of challenges. Like fentanyl, algorithms rewire your brain. Contact with individuals, particularly in heated conversations, constitutes the addict’s greatest fear. It’s the equivalent of withdrawal. And, compared to other narcotics, withdrawal from fentanyl use—or synthetic certainty—is much more painful.”

“Think of what it must be like,” Sidney said softly. “Being pushed closer to the realization of your own meaninglessness. Realizing how impossible it is to establish any kind of lasting meaningfulness in a virtual world. Dancing on a knife’s edge above the abyss. Glancing into the darkness, seeing your fading virtual self falling into blackness. You become desperate to touch something real, if only for a moment. But you also know such a touch would destroy the synthetic certainty at the foundation of your identity. Reality is the antimatter of synthetic certainty. And then, you come to realize you have no facts—no actual facts. Only unfounded opinions. What happens when you discover the foundation of your identity is unfounded?”

“Welcome to our worlds,” Tom said. “Sidney just described a growing percentage of the population that is becoming increasingly unable to define who they are. AI has taken over their virtual evolution. They are rendered

meaningless, even within their own humanity. Their potential is mostly spent, their options have faded, even their identity is no longer their own. How do they cope with the realization they are destined to not amount to much of anything? That their passing will go unrecorded?

“Sidney patiently listens to a climate change denialist who’s sweating from all pores, vociferously denying established science, and blaming it all on a left-wing conspiracy. The guy’s a walking validation of something that Isaac Asimov said years ago. ‘There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.’ Their ignorance, fertilized by their insistence that they matter, turns toxic with the realization that they don’t.”

“Tom doesn’t have it any better,” Sidney interjected. “His world is increasingly dominated by the evangelically irrelevant. Manipulated by billionaires, they are sliced and diced—redefined and repurposed. And in the end, they become... how was it that Shakespeare put it in *Macbeth*? ‘Life is but a walking shadow; a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ Americans have always believed they were more than that. Now, for many, there’s only loneliness and a recognition of their own individual meaninglessness. Their high tolerance for cognitive dissonance crumbles when the defenses of their delusions are breached. When pressed, they follow false prophets, regurgitate wing-nut conspiracy theories, and declare undying allegiance to half-

baked theologies.”

“For them, exchanging personal views constitutes an unacceptable element of risk,” Gault offered.

Sidney touched Matt’s hand and said softly, “For people like us, conversation is not about winning or losing but about learning, connectedness, and collaboration. It’s a form of open-ended play through which we satisfy our social needs and intellectual curiosities. When we chat, mutual openness, even vulnerability, helps the conversation unfurl. But vulnerability is a mortal threat within a religion-of-one.”

“So, what’s the way out?” Gault asked.

“Your only recourse is to avoid Kipling’s trap altogether,” Sidney replied. “It’s your conundrum you need to pay attention to not theirs. As Robert Browning wrote, ‘Tis an awkward thing to play with souls, and matter enough to save one’s own.’”

“Physician, heal thyself,” Tom said with a wide grin.

“Okay, bring it home for me,” Gault pleaded.

Sidney winked at Tom, smiled, and began. “Now, if we could win to the Eden Tree where the four great rivers flow, and the wreath of Eve is red on the turf as she left it long ago, and if we could come when the sentry slept, and softly scurry through, by the favor of God we might know as much—as our father Adam knew!”

Matt laughed and said, “Or as the saying goes, ‘I knew him before he was a virgin.’”

Tom chuckled. “You know, for a youngster, you’re showing surprising sense. Old Rudyard got it right. Adam’s response should have been, ‘Go back to hell, you old meddler.’ Dirty Harry hit the nail square on the head. Best you can do is manage your own conundrums. And know your own

limitations.”

Sidney nodded. “That old fox. Kipling knew. Art leads to art experts. Art experts lead to forgery. The best we can do is avoid becoming forged authors of our own forged forgeries. In a virtual world, the artist becomes the art expert who inevitably becomes an art forger and then becomes the god who condemns the whole group to eternal damnation. That’s the trap you should try to avoid. Your openness and curiosity are the only paths to authentic meaningfulness. They’re the only gifts you can truly give your students. Teach by example—by induction. And, for those, there are no measures of perfection. If your students take them, mazel tov. If they don’t, c’est la vie. Remember, you can lead a horticulture, but you can’t make her think!”

“Son,” Tom said, “living long as Sid and I have—and given all the holes we have fallen into and had to crawl out of—it leaves you humbled. You come face to face with how much time you’ve wasted on nonsense. What you saw today was a steaming pile of it. Background noise in a play written, and performed, by a mindless eunuch. If there’s any gift we can give you, it’s this: focus on what’s important and separate it out from the background noise. Maybe that leaves you with only five to ten percent. But making sense of that five to ten percent is the road to relevance. The road to sanity. That’s your superhero skill, my boy. And Sid and I prefer drinking with sane people.”

The waiter stopped by. Matt ordered another round. Tom raised his glass, winked at Sidney, and said, “Mama, I think our work here is done.”

Professor Gault smiled ruefully and responded, “To avoiding the sticky delusions of synthetic certainty. Drinks are

on me. And that's a fact!"

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What does the group mean by the term, “synthetic perfection?” Who is doing this, and what do they mean by saying perfection is synthetic in its nature?
2. Tom says, “Critical thinking is a mortal threat to a religion-of-one.” What does it mean to be a religion-of-one? Why would critical thinking be a threat to that religion?
3. Do you think the group in the story is anti-religious? Is there a religious faith type they would be in support of? How does that relate to a worldview they would be in support of?
4. The group seems to be advising Gault that he is no better than his students. What do they mean by this, and do you agree?
5. The group argues, in part, there is no reason to argue with a person who has renounced reason as the basis of their conclusions because their opinions (*viewed as facts*) are the basis of their self-identity. If that is the case, how should you interact with these types of people regarding conflicting ideas?

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Y o u r F i r s t L e s s o n

Kristina Ryan Tate

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Content Disclosure: Sexual Innuendo; Mild Language

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Margarite lined up behind the stream of cars spilling into the street, parents more punctual than she. She couldn't get used to being back here at the middle school she herself had attended. She'd hated school, though it wasn't until high school that she'd finally given up altogether, brought coloring books to class instead of textbooks, got high during lunch break. Still, for Evie, she hoped things would be different.

The bell rang and students poured out onto the sidewalk, car horns snatching someone's attention, a mother—always a mother—yelling *Shelby!* out the car window, and Margarite rolled her own window down. Heat smacked her face, sweltering and smelling like onions. At least in Idaho it had been cool, she thought, and she flicked the thought away. At least in Arizona, you're free, she reminded herself. That was worth sweltering heat.

The radio that was playing country's top ten crackled and switched to the next song, only the tune didn't fit. Margarite stared at it like it had suddenly taken on a life of its own. *Shit, motherfucker, fuck, fuck, gonna eat that pussy hole.* She reached up to turn it off, and just as she did, the car door swung open. "No, Mom, I'm listening to that!" Evie's hand shot out and swatted hers away. Only then did Margarite register the radio had picked up Evie's Bluetooth.

"Evangeline Hope, turn that shit off." She started to pull from the curb, waving at the rude parent honking behind her.

"No way. This is my favorite song."

"Well, at least turn it down."

Evie scoffed, lifting one pointy wrist to turn the dial just a tad.

Margarite reached up and turned it even more. "Do you even know what they're singing about?" Back in Idaho Evie had been a child, but in this new city, she was transforming into something else, too mature for her own good.

Evie tilted her head back, pressing it against the back of her seat with a scathing look. "Ya, duh."

Margarite gripped the steering wheel. "Okay, what's it about?"

"Sex, Mom. I know about sex."

As Margarite steered the car around a corner and they rolled to a stop at a red light, she turned and faced her daughter, just thirteen years old. "How do you know about sex?" Evie shrugged, looking away. Her platinum hair was greasy at the scalp, and Margarite refrained from telling her it was time for a bath. She hoped to imbue all her maternal wisdom, even if she'd been doing a shabby job of late, to evoke a kind of openness, to

be as cool as a welcoming lake on the hottest summer day, totally and unequivocally Evie's ally with what she said next: "Evie, are *you* having sex?"

And on her daughter's face, in those blue glistening eyes and the chubby cheeks that framed them, disdain was replaced by a flash of the little girl she'd been mere months ago before they'd packed up their lives and driven to this godforsaken city in the middle of the night.

Evie nodded. Yes. And the flash was gone. Evie morphed back into something else, not a woman exactly, not a girl, but the monster she was in the in-between.

Margarite clamped her hand on her own leg to keep herself breathing. "Okay," she said slowly. "And it was your choice?"

"Yes! Mom!"

"Evie, you don't have to yell. I'm just asking."

There was silence. Just the whir of cars that passed her. The vulgar rap of the stereo, a murmur now. "Did you like it?"

Evie nodded again, this time her face clamped shut like a steel trap.

"Okay," Margarite said. She turned and pulled onto the highway heading west, the low Arizona summer sun blasting into the car again.

* * *

Margarite took Evie to Planned Parenthood. She would have made an appointment with her own gynecologist—she wasn't embarrassed about what Evie was doing, worried but not embarrassed, and she didn't want Evie to be embarrassed either—but that would have meant getting insurance involved and one of the stipulations of her divorce from Evie's father all

those years ago was that he had to provide health insurance until each of their three children turned eighteen. Now that the boys had aged out—one living with his girlfriend in Phoenix, the other still back in Idaho—Jason was hyper-focused on Evie’s medical bills in a way he’d never been when it was all three kids.

It had been ten years since the divorce and the custody battle that had ensued. Sometimes Margarite caught herself laughing. How back then she’d thought that would be the worst of it. *It’s hell on earth*, she’d told her sister almost daily. Jason had controlled everything because Jason controlled the money, the insurance, even the kids’ cell phones. Margarite had to be careful what she said because Jason documented every little thing. He saved text messages and emails as “evidence,” he said, that she was a bad mother. Every night she went to bed thinking, *He’s going to take my babies from me*.

Then, when she’d won that battle—or, at least not lost, there was no winning in divorce—there was a brief period where Margarite thought she’d be free of him; but somehow, he held an even tighter grip on her via the three children she’d been forced to co-parent with him. He monitored their cell phones and refused to sign papers that required both parents’ signatures. It broke her heart to think of the field trips her kids had missed, the braces they never got, all because their father needed to exhibit some semblance of control, and their mother didn’t have the financial means to fight him where it mattered—court. Truthfully, that was one of the reasons she’d been attracted to her second husband, Kevin, in the first place. He may have been an asshole, but once he’d come around, even Jason had backed off. She should have known not to marry a man even Jason was afraid of.

“What about that ring thing?” Margarite asked the nurse who was taking Evie’s blood pressure, checking her temperature. “Nuva something or other?”

“Yes, we have that as an option, but we recommend the pill to start, because it’s simpler and also because we’re able to prescribe it at no cost. The doctor will explain everything.”

Evie stared at the plastic charts on the wall with a crinkled nose—*How to prevent sexually transmitted diseases!* and *How to put on a condom*. The night before, Margarite had attempted to go over these things.

Gently, she’d told her daughter she had to protect herself—about STDs, the importance of a woman carrying a condom, and that she was going to get on birth control immediately—and for a brief moment Evie had listened, even shared, welcoming some fraction of Margarite’s feminine wisdom before shutting her out again. It had been so much easier with the boys. She’d simply left small brown paper bags of condoms outside of each of their bedrooms like gifts with a note inside—*wrap it up*.

The boy, Evie told her, was a sixteen-year-old from another school. Margarite had tried to wrangle her shock. Evie had always tried to be more mature than her age, had strived her whole life to keep up with her older brothers. But sixteen? That seemed like another generation entirely. His name was Garret, and he and Evie had met at the church youth group Evie had attended a few times, Young Life.

“I want to meet him,” Margarite said as sweetly as she could. She was careful, thoughtful. One wrong move and she’d drive Evie away. Margarite’s own parents had had such little interest in Margarite’s romantic life. They’d never expressed a

desire to meet her prom or homecoming dates, had never talked to her about things like sex or condoms, much less birth control. Maybe if they had, things would have turned out differently. But after her mother left, her father wouldn't so much as buy tampons for the girls let alone talk to them about sex, and when Margarite had wound up knocked up at eighteen, he'd kicked her out without much thought to where she'd go next. Marrying Jason was as much a lifeline as it had just made practical sense. Where did her father expect her to go?

Evie's doctor was an Indian woman with kind dark eyes. While she checked Evie's heart rate, needlessly repeating some of the same measurements the nurse had just taken, she asked Evie a few questions. "So you wanted to have sex, right? This wasn't something anyone pressured you into?"

"Yes," Evie said, showing the doctor the timid respect that she hadn't paid her mother. "I mean, no. I mean, I wasn't pressured." Evie's knees were pinched together and her back was straight. Margarite could see the little knobs of her spine through her thin cotton dress, like a ladder leading up to her head.

"And you know sex comes with responsibility, right? Your mother has talked to you about that?"

Evie nodded, glancing over at Margarite with glassy blue eyes. That morning, Evie had sashayed in and out of Margarite's bedroom presenting a different dress each time. It reminded Margarite of the years she and her sister had done this, showing off their new outfits like a runway show, filled with anticipation of the places they'd go, the people—the men—they'd dazzle, and Margarite had nearly cried. It was a rare soft side from her daughter that she couldn't help but mourn. She praised each

dress to a varying degree, sometimes seeing flashes of the girl Evie used to be, all spunky and innocent, and sometimes the woman she was becoming, each dress shorter than the last, those long slender legs bursting past the hem. She and her sister's runway shows had a different air about them now, watching Evie pose. Evie was beautiful. She had long blonde hair and knobby shoulders, a long, slender neck. Margarite resisted the urge to mess it up, to insist they go make mud pies or play dolls. She wanted to rebottle her daughter's beauty before the world could get ahold of it.

* * *

When Margarite left Kevin—the time that stuck—there had been less legal fanfare. No custody battle, not even a divorce hearing. Just signed papers in the dark, whispered urges for Evie to hurry up and pack. They'd driven all night to put distance between him and them. From Idaho through Utah, before Arizona had descended upon them like a heat dome. Margarite didn't even take the phone that was tethered to his account. She knew he'd be calling it all night, maybe all week before he realized it was stowed away in the dresser drawer, the scuff marks still sliced across the screen from their last fight. Instead, she had the new one her sister had sent her, the \$2,000 her dad had forked out—he couldn't show up physically but sometimes he compensated in other ways—and Evie by her side. They didn't need more than that, she kept saying to Evie all that month. Kept trying to convince herself, until it was true.

It was weeks before the two finally began to accept he wasn't coming for them. They secured a condo near where Evie's brother and his girlfriend were living—Margarite's father helped with that too, apologizing, maybe, for the home he'd

once taken away. It wasn't "returning home," but there was something oddly comforting about the saguaros of her childhood, standing guard around her, the silent protectors she'd so desperately needed all those years away. Like maybe it was the do-over she hadn't been afforded back then.

Margarite got two jobs as a waitress, and on her days off, she explored the desert. Evie was making friends in school, she'd even joined the volleyball team, and Margarite had secured a therapist, was slowly coming back not to herself, exactly, but to a place where she might find a new person, a stronger, more independent one. She enrolled in community college, was thinking about nursing—she'd always loved that part of being a mother, taking physical care of another being. As things settled, Margarite let herself be apart from Evie for longer and longer periods of time. One weekend, she wound up in Jerome, perusing a Gold Rush museum. As she walked the dusty, rickety halls, she found herself wondering: Who might she have become had she been given the chance to grow up?

That was when Margarite stopped suddenly, her attention caught by the women on the wall. Women from the 1890s whose framed licenses hung there, declaring: LICENSE FOR PROSTITUTION. Each featured a black and white photograph of the woman it had belonged to. They were nude, their soft white breasts like fruit from an overripe tree, one supple and small, another heaping and drooping, and the third, uneven, perfect in an imperfect way, but all of them had the same bold look in their eyes. Margarite could have only described it as pride. When the guide told her each of these women had been murdered by a man she'd loved, Margarite wasn't even surprised.

“Why?” she asked anyway, standing at the register with the licenses in her hands.

The woman shrugged; one strap of her tank top loosely fell down a shoulder. “They were the richest people during the Gold Rush,” she said as if that were explanation enough. And it was. Margarite knew how a woman’s autonomy could threaten a man.

“Why can’t she take the pill?” Margarite’s sister, Sam, asked the night Margarite and Evie left Planned Parenthood empty-handed. They were whispering over a shared bottle of wine. Evie was upstairs.

“She’s thirteen. She won’t remember to take it.”

“I mean, if she’s going to be making adult decisions...” her sister went on, “she should understand there are adult repercussions...” Margarite and Sam connected over so many things, particularly the shitty men in their lives, but when it came to parenting, Sam was naive. At thirty-six, she’d decided she wasn’t having kids, which was fine—Margarite understood, was envious even—but she saw how narrow-minded it sometimes made her, more simplistic than Margarite’s own life afforded her to be.

Margarite said, “I can barely remember to take it, and I’m almost forty.”

Sam’s eyes went big, and then she laughed. “I just realized I forgot to take mine today and yesterday.” She dropped her head on the table. “Fuck, it’s just a lot.”

“I know.” Margarite refilled Sam’s wine, and she lowered her voice further. “I don’t want to tell her she can’t. I don’t want to make her feel terrible about it, and I’m not in control of her vagina—obviously, I am not in control of it. But I tell you what,

I sure as hell don't want her showing up here with a baby."

"Oh god, do you think that could actually happen? *She's* a baby!"

Margarite threw her hands up. "Happened to me."

Margarite's sister leaned back to stare up at the ceiling. Sometimes she thought Sam was as exhausted as she was, fighting with all of the men. "They have this microchip now," Margarite went on, "stays in for months, really incredible, but it's \$500. Of course, Jason's insurance will fully cover it. I already called to ask."

Sam's eyes grew wide. "You're gonna tell him?"

Margarite shrugged and then took a big gulp of wine. "Maybe we can sneak it in her before he notices."

* * *

A few weeks later, Margarite was at work, and her phone was vibrating incessantly from inside her apron. Evie was with her father for the weekend who had swooped into town like Maverick when Margarite told him about the birth control. "What the fuck were you thinking?" he'd snapped before closing Evie into his truck. It was unclear if he was yelling at Margarite or Evie. He took Evie camping in the woods—lord knows what he was filling her head with—and so Margarite had taken the opportunity to load up on shifts at the bar to keep her mind off it.

When the dinner rush finally died down, Margarite snagged a quick second to duck into the bathroom and check her phone. A number she didn't recognize. She called it back.

"Margarite!" The woman's voice sounded both relieved and desperate. "I'm Linda, Garret's mom."

"Hi! I've been meaning to call you. We've just been..."

dealing with a lot.” Margarite paused while the image of her daughter’s boyfriend gelled with the smoky husk of this woman’s voice. Garret had come over for dinner that week. He was respectful and kind, handing her potato salad from Safeway. He was a tall handsome boy with bushy eyebrows hunched worriedly over brown eyes, and Margarite saw immediately why her daughter liked him. He shook her hand before hugging Evie, and after dinner, she’d sensed her daughter’s penetrating stare on her back, but she stayed in the living room the whole time he was there. She’d gotten Evie that microchip, but it was one thing to help her protect herself, another thing entirely to facilitate the sex she didn’t feel Evie was ready to have.

“Actually, Jason, that’s your husband, right? He called and told us what happened between... Garret and Evie,” the woman said. Of course he did, Margarite exhaled slowly. Her mind went to her daughter. She hoped Jason had been kind, though she was sure he hadn’t.

The woman went on. “Margarite, I’m just so sorry.”

Margarite laughed. “For what?” Sorry? She was standing in front of the bar’s wide bathroom mirror. In her reflection, she found the familiar look there, the tired, weary brown of her eyes. She wondered when they’d lost the glint that Evie’s had now, wondered what else she could do to try to get it back. “You have nothing to be sorry for,” Margarite said. And actually, he’s my ex-husband, she thought.

“We met Evie. She’s lovely. And Garret really liked her.”

“Liked?”

The woman sighed. “Believe me, we did not know she was thirteen. Never in a million years would I have thought she was thirteen. We told Garret he can’t see her anymore, of course.”

Margarite bristled. She never understood why some parents tried to make such decisions for their children. It was like they forgot they were ever teenagers themselves. Didn't they realize this would just drive them into each other's arms? "Is that what they want?"

"Well... ah..." Garret's mother's throat seemed stuck. "*Of course*, he can't see her anymore."

"Listen." Margarite took a deep breath. She had to get back to work. The other waitresses would be wondering where she was. "I wish they had waited. I wish Evie had been a little older, but I'm not angry. I can't control how you feel, and believe me, I certainly can't control my *ex-husband*, but for what it's worth, I don't think any of us should be apologizing. And I feel strongly that we shouldn't try to control them. Support. They need support."

The woman laughed nervously. "I think Jason has a different opinion."

"What do you mean?" Margarite found her eyes in the mirror again; her body tensed.

"He sent the police over here this afternoon. He's threatening to press charges."

"He did *what*?"

"Can he do that? Can he press charges? I mean, Garrett's sixteen—he's not eighteen."

Margarite shook her head. Does it matter? she wanted to say. He's a man. He does whatever the hell he wants.

* * *

Margarite was out on the patio when she heard Evie's father drop her off, his truck idling in front of the house. She looked at her phone—it was just past 9 p.m. A little late for a

school night, she thought derisively. Margarite had gotten her own messages from Jason: *This is your fault. She should have been living with me. How the fuck are you going to fix it?* She hadn't responded to a single one. She picked up her wine glass to pluck out the dead fly floating at the top.

Evie came pounding through the house, rattling the Arcadia door as she pried it open. Margarite pulled up her knees so her daughter could sit at her feet.

Evie was already crying, tears rolling down her cheeks, her face moist and glistening. "It was awful!" she wailed when the glow of his headlights disappeared.

"Which part?" Margarite asked.

"All weekend. He said I'm not allowed to use my phone, and I'm not allowed to go places, and I'm not allowed to do anything!" Another stipulation of the divorce: Jason had to provide the children's cell phones.

Margarite's voice was steady. She clutched the stem of her wine glass, taking bitter little sips as her daughter spoke. Jason hadn't reacted this way when either of the boys had started having sex. He hadn't even known. Had birth control been an option for boys, maybe things would have been different. Probably not. Instead, they got privacy. The space to make their own decisions. And mistakes.

"Your father is just heartbroken," Margarite said to Evie. "It's hard for dads when their baby girls start having sex. He's heartbroken because his little girl is growing up, and yes, I wish you had waited, but—"

"He said I'm..." Evie's lips quivered. "I'm... loose."

Margarite nearly broke the glass in her hand. "He said what?"

“He kept saying, I know your mother makes questionable decisions, but you won’t end up like her.”

Margarite kicked her feet off the chair and swung around to face the yard. “Honey, I don’t know. Your father has... he...” She trailed off. She hated bad-mouthing Jason to his children, even if he started it. But this was too far. *Her* questionable decisions? Where was his responsibility in these questionable decisions? He didn’t call her decisions questionable when it suited him, when she’d been somebody else’s teenage daughter his dick was deep inside.

“He shut my phone off!” Evie wailed. She had the pinched whine of a girl who was learning the first of many lessons.

Margarite set the wine glass down on the table beside her. Her mind flashed to the ladies in Jerome: Yellow Rose, Linda Sue, and Rosita del Oro. It was then she identified the look in their eyes. It wasn’t pride. It was defiance.

How long would it be before some man decided to put out her daughter’s light? First, he’d do it little by little, first her phone, then her money, then her clothes, and then what else if he didn’t get his way? “Well, that obviously won’t work,” Margarite said.

“Exactly! This is so unfair, Mom. Why is he doing this?” Evie hung her head back, her hair brushed against Margarite’s legs. It was baby soft, a laborious task Evie devoted hours to every day.

“Look at me,” Margarite said. She leaned forward, gripping her daughter’s chin in her hand. She wasn’t a baby anymore.

“Mom, don’t—”

“No, you listen. What you did is normal. You hear me?”

You don't let anybody tell you different, not even your dad. Especially not your dad. There's nothing wrong with what you did. You're young. But your body is yours. You hear me?"

Evie was crying hard now, tears rolling down those puffy cheeks and onto her shirt. If only she'd stood up to this man sooner, Margarite thought, if only she'd held her ground, even when threatened, her life would have turned out differently, and so, therefore, would have her daughter's. But she wasn't going to let him take this from her daughter too, her dignity, her freedom.

Margarite said, "Nobody, not nobody, gets to say what you do with your body." As she said these words, she closed her eyes, realizing she was saying them as much to herself as she was to her daughter.

* * *

In the morning, Margarite watched a scorpion scuttle across the patio. From inside, where she sat at the kitchen island, she thought she saw something in its clutches, a grasshopper, maybe, stung and paralyzed, dinner for the week. Evie came trudging down the stairs, rubbing away sleep, her eyes puffy from crying. Margarite had been up for hours. "Morning gorgeous," she said while Evie walked past. She waited for Evie to pour cereal, until she was sitting at the kitchen island across from her, when she finally pushed the shiny white box in her direction.

Evie's eyes went wide. "But is it? Did you?"

Margarite said, "You'll have to have a new number of course, and listen—this isn't some freebee. You're going to have to keep up with your chores and chip in for this." She sipped her coffee. It was black but lightly sweet, her favorite middle-of-the-

road French roast. “But I promise I won’t ever shut it off.” Margarite wanted her daughter to know that a cell phone was an immense privilege—she hadn’t had one when she was her age—but a right too. That it was important for a woman to have control.

Evie let her spoon slop over in her cereal as she pulled the phone from the box. It was identical to her old phone in every way except the one that mattered. “What about Dad’s?” she said.

Margarite shrugged and stood, her mug empty. “Leave it here. Give it back. I don’t care. He’ll figure it out eventually and he’ll be mad. That’s a whole other conversation. But listen, your dad’s emotions are his own, and sooner or later you’re going to have to stand up to him.”

Margarite dropped her mug in the sink without washing it. “Now get dressed. There’s one more thing I’d like to do today.”

In the car, Evie cranked the AC and set about connecting her new phone to the Bluetooth stereo. They were on the highway when she finally looked up. “Where are we going?” she said. Her window was halfway down, and a light breeze wafted through the car. The desert slid by, city surroundings gliding into wide dirt valleys dotted with saguaros.

“Jerome,” Margarite said, gripping the wheel. “There’s some women I’d like you to meet.”

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What are the factors that lead up to Evie having sex at thirteen years old? Is this the culminating failure based on a series of events, an individual person, or not a failure at all?
2. Do you think Margarite made the right decision by supporting Evie in her new sexual relationship with an older boy? If you think she should have handled it differently, how should she have handled it?
3. While Margarite doesn't agree with her ex-husband's discipline, does she have any obligation to provide a united parenting front? For what reasons should divorced parents go their own way regarding parenting?
4. Do you think Margarite will be doing the right thing by showing Evie the photos of prostitutes as a sort of role model for women? Why or why not?
5. Margarite strongly advocates that Evie has the right to have control over her own body, even at thirteen years old. Do you agree? What factors at what ages contribute to children obtaining different levels of decision-making autonomy?

* * *

P u r g a t o r y

Serena Smith

* * *

Content Disclosure: Mild Violence; Depiction of Drug Use

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I didn't cry when I got the news. I knew I was supposed to, but I just couldn't. The fact that I was his daughter made it worse, too, because I was expected to love him. When your father gets that sick, you're supposed to feel irreparably broken. You're supposed to cry until you have no tears left. And, frankly, it isn't supposed to matter how much torment they put you through. Shouldn't the thought of his death still bring me remorse? Was what I was feeling characterized as grief? I felt wrong like a piece of me was floating outside my body, but I didn't feel sorry. I'll admit it; I knew he deserved what he was getting.

If he would've just OD'd, my life would have been perfect.

Unfortunately, cancer is not the same as an OD. I know it's a horrible thought, but if his death had been the result of his drug abuse, I could have blamed it on him. He took too much.

He couldn't control himself. He made it happen. There were countless times when he came home in a daze, stumbling and crashing into walls. He'd litter the floors with beer cans, shoot up again, and then fall asleep in the bathtub. When I was younger, the utter strength of his drunken sleep used to terrify me. No matter how hard my mother or I tried to rouse him, he'd still remain asleep, barely breathing. After a while, though, I learned to just be grateful for the quiet.

It was clear he wasn't safe from himself. He *could have* OD'd. But he didn't. Instead, he got cancer, which meant I had to feel heartbroken.

It was still his fault, though.

The doctors refused to admit it, but he caused his disease. I looked it up. Excessive drug use can be directly linked to an uptick in cancer. Whether they'll admit it or not, he DID cause it. But it wasn't that obvious, so he was never held accountable. Nobody wanted to blame him. It was such an outrageous claim that even I felt guilty for believing it. Cancer is a monster all on its own. Children and other innocents get it all the time. Connecting cancer to self-sabotage, in a sense, is kind of like saying everyone who gets it should be blamed. That isn't fair. Even if it *was* his fault.

He hit her, you know. I remember one particular day when we had just gotten home from the hospital. He was undergoing his first round of chemotherapy and had asked us to be by his side. We both went, but only because we felt like we had to. The doctors and nurses would think we were bad people if we let my father undergo chemo alone. I often wondered if they would think *he* was a bad person because he spent the greater part of every week brutally attacking Mom and cussing

and yelling at me. He called me fat pig so often you might have thought it was my name. But, sure, why not claim that everyone was right? He was sick, so *he* was the victim.

They had to have known to some extent—all those nurses. Mom never took her coat off, no matter how hot the hospital room got. She flinched every time my father raised his arm, even when he wasn't about to hit her. They had to have seen the dread in her eyes whenever he opened his mouth—the fear that intensified tenfold whenever he was around. It was very unlikely that they didn't know exactly the type of man he was. But apparently, cancer cancels out wrongdoings. With cancer, you can only be a martyr. Can a martyr also be a monster? Because I kind of feel like my father was both.

“Don't you think this whole thing could've been his fault?” I asked Mom that day. She stopped folding his clothes and stared at me in shock. Standing in their bedroom with her coat off, she was exposing her bruises to the world. Large splotches that extended so far, they painted her entire arm purple. Some of them were new—because cancer, as it turns out, does not heal your inner demons. In the case of my father, it actually made them worse. It gave him yet another excuse to be a tyrant, forcing me to feel upset for him even when I knew I shouldn't have.

“No one deserves this kind of torture,” Mom replied.

Come on, Mom, there's no way you actually believed that.

That man was a villain. He was the antagonist unraveling the threads of our lives. Frankly, he deserved worse. For him, cancer was nature's way of dishing out karma. I knew it. Mom knew it. Everybody probably knew it. Yet, no one would admit it out loud, not even me. Even thinking it almost made me as

bad as he was. It wasn't right. So, instead of arguing with Mom, I sighed and nodded. She said what she thought she needed to, never letting anyone see her contempt, which made her a better person than I was.

He never actually hit *me*, which made the whole thing even more miserable. Screaming and pleading for him to stop, I was forced to watch as he slowly killed every piece of joy Mom had left in her, murdering every. last. drop. until she was nothing but a hollow shell, whimpering when he was finished. And I never tried to stop him. I told myself I wouldn't know how to, but if I'm being honest, my resistance was out of fear. I didn't want to have bruises too; I didn't want to constantly be in pain. On some level, that made me complicit. I never called the cops or threw myself in front of her, and now she'll never be the same.

The last time was the worst. He kicked and punched and shoved her into things. By the end of it, lamps were shattered on the ground, furniture was upturned, and my mother had been beaten so hard she was no longer moving. All I can remember is screaming. And then, in a desperate attempt to save her, I ran into my parents' room to grab their cell phone.

There he was, asleep on the bed as if he hadn't ruined her. I looked over to their nightstand, finding exactly what I knew I would—a vial of meth and a used syringe. Determined to rescue my mother and afraid of what he would do when I did, I picked up the needle and filled it to the brim. I could feel Mom's freedom in my hands. If I was strong enough, I would be the brave heroine I had neglected to be all that time. I could rescue her, sending all that meth into my father's bloodstream and watching as his breath slowed to a stop.

It would have been so easy. Why would anyone even suspect me? I could've worn gloves, placed the syringe back in his hand, and made it look like he'd gone too far this time. When he was asleep like that, he was going to stay that way, even as the needle pierced his skin. And everyone would assume he had OD'd like he could have done—*should have done*— years ago. It would be the perfect escape.

But I wasn't fearless. I was still a coward who could only worry about herself, so I set the full vial back onto his bedside table and called 911.

My father insisted that he didn't know what had happened to Mom. Blaming the fight on me, he milked his illness, trying to prove he was incapable of that level of violence. Instead of calling him out, I bit down on my lip until it bled.

Mom ended up surviving, and by that point, my father's illness had stripped away his strength until he could no longer hurt either of us. Even so, every day when we followed him into that hospital, I wished I had just killed him. I'm horrible! Okay, I get it. I know. My thoughts, my actions, what I almost did, and what I didn't do—they all made *me* the monster.

Now that he's gone, I wish I didn't still feel so much shame, not because of what I could have done, but because of what I *should* have. I've always been weak. My father loved pointing that out about me, and I've finally come to realize that, through it all, he was right. He's dead, and he still haunts me.

So, you can sit there and cry about his death. You can scream at the universe, cursing God for taking him too soon, but I'm not going to. I'm glad he's gone. My only regret is he wasn't taken sooner. You wanted me to give the eulogy. Fine, here's your eulogy. I'm telling you how it was. There were always signs.

He never acted like a saint, but you all treated him like one. You let him torture us, and you let him think that what he was doing was okay. You never tried to stop him. Can you live with that? Because I can't.

But here's to him, I guess. You all can celebrate his life. Fine, whatever. I'll take pride in celebrating the end of it. Have a good death, Dad. I hope you rot in Hell.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think the narrator will someday grieve the loss of her father? What leads you to your conclusion?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the idea that a person who gets cancer, regardless of their issues, deserves empathy and support?
3. Does the idea of drug addiction as a disease to be treated and abuse as a generational cycle that is difficult to break lessen the culpability of the narrator's father?
4. Is it ever okay to be happy someone is dead? Under what conditions (*if any*) is it okay?
5. If you were the narrator's therapist, what feedback and suggestions would you give her to have a successful and happy future?

* * *

The Institute's Dark Secret

Madeline Ciccone

* * *

Content Disclosure: None

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The greenhouse doors dissolve at Nikolas's touch, revealing a gray-blue world that should not exist. I stride forward, attempting to match his purposeful gait, but hesitate at the threshold. Powerful energy emanates from the doorway. Feeling silly, I shake off my novice nerves and follow him into an ethereal garden. Rows of strange silver flowers sway beneath a fabricated moon. The environment is both more improbable and more awe-inspiring than I'd imagined. I laugh, fingers trailing through air laden with shimmering dust, and earn a reproachful look from Nikolas.

"Focus, Simone," he says. "We're here to collect samples."

I refrain from rolling my eyes. Working alongside my mentor these past few years has hardened me to his stern

demeanor. He thinks excitement distracts the brain from absorbing information.

“Right,” I reply. “I’ll ignore the spectacular scenery. Never mind that the Institute has been keeping a secret since its inception or that you’ve known about it for ages.”

“Just be grateful you’re in the inner circle now.”

The weight of his words presses upon me. Only a select few alchemists know about the greenhouse under the lowest level of the Institute. It’s buried beneath layers of enchantments and hidden behind a maze of twisting corridors and dead ends. The Institute had wanted to dissuade overzealous individuals from probing too deep into its foundation. As a newly inducted member, I’m expected to place the noble pursuits of alchemy above all else. Supposedly, secrecy is for the greater good.

We walk further into the greenhouse, to a place where silver flowers reach my shoulders. I lean in to observe more closely but immediately fall back in surprise. A sprite-like creature with delicate, lacey wings perches on a leaf. The creature’s face resembles a lynx. She tilts her head and gazes at me with luminous eyes.

“*Lynx fata*,” murmurs Nikolas. “A faerie lynx.” He gazes adoringly at the creature, almost possessively. “I made the discovery while researching—” He presses his lips together. Inner circle or not, Nikolas guards his projects closely.

I frown. Our world contains the faintest traces of magic. Creatures like this one belong to an earlier time, or perhaps, even an entirely different place.

“Where did she come from?” I ask.

“That’s irrelevant.” He pulls a vial from his robes and taps it. “Samples, Simone. Stay on task.” This time, I do roll my eyes.

Leave it to Nikolas to start my first sanctioned excursion with a mild reproof.

The tapping sound spurs the faerie into motion. She crests the flower's crown before jerking backward. An iron chain tethers her to the plant.

I gasp in outrage and turn on Nikolas. "You've chained her!"

"Some of the faeries are... more temperamental than others," he replies. "That one is under observation at the moment."

Unease washes over me. When Nikolas invited me to perform field research in the greenhouse, I imagined taking notes on exotic plants. He never mentioned the existence of any rare creatures.

I make eye contact with the lynx-like being and try to look friendly. *I won't leave you.* She regards me warily. I blink slowly, the way I communicate with my cat back home. *I promise, Lucia.* The name flashes in my mind, and I grab onto it. I want to call her by something other than "that one" or "it."

Thoughts swirling, I catch up to Nikolas, who has waded further into the field of flowers and fluttering creatures. For as long as I've worked as his research assistant, Nikolas has been developing an elixir at the behest of the Institute. While he's never acknowledged the purpose of his research, the Institute is only interested in two subjects: happiness and longevity.

A nearby field brightens, diverting my attention. Faeries flit between flowers like busy pollinators. Luminous white strands drip from their fingers and coat the shimmering petals. My pulse quickens to match the beat of their wings when they take flight. As Nikolas stoops to collect a sample, the reality of

the situation hits me like a brick transmuted into gold.

“You’re developing an elixir of life extension,” I say.

Nikolas raises his eyebrows. “That’s a suspiciously astute guess.”

“And these creatures are essential.”

“Yes, the *lynx fata* is imperative to the process. As are the *selenicereus*—the night-blooming flowers.” He stands and hands me the glowing vial.

His confirmation sends my thoughts whirling again. I want to know everything about the faeries and the elixir’s properties, not to mention what’s hidden in the remaining rooms of the greenhouse. But Nikolas is notorious for obscuring his work in shadows, so I settle on a seemingly innocuous question. “How long before the study is complete?”

Nikolas runs a hand through his short, curly hair. “I see you’re determined to derail our planned fieldwork.”

“You’ll have to excuse my distractedness.”

Nikolas takes the vial back and pockets it. “The research is ongoing. We hope to establish the elixir’s base soon, but the faeries’ contribution will always be essential.”

His words sink like a stone in my gut. If faeries are required to create the elixir, they’ll never be released. Their predicament will only worsen over time. As human demand increases, more faeries will be stolen and forced to work in captivity.

“In other words,” I reply, “the Institute has approved subjugating a species for the greater good of humanity.”

Nikolas sighs. “Your accusation is loaded. They’re hardly even animals. They don’t feel or comprehend like we do.”

“How can you be certain?” I gesture at the field. The

faeries fly in small groups, alighting on flowers together. One couple grooms each other affectionately, tongues lapping over furry faces.

“Given enough time, I’m sure we would prove their limited intelligence.”

“So, intelligence is the deciding factor? Would you take your special ingredient from toddlers if it turned out they could produce it?”

“That’s not the same, and you know it,” admonishes Nikolas.

“What about from somebody with lower intelligence than the faeries? Could you exploit them?”

“I hardly think that dignifies a response.”

I cross my arms. “Oh, right. I forgot that humans exist on a higher plane than all other species.”

Nikolas raises his voice. “I would think that, as an alchemist, you might show some more loyalty to your species. We took an oath.”

I uncross my arms and take a deep breath. Nikolas is repeating the mantra of the Institute. I can’t blame a head alchemist for thinking the same speciesist thoughts as his colleagues.

“Don’t all beings deserve respect?” I ask instead.

“Yes—to a point. But I also respect the study of alchemy. What I accomplish will make the world a better place.”

“For humans,” I say.

“For humans,” he concurs. “There is no nobler purpose than the pursuit of that which furthers humankind.”

“What will people say when they discover the source of their extended lives?”

Nikolas's lips curve into the grimace of one drinking a bitter tonic. "They'll give thanks and continue on their unexamined way. No one cares where the extra years originate from."

I hope he's wrong, but there's an element of truth to his words. Most people—alchemists included—don't know the full extent of what goes on behind the Institute's walls. In my hometown, people embraced the traveling alchemist who visited during the warm season each year. I'm not sure how many villagers would willingly give up their tinctures to protect creatures viewed as lesser beings.

"Is there nothing I can say to convince you to let them go?" I ask.

"No, Simone. I trust my internal compass. These faeries will live meaningful lives in service of alchemy. Perhaps even longer, happier lives." Nikolas pulls a different vial from his pocket containing a liquid viscous as smelted moonlight. "This is all we need: the moonlight they weave. Is that so cruel?"

"It's cruel to steal their autonomy, to force them to do your bidding."

Nikolas looks up at the full moon. He seems to be considering something. After a moment, he replies, "Do you not drink honey with your tea each morning?"

I shake my head. "I don't consume animals or their byproducts."

"You know," he huffs, "the faeries would produce this moonlight with or without human intervention."

"But not under these conditions."

"I can assure you the environment in this greenhouse matches that of the faeries' home realm. We transported them

as quickly and painlessly as possible. I'll concede that the scale of their home is smaller now, but there are no predators here."

Aside from the ones in lab coats. I want to hold a mirror to his face and make him acknowledge his hypocrisy. Aloud, I say, "What if they long for their world?"

"You're focusing on the wrong details. Look at the mutually beneficial relationship we've managed to create. The faeries are given a home while we harvest moonlight for the elixir. They needn't worry about survival, and we needn't risk the perils of excessive portal travel. Think of the process as *rehoming* if you must, but don't act as if these creatures are capable of noticing the difference between a natural and fabricated habitat."

I nearly gasp at the mention of a portal but cover my surprise with an exaggerated sneeze. Nikolas's face has turned a worrisome shade of purple underneath the blue light of the moon. Acquiescing and moving on with our planned fieldwork might mend the widening cracks in our mentor-mentee relationship, but I can't shake the image of the first faerie we passed.

"That's rich," I retort. "But I doubt their realm has an overabundance of chain-producing plants."

"We have done nothing more than what is necessary for the cause."

"I refuse to accept that *the cause* necessitates suffering. You're putting the selfish desires of humans above the lives of other creatures."

Nikolas throws his hands into the air. "I thought you had more ambition! You will need to accept that alchemy has tradeoffs if you wish to advance in our field." His booming voice

echoes across the greenhouse, and I realize I've pushed him further than during any of our previous debates.

At a loss, I watch a group of tiny sprites playfully zoom between giant leaves. A larger faerie swoops down to intervene when the play turns rambunctious. I don't need a common language or specialized tools to recognize their complexity. The faeries have inner worlds and thoughts; they are beings with inherent worth.

Nikolas views the faeries differently. To him, they are a means to an end, valued only for the benefit they provide to humans. I find his logic twisted, but I don't fault him for taking his oath seriously. He's guided by a desire to help people lead better lives. The goal is admirable, even if I disagree with his methods.

Murmuring to himself, Nikolas adds, "What are a handful of faeries weighed against the promise of a longer lifespan?"

Before I can respond, a door I had mistaken for a tree opens. Faint squeaks and roars of indignation precede a woman's silhouette. Her footfalls are soft as if she doesn't wish to make an impression on the world.

"Anna," says Nikolas. "Working overtime today?"

"Y-yes," she stammers. "In the lab." She glances my way quickly and then returns her gaze to Nikolas. "I was told to fetch you. It's urgent."

Nikolas looks relieved at the interruption. "Simone, we can finish this debate later."

The fierce passion I'd been attempting to restrain spills like the contents of an overturned cauldron. "What's in the lab?" I demand.

Nikolas glowers at me. "Nothing so sinister as what you're

imagining. We're researchers, not monsters." Turning to Anna, he adds, "Please see Simone out before joining me."

Anna, who had frozen during our argument, leaps into action. She seems grateful for the directive. Grabbing my arm, she moves away from the door where Nikolas has vanished. I let her escort me as far as the towering silver flowers that hold Lucia prisoner before yanking my arm free.

"Are you running experiments on those innocent creatures?" My voice is still heated with passion.

Anna takes a step back but remains silent.

I soften my features and imagine rebottling the spilled potion. "Nikolas mentioned another realm. Do you know anything about that?"

Anna shrugs her shoulders noncommittedly and looks away. Is she truly indifferent to the suffering around her? I try an appeal to her humanity instead.

"What's happening here is inhumane. You've no right to imprison these faeries for the sake of increasing the human lifespan. Doesn't it bother you?"

"I don't like to think about it," she finally answers. "But the wheels are already in motion. It's pointless to choose sides."

"I'm not asking you to pull any levers. All I need is information."

Anna freezes again; she appears caught in an internal match of tug-of-war. A passing faerie flits by and pulls her ponytail, causing her to stumble. Righting herself, she meets my gaze.

"Please," I implore. "Show me how to locate their realm."

Anna nods tersely and motions toward the center of the greenhouse.

While her back is turned, I search the flowers for the ensnared faerie. Lucia soars to meet me. Carefully, I remove a tincture from my robes and dissolve the chain, releasing her.

“Follow me,” I whisper. “I’m here to rescue you.” Lucia stares at me with her wide, lynx-like eyes before settling into my pocket.

When I join Anna, she parts the leaves of a gray willow tree and unlocks another hidden door. “The portal’s through here,” she says. “I won’t participate in your foolish idea, but I won’t stop you either.”

I smile at her sense of morality and pat her hand. “Thank you.”

She shuts the door in my face, sending me into the darkness of twilight.

* * *

The steep descent seems to last an eternity. Eventually, we enter a cramped room filled with laboratory equipment. Torchlight illuminates all but the room’s center, where a circle of rippling water beckons. I cross to the pond and stare into its depths. Instead of my reflection, I see an ethereal world that resembles the greenhouse garden—but blurrier, as if my human eyes weren’t meant to see it.

This must be the portal.

“You’re safe,” I tell Lucia. “Return to your home.”

Lucia hovers over the portal before banking left. She scratches at a locked door and turns an accusatory gaze upon me. I furrow my brow, trying to interpret her behavior. The world turns glassy when I finally understand.

“I—I’m sorry.” My voice catches with sorrow. She wants to free the other faeries before returning home. I wish I could

save them all too. They don't deserve to be trapped, existing at the whims of the Institute. But Nikolas could discover us at any moment. If I don't close the portal now, I might not get another chance.

I brush away fallen tears and try to ignore my rapid heartbeat. *C'mon, Simone. Think. Nikolas invited you into the inner circle for a reason.*

Lucia continues to drag her sharp claws across the wooden door while I search the room for inspiration. A corner bookshelf contains fables and historical tomes but nothing relevant. I recognize each title from my research with Nikolas in the library. Unfortunately, the Institute's library is teeming with references to individuals who have located portals; an account of how to close a portal is conspicuously missing. Likely because alchemists tend to consider human wants and needs above all others.

Still, I refuse to accept that Lucia's fate is sealed.

Sealed. That's it! I open my robes and remove a variety of vials. An alchemist never enters a secret greenhouse at the foundation of an antiquated Institute without their finest potions. Moving quickly, I measure and pour the liquids into a potent combination. The result is a waxy steel substance. Now, all that's left is to rescue a stubborn faerie and close the portal.

"I'm sorry," I repeat, inching toward Lucia. She tries to dart past me, but I hold her close. "The least I can do is save you."

I drop her into the portal as gently as possible and empty the contents of the potion. The surface of the pond crystallizes instantly. Instead of an ethereal garden, I see my reflection. The potion appears to have worked. The portal is closed.

I tap the opaque surface, testing for weak spots. Before I

can celebrate, Nikolas bursts into the room. His face darkens when he notices the hardened portal. “You’ve no idea what you’ve done.”

“I’ve prevented the suffering of more innocent creatures,” I retort.

Nikolas takes a step toward me, his hands balled into fists. “No, you overreacted. You let emotion rule over logic.”

“I did what was right.”

He shakes his head. “When the other head alchemists learn about this...”

“Maybe they’ll adopt more compassionate practices.”

Nikolas continues to shake his head. “You still haven’t grasped the magnitude of your folly. Your actions have resulted in the loss of centuries of human experiences.”

My legs tremble, but I hold my ground. “I had to act; my conscience wouldn’t allow otherwise. I’d rather accept my mortality than live longer at the expense of other creatures.”

“Then you should have excused yourself from the project instead of forcing everyone to make the same choice.”

“The average person will share my perspective once I reveal the Institute’s dark secret.”

Nikolas’s face burns bright with passion. “As if the Institute will let you spread lies about your traitorous actions. No, the public will blame you for their mourning. You will be held accountable for immense loss, for unrealized potential. It was foolish to place faeries on the same level as humans.”

I return his heated glare. Mine is a fire of conviction—not damnation. He likely believes the same of himself.

Our silent confrontation is interrupted by a flickering light within the sealed portal. For one bittersweet moment, I see

Lucia, free and frolicking with her kind. My heart swells, then breaks as the image slowly disappears. All that remains is our reflections. In the still, cool water, I meet Nikolas's dampened eyes and wonder at the depths of our convictions.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Did Simone do the right thing by sealing the portal? What factors are you taking into account in your decision?
2. Do the faeries deserve protections? What kind of signs (*or tests*) would you want to review before coming to your own conclusion? What is the “deserves protection” cutoff?
3. Given that Simone has taken an oath to the Institute, and to the alchemists, should those oaths have prevented her from closing the portal? Under what conditions can promises be broken?
4. Nikolas argues what they are doing with the faeries is no different than taking honey from bees. Do you agree? Is it different than taking milk from cows?
5. How would your opinion change if you slightly changed the scenario? For example, if the process required killing the faeries? Or, if the elixir created didn't extend lives but cured a horrible disease or a world-ending plague? What if the faeries sold their own kind to humans to keep because those faeries broke their laws?

* * *

N e r d s

Anonymous

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Content Disclosure: Sexual Situations

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A few might have passed for young adults, but they were all just kids. High school kids. Yes, seniors, but still, merely kids. More specifically, they were kids who were nerds. Ten of them. Science or math, music or computers. Dungeons & Dragons. They were all nerds in one form or another.

Everyone knows the type. Bright but socially awkward. They were never going to hang with the cool students at parties or around the school lunch tables. They were neither athletic nor fashion-conscious. They talked too much or barely spoke. Always on the wrong topic. They were invariably the last to be chosen. No one ever called or texted. To pass long days, they hid for hours in the library, labs, or music rooms. They grew accustomed to a lot of alone time.

All ten were scheduled to attend universities that eventually could set them apart: Brown, Duke, Northwestern,

and the like. On those elite campuses, with a bit of luck, they might well find themselves more at home. They would still be nerds, of course, but being a nerd is not necessarily a negative at such prestigious schools. Unfortunately, the possibility of a brighter future provides no immediate solace to a high school nerd. A kid cannot trade today's loneliness for tomorrow's potential friendships.

Then, in January of their senior year, a miracle happened. They discovered each other. At a pep rally, where they were supposed to cheer their hearts out for students who were often condescending, the ten happened to wind up clustered together in a far corner of the gym like a pack of lambs waiting for the axe. Their biting sarcasm at the silliness of the event spread like a virus from one to the other. They connected on a fundamental level, and an immediate bond was formed. At that moment, they became inseparable. Before and after school and, especially, during lunch, they were united. Every joke was funny. Every comment was brilliant. No one bullied them. No one got any sport out of making them feel odd or stupid. As they amused and teased each other, high school went from miserable to bearable and even, at times, fun.

They were five guys and five gals, but Liz quickly became the leader, probably because she had rich parents. Wealth provided her with a perspective of possibilities that none of the rest shared. She told them where to meet and what activities to join. She pushed them to break rules and be careful not to get caught. They experienced the comforting security of camaraderie that had totally passed them by in prior days. They picnicked in a cemetery late one evening where they all dressed like vampires. They rescued the fruit flies by letting them loose

in the biology class. They stayed up late watching horror movies while supplying their own running commentary. They tried karaoke and competed to see who was worse. They even deflated the tire of a student who called them “a bunch of weirdo losers.” Life improved (according to one of the math nerds) on an upward-sloping line that approximated twenty-eight degrees from the horizon.

Nevertheless, one problem haunted them all. They were virgins. That fact gnawed at them as it can with any high school kid. Their sexual experiences ranged from insignificant to nonexistent. Within their group, pairing off seemed inappropriate, like some kind of treacherous mutiny against the rest. Desperately though, they feared enrolling in those fancy institutions of higher learning as virgins. It seemed to brand them as hopeless nerds. They craved the self-assurance that only comes from having experienced the most fundamental of all human actions. Dreaming is never the same as doing.

The loneliness had dissipated, but their sexual frustrations grew by the day, if not by the hour. As graduation approached, they realized their alliance would inevitably disband as summer vacations and college matriculation pulled them in ten different directions.

Liz, of course, came up with the solution. Only Liz could have dreamed up a plan that solved the problem so perfectly.

Her parents owned a huge, isolated vacation home overlooking a nearby lake. She instructed her friends to tell every parent an identical story: On the night of graduation, the members of the group planned to have one final party at the lake house. The ten had all been such perfect children that mothers and fathers alike suspected nothing more than soft

drinks, popcorn, and video games. In fact, most of the parents were thrilled that their previously isolated children had found companionship before venturing out into the unknown world beyond high school.

Liz swore each of them to absolute secrecy before explaining her plan. She expected trepidation, but she received unbridled enthusiasm. What they were going to do was never to be spoken of, either inside or outside of the group. It would be an experience that would be embedded in their razor-sharp brains forever. High school for them might have started in loneliness but, as far as Liz was concerned, it was going to end with a night like no other.

In preparation, the females all styled their hair in similar cuts as did the males. On that fateful night, after all the folderol of the graduation ceremony had concluded, Liz ushered her nervous friends on a tour of the lake house. She pointed out the various bedrooms with numbers tacked to the doors. The young men then descended into the basement in rapt anticipation while their female counterparts huddled together in the living room. One by one, the five women picked the number of a specific bedroom out of an old baseball hat. At 11:45 p.m., they each went to that designated spot and entered the room.

At 11:55 p.m., the males also drew lots for a bedroom number. Seconds later, they stood silently outside their chosen door with hearts hammering. Liz had connected the house's electricity to a timer, and at midnight, the power automatically went off. It would not come back on until 4:00 a.m. Each couple had plenty of time to play, experience, and (hopefully) enjoy. No promises were made.

Without lights, the lake house was as dark as any cave.

After the power was extinguished, each young man opened the door in front of him and entered a bedroom that contained one of his female friends. Neither person was allowed to speak. Neither could attempt to identify the other. Yes, the various heights and weights were different, but in the absolute darkness, those clues provided little assistance in figuring out who was being held. Skin is skin.

Liz had programmed her computer to sound a phone alarm at 3:45 a.m. At that moment, each of the men had to gather his clothes and leave the room without a word. When the lights came on after a few more minutes, they walked silently to their cars and drove home. Fifteen minutes later, the women did the same.

Nerds know how to follow rules. They never spoke about what happened that night to any person. Within a few days, they began to transition into the jobs and activities of summer and then off to college. The high school experience was complete. The ten never really got back together. But that was fine. Several months of companionship, culminating in their own personal graduation ceremony, had taught each of them that even nerds did not have to be lonely human beings.

* * *

I was the nerd who played the cello. Which person was in that bed with me? Touching, caressing, and holding me? I could probably have guessed, but I preferred not to know. To this day, I thrill at that mystery and the sheer excitement of those intimate moments. The best experience of my life? Well, certainly the most interesting. If I am lonely, I think of those hours and smile.

How does having sex for the first time affect an eighteen-

year-old? What are the long-term ramifications of such a unique coupling as took place that night? A therapist could probably provide a thousand different possibilities. I cannot speak for the other nine, but I know that evening altered the course of my life. By becoming a member of our group and especially because of Liz's scheme, I went to college a few months later as an entirely different person.

Something inside my psyche had shifted. Yes, it was the sex, but it was also knowing that I was not cursed to be a nerd forever. Close friendships were possible, even for me. When I left home for college, I had experiences buried deep within me that I had previously only dreamed about. I was no longer a kid. I was no longer a nerd. Some people just get lucky.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think the tale in the story is based on true events? Does being (*or not being*) based on true events change your opinion of the night? Why or why not?
2. If you were one of the prospective nerds in the story, would you go along with the idea? Besides an interesting story (*and sex*) what else (*if anything*) would you personally get from the experience?
3. Do you think what happened in the story is immoral? If so, what aspect of the story is immoral? What factors might you change to make the story more (*or less*) moral?
4. Do the rules matter? What if one of the nerds in the story wasn't a virgin and simply lied about their virginity to fit in with the group? What if one of the nerds fixed the lottery so they knew who they would get paired with? What if they said who they were upon entering the room?
5. To what degree does the age of the participants matter in the story? Would it matter if they were all younger? Would it matter if they were older? Why?

* * *

The Freedom Machine

Remi Martin

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Content Disclosure: Mild language

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One step closer to Freedom, the box read. It's time to say goodbye to the stress of indecision and let your new Infinity System make decisions for you! Clinically proven to reduce anxiety, the Infinity System improves productivity and always result in the optimum outcome for you. Put your life in the hands of a higher power and find true freedom—the freedom to be yourself!

The box had sat unopened on the kitchen counter since its arrival that morning. Kiki sat on the chair in front of it, a lit cigarette between her fingers. A cup of coffee, untouched, had been placed on the worktop beside it some time ago. She didn't know what to do.

This seemed to be a recurring feeling she had been experiencing over the last few days and one she was getting used to. The decision that sat in front of her, however, was a big one. It had the potential of steering her life toward one of two very

different outcomes. She didn't want to take it lightly.

Her foot tapped on the leg of the chair as she considered her options again and looked back on the last few days leading up to this moment. She had been doing this much more frequently than usual, this tapping, ever since her original Infinity had gone offline. She was starting to think she was developing a nervous tic.

The cigarette made its way to her lips again, and she inhaled the rich relief of tobacco smoke. She felt entirely unqualified to make such an important decision. Come to think of it, she felt entirely unqualified to make any decision at all. She didn't have the abundance of data that the Infinity System had, or the computing capacity, or even the same insight into her motives. She knew what decision the Infinity System would recommend, that much was obvious. This just happened to be the one decision it couldn't make for her.

Sighing, she slouched back in her chair, and let her mind wander back five days, to the moment when her system had shut down, in the hope it might give her some perspective, or at least some clue as to what she should do now.

* * *

She woke up that morning feeling well-rested, as she usually did. The alarm went off at the opportune time as she crested the wave of unconsciousness and drifted into the lightest part of her sleep cycle. *07:14 a.m.*

Her hand fumbled around her bedside table for a minute, as she habitually reached for her Infinity System's earpiece and clipped it in place around the curvature of her ear.

"Good morning." Finny's familiar voice spoke into her ear. "Ready for another optimum day as your best self?" Kiki

was.

“Take a few minutes to enjoy being in bed. You have a busy day ahead of you if you want to achieve your highest potential.” Kiki did as she was told, enfolding herself back into the warmth of her duvet and nestling her head into the fabric of her pillow. She didn’t protest at having to get up soon or worry about what she would have to do that day, or how she would organize her time. She had given her life over to a higher power years ago and put her trust in its patient, methodical guidance.

She didn’t need to be told to go to the toilet, or to brush her teeth, these being things she was in the autonomous habit of doing, so the next time Finny spoke to her was in the kitchen, as she was about to start the coffee maker.

“Coffee is scheduled for 10 a.m. today to improve performance, boost serotonin, and prevent a late-morning caffeine crash.” Kiki stopped in her tracks.

Finny was always encouraging her to do healthy things like this. For years before getting the system she had been trying to quit smoking. Finny made it effortless, slowly weaning her off cigarettes, and giving her new routines to follow to replace the habit. She still allowed her the occasional social cigarette, but other than that Kiki hadn’t smoked in two years. And this was the least of it.

Before getting the system, she had been nurturing a low-level anxiety that was really starting to blossom. This was one of the things that gave her the impetus to finally try the Infinity System out. Now, she never once questioned her place in the world, it was set out before her as clear as day. She never worried that she was wasting her life or not achieving what she should be; these worries were taken care of. She knew if she just

followed Finny's advice, she would be in the best possible place for someone of her intelligence and ability, for someone in her circumstances.

Sitting down with a healthy breakfast, pre-prepared by Infinity Co, she opened the Infinity App on her smartphone to check the day's schedule.

The colorful boxes, detailing all the things Finny had planned for her, shone below her fingertips. She had the option to edit and reschedule, even delete, any of these plans, but she never took advantage of this option.

"Why not have a quick play on the piano?" the voice from her earpiece suggested, right on schedule. "The recitals are coming up in a few weeks' time, after all." Kiki had been expecting her to suggest just this. She'd seen the allocated twenty-minute slot on the Infinity App dedicated to playing the piano. It would cement what she had learned the previous evening and take advantage of her fresh mind to optimize her learning ability.

As she sat down and began playing, Kiki soon realized too that it was exactly what she needed that morning. She practiced with gusto, easily playing sections and refrains she had struggled with the night before and strengthening neural pathways in the process, improving her muscle memory. She lost herself in the music as she played, in the rhythm and cadence of the piece, which functioned to uplift her, and improve her self-esteem. She ended the twenty-minute session feeling very good.

"That was beautiful," Finny assured her. "You deserve a sit-down. Perhaps you'd like to watch the news?" Finny knew full well this was exactly what Kiki wanted; knowing about world events helped her to feel grounded, and she got a buzz from the

fast pace and flashing imagery of her favorite news channel.

“Truly outstanding!” the anchor was saying as she turned on the television. *“And these figures have been confirmed by doctors, did you say?”*

“That’s correct, yes,” a man with a blue suit and a sharp jawline replied. *“Our clinical psychologists, down at Infinity Systems HQ have seen an eighty percent reduction in the symptoms of their patients, in cases of generalized anxiety and mild depression. We’ve seen nothing like it in any other treatment.”*

“And am I right in thinking that doctors are considering prescribing it in certain cases?”

“We’re still hoping for legislation to be passed...” the men carried on in a similar overemphatic zeal for five minutes, ten... fifteen. Finny didn’t usually let her indulge quite this long, but she trusted there was a good reason for it. Soon, they were back in the newsroom discussing party politics, a high-profile murder case, a new tax cut for home buyers; why was she still watching this?

Eventually, despite having not been instructed to, she took the earpiece off and examined it. The usual speck of green light that indicated life wasn’t illuminated. *Finny had turned off!*

Jumping up, without knowing whether it was the optimum course of action, she ran upstairs to grab the charger. She was sure she had charged it last night, but perhaps it hadn’t been in range of the electromagnetic charging point. She plugged it in manually now, careful that the metal nib of the charger clicked into place, and waited with bated breath for the spark of life to return, and to hear Finny’s soothing voice guiding her again.

Nothing happened.

Kiki didn't know what to do. Usually, she would have Finny to direct her at times like these. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she reached into her pocket and opened her phone. At least she could check her schedule on the Infinity App.

As the software opened, however, she wasn't greeted with the usual clean, user-friendly interface or brightly colored boxes. Instead, she was greeted only with a warning: INFINITY SYSTEM OFFLINE.

Oh no.

Unsure whether it was in her very best interest, she wandered back downstairs, feeling dazed and a little breathless. She slumped against the kitchen counter as she wrestled with the decision of what she should do next.

A number of options presented themselves to her, in the jumbled mess of her mind, where usually she would only find one. For years she had known exactly what path to take, minute-by-minute, and now she was back to fumbling around in the dark, grasping aimlessly at options. She considered, only for a split second, ringing the emergency services, before realizing how dramatic that sounded. Her instincts told her to switch the television back on. At least there, people knew what they were talking about, who had it all together. She knew, of course, this would be wasting time; precious minutes were passing her by, like untapped resources going to waste. She was struck by an ambiguous guilt, which seemed to weigh down the lining of her gut.

There was no higher power left to follow.

While she was deliberating, she clicked on the coffee maker, which began whirring in the silence of her kitchen, muffled by the whirring in her head.

She sat on the kitchen chair again. Her mind was pulling her in a hundred different directions, which resulted in her being unable to move toward any of them. She was paralyzed by possibility.

Eventually, the coffee maker clicked off, having made her coffee all over her kitchen work surface, given she hadn't put a container beneath it. She presumed Finny would have suggested she clean it up, but she couldn't know for sure. In any case, she had made her decision!

She had decided that she very much needed someone, something, else to make her decisions for her.

* * *

“How do I know it's making the right decision?” a middle-aged woman was asking the store clerk, a gangly man with an acne problem. “Surely I know myself better than some machine?”

“It's simple, really. Finny here is designed to sift through and logically assess information in ways our brain can't. She can read your vitals and has insight into your brain chemistry, so can get a good, not yet complete but good, picture of your emotions when you're undertaking tasks. She has access to social media feeds, records, thousands of hours of video of you, all the information from your smartphone and television and computer about your viewing and user habits. Not only this, but she has all this information for everyone else, too, even more if they also have an Infinity System, and she's hardwired to know what we want and how to achieve it. It really is a no-brainer!”

Kiki stepped into the center of the Infinity Store, sidestepping sleek display stands and ignoring the curved facias and futuristic furniture that usually would have inspired a sense

of awe. Today she was feeling far too panicked to appreciate the beauty of the place.

The gangly man was clearly preoccupied with his sales pitch. Luckily, she was able to catch the eye of another of the clerks, a bored-looking man with gelled black hair.

“Morning. Welcome to the Infinity Store. I’m a fully trained Infinity Mastermind here to help with any questions or requests you might have. Are you ready to find true freedom?” he asked robotically without looking up from his phone as Kiki approached.

“Erm...” Kiki didn’t know quite how to answer that question. “My Infinity System went offline this morning. It needs fixing.” The clerk put down his phone and leaned across the counter toward her; he looked more interested now. His nametag read ‘Reggie.’

“Broken?” he said. “Now that doesn’t happen very often. Let’s have a look at her.” Kiki took the earpiece from her bag and handed it to the clerk. He briefly inspected it.

“It’s just...” Kiki hesitated. “I don’t know what to do.”

A look of concern crossed Reggie’s face. “You must be having a difficult morning. Has it been active long?”

“Years,” Kiki replied. Reggie let out an extended whistling sound.

“It can be tough, the adjustment.”

“Adjustment?” Kiki stammered. “Can’t you fix it?”

“Me?” The man laughed. “I’m a vendor sweetie, a salesperson. We’ll have to send it away to be repaired, could take up to five days.”

“*Days!*” Kiki couldn’t process what she was hearing. The feeling of panic intensified in her chest. “But... what do I do

now?” She didn’t expect an actual response to this question, but Reggie decided to give her one anyway.

“Maybe,” he said, slowly taking his own Infinity earpiece from his ear as he did. “You could take this opportunity to do something...” he leaned even further forward now, closer than Kiki found comfortable as if he wanted to whisper something to her, “...*impulsive*.”

Kiki didn’t do impulsive. She hadn’t done impulsive in years.

“How about...” Reggie continued. “You come with me to a bar later? Trust me, if there’s anything you need after being plugged in for years it’s to let your hair down and relax.”

Kiki didn’t know what to say. Had Finny been here, she would have anticipated this interaction and interacted with the clerk’s Infinity System to decide what the outcome might be. She would either have cleared Kiki’s schedule, or *recommended* she politely decline as she had other professional or recreational things to attend to. In fact, had Finny been with her she never would have ended up in this ad hoc situation at all. Kiki, however, was in the habit of agreeing to whatever suggestion was whispered in her ear.

“Er...” she stammered. “I mean okay, if you think it’s a good idea. You are the Mastermind after all.”

“Exactly,” Reggie replied. He proceeded to scribble something on a slip of paper. “This is the number for the store. We have your details on the system and will ring when your Infinity System is back online.” He pressed the paper gently into Kiki’s hand. “The number below it is mine. I finish at five if you want to take me up on that drink. Are you at work today?”

Work!

She was supposed to be at work! Without Finny to remind her, she had forgotten to go to work!

Muttering her thanks, she turned and ran out of the store, sliding the scrap of paper into her pocket as she did so.

* * *

“He can be such an *asshole*,” she said, or rather screamed, to her new friend over the loud music and the jumble of voices.

“You ought to see Gina at the store when she’s having a bad day,” Reggie yelled back to her. “*Jesus!*” He shook the ice in his glass back and forth and asked, “Another?”

More decisions. Kiki looked at him blankly.

“Another,” he decided for her and disappeared into the swarm of bodies converging around the bar.

The rest of Kiki’s day hadn’t gone as smoothly as usual. Her boss hadn’t been happy about her tardiness, which was typical. Late once in three years and there’s hell to pay. He hadn’t listened when she tried to explain about her Infinity System and insisted she had to make up the hours later in the week. By the time her shift was over, she needed a drink.

Now the buzz of alcohol was starting to numb her around the edges and blur the moments into one another as they passed. At the same time, the tension she had been holding in her shoulders began to seep away. She stopped tapping her foot out of anxiety and started tapping along with the music. Reggie returned with another drink. This was a good decision, she thought as she took the cocktail from his hand.

“I think this was just what I needed,” she told him, sinking back into the chair. She took a sip and watched as the alcohol dulled the world around her.

Later, as the room swayed with the music, he led her into

the shifting mass of bodies, to dance. The crowd provided a shield of anonymity, and the alcohol eased her inhibitions. For a while, it all felt so easy, as she threw her limbs around and twisted to the rhythm, each movement a decision she made without care. Not one of them productive.

She chose to throw her head back, to spin, to sway. She chose to buy another drink and to sing the words of a song she loved. She chose to take Reggie by the waist and kiss him, as the bodies writhed around them, and the fog of alcohol warped the world around her.

* * *

She woke up with a headache, feeling tired and aching.

Her memories of the evening before were dim and semi-formed, elusive vapors that disappeared whenever she tried to look directly at them. She knew, from the pounding in her temple and the taste in her mouth, that she had drunk too much. She had certainly slept in her own bed, but she distinctly remembered kissing the clerk from the Infinity Store.

This much was confirmed when she checked her messages.

Had fun last night. The first message read. Pop into the store on Saturday to pick up your Infinity System—or sooner if you want to see me.

Not for the first time, Kiki realized she had no idea what it was she wanted. She usually had someone to spell that out to her.

She was used to going on dates, of course. These were usually (who was she kidding, for the last few years always) set up by Finny. They didn't always last, but were optimally matched to improve her mood whether they lasted a few weeks

or many months. When Finny told her this or that person was no longer serving her best interest, she was able to let go without too much dismay or heartbreak, knowing without a doubt it was the right decision for her.

Now she was on her own.

She knew some creep that hit on her at the Infinity Store probably wasn't the sort of person Finny would connect her with, but she was feeling lost, and having someone to support her with this didn't seem like such a terrible thing. This Reggie guy was confident. She hadn't once seen him deliberate last night; he always seemed to know what to do next, and that was something that appealed to her right now.

In any case, she had a few days to think about it and more pressing decisions to attend to. Like what she was going to do today, for instance. Ignoring the queasy feeling that came with this thought, she rolled over and prepared to get out of bed. One thing she was definitely going to do today was go to work.

Well, maybe after just five more minutes.

* * *

Kiki slithered through the next few days in an unsure stupor. Work, it turned out, was a relief, because at least here she was told what to do. Her inability to make decisions, however, meant her productivity was suffering, and people, including her boss, were starting to notice. At least without an Infinity System to track her productivity, they had no hard evidence to prove this.

Outside of work, however, was another story. She'd skipped breakfast for two days in a row now, having not left herself enough time to get ready in the morning. There was still a pool of coffee staining the kitchen surface that she hadn't yet

gotten around to cleaning. She found herself at one point in a corner store, having just bought a packet of cigarettes. Luckily, she still had just enough motivation to resist smoking them.

Evenings were even more daunting. She didn't know whether to read, to catch up on emails, to ring her friends, to exercise, to practice the piano. For the last two nights, she ended up watching TV, feeling like she should be doing something else.

On more than one occasion, it occurred to her that she didn't have to do any of the above at all. She didn't *have* to stay in her apartment, or in her job, or even in this city. She could, she realized, do something entirely new. With these thoughts, however, came an acute sense of panic. At least she would have Finny back before the long, empty chasm of the weekend, she thought.

On the third night of this indecision and monotony, she found she couldn't take it anymore. She left her apartment, again in search of someone to make her decisions for her. Back to the familiar futurism of the Infinity Store. She heard his voice from across the room as she was entering.

He was with a customer, a young, frazzled-looking woman.

"Maybe," he was saying, "you could take this opportunity to do something *impulsive*."

Kiki was halfway across the store before she stopped in her tracks. *Wait*.

The woman looked up at him doe-eyed and lost.

"Maybe," he continued, "you'd like to come out with me tonight. Trust me, there's nothing better for someone who's been plugged in for years than to let their hair down and relax a little."

Back in her apartment, she buried her head beneath her duvet. *It was a line!*

She felt so stupid! She never would have fallen for something like that had it been Finny whispering in her ear, instead of that *jerk*. Come to think of it, she never would have fallen for that a few years ago, before Finny had come into her life.

The only decision she could make after that was the conscious decision for unconsciousness. She went to sleep.

* * *

She had muddled through the days that followed and eventually replied to Reggie to tell him she wanted her device delivered. It meant she would have to wait an extra day, but at least she wouldn't have to see him.

Now here it was, on the table in front of her. She had finally caved and opened the cigarettes. It was probably her last chance to smoke before she turned Finny back on.

She didn't know what to do.

With Finny, she felt safe. She was free to enjoy whatever it is she was doing, knowing she was doing precisely the right thing at that moment. Without her, she felt untethered, unsure, constantly questioning herself and the decisions she made. But at least she knew her decisions were her own, that she was controlling her own life.

One was radically liberating, and the other freed her from the anxiety of this unbearable liberation. She didn't know which freedom was worse.

Eventually, the silence of her indecision was punctuated by a familiar, soothing voice.

“Good afternoon, Kiki—you've been managing awfully

well without me. How about we start to get things back on track?”

* * *

This story is a part of our legacy-of-excellence program, first printed in the After Dinner Conversation—June 2021 issue.

Discussion Questions

1. Is the process and experience of making choices more important than making the right choices? Does it matter if some of the choices you make are the wrong ones?
2. Is there really any harm in offloading less important questions to a machine, so as to focus on making better decisions regarding important questions?
3. If you had the chance to use the Infinity System, would you? Why or why not?
4. Does it matter that the Infinity System only suggests (*or reminds you*) of a better course of action? You have the free will to not follow the suggestion.
5. How is the Infinity System different than an online calendar, cloud-based reminders, to-do lists, and other productivity tools?

* * *

Author Information

We Are Here

Harley Carnell lives and writes in London, England. His fiction has been published, or is forthcoming, in *Vastarien*, *Riptide Journal*, *Penumbra*, *Sarasvati*, *Confrontation*, and others. He has also had stories performed on the *NoSleep Podcast*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Nocturnal Transmissions*, and the *Drabblecast*. His critical work is published in *Gamut* and *Aurealis*, and is forthcoming in the *Lovecraft Annual*. www.harleycarnell.com

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Purgatory

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Nerds

The author of "Nerds" resides in the great Commonwealth of Virginia and continues to be a teacher even after more than fifty years in the classroom. The author is especially proud on having his second work published in *After Dinner Conversation*.

The Freedom Machine

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