



# quip

FEATURING

ANTHONY D'ARIES

LILI XIE

JUSTIN DAVID STONE

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Hi readers,

We're excited to share our fifth issue with you, an issue that deals with themes of stagnancy and action. In each story, characters must choose between passivity and action, something that, to us, feels very timely in a weird, not-yet-post-COVID world.

In Anthony D'Aries' "People Like Us," Daniel finds himself at the home of his dead idol, in a tense stalemate with his idol's wife, one in which she clearly has the upper hand. In Lili Xie's "The Ginkgo Tree," Ying works at a convenience store, waiting for her life to start. In Justin Stone's "Sky Clipper," surly sixteen-year-old Ashton begins to open himself to a new and surprising friend while spending the summer doing community service. Each story deals with feeling stuck—in your life, in an interaction—and having to choose to stay stuck or move, open yourself up to hope and disappointment.

For us, quip has been an exercise in opening ourselves up. We weren't editorial newbs, but we didn't know much about running a lit mag outside of a graduate school bubble—and it's been the best. Spending time with these stories over the past four years has been an immense joy and privilege, tapping into our creative selves when we both felt like corporate sellouts. When we weren't working on our own writing, quip reminded us of the power of storytelling. Of keeping ourselves open. And now that we're both writing again, we're diving in headfirst. This means we're taking an indefinite break from quip. But we'll leave the stories up for everyone to read and share for years to come.

Thank you to everyone who has ever submitted to us, for the thousands of stories that have come across our desks (more like our computer screens, but you know what we mean). Thank you to our readers and our talented contributors who have made this such a pleasure. And thanks to our friends and family, for your constant support and love.

Yours,

Anna Blake and Sarah

# SKY CLIPPER

Justin David Stone



I don't know why the ducks even liked the lake at MacDougal Park. Nobody in Silas cared about it. To call the lake blue gives the wrong impression; this was not a place of tranquility or natural beauty. The water was blue all right, but the bright synthetic blue of paint. Also like paint, the water lay thick, heavy. When a strong wind blew, one begrudging ripple might hunch across the surface, but it never got far before giving up. The lake was so round as to be too round. Some folks in town called it the Blue Hole, or, more commonly, the Hole. Even people-made things should look and feel more earthly than the Hole. But the ducks stuck to that blighted lake, and so did John Boyer.

All of MacDougal Park was supposed to be “refurbished and restored,” but the lake was priority number one for Boyer, the town maintenance guy tasked to oversee the project.

When I showed up for the first day of my sentence—two hundred hours of community service—Spencer Carr, a fifteen-year-old Shady Oaks kid, had already been there a week or so. At 9:00 a.m., he lay kicked back on the lake's shore in polo shirt, boat shorts, and

flip-flops, smoking a cigarette while Boyer, in his green janitor outfit, stood with shovel in hand delivering some monologue. Seeing the two of them there in the interminable sun, I wanted to die.

Me and my old man lived on this side of Silas, known as the shitty side, at the Crest View Trailer Park, but even though I was only a ten-minute walk from MacDougal Park, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen the Hole in hard daylight. No way could I do this, not all summer. But according to the asshole judge, it was "either clean the lake or bend over in Boys State," which he pointed out gleefully was "the first step to a life in prison." So, I shielded my eyes and trudged toward the Hole.

When he saw me coming, John Boyer winced. But he put his shoulders back, tried to stand tall, and smiled at me in a conspiratorial way.

"Ashton Pratt?" he said.

Spencer Carr looked at me and laughed. At what, I couldn't tell.

"Ash," I said.

Boyer considered my black t-shirt, baggy black pants, black boots, and long black hair.

"Did you bring anything to work in?" he asked.

I didn't know how to answer.

"I got a couple of these city work uniforms in the car," he said.

Spencer laughed again. "You don't have to wear that shit."

I stared past Boyer and said, "I don't want to wear it."

"Okay, that's cool." Boyer's nice-guy smile suffered at its edges. "I just didn't want you to have to get your good clothes dirty."

"Whatever," I said. "They're already dirty."

Boyer might have been thirty or he might have been fifty—just some old dude. He was bald on the top of his head but sported a long, depressing ponytail and John Lennon glasses on a face pocked by ancient acne scars. A pushover.

I pulled out the crumpled cigarette I'd snaked off my old man and lit up. Boyer started to say something but didn't. I blew a cloud of smoke over his head.

"The Hole smells like shit," Spencer said. He stretched his tan legs and took another drag on his cigarette.

Boyer sighed. I could tell sighing was kind of his thing. He placed his dirty hands atop the shovel handle and considered the lake. "It's a complicated chemical process. I'm trying to figure it all out and put the proper corrective measures in place."



“Corrective measures.” Spencer cupped his balls. He flicked his cigarette into the lake at some ducks.

Boyer wobbled. “Spencer. Please. Our task is to fix this lake.” He reached his shovel and tried to bring the cigarette back to shore but he missed. The butt didn’t sink so much as become absorbed by the goopy blue lagoon.

John Boyer looked at me looking at the lake. “The former, and soon-to-be, beautiful MacDougal Lake,” he announced.

Good fucking luck, I thought.

Boyer said, “You know what year they built this lake?”

I imagined a bunch of assholes trying to nail water together. One night at the Hole, not long before, I huffed a can of Dust-It, passed out, pissed and shit my pants, and woke a sick mess to discover some fucker had stolen my wallet. There wasn’t even money in it, only the last picture I had of my mom and me, taken at some department store in Jeff City when I was little and she was still alive. Pretty much the last thing in the world I cared about.

“1938,” Boyer said, still talking. “Part of a big WPA project. When that kind of stuff mattered.”

Whatever and whatever. I reckoned I had 199.9 hours left of my sentence. Mosquitoes buzzed near my ears. I slapped at them but missed.

Boyer hoisted the shovel to his shoulder. “Well, fellas, I’m going to mosey over to the truck. I have some mosquito repellant I made, nontoxic, and I’ll grab more trash bags and get Ashton some work gloves.”

“Ash,” I said.

Boyer shook his head. “Ash. Sorry, man.” He started over the small hill between the lake and the parking lot. “You guys need anything else? Some waters?”

“Cigarettes,” Spencer said.

“Sorry,” Boyer said. “I quit them sticks twenty years ago. The day my mom died of cancer.”

“Big fucking whoop,” Spencer muttered. I didn’t know if Boyer could hear, but he probably did.

“I’ll get us some waters,” Boyer said. “Going to be another scorcher today.” He turned and disappeared over the hill.

Spencer was not one of the scabby town kids. We both went to Silas High School but had never said a single word to one another. He was a freshman and I was a sophomore, and he lived on the other side of Silas in a newer development called Shady Oaks. Spencer was famous because once in middle school he put two hits of acid in Ms. Winslow’s coffee and she almost died.

“What’s your hand supposed to mean?” he said.

“What do you mean my hand?”

“Them tattoos on your fingers.”

“FUCT.” Just what it says.

“Who did that to you?”

“Nobody.” I did it myself with a home kit. One letter needled into the top of each finger, the black ink already fading.

Spencer grinned. “What’d you do to get put out here?”

“I don’t know.”

The ducks on the lake seemed like an extended family: four big ducks and two tiny ducklings. Following each other round and round as the water parted thickly before them. I guess no one told them how terrible it was out here.

“I put a dead dog in some asshole’s car.” Spencer laughed. “All propped up like it was driving. With sunglasses and a scarf. Fucking hilarious. The judge gave me forty hours of this shit with John Boner, but it was worth it.”

Horseshit. I got two hundred hours just for messing with an empty house.

Spencer yawned, lit a new cigarette, and lifted his leg to fart loudly. “Basically, I just chill all day while John Boy pulls his pud. I’m bored off my ass, though. Now that you’re here we can really start fucking with him.”

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The rest of that first day, like Spencer, I just sat on the yellow grass by the lake’s trash-strewn bank. Mosquitoes churned around us in great clouds. We slapped at the air and watched Boyer work, his attention focused on a rotted, caving woodshed on the lake’s far shore. He had lumber and tools and was trying to rebuild it. Boyer kept glancing over at us and the untouched pile of trash bags, gloves, sun hats, and mosquito flower spray he’d brought from the truck.

“He’s all about to cry,” Spencer said.

I think maybe he was.

“He looks like some kind of chick in that big floppy hat,” Spencer said. “Like my grandma or something.”

I had no more cigarettes, no nothing. Spencer seemed to have a bottomless pack of cigarettes, but he wasn’t sharing and I wasn’t asking. It was over 100 degrees outside with 100 percent humidity. Sweat oozed from me, soaking my clothes. Bright red mosquito bites swelled on my arms, and I itched them bloody.

The ducks floated back and forth. Now and then they'd lift a wing and try to clean themselves, their undersides blue like the lake. The babies were little trembling blobs of down with orange beaks sticking out. I wondered if the ducks were migrating somewhere, and if so, why they couldn't get on with it. Surely there was a more desirable body of water somewhere on this godforsaken planet.

"Look at them stupid little shits out there," Spencer said.

Late in the afternoon, Boyer trudged up and sat by Spencer and me. He had some bottles of water and asked if we wanted one. Neither of us answered. He opened a bottle and took a long drink. Then he too stared at the lake, the ducks. We sat in silence for an eternity.

"I don't know," Boyer said finally.

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Coming down rutted Crest View, past the rows of sinking trailers, their chained dogs, downed satellite dishes, gaping appliances, and abandoned toys, I could see my old man before he could see me. He squatted on a bucket before the van, staring at a rust-choked piece he'd removed from the engine. The van hadn't run in years, but most days he was out here in his overalls lost in one of its parts.

I was up the shaky metal steps and almost through our open door before he saw me and said, "Did you take my cigarettes?"

"No."

"Where you been?"

"Cleaning the lake like the judge told me."

"You still ain't done with that?"

"Dad. Today was the first day."

He stared past me toward Eldon Avenue's wobbly traffic, grimy pick-ups and sagging sedans crisscrossing in coughs and rumbles. His arms and hands were smudged black with grease, his face smeared too. In the next trailer, our neighbors listened on their TV to wailing sirens.

"Sorry," he said.

I went inside to make a sandwich, but the peanut butter jar in the cabinet had been scraped empty.

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The next morning when I got to the Hole, Boyer had backed his battered green Silas Parks and Recreation truck to the shore. He was way too awake, smiling. "Ash, help me out a sec, will you? I want to show you something cool."



In the truck bed sat a huge wooden boat. It featured side-by-side seats for two people and bicycle pedals that could be operated from each seat. The boat's body had been freshly painted: clouds feathered in whites and grays floated on a sky-blue background. A calligraphic name adorned both sides: *The Sky Clipper*.

Boyer said, "Take that side there and help me lift this thing out."

It weighed ten thousand pounds, but we heaved the boat from the truck and set it by the lake. The ducks observed the operation, their black eyes glistening in the morning light.

Just then, the horrible revving of a car engine came suddenly closer. A shiny red convertible topped the rise and raced toward us, music blasting from bass-heavy speakers. It was Spencer, toothy face and windblown hair. Boyer and I had to press against the truck as Spencer braked to a grinding stop, gouging deep skid marks in the grass. He leered at us, bobbing his head and upraised hands, singing, "That's right, that's right, that's right, motherfuckers."

John Boyer bolted toward the convertible. Spencer tried to shrink away, but Boyer grabbed him hard by his polo shirt, lifted him from the car seat, and pinned him against the seat top so that Spencer was held prone, his legs and arms splayed in weak protest. They were practically the same size, but Boyer totally owned Spencer's ass. I couldn't believe it.

"Fuck you, faggot," Spencer spat. "Take your hands off me."

Boyer stuck his red face inches from Spencer's and screamed louder than I've ever heard anybody scream. Not words. A sustained guttural shriek that split the sky.

When he stopped howling, the silence was deafening too, hovering over the three of us at the edge of this lake at the edge of this field at the edge of this town. Clouds tumbled silent somersaults across the long Missouri sky.

Finally, Boyer released him, and Spencer collapsed in a quivering pile of boy across the car's leather seats.

"Your ass is grass." Spencer trembled.

"Your ass is grass," Boyer screamed. He moved again toward Spencer, who cowered, bleated. "One call to Judge Dickinson and you're in Moulder County lockdown, Spencer Carr. You got that? I already talked to the judge this morning. You don't know how close you are, son. To any-goddamn-thing."

Spencer backed his car slowly from the lake. Boyer followed him over the hill to the parking lot, and I was left alone at the Hole. Out on the too-blue water the ducks stretched their wings and necks, the little ones lazily trailing the big ones like they had all day.

I put on a pair of Boyer's work gloves, grabbed one of the large industrial trash bags, and began to clean one tiny portion of the lake.

Boyer hiked back over the hill. Spencer trailed him with head hung. They stopped and watched me pick up trash, but I didn't want to make eye contact with either of them. Spencer plopped down far from the shore and brooded. Boyer pushed *The Sky Clipper* into the water, climbed aboard, and tried to pedal toward the middle of the lake. The boat did pretty

good out there, but Boyer turned in slow circles without getting anywhere. While I cleaned, Spencer kept shaking his head, sniffing, muttering something about a “sky crapper.” Boyer circled round and round while the ducks, curious, kept a close distance.

I filled bag after bag with garbage. Decades of inscrutable shit had been discarded at the Hole: baby bottles, pill bottles, textbooks, tires, stiff, bloody rags, hamster cages, bicycle chains, fast food bags. In my mind, I catalogued secret histories. I found a crumpled note that said, “I miss you. Will you b with me? Circle yes or no,” and “no” had been circled. I put the paper in my pocket. I kept other things too: a guitar pick with the words “Cheap Trick” written over it; a bag of marbles that looked like small planets; a silver ring with a skull on it; a working calculator. But I couldn’t find my wallet or the picture of Mom.

Spencer started picking up trash too. A couple days in, he just got off his ass and began to work. I more than doubled what he did, but together we filled dozens of garbage bags, tossing them in the back of the truck. He even bummed me a couple good cigarettes. But it was hot as hell out there in MacDougal Park and getting hotter, a mosquito feast, the sun a mean nail overhead. I chafed and itched and sweated through my heavy black clothes. My pale skin cooked red. Boyer brought me one of his big straw hats. I put it on and immediately the wide brim’s shade cooled my face. Who knew?

“Thanks,” I muttered.

His mosquito repellent worked too. Boyer tried giving Spencer both, but he—even with the weird, whitish burn around his ears and lips—told Boyer to go put on perfume and be a cross-dresser by himself.

While we pulled endless trash detail, Boyer worked on the old shed, which turned out to be a boat storage and pump-house facility. He stripped rotted planks of wood, reframed and sealed the building. A perfect place for kids to hang out and do drugs.

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When I got up on my sixteenth birthday, my old man was still passed out on the pullout couch in the front room. I didn’t want to wake him, although even asleep he looked tormented. The same year mom died, the Cargill’s factory where he and pretty much everyone in Silas worked, closed and something inside him broke.

I pulled on my crusted clothes that now smelled brackish, spoiled, goaty. I drifted past Eldon Avenue’s shuttered store fronts and gas stations while the sun rose over Silas like a blistered sore. I couldn’t figure out if I was early or the world was late; if the world was to be made or the world was done. When I reached the lake, Spencer was alone on the shore. His eyes were bloodshot and wobbly. I knew the look. With shaky hands, he sucked on a cigarette and asked if I wanted one.

“Sure,” I said.

Across the dawn-gold water, the ducks were gathered together, still, heads tucked into wings. I don’t know whether it was the morning light or exhaustion or whatever but I realized something I’d been trying to know—the ducks were like stained glass, the sunlight seeming to come through them, infuse them, or else from them, each radiating its own sun. How

vivid and varied were their colors, their panels and patterns, each crested duck unique yet blended with the other ducks.

Spencer picked up a baseball-sized rock. He tested the rock's weight, studied the distance. I wished I'd grabbed him; how could I not? I was frozen open like in a dream—knowing what comes next.

I tried to say, *don't* but couldn't speak.

A smile flashed in the white burn of his lips, and Spencer hurled the rock.

It arced skyward, hung, descended; perfect, pinpoint. With a terrible splash, the rock struck one of the baby ducks, and both disappeared under water.

“Bang,” Spencer cried, arms shooting straight up. Just like that, where six ducks had been, now five. The remaining ducks flapped on tumultuous water, thrown and startled, looking, looking, looking everywhere, unable to grasp the empty space between them.

And then, the gone duckling resurfaced, but barely, on its side in the water. It tried to right itself with feeble flaps and kicks but could not. The others circled, reaching anxiously with hooked bills to lift the tiny one back atop the water, into the world.

Laughing uproariously, Spencer picked up another rock.

With a sudden fist I nailed Spencer's head—a thick, numb crack. He crumpled to the ground, and I dropped on top him, punching and punching. He tried briefly to push me from him,

but that would never happen. Far from mind I felt the weight of each terrible blow and the giving of him below, the going away.

At some point, hands pulled me from him. It was John Boyer. His face distant, mouth making shapes.

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An ambulance came for Spencer Carr and the cops came for me. A whole bunch of cops, weirdly happy to be there. I wouldn't say anything to anybody. They read me my rights, put me in handcuffs, pushed me around. Off to the side, Boyer talked to some of them, and they made notes in their books. They shoved me in the backseat of one of the cop cars.

Right before they shut the door on me, I yelled to Boyer, “The duck!”

His eyes met mine through the window's wire cage, and he looked to the lake where the ducks orbited the small, still blob of feathers. The car took me away.

At the police station, I got booked, fingerprinted, questioned. Assault, second offense, whatever, whatever. The whole time I could hear cops laughing in adjacent rooms. I guess all kinds of hilarious things were happening in the world.

One asked who I wanted to call and I said nobody. When they put me in the cell and finally left me alone, I noticed my hands: bloody and swollen, stupid. That's when I started smashing my head against the wall.

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Sometime later, I was in a hospital room. And Boyer was there. But at first he wasn't Boyer; he was the room, breathing and beeping, thin curtains, unknowable activity down a hallway or across a sea. Then he was telling me he was glad to see me. The first thing I did was ask if he ever took off his city janitor uniform. He laughed for a long time and said luckily they gave him two. I asked if Spencer was okay, and he said yes, that kid's made of rubber. I fell asleep, woke and fell asleep again. At some point I saw my old man. He was crying, and then he fell asleep too.

Later, when my head had stopped throbbing, I saw a nurse and told her I couldn't pay for any of this, and she said they knew that. They were getting me out of there. Boyer came back and I was discharged. At first, I figured he was supposed to pick me up and take me back to jail. But then we were outside in cascading sunlight and close, welcome heat and he asked if I was hungry.

"No," I said. "I'm alright."

"It's on me," he said.

"Whatever."

He took me to Jolene's, a diner I hadn't been to in ages. I don't think I've ever been so hungry. He kept ordering food and I kept eating: steak, eggs over easy, bacon, sausage, hash browns, buttery toast, tomato, asparagus, pancakes, cherry pie, peanut butter pie. Around

us people talked quietly, chewed, sipped sodas and coffee. Couples, families, friends, work crews. I could hear cooks in the kitchen making food, their dishes and soft clatter. The activity stilled me. Even with my bandages and hospital bracelet, the waitress kept coming back to our table smiling at me as she refilled our drinks and asked what else we wanted.

Boyer asked what I did to get community service.

I thought about it for a minute and then I said, "I busted up this house."

"Where?"

"Over at Shady Oaks."

"The newer, better Silas."

"I guess."

"Why'd you do that?"

"I don't know. One day I was just over there. I always used to play at that creek. My mom took me."

"Bear Creek."

"You know it?"

“We played there too. Giant crawdads.”

Remembering, I smiled. “I caught them big bastards.”

“You have to be patient to not get pinched.”

“I liked to build them pools in the rocks. But they didn’t need that—they had the whole creek. So, I always let them go. I just liked to look at them.”

“They’re like living spaceships,” Boyer said.

“Time machines,” I said.

Boyer sipped his coffee. “So why the house?”

“I don’t know.” Around us, Jolene’s murmured. I leaned closer to Boyer. “It was a new one, finished but empty. They left the back door unlocked. I slipped in and started hanging out. Reading, smoking cigarettes, writing on the walls. Sometimes I slept there. Felt like a huge hidden cavern. Different rooms for different moods. Nobody bothering me. But of course, one day I woke up to a big moving truck in the driveway. I snuck out back and hid in the woods while workers carried in furniture and tons of stuff. A family pulled up—mom, dad, two little kids. Super happy. All day I watched them looking around, making big plans. But at night they left again. So, I tried the backdoor and this time it was locked. I got real mad about it. Grabbed a rock and broke the window in the door. I went inside and started searching through all their stuff. The dude had golf clubs. Right there in the living room. I took the big club and just started destroying everything in the house.”

We both got quiet for a minute. For something to do, I ate another piece of toast. I imagined everyone was watching me, but I don’t think they were.

“How’d you get caught?”

“I’m an idiot. They got security cameras all over that hood. Nobody looks like me.”

The waitress came with the check and Boyer gave her money. She said she hoped to see me soon.

“I talked to the police about you and Spencer,” Boyer said. “Judge Dickinson. I told them I witnessed the whole thing. That Spencer started the fight and you acted in self-defense. They’re willing to drop the assault charges against you. But you have to stay all summer and finish fixing the lake.”

I didn’t know what to say. Beside the fact that lake could never be fixed, it was an unbelievable break. Outside, Boyer asked if I wanted a ride home.

“No,” I said. “Thanks.”

“You want to come over to my place and have a beer or something?”

————

Boyer's house was not far from our trailer. I knew the place because it had colored flags strung across the porch. Kids always ripped those flags down. I did a couple times too. But always more flags appeared. I asked Boyer what their deal was and he said they were Buddhist prayer flags. The five colors—blue, white, red, green, yellow—represent health and harmony, the elements in balance. I asked where screaming at people fit into all that and Boyer laughed. He said, "It's hard to be a human being."

While Boyer stepped away, I looked around—books, pictures and paintings, antiques, records. The place was old but well kept. In the living room, he had several guitars, amps, and a full fucking drum kit; I'd never seen that. I couldn't believe nobody'd stolen it. Above the fireplace was a black and white photograph in a silver frame: MacDougal Lake a long time ago. A young couple in a pedal boat smiled like they had all day. The woman held a round baby, one eye open and one closed. Behind the family, people in boats paddled the lake. On the far shore, the boathouse.

Boyer brought two cans of beer. "Just one," he said, and then raised his. "Cheers."

"Cheers," I said. Soft warmth spread through me. Sunlight streamed in the window. Boyer beamed.

"Let me show you something," he said.

In his backyard, Boyer had a plastic pool filled with water. Bandaged and floating, doubled in size, was the brown and yellow duckling. "We'll be able to put him back in a few days," Boyer said.

"The other ones are still there?"

"They are. Waiting. I told them." I thought that was the best thing I'd ever heard.

The duck kicked toward me with wet, bottomless black eyes.

"You have a band?" I asked.

"Used to," Boyer laughed. "Kind of hard getting along with folks. You want to jam?"

"I don't know how." In the living room, Boyer gave me a guitar and took one for himself. He turned the amps up and the room hummed. He showed me a chord shape, strummed a pick across the strings.

"Now you," he said.

I thought about telling him about my mom, about her picture lost to the Hole, about my dad, about how he'd forgotten my birthday. But it didn't really matter if Boyer knew. This was pretty damn good. And when I strummed A, holy shit, I lifted.



# THE GINGKO TREE

Lili Xie

Ying had always imagined it would start like this: on a sunny afternoon, she walks by a ginkgo tree, under which a young man sits playing his guitar. Sunshine sneaks through ginkgo leaves and shines on his black hair, giving it a golden glow. He notices her approaching and raises his head. Their eyes meet. They fall in love. They marry and live happily ever after.

But it didn't start like this.

As Ying rode her bicycle to work that June morning, she looked at the gray sky and thought, "It's going to rain today." She found herself excited at the idea. At least it would be a change. She'd been working as a cashier at a local convenience store since high school. Now, she was twenty-seven, and her life in the small town of Shazhou was quiet and unchanging. She hadn't expected herself to like a cashier's job, but she gradually got used to it and enjoyed standing behind the counter, seeing people come and go and wondering about their lives. It was like watching movies.



The convenience store was located on a small street. With the impending rain, hardly any people came in all morning. It felt humid in the store even with the air conditioner running. Ying usually read on slow days like this, but she was in a low mood. She leaned against the counter and stared at the grayness outside. From the window, the only view was the square, dull buildings of the apartment complex across the street. That was when Mr. Cool walked in.

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Ying couldn't remember how many blind dates she'd gone on. She was aware of the rules. A cashier, especially a chubby cashier with brown freckles on her nose, wasn't the first choice for men. Men preferred pretty girls who worked in offices, banks, or schools. That none of her blind dates had called her back hurt her mother more than her. She wanted Ying to have her freckles removed.

Ying's mother made it her mission to find Ying a husband. She enlisted the help of warm-hearted family and friends to play matchmakers.

"I found someone who's a perfect match for you," her aunt proudly announced over the phone. "He's twenty-nine, 170 centimeters tall, works for the steel company. His aunt works with my husband. Really nice guy. Good income."

Ying hated blind dates. It seemed odd for two strangers to meet and fall in love just because her mother's matchmakers happened to know them both and think they might be compatible after weighing their family backgrounds, jobs, appearances, and ages. But how much do they really know about her?

As expected, the date didn't turn out to be exciting. They met in a crowded teahouse. Goldfish gasped for oxygen in a fish tank by the entrance. Her aunt went with her, and the young man arrived with his aunt as well.

The two aunts talked much more than the two potential lovers.

Afterward, when Ying got home, her mom asked eagerly, "How did it go?"

"I don't know." Ying was having a hard time remembering if he wore glasses or not.

"Did he ask you for your number?"

"No."

Her mom said, slowly, unable to hide her disappointment, "Don't worry. We still have time."

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It had been ten years since Ying last saw Mr. Cool. He'd been a year ahead of her in school, and they'd never taken a class together. She'd been too shy even to find out his name. Occasionally, she'd encounter him in the hallway, at the bicycle shed, or in the gym. She named him Mr. Cool because something about him stood out. Once, at the bicycle shed, a dozen bicycles had tipped over and were lying scattered across the ground. He was walking by with several other boys, and immediately he stopped and started to set the bicycles upright.

His friend said, "Why do you bother? If the bike owners come, they'll think you're the one who caused it and be mad at you."

He continued to work. She had the urge to help him, but she didn't.

Another time, she was playing badminton in the gym. He was there, too, playing volleyball with some boys. Her birdie landed at his feet. He picked it up and started to walk toward her across the gym.

One of the boys said, "Hey, just throw it back. We're waiting for you to serve."

He kept walking, as if he didn't hear him. He stopped in front of her, placed the birdie in her hand, and said, "Here you go."

She blushed and forgot to say thank you.

Mr. Cool hadn't changed at all—still handsome, tall, with a crewcut. He wore a tan ironed shirt without a tie. She wondered what he had been doing all these years. Did he still live in town? Did he go to college? Was he married?

She felt a jump in her chest as she thought of the last question. What if he wasn't married? What if he didn't even have a girlfriend? Oh, there shouldn't be any "what ifs." After all, she was just a plain cashier. He probably didn't remember her at all. But she wanted to talk to him. She needed to talk to him. Tell him she'd named him Mr. Cool and ask if he liked the name. Tell him some blind date stories. Tell him she didn't care those guys never called her

back because she wanted something more. Something more than them. Tell him all about herself. He'd understand.

"Hi." His voice startled her. She blushed like a schoolgirl and rang up his items. A box of chocolate. A shaving blade. *Poetry Magazine*.

"Is that all?" she asked. He read *Poetry Magazine*. That was her favorite, too.

"Could I have a package of Zhonghua?"

"Sure," she said and handed him cigarettes. He smoked. When did he start to smoke? Did he drink, too? There were too many things she didn't know about him. Too many things she wanted to know. "That's fifty-three yuan."

"Here you go," he said.

*Here you go.* Many years ago, he'd said the exact same thing when he'd put the birdie in her hand.

"It's muggy today," he said while waiting for his change. "It's going to rain,"

"Yes, just don't know when it'll finally come," she said. Did he notice she was flushed? "Better sooner than later. Oh, thank you." He took the receipt and change.

"Sure," she said, eyes lowered. Many years ago, he'd picked up the birdie for her and took the

trouble to go across the gym to return it, but she hadn't said thank you. She should have. And she should've helped him set the bicycles upright.

He disappeared through the store gate. Outside, the sky darkened. It was going to rain soon.

---

That night she was sleepless. The air was sticky. The rain still hadn't come after brewing all day. She'd never felt so bad about herself, about the way she lived. He'd never come back to the store. She'd spend the rest of her life wondering about him and regretting the things she hadn't done.

*Poetry Magazine*. She should've told him she liked that magazine, too. Who was his favorite poet? Did he like Hai Zi? Hai Zi killed himself by lying on the rail in Shanhaiguan. People said he was crazy. People said all poets were kind of crazy. Did he think so?

She should stop wondering. She had spent enough time wondering. She needed to change. Her life needed to change. She needed to say the things she meant to say and do the things she wanted to do. She hated blind dates. She wanted more for her life than the convenience store.

She'd start tomorrow. Tomorrow she'd quit her job. The manager and other cashiers would be shocked. So what? She'd had enough quiet life. She would walk out from behind the counter. She'd leave the small town she'd lived in her whole life. Her mother would cry and try to stop her. But she would leave.

She'd go to Shanghai. It was a big city. She'd get a job there. Any job. She didn't care. As long as it would pay for night school. Yes, she'd go back to school. She'd always liked languages. She'd study French because it was soft and romantic. Maybe she'd meet someone in class, someone who had Mr. Cool's qualities. There were beautiful ginkgo trees on college campuses.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow everything would be different. She smiled to herself. She didn't set the alarm clock for 8 a.m. like usual. As she fell asleep, thunder clapped and rain began to fall.

---

The telephone rang.

"Hello." She picked it up, her eyes closed.

"This is Wei Zhang." It was the man she'd just gone on the blind date with. "I got your number from your aunt. I was wondering if you have time to have dinner with me this evening."

"Oh," she said and opened her eyes. It was daylight again, a fine day. The sun shone brightly and hurt her eyes.

She remained silent for a while and then heard herself say, "Sure."

She hung up the phone and glanced at the clock by her bed. It was almost eight. Yesterday was just a dream. Dreams and reality never met. Her mother had breakfast waiting for her. That evening after work she'd have dinner with Wei. They'd probably go on to get married. She couldn't remember if he wore glasses or not, but that wasn't important anyway.



# PEOPLE LIKE US

Anthony D'Aries

“Where’s your wife?” Meg asks after lunch. She answers her own question with a laugh. Wide-mouthed, white-toothed. Loud. Her *ha ha*’s bleed together, sound more like *ah-ha!*

“She’s at work,” Dan says.

Meg smiles. Dan follows the long leash from Meg’s hand to Jack, a small, frail breed. Meg calls him “Jackie,” and for all her money, you’d think she’d have a healthier, happier dog. Jack’s fur is patchy and matted, and the thing doesn’t shit so much as tremble and beg his body to perform.

She runs her fingers through her hair. A few zigzagged strands of magenta. She walks toward her house, giving Jack a sharp tug, breaking the sniffing trance he was enjoying. Meg opens her front door, turns to face Dan on the lawn, and laughs again.

“You coming?”

The front of her house is the same blunt, brick face from the cover of her husband’s memoir: *While We’re Young*. In the photo, Meg stands in high-waisted bell bottoms, a white blouse with ties on the chest, sleeves flowing over her hands. Richard Reed’s arms are wrapped around her. He is a bearded barrel of a man, his smile scrunching his flushed face. She rests her head on his chest the way a reluctant rider leans back on a rollercoaster. *We’re going places*, he says. *Where?* she wonders.

“Come, Jackie.” Meg unclips the leash. Dan stands in the open doorway. She walks down the hall, through blades of sunlight. Jack click-clacks behind her. Dan’s sad, silver sneaker of a vehicle in the driveway, Meg’s black Audi almost touching his back bumper. He steps in. Takes off his shoes. The door clicks.

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Meg didn’t go to parties. She “attended affairs,” and mostly they were “abysmal.” She got away with phrases and alliterations Dan never could. Dan wanted to talk the way Richard talked. From what Dan read—and what Meg, after a few glasses of wine, would tell and retell—Richard had a remarkable way of shifting linguistic gears, of adapting phrases, speech patterns, cadences to navigate various events and gatherings. A kind of socioeconomic code-switching. According to Meg, Richard could keep up with her Manhattan friends and relatives on topics like real estate, boarding schools, politics, but usually, by the end of the affair, when most of the guests had left, she’d find him on the fire escape, sharing a joint with one of the waiters.



Some of those affairs were held here, in this same house, though it's hard to imagine people having fun here. Dark wood floors. Antique couches with ornate wood trim. A brass rolling bar holding empty crystal decanters. A wrought iron sign on the front lawn proclaiming this property part of the National Register of Historic Places with a short paragraph about the wealthy whaling tycoon who once called this site home.

As the hallway leads Dan deeper inside, he passes photos of Meg and Richard on the wall. A sepia-toned shot from their wedding day, Meg straight and rigid in her bright white dress, her hair long and brown. A much slimmer Richard, more hair, eyes preserved in amber aviators, a thin, handlebar mustache curving around his grin like an upside-down horseshoe. He bares his teeth. Meg's lips are sealed.

Other photos show them on different vacations—beaches, mountains. A shot of Richard Dan recognizes from the Vintage printing of his collected short stories. The original on the wall is untouched, unfiltered, but the pose is iconic: Richard sitting on a wooden bench swing, back against one armrest, feet up on the other, arms folded across his chest. His white cable-knit sweater is yellowed from nicotine and coffee and age. On the book cover, the sweater is bright white, blue eyes hazy like polished aluminum. Not a smile exactly but not a scowl. Something in between.

Dan hears Jack's food tinkling into his bowl like coins from a slot machine. Meg opens and closes cabinets, runs water. The last wall before the kitchen holds photos of their daughter, Noelle. Dan had read about her, and Meg had mentioned a few clipped details about Noelle's meandering careers in New York—a production assistant on a documentary, a dog-walking business, a dozen or so hours away from her yoga instructor certification. It's creepy how

much she looks like Richard. Shave his wedding face, throw on a curly wig, add a few more freckles and some makeup, and you have Noelle. In one photo, she's in a park, tall buildings jutting up behind her, a pensive dog's face pressed close to hers. Another small breed Dan can't identify. It's clear from the angle, from Noelle's slightly upturned stare, that she is taking the photo herself.

"Daniel," Meg says. "I'm going to change."

"Oh, ok."

"Meet me in the kitchen."

\_\_\_\_\_

The whole thing seems too cliché to happen in real life, but here Dan is, an aspiring writer following an older woman into her home, an older woman who was married to "the master of the short story" for twenty-five years until, a few weeks after winning the National Book Award, he shot himself in the face in one of these rooms. Which one? Dan wonders.

Jack lifts and tilts his head, chewing with eyes clenched. Meg is upstairs by the time Dan enters the kitchen. A faint scent of cinnamon. Steam rushing from a black kettle on a black stove. A long row of brass handles. Dan turns one, then another, pilot lights clicking until he finds the right one and the flame disappears. He opens cabinet after cabinet. Dishes, serving platters, wine glasses. Where does she keep the food? No cans or boxes. Spices in labeled silver canisters. Three white jars on the counter. As he opens one, he has the odd feeling

he's playing some kind of carnival game, a small crowd forming around him. The first jar contains sugar. The second, flour. He reaches for the third.

"Daniel."

"Oh, yes?"

Meg stands in the doorway in shorts and a white tank top. Barefoot.

"What are you doing?"

"Sorry, I was looking for the tea, but I couldn't find any."

"We're not having tea." She moves like a dancer from cabinet to cabinet, reaching and turning, bending and lifting. Her body seems to change the dimensions of the room, the composition of the fixtures and furniture. It's as if Dan had been fiddling with a piano, and now it is in the hands of a master.

Jack pauses his crunching, then bows and resumes. How can she stand to live with something in such pain? Jack laps his water, then lifts his head. His throat distended, Dan certain the creature is about to vomit. But whatever coursed through him passes. He walks out.

Meg places two tall glass mugs on the counter. She uncorks a bottle of tequila and splashes a generous portion into each glass. Then she pours the hot liquid from the kettle, which isn't water after all but a spiced cider. The clear and brown tumble together, Meg's face hazy in

the steam. She places a spoonful of whipped cream on top and dusts it with cinnamon. The cream is half-sunk by the time she hands it to Dan.

He almost declines. Almost says something stiff like, *Oh, I really shouldn't or I'm driving.* He should say that, say anything, but instead he takes the glass and holds it as Meg pushes hers against his.

"To new friends."

---

Dan was turned on to Richard Reed by Mr. Driscoll, his high school English teacher. Driscoll turned him on to a lot of things: Tom Waits, Eric Bogosian, Terrance Malick. "The Burgeoning Loner Starter Pack." All through class, Dan felt like he was the only one listening, but Driscoll didn't care. He taught as if he were standing in front of a crowded amphitheater.

They often talked after the bell rang. Dan in the first row, Driscoll pacing in front of the blackboard like a panther, bellowing, brushing his long hair back with both hands and nodding when Dan told him about a story he was working on. To top it all off, Driscoll and some of the other English and art teachers formed a punk band called the Split Infinitives. "More Lou Reed than Iggy Pop," Driscoll said. Dan nodded as if he knew either of those names.

"You should check this out," Driscoll said after class one day, handing Dan a battered copy of

Reed's collected short stories. The same face that would later stare at him from the hallway photograph watched him from the book cover.

Maybe it was weeks or months before Dan finished the collection, but in memory, he devoured the book in one night. Dan's stories often featured an introverted, high school protagonist whose greatness was only appreciated after his untimely death, yet somehow he could see himself in Reed's stories about Midwestern married couples. Men who worked jobs Dan didn't think anyone had in real life: door-to-door vacuum salesman, traveling knife sharpener, ice fisherman. There were lots of cigarettes and gin and wives in sheer sundresses standing before their husbands in kitchens. Children who spied and crept through shadows in hallways and basements. Or only children, skipping school to watch a dirty movie or vandalize an abandoned house. Each story a polaroid within Reed's mosaic universe.

Even now, as Dan carefully carries this elaborate cocktail into the living room, when he spots Reed's books on the shelf, he feels exposed. It's as if Meg has unearthed his high school journals and splayed them under a spotlight. He stops short in the doorway. A thin droplet of whipped cream rolls over the rim of his glass.

Meg places her drink on the coffee table and sits in the loveseat. Dan takes a slow walk around the room. He sips, then bends toward glass cabinets full of porcelain dolls and crystal serve ware. Dried roses lean in a vase on a baby grand piano. White curtains droop across the windows like heavy eyelids. The longer he stays, the harder it is to leave.

He's wasted hours of his life trying not to offend people. Trips to museums he secretly hated—the cold, sparse rooms, the obligatory reading of placards, the side glances from sleepy

security guards. And yet many times he's found himself, feet aching, stomach rumbling, following Rebecca through a marble maze. A few massive oil paintings of ancient battles or looped closeup footage of people laughing or crying usually carried him through the visit, but most of the time, he felt like he was wandering an expensive showroom full of items he could never afford.

Wood creaks behind Dan and he turns. Meg leans against the armrest, legs tucked underneath her.

"Most of this junk belonged to my mother. If you see anything you like, take it."

Dan has no intention of touching, let alone taking, anything. In the bookcase, between and on top of some of Richard's books, are marbled notebooks, legal pads, stacks of rubber-banded notecards.

"Were these his?"

Meg sips and nods without looking up.

"Wow, is this a first edition?"

Meg exhales. "Daniel, sit."

The other chairs are on the opposite side of the coffee table, across from where Meg sits in the loveseat. Those few steps, under Meg's watch, would be miles. He sinks onto the cushion beside her.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Sure, yes.”

Just above Meg’s knee, a blue vein flashes like a minnow as she turns toward the window. A thick scar up the side of her thigh. Her hand idly strokes the top of her leg, not unlike the way Dan’s grandmother would brush her palm along her forearm as they talked at her kitchen table. He thinks of his own mother’s habits, her ever-present need to self-soothe: the caressing, the humming, the lavender-scented body wash and chamomile teas and bergamot candles. All of it ritualistic. Compulsive.

“Have you traveled much, Daniel?”

“My brother and I backpacked through Europe after I graduated.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Yeah, it was great, actually. We were in Amsterdam for a few days. Switzerland, Paris. Italy.”

The names of the countries impressed his old friends from high school or certain relatives, people who hadn’t traveled more than fifty miles from their hometown. Meg watches him.

“Hostels. Street food. Perhaps a few drunken walks through the Red Light District. Is that a fair summary?”

“Basically,” Dan says.

“And your brother. He’s older?”

“About ten years.”

Meg nods. “So, while he was out fucking different women, you were wandering the city alone? Reading in your room? Something like that?”

Dan laughs through his nose, though he finds nothing funny. He has the urge to see if someone is holding cue cards behind him, his history documented in black magic marker.

After a long pause, she laughs, loudly. That same *ha-ah-ah-ha* from the front lawn.

“You remind me of Richard when he was young.”

Dan smiles.

“That’s not a compliment.”

———

“You could just leave,” Dan whispers.

He stares at himself. A tired little boy. Not a twenty-six-year-old man. Water rushes into the toilet. The sound deepens as the tank fills, and an urgency overcomes him. His brain tells him to figure this all out before the water shuts off. He used to do things like this when he was a kid—get into bed before the door closed, race across the yard before a gust of wind died, finish his juice box before the green minute on the microwave changed. An innocent

game that mutated over time and eventually led him to this moment, staring at himself in Meg's bathroom mirror, heart pounding, mouth dry.

"You can just leave," he whispers again.

He remembers her car blocking his in the driveway, how she had waved him in first.

He doesn't move.

---

Jack sits in Dan's spot on the loveseat. The dog lifts his head when Dan enters, as if to make sure Dan notices, then lowers his chin. Dan sits in one of the high-back chairs across the room. The cushions feel like two smooth stones.

"You can leave, you know."

Dan straightens. "What?"

"If you're uncomfortable. You can leave. You can just stand up. Say goodbye. Walk out the door."

"Oh, no, I'm not un—"

"Daniel, please." She brushes her hair back. The side Dan can see is completely gray. The magenta streaks face the wall.

"You don't like it when I call you 'Daniel,' do you?"

"I don't really mind."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, you don't like it, so why would you say you do?"

She takes a tiny sip from her water glass. Something else? More tequila? Maybe gin?

"This could go several ways, Dan. You could sit there and watch me drink. We could go upstairs. Or you could leave."

Loops and whirls in the hardwood floor like fingerprints. Jack yawns, a moan of pleasure ending in a squeal.

---

Dan sits in his car, ears ringing. Windows up. He left the front door open. The house looks like it's missing a tooth.

Meg appears, cradling Jack. She presses her lips into a dramatic pout, like a little girl whose playdate wants to go home. Then she storms down the steps, the driveway, and doesn't stop at Dan's car. Her shorts flash by his window. She tosses Jack onto her passenger seat, starts her car, and backs out without looking, then idles in the middle of the street. Dan puts his car in reverse and rolls down the driveway. A grinding squeak. He quickly releases the emergency brake and the car jolts back. Dan throws it into drive. As he pulls away, Meg waits in the street, hands on the wheel, leaning forward as if squinting at a road sign.

He drives down wide streets. Many of the homes have gated driveways. Fences of wrought iron spears, little red and white jockey statues holding lanterns. He recalls reading something sinister about them, some cruel history hiding in plain sight. His heart thumps in his throat.

Lefts and rights, the road a black river carrying him into a different neighborhood. Until he reaches a dead end. Two boys, middle school aged, playing basketball. The hoop is portable, the plastic base filled with water or sand to keep it stable. Behind the hoop, a silver guard rail. Beyond that, a thin stretch of trees. And beyond that, the steady rush of traffic.

Dan idles in the road. The chugging and puttering of the exhaust sound like he's sinking into water. One boy retrieves the ball from the bushes. The other boy turns toward Dan. The boy with the ball joins the other and stares. They turn toward one of the houses and a woman appears. Flannel shirt and jeans. Gardening gloves. She raises one gloved hand to shield the sun, to get a better look at this stranger in the street.

---

Meg picked the place. Dan usually ate a tuna fish sandwich at his desk or ran out for a slice of pizza, but today he parted a heavy red curtain and found himself in a dimly lit dining room. Dark wood and brass fixtures. Waiters in white shirts and bowties.

“Steppin’ out on your wife?” Diane Lanford said, when she saw the pair waiting for a table. She clutched her monogrammed tote bag, sunglasses in her hair like she was strolling to the beach. Diane oversaw all the case workers at Bristol House and had done so for the last twenty-seven years. She happily supported Dan’s workshops for the residents, his book

clubs and writing groups; he was still young enough for his incompetence to be interpreted as shyness. And she was the one who hired Meg, who thought the residents would enjoy a watercolor class between AA meetings and anger management classes.

Dan laughed and blushed.

Diane smiled at Dan, but when she turned to Meg, her lips tightened. Her expression changed so suddenly and drastically, she looked like a different person. Meg laughed her laugh.

“No, no, not stepping out,” Dan said. “Just grabbing lunch.”

Diane nodded. She seemed like she was trying to tell Dan something with her eyes.

“Bye, Diane,” Meg said. She turned, and Dan followed.

The host greeted Meg by name and escorted them to a curved booth at the back of the room.

“I’ll have a bourbon.”

“Very well, madam. And for you, sir?”

“Just water, please.”

“Sparkling or tap?”

Dan looked at Meg. She raised her eyebrows.



“Sparkling, I guess,” Dan said.

“Excellent, sir.” The way he said *excellent* made Dan think of stickers elementary school teachers put at the top of spelling tests.

“You know,” Meg said, “the first time I brought Richard to a place like this, he took his boots off under the table.” She covered her mouth with her hand but that only deepened the sound of her laugh.

“That was one of the things I loved about him,” she said. “He was blue-collar, and I was just so tired of everyone in my life behaving. With Richard, I never knew how the night would go. I mean, I had an idea, but I was never quite sure how we’d get there.”

The waiter returned with their drinks, and as he poured Dan’s sparkling water, Meg said “And it turned me on.” The waiter’s hand went still. Dan stared at the unlit votive candle as if trying to light it with his mind.

“I’ll be back to take your orders.”

Meg leaned forward and pat Dan’s hand. Her skin was rougher than expected. Colder.

“So,” she said. “What do you make of Diane?”

Dan’s head spun. He tried focusing on the bubbles in his glass, following each one to the surface, watching them pop.

“I don’t know,” he said. “She seems like a nice person.”

“She does?”

“I mean, from what I know. I don’t know her that well. But she’s always been nice to me.”

She sipped. “To hell with nice, Daniel. Nice is boring.”

This could have been one of Richard’s stories. That detail about boots under the table reminded Dan of similar details about class, money. Fish-out-of-water moments. And aggressive women. Women who talked like Meg. Women who were always half-drunk, spoke with sweeping hand gestures, and no matter the topic, always seemed one sentence away from emotional collapse. Like actresses in old movies, the kind who slapped their husbands one minute, fainted into their arms the next.

“You’re a thinker,” Meg said.

“I am?”

“Yes.”

She traced the rim of her glass, then cleared her throat.

“I am, too,” she said. “People like us—”

“Are we ready to order?”

Meg exhaled, leaned back, and stared up at the waiter. She ordered for both of them in French that sounded authentic. The waiter nodded and left.

“People like us,” Meg said, “we feel more. Maybe we feel too much. But we can’t control it. We can’t control feelings. We wouldn’t want to. That’s the problem with the world today. Everyone trying to control everything. But you know what?”

“What?”

“It’s so much better to just. Let. Go.”

---

When Meg was in the bathroom, the spell broke. At least for a moment. And Dan could gather his thoughts. This was getting out of hand. He didn’t really want to be in one of Richard’s stories. Things didn’t end well. In fact, they often didn’t end at all, and sometimes Dan wondered what the hell the story was even about. But there was something hypnotic about Richard’s writing. The short declarative sentences. The hint of something sinister, some evil aura glowing at the edges of people, places. The way he transported a reader to a location both specific and vague. Never naming a state or town or street, and yet as he read, Dan was in his childhood neighborhood or in his car, on his commute to Bristol House. But then something horrific happens. A newlywed couple crashes their car, a jagged fence takes out a boy’s eye, an old man slowly turns off his oxygen. The end. What was Dan supposed to do then?

Before Meg returned, the waiter placed their food on the table. Some kind of pasta. Tentacles, like tiny rubber hands, reached up through the red sauce.

“Enjoy.”

Rebecca was probably sitting in the cramped breakroom at her office, taking the last few bites of her salad while catching up on email. What if she’s not, Dan thought? What if she’s some place he has never been, with someone he has never met? What if she is somewhere doing the same thing he is?

“Here we are,” Meg said in a sing-songy voice. She leaned over her steaming plate and inhaled deeply. “Wait’ll you try this.”

---

Meg and Jack are still in the car when Dan returns. He parks in the street and opens the door. Muffled jazz coming from Meg’s car in the driveway.

He walks toward the Audi and for a second, he’s eight years old, working up the nerve to knock on his neighbor’s door and ask if he can retrieve his baseball. Another thing he loved about Richard’s stories: His characters had the same secret thoughts and fears as Dan. Little private things. A character rehearsing his order before calling a pizza place. Things Dan did that he never told anyone. That’s what a real writer was—a clairvoyant stranger who knew all of the reader’s secrets.

Meg's window whirs. Smoke rises around his face. The jazz louder, frantic.

"I had a feeling you'd be back," Meg says. Another puff of smoke as she reaches over and rubs Jack's belly. The dog rolls onto his side, one little T-Rex arm cocked in the air, his eyes closed.

"I'm sorry," Dan says. For what? "I'm sorry I left so abruptly."

She lowers the music slightly, then tosses her cigarette on the grass.

"You know what I've learned over the years, Daniel?"

He waits.

"There is no limit to the number of times we can change our minds."

---

The sun casts new shadows in the hallway. He follows Meg and Jack, same as before, yet part of Dan expects change. For the eyes in the photographs to appear hollow and white, like raccoons caught in headlights. The living room will be where the dining room was. The bathroom and kitchen will have switched places. Lefts now rights; rights now lefts. He'll try to follow her up the stairs but when he gets to the top, the ceiling will press against his back as her bedroom door shrinks to dollhouse size. Like the haunted house he once visited as a kid. Stare at the mirror long enough and a second version of himself would appear. This old

house contained apparitions—hundreds of years of history emanating from the foundation. The Megs and Richards and Noelles and Jacks on the wall. Richard's characters pressed between covers like over-stuffed boxes of nightcrawlers. Half-formed creatures scribbled in his notebooks. And the Dans—the one who ate lunch and followed Meg's Audi to her house and the one who returned and now walks the hall.

He looks up from the bottom of the stairs. Meg walks from the bedroom to the bathroom without glancing down at him. The bathroom door, half-open, framed in light. Water rushing in the shower. Dan waits. He waits until the light is hazy with steam. He waits until Jack stops pacing in the living room and collapses. He waits for an omniscient narrator to speak to him, for him, to escort him to an ending that is unexpected and inevitable.

# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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