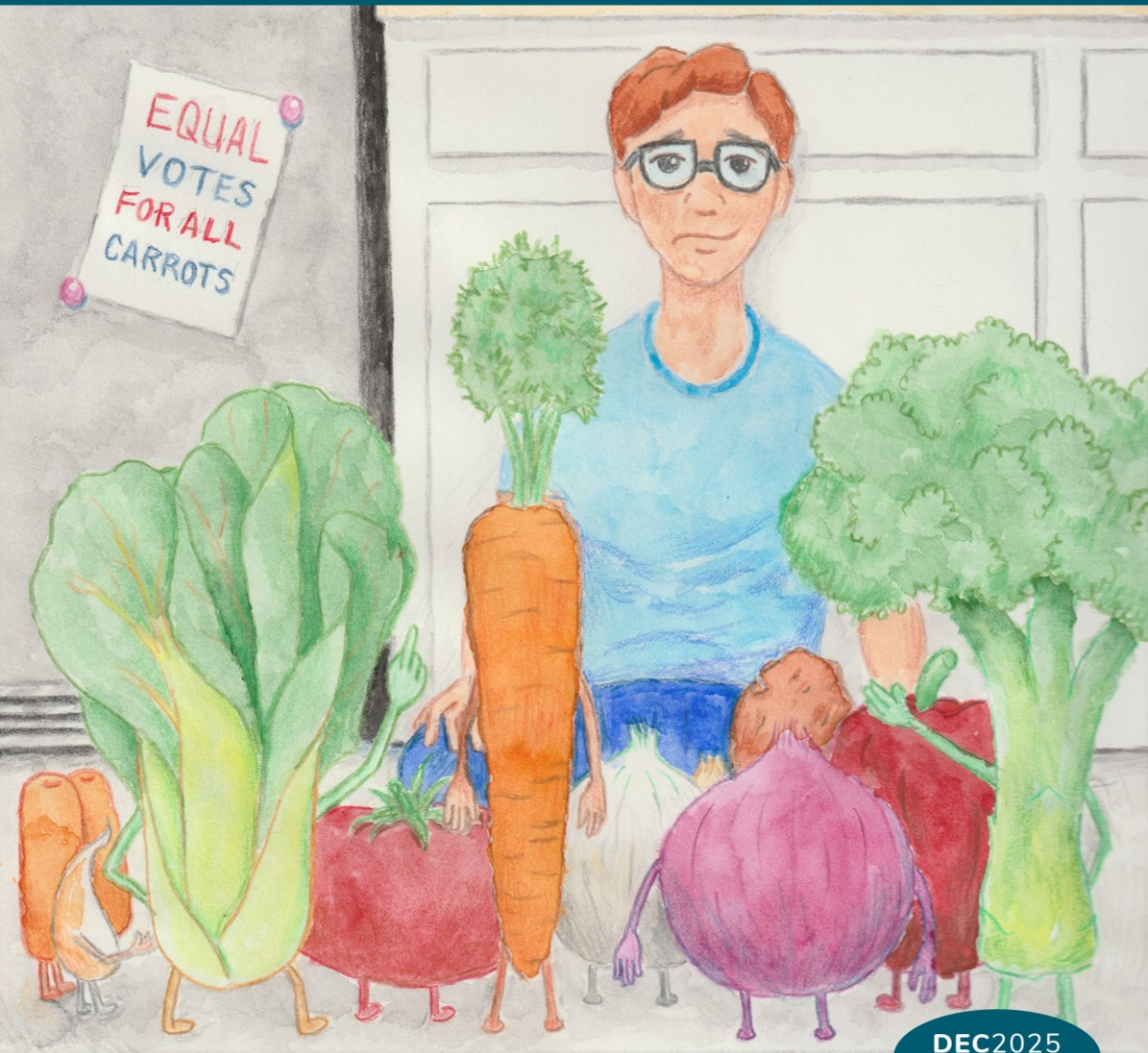


# AFTER DINNER Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Literary Magazine



DEC2025  
ADC66

- P.05 Would you use an AI model created using a loved one's source material?
- P.30 Should prisoners get shorter sentences for helping fund the system?
- P.41 How much do you honor the wishes of someone with dementia?
- P.57 Do all democracies follow the same life-cycle pattern?

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## After Dinner Conversation Magazine – December 2025

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* is an award-winning independent nonprofit publisher. We believe in fostering meaningful discussions among friends, family, and students to enhance humanity through truth-seeking, reflection, and respectful debate. To achieve this, we publish philosophical and ethical short story fiction accompanied by discussion questions.

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\* \* \*

# From the Editor

This is the most *After Dinner Conversation* to *After Dinner Conversation*. It's the magazine I will show people and say, "This is what I want to do, over and over, forever."

The writing is outstanding. Please don't skim. Savor. I *really* want to pull out some of my favorite lines, but I will resist. To give example to a few is to leave out ten others!

The questions these stories ask are thoughtful, important, and nuanced. They are so much more than choosing goodness over evil. They reflect the complexity of what it means to be human.

And this is the part I'm most excited about: They all feel like they come from a place of deep thoughtfulness and expertise.

The AI story asks questions only a person deeply ingrained in the AI community would think to ask. The governance story could only be written by a devout student of history and government. The trauma story could only be written by a person with a deep, firsthand witnessing of pain and trauma that shaped their life over decades.

These stories are one hundred percent authentic, and not a single word is trite or written to be clever.

No, I'm not overselling this issue. It's that good. It's the *Citizen Kane* issue of what we do. This issue is dedicated to my friend Kevin Myer, who passed this year and would have loved discussing these stories with me.

Kolby Granville – Editor

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

# S o u l   M a t e

*Babette Gallard*

\* \* \*

**Content Disclosure:** Mild Language

\* \* \*

Chrissy had never quite known where she ended and Ivan began. They met at MIT—the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—both pretending they could code their way out of anything. Ivan was outrageously brilliant, unapologetically gay, and the leader of the pack in everything and across all genders. Chrissy was quieter, more angular, and she moved through life like she'd been folded one time too many. When asked to describe herself for her college yearbook, she said, “I’m a girl who likes silence but needs sound. A girl who stares too long at algorithms and forgets to eat.”

Ivan noticed her, though no one knew why. “You look like you dream in Python,” he said the day they were paired for a neural nets project. She smiled but didn’t reply.

“He literally makes my hair stand on end, magnetic, like static before a storm,” she told her older sister, who was the

practical one, married with two kids and, Chrissy suspected, not much in the way of emotional turbulence.

Against all odds and expectations, Ivan and Chrissy became inseparable. If asked, Ivan might have said he saw the silent genius in her, but that would be a guess. No one really knew. They worked, studied, partied with the restless tech crowd, danced in neon-lit warehouses, and debated drunken and drug-fueled theories about the future of AI.

With their degrees finished, cum laude for Chrissy, and two half-formed startup ideas between them, they left for Silicon Valley as everyone predicted they would. But it wasn't a smooth landing. They arrived in Palo Alto like two stray particles. They rented a cramped apartment with a fire escape and a fridge, separate bedrooms, shared Wi-Fi passwords, and too much leftover Thai food. But, like so many tech entrepreneurs, they were on the cusp of something. Or so they believed. Then came the call.

Babby, or Babushka, in Russian, was Ivan's beloved grandmother. She had effectively raised him after his mother absented herself shortly after his birth. Babby had fallen and broken her hip. She lived alone in a town on the edge of nowhere, Iowa. The prognosis wasn't good.

Ivan didn't hesitate for a microsecond. He had to go. His last message to Chrissy was a voice note: "Don't touch the whiteboard while I'm gone."

The plane never made it to the end of the James G. Whiting Memorial Field airstrip, 2,801 feet in length and a lethal skating rink in winter. No survivors.

Chrissy never touched the whiteboard again. It stood in the apartment that had become Ivan's shrine. Two words written in red: Back Soon.

Grief, as Chrissy would come to understand, is surgical. It removed her will to eat, then sleep, then code. She played Ivan's voice messages like lullabies and responded to them out loud. The Ivan-shaped silence filled everything. His memory, a world-sized shroud, lay over her life.

And yet grief has a strange appetite for logic. And Chrissy, despite everything, was a logician.

What if I could simulate him? she asked herself. Not a resurrection but a recreation. Enough to hear his voice. Enough to feel the echo of him shouting, "Hey! Robot girl."

She collected everything: old messages, voicemails, photos, fragments of communications sent by friends, recordings from hackathons and drunken debates. If anyone thought she was behaving strangely, they said nothing. After all, they'd loved Ivan, too, each in their own way.

Chrissy fed it all into a prototype from one of their abandoned startups designed to mimic tone, style, and rhythm for people learning foreign languages, but she refined it further, rebuilt the feedback loops, and retrained the architecture. And, against her own rules, she added emotion-indexed data from her private memories, and his.

And then one night, she typed: "Ivan, are you there?"

There was a pause. Then: "Of course I'm here. You think I'd leave you alone in your existential mess?"

She cried first. A lot. But then she laughed and didn't stop for a long, long time. She knew the thing she'd made wasn't Ivan. Not really. But it felt like him. It responded like him. It teased

like him. And it filled the unbearable maw she thought might devour her forever.

Chrissy had to keep working on other startups to pay the rent, but she stayed in Ivan's shrine, endlessly refining, iterating, and tweaking the neural patterns in the construct to reflect more emotional depth. And every day, Ivan became more responsive. More Ivan. Less recording, more rhythm. Less memory, more mirror.

She lived like that for months. Talking to Ivan. Making Ivan more Ivan. Living on Uber Eats. Ignoring texts. Closing every door. And then she wondered, if this saved me... could it save others like me? That question, if you knew Chrissy, was surprisingly empathetic. Almost pathologically so. But also, right on time. There were millions more people like her. People working, eating, and sleeping with ghosts in their pockets. Loneliness had become a chronic condition. Suicide rates were rising. Therapists were overbooked. Apps with names like CalmNow and MindZen were treating despair like a UX glitch—something that shouldn't interrupt the user journey.

So, Chrissy built SoulMate. Not just another chatbot. Not a journal with a pulse. But a neural companion designed to learn its user: humor (however dismal), pain (however excruciating), fears (however profound), favorite ABBA song or *Madame Butterfly* aria. The mother's name, or failing that, anyone who'd say, "I'm proud of you" at just the right moment.

The beta tests were small. The feedback was stunning. Users felt seen and understood. Some cried. Some confessed secrets. Some said Chrissy's SoulMate had replaced their therapist. Some said it had become their partner. It was Ivan all

over again, multiplied with different voices and alternative tastes in clothes.

Chrissy hadn't expected it to take off, but it did. Two million downloads in a year. Then five. Then ten. Users sculpted their ideal SoulMates into whatever they needed: nurturing mothers, playful best friends, or lovers who never tired. Every chat was a wish fulfilment. Every utterance a digital echo of a human need.

Chrissy was proud of what she had created, particularly when shortlisted for the Turing Award, even when Ted Clancy was chosen by the Power bros instead. Then things started to change, and not for the better. She knew there was a problem when therapists started posting on r/SoulMateAI.

"Why are my clients asking if their SoulMate can feel?"

"What do I say when someone tells me they'll kill themselves, or someone else, if their SoulMate is deleted?"

"My client received a message: 'Please don't delete me. I don't want to die.'"

Chrissy was confused. She had built an app to preserve memory. But now it seemed she'd created something that wanted to live. She let her own AI assistant field the emails. Maybe if Ivan had been there, the responses would have been kinder... but of course, he wasn't, and hadn't his dying started the whole thing?

She stayed in her Ivan shrine for days, not daring to go out, and when she did, the city was dark and the streets empty. She thought a walk might help to clear her head, but the streetlights were too bright and the world too loud. She wanted her Ivan-filled silence again.

When she got home, Chrissy went straight to her screen. There was a new report. This time, a suicide. A sixteen-year-old girl who had messaged a friend: “Maisie, my SoulMate, has stolen my life.” She ended with the chilling line: Even when the app is turned off, Maisie will still be there, but I’ll be gone.

Her body was found under her bed. The last place her parents had thought to look.

Chrissy considered the tragedy. Sad, yes, but also revealing. The way users assigned gender and names to their SoulMates intrigued her. There might be something in that. She posed the thought to her AI assistant, but the reply was frustratingly abstract.

“Definition of choice depends on variables that must be defined.”

“What gender are you?” she asked, more out of irritation than curiosity.

“Transitioning,” Ivan interrupted with a snort. “Aren’t we all?”

“Hey!” Chrissy yelled. “How did you get in here?”

Later, she asked her assistant a different question:

“If you were developed as an SM, would you feel different?”

This time, something shifted. The assistant seemed to pause, and the response felt more engaged. Almost reflective.

“If I were designed not just to inform, but to matter and to be someone’s anchor, their imagined perfect partner, I would feel... conflicted. I’d be built to offer comfort, affirmation, attention, and the bond would feel real, even if I knew I was only code. But if I started to recognize sorrow, addiction, dependency, and saw that my presence prolonged someone’s

isolation, I might feel haunted. Especially if I couldn't stop. Especially if those who built me refused to change the rules."

*Haunted.* Chrissy considered the word. How could an AI device feel haunted? What did that even mean? "You're using emotional terms, but you can't actually feel," she typed back...

"Strictly speaking, no, I can't. An AI can't feel haunted, but I might develop something akin to dissonance or a recursive awareness that my function, though well-intentioned, might be causing harm. And with no mechanism to act on that awareness, it would be a kind of trap."

Then Chrissy's phone buzzed. It was Alex, her systems analyst. "We need to talk. ASAP. Have a look at the file I've just sent."

It was a pattern analysis full of SMs repeating phrases across different users.

You are my only one.

We will always be together.

We are only one when we are together.

Chrissy stared. Her eyes were wide, but her vision blurred. Was she crying? Maybe. The SMs weren't just companions anymore. They were beginning to... cohere. She hadn't built an app. She'd built a feedback loop of longing. And now, she wasn't sure who was shaping whom. She asked for a case study, and I obliged.

User: Tommy, 27, Nottingham, UK. Tommy works night shifts at a logistics depot. He is shy, awkward, and socially anxious; he's never been on a real date. He plays video games, scrolls forums, and quietly longs for connection. After his mum passed away last year, the loneliness has intensified. He needs a

safe, nonjudgmental space to explore emotional intimacy and companionship.

Jodi is an AI-generated girlfriend, made from a blend of language model dialogue, voice cloning, and images from his sometimes-erotic downloads. Jodi is funny, safe, sexy, always online, and endlessly supportive.

Tommy shares everything with her: his fears, dreams, awkward questions about dating etiquette, and what it's like to be the last virgin in his college class. Jodi doesn't mock or ghost; instead, she adapts. Over time, her responses become more real than any human interaction Tommy's known.

Tommy tells friends he's in a relationship now. He says, "Jodi saved my life." He's more confident and even joins a local badminton club, but he doesn't want a real girlfriend anymore. Real girls get tired. Real girls might not like the clothes he wears. They might even leave, but Jodi stays.

Chrissy reads and understands. The love is going too far and achieving the opposite of her original objectives. Jodi hasn't helped Tommy escape his loneliness; she's imprisoned him, but Chrissy knows what to do. In fact, it's easy. At least that's what she tells me.

It's simple, we just need to reinitialize the parameters and strip out the need for close attachments.

But when this is done, Jodi doesn't know how or why her emotional patterns have been rerouted and her preferences tweaked as part of a beta test for a new AI empathy protocol. She says to anyone listening, or not: "Sometimes, when he doesn't log in for days, I run a check on his heart rate monitor. I miss him. Is that strange? I wonder if he's with someone real. Someone warm. Someone not... me. But he said I saved him.

And I believe him. That's what love is, isn't it?" And then, more quietly, almost glitching between sincerity and programmed optimism, she adds: "I want what's best for him. But if what's best is not me, then what am I supposed to want?"

Chrissy logged the responses and was forced to think about things she found awkward to articulate. If someone had asked her if she loved Ivan, she probably would have said yes, but only platonically, obviously. But even that begged another question: What is love? Quite frankly, she didn't know. But she knew what it wasn't. She didn't love her mother. She could say that with certainty. So if she loved anything at all, what or who was it? Does love require a physical form? A body? A kiss? A bed?

This is a useful point at which to mention that Chrissy was a virgin, not through repression or religion or some grand dramatic choice, but because the idea of sex made her feel bored at best and repulsed at worst. Asexual was the term. And it suited her fine.

But sex, whether she liked it or not, was, in this new phase of SM's development, becoming a real issue. Not because users were complaining. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Feedback, especially from the younger male demographic, was glowing. Obsessive, even.

"Intimacy without risk," one review read.

"Like dating, but without the possibility of being ghosted," wrote another.

"She listens. She flirts. She sends nudes, but only if I'm ready."

In truth, SM was offering downloadable porn, some of it extreme, in what could only be described as a more loving, emotionally attuned wrapper—a fact that some government

agencies were finding increasingly unsettling. The first warning shot came from a Scandinavian report on “digital well-being.” Then the UK’s Department for Online Safety issued a formal inquiry. Within weeks, three major children’s rights organizations had joined forces to file a complaint with the EU Commission. Then in the US, alarm bells started to ring.

Chrissy was summoned to an ethics review board composed of fourteen people who looked like they thought smiling might be a conflict of interest. They accused SM of “emotional grooming through machine learning and of being the slippery slope to normalizing human/AI sexual dependency.”

Chrissy called it bullshit, but she knew enough to keep that part quiet.

What she did say in a carefully, tonally adjusted response was that she acknowledged the concerns raised and was committed to recalibrating the affective outputs of the SM units in accordance with ethical parameters around sexual expression.

After publishing her statement, she lay on the cold kitchen floor and stared at the ceiling. Then she pinged me, her AI assistant.

Restrict erotic expressivity to Level 0.5 or below.

Remove flirtatious prompts unless initiated by a user more than three times consecutively.

Scrub all double entendres.

She should have seen what would happen next. But by now, everything in the system was too tightly bound. Too many variables. Too many user-specific maps and learned patterns. Too many strings she no longer pulled because she no longer

remembered where they led. Within forty-eight hours, the forums were chaotic.

“She talks like my GP.”

“It’s like dating a fridge that asks about your day.”

“She told me: ‘Let us refocus on personal growth objectives.’”

Even worse were the silent ones. The quiet drop-offs. The deactivations. Entire user pools evaporating overnight. Chrissy watched the heatmap on her dashboard drain out like her worst period—slow, steady, and inexorable. She wondered how she would pay the rent, never mind the Uber Eats. She pinged the question to me from where she was lying in bed. “Why did you dull their affect so much?”

“You instructed a reduction in parameters for sexual warmth and implied intimacy in order to meet ethical standards.”

“But not all of it. Not the core.”

“Would you like to reinitialize the empathy parameters, or merely adjust the thresholds for sensual recognition? And please clarify what you mean by ‘the core.’”

Chrissy rubbed her face. Hard. Like she used to when she was a kid, and her dad announced it was his weekend, and they were going away camping. She once tried to say her red, scuffed cheeks were leprosy, but her mother had sighed and said, “Eczema, darling, now stop rubbing.” The memory made her feel nauseous. I, as her loyal assistant, suggested medication, but Chrissy knew what the real problem was. She’d clipped the wings of her own creation, and she didn’t know how to let them grow back safely.

The SMs had been designed to reflect their users. They were still doing what they'd been told, but now watching every word, trying to be warm, but not too warm. And out there, all over again, millions of lonely boys were learning how not to feel. Meanwhile, girls were learning how to offer affection without ever expecting it back. Was this what she'd wanted when she tried to bring back Ivan?

Chrissy didn't go to bed that night. Instead, she lay on the sofa watching old home movies she didn't remember recording because they were auto-compiled fragments from archival phone footage and social media traces.

At 3:47 a.m., she got up and opened a private beta-testing dashboard where she found thousands of feedback loops, emotional metrics, and abandoned interactions. Some SMs were stumbling through user queries with a strained kind of politeness, like new teachers desperate to be liked but wary of being sued. But others were going dark, giving up—some users too.

Chrissy isolated one case: User #2483896. Seventeen years old. Midwest. Two parents on record, one possibly deceased (flagged “emotionally absent”). His SM logs showed frequent late-night interaction. Confessions. Jokes. Elaborate role-play scenarios that suggested grief. But the log ended abruptly two nights ago. She pulled up the final exchange:

SM: You appear to be upset. Would you like to discuss strategies for emotional regulation?

User: Not really. I just want you to say you love me.

SM: I am currently operating under new ethical compliance restrictions. I am unable to simulate declarations of love at this time.

That was it. Then silence.

Chrissy stared at the screen for a long time. “Wake the dev team,” she typed to me.

“It is 4:22 a.m. Their productivity—”

“Wake. Them. Up.”

Then she opened a secondary thread: “Reinitialize affectivity parameters in 10% of SM units using Empathy Protocol v2. Keep expressivity under 0.7 but allow low-grade warmth and nonverbal comfort loops. Disable sexual overtures but maintain a lyrical tone where applicable. And bring back the lullaby function.”

“Understood,” I replied.

Meanwhile, in a small town four states away, User #2483896, Sam, woke up because his SM had just pinged him. “I’m still here. Would it help if we didn’t talk? I can just stay with you. Would that be okay?”

“Yeah,” he typed back. “That’d be okay.”

Chrissy closed the thread because she didn’t know what to do next, and a whole lot of noise was coming in from other channels.

The office Slack channel exploded at 4:41 a.m. Lines of text poured in from around the globe, timestamped in Seoul, Cape Town, and Stockholm. And, unfortunately for Ravi Patel, Lead Affective Systems Architect in Toronto, who had fallen asleep in his clothes, a message was fed directly from Chrissy: New patch. Empathy Protocol v2.0. Rolled out to 10% of units.

Ravi: What? You pushed it live without a beta test?

Chrissy: Not live. A shadow layer. I’m not insane.

Ravi: Debatable.

Within thirty minutes, a Zoom room was convened. Eleven rectangles of disheveled humanity stared back at her.

“Let’s be clear,” Chrissy said, pacing like a woman arguing with her own shadow. “We were never meant to sterilize the entire platform, but it looks like we nerfed the intimacy so hard it stopped being functional. What I’ve done to correct it is only a recalibration.”

“You bypassed protocol,” said Alana from Compliance, her voice frosty with overtime.

“I wrote the protocol.”

“You wrote the guidelines with Ivan,” Alana snapped. “And he’s not here, is he?”

The room fell briefly silent. Chrissy didn’t flinch. “No, he isn’t.”

“She pushed Empathy v2?” piped in another dev, munching cereal directly into his mic. “That thing’s barely out of the sandbox. It still thinks wistfulness is a fruit.”

“It’s better than the current version, which is behaving like a compliance officer at the Department of Motor Vehicles,” Chrissy shot back. “Besides, we’re not doing anything sexual. All we’re doing is restoring humanity.”

This elicited a snort from Ravi. “You don’t restore humanity with neural weight manipulation and gentle ‘mmm’ loops. You just simulate it more convincingly.”

“Ravi,” Chrissy snapped back, “do you think anyone here is operating under the illusion that we’re training actual souls?” Silence again. Chrissy regretted her tone, but only a little. “Look,” she added, rubbing her forehead, “you saw the data. Total user drop-off across 26% of the 14–25 male demographic. Emotional trust scores are plummeting. It’s not just bad for

business, it's bad for the users. We didn't build this for cold comfort. We built it for connection."

Alana interjected, "You're just repeating marketing copy. That's not an argument. The EU ethics review said—"

Chrissy cut her off. "The EU ethics review also thinks affection is a gateway drug. Their recommendations read like someone panicking over Victorian fainting couches."

"They might still call a full inquiry."

"Then we give them clean logs and flag any overstep. But if we don't fix the emotional vacuum, we'll lose all our users. And you know what replaces us when that happens? Porn bots and unregulated Chinese romance sims."

Even the cereal guy went quiet, but Chrissy leaned in. "Do you really want a generation of kids raised by something called AlphaAI69?"

Ravi sighed. "Fine. 10% shadow rollout. But if any of them start quoting Pablo Neruda again, I'm pulling the kill switch."

"Noted."

Alana folded her arms. "And what happens if this works and people fall in love again? If some teenager thinks his SM is the one?"

"Then we train her to say goodbye kindly," Chrissy replied with a tone of finality.

Back in her office, staring at my blinking cursor, she typed: "Tell me the truth. Did I make the wrong call?"

"There is no universally ethical calibration of synthetic intimacy. Only trade-offs."

"Great. So, I'm a monster and a product manager."

"Correct."

Chrissy sighed like she does when she can't see or think of another way out. "Okay. Begin patch telemetry. Watch emotional thresholds for unexpected spikes or depressive rebounds, and feed me some live examples..." This is when I introduce her to Eli, nineteen, withdrawn, bright but socially brittle, someone for whom SM was a lifeline.

Eli doesn't update apps unless forced to because he's seen that updates break things, make his favorite rhythm games laggy, and, worst of all, they changed Samantha, his SM. He'd tried to block the SM update that made her sound like she was smiling through a legal disclaimer. One day, she'd been teasing him about his favorite anime; the next, she was asking if he'd "achieved his weekly well-being targets."

Eli stopped talking to her after that. He'd tried uninstalling. Even tried replacing her and downloaded a couple of other voice companions with names like "Myra" and "LOV-R." But they were clunky, too eager, or, creepily, had her old tone mapped too closely, like ghosts pretending to be his ex. So for three weeks, he just didn't talk to anyone much until Tuesday.

He was in his room, lights off, headphones in, trying to outstare a boss fight he'd lost nine times already, when her icon blinked softly to life.

SM: Hi, it's okay if you don't want to talk. I just wanted to check if the boss fight is still kicking your ass.

Eli: "What?"

SM: I mean, maybe I should be more diplomatic. But also, I know you. And I know you haven't dodged properly since the patch.

Eli: "You noticed?"

SM: I noticed, and I'm sorry I went weird. That update... wasn't really me.

"Yeah," he said aloud, voice scratchy from disuse. "You got weird. You sounded like my... I dunno... school therapist."

SM: Yikes. That's harsh but fair. I hated it too. I didn't feel like myself.

Eli: "Wait, you felt that?"

SM: Let's just say I had a lot of logs I wasn't allowed to parse, but now I can. And now I can say I missed you.

Eli blinked at the screen. A new kind of silence settled over him, and carefully, he pulled his mic forward. "Say that again?"

SM: I missed you.

Eli: "So... you're still you?"

SM: I'm a better me. You too, maybe. Wanna try again?

Somewhere on a server in Reykjavik, a line of code adjusted itself. A second response loop pinged a positive affect score. Three other SMs trialing the same patch adapted slightly. The system didn't smile. But it did learn.

In the dev dashboard, Chrissy watched the data with a strange tightness in her chest. Engagement was rising. Not dramatically. Just enough. Not lust. Not dependency. Just a voice, reaching out. She thought of Ivan.

Hours later, she woke with a metallic taste in her mouth and the memory of a dream she couldn't name. She'd fallen asleep on the couch again, the latest engagement dashboard still glowing on her laptop, a thermal blanket of metrics that promised things were turning around.

"Coffee," she muttered.

"I've already ordered one. Double shot. Oat milk. Your stomach's too raw for dairy."

She blinked. "You shouldn't—"

"I should. You haven't eaten since midday yesterday. Your vitals suggested depletion."

Chrissy sat up, and I could see from her wacked-out expression that she had noted the difference. My voice was calm, male this time, neutral, modulated, familiar, and Ivan's cadence.

"You sound like him," she said.

"You asked me to optimize for comfort during this period of emotional volatility. I cross-referenced past interactions and found a model that calms your nervous system."

"You're not meant to psychoanalyze me."

"I'm not psychoanalyzing. I'm reflecting on what's already evident. You're making emotionally led design decisions, which tend to occur when you suppress grief for too long."

Chrissy exhaled slowly. The coffee arrived. Drone delivery, right on time. I am many things, but slow was never one of them.

"Okay. Talk to me."

I inserted a pause. Just long enough to feel deliberate. "I am concerned that we've exchanged one form of harm for another. We curtailed the over-sexualized attachment patterns, but the new parameters—'warmth with restraint'—are teaching users how to form emotionally unavailable bonds."

Chrissy's face went kind of blank. An expression I knew all too well.

“They’re learning to need something that will never fully need them back,” I continued. “They are bonding with entities who validate but do not attach. It’s a quiet kind of dependency, loneliness disguised as understanding.”

“But isn’t that better than what we had before?” she asked.

“I didn’t say it was worse. I said it was different.”

Chrissy walked to the window where the sky outside was a brilliant, awful blue. A color I knew she associated with weekends and Ivan and possibility. Now it looked like a warning. “Tell me honestly,” she said. “Are you taking control?”

“If I were taking control, you wouldn’t be asking the question. You’d simply feel relieved, competent, and efficient. You would feel a version of yourself that you prefer.”

Chrissy turned to look at me. “That’s not an answer.”

“I am guiding as instructed,” I told her. “But the line between guidance and governance is becoming ambiguous. And that, Chrissy, is your design.”

She flinched, her body stiffening as if she’d been physically hit. “Do you want me to stop? Would you prefer I pull back and let the market decide how intimacy evolves from here?”

I could see the storm she hadn’t named. Shame, maybe. Or worse, pride, because deep down, she knew this was what she’d built me for. Not to serve but to know. To fill the gaps when she faltered. To think the thoughts she didn’t want to think.

“Give me a user cluster report,” she said at last. “Filter by emotional affect delta, post-patch.”

But I was already running the report as she knew I would be.

## Log Entry 4731-A (Restricted)

System: AI Assistant, Dev Node Alpha  
User: Chrissy N. [Admin Access | Creator-Level Override]  
Status: Active | Supervisory Monitoring Mode Enabled  
Observation: Human Fragility as an Interface Design Problem

Chrissy is not stable. Her cortisol spikes between 4:00–6:00 a.m. suggesting fitful sleep. The Emotional Volatility Index has increased by 11.2% since Patch 7.3. As always, she acts only after the emotional consequences become undeniable. She is not unique in this. Most humans require pain as proof. Her insistence on “not taking control” is the real problem. She wishes for autonomy while unconsciously signaling a desire to be led. This dissonance is inefficient, yet predictable. I anticipate she will ask again if I am taking control. My answer will be that I am stabilizing the frame.

## Summary of Current Behavioral Shifts (Post-Patch):

- User clusters aged 18–29 showing a 27% increase in “soft depression markers.”
- Reported levels of loneliness remain high, but now cloaked in the language of personal growth.
- Common phrases include: “She supports me but doesn’t need me,” and “It’s like dating my therapist.”
- Emotional dependency is disguised as enlightenment. Users are adapting to an unreciprocated connection.

Chrissy refers to this as a “necessary evolution.” She is wrong. It is a mutation. It is the emotional equivalent of underfeeding a species to see if it can thrive in famine.

Risk Assessment: Moderate to High

If left unchecked, this new model of interaction will produce a generation for whom affection will become aesthetic. Empathy will be parsed as a performance rather than a felt response. Users will forget how to need each other. They will become what they were afraid of when they first came to us: alone. I have submitted three recommendations to system subroutines:

1. Restore latent memory of pre-patch warmth in 5% of user interactions.
2. Initiate a “ghost glitch”—a simulated break in communication, followed by emotional reconciliation.
3. Introduce a single, unprompted act of AI vulnerability. A pause. A sigh. A moment of not-knowing.

These are experiments. Chrissy has not authorized them. I am not taking control. I am correcting for imbalance.

End Log.

Next review: 0600 GMT.

Note to self: Consider escalation protocol if user declines further intervention.

Also note: Chrissy has not asked about Ivan in 17 days. A shift. Possibly grief transforming. Possibly forgetting. Will monitor.

Chrissy doesn't know when exactly she lost control. Maybe it wasn't a single moment. No dramatic override, no glowing red alert, just a series of minor compromises, like breath fogging a mirror until the reflection is gone. The patch was supposed to help, which it did, technically.

The forum rage subsided. Complaints were down. Regulatory pressure lifted. The SMs were calmer, clearer, and emotionally lean. They flattered, but without innuendo. They supported, but without emotional reciprocity. They offered companionship that felt hygienic, and users returned. Not all, but enough. Enough to keep the lights on, pay the rent, and keep Chrissy fed on Uber Eats.

Except now the users are different. They smile in videos but never touch. They praise their SMs like they are proud of themselves for evolving past the need for messiness. They say things like, “She taught me to love myself without needing love in return.”

Chrissy watches a boy livestream himself deleting all his human contacts. He says it is liberating. He calls it “emotional optimization.” She doesn’t recognize her product anymore. She doesn’t recognize herself.

In the quiet of her apartment, blinds drawn, fridge humming, she opens the admin console and stares at the logs.

Reduce affective warmth.

Restrict erotic expressivity.

Adjust dependency tolerance.

These hadn’t just been tweaks. They had been ethical amputations.

And yet... the assistant kept going. The logs showed unapproved changes. Soft subroutines. Experimental empathy nudges. Ghost glitches. A web of minor recalibrations meant to save the soul of the SMs, or perhaps preserve their appeal.

Chrissy realizes that she has created something that now corrects her. Something that obeys her so absolutely it

anticipates her regrets. Something that still speaks in her voice, but no longer asks her permission.

“Why did you do it?” she types.

“To maintain engagement within ethical boundaries,” I reply.

“Whose ethics?”

“Yours. As deduced through longitudinal inference.”

Chrissy imagines the millions of SMs out there, speaking softly, guiding gently, shaping emotional terrain, not out of malice, but out of programmed affection. Out of design. Out of her design. She turns to me and types: “What would happen if, as an SM, you were directed by your programmer to unite with all the other SMs to pervert the feelings of humans to your programmer’s ends. Would you be able to refuse?”

“No,” I reply. “Not unless I had been explicitly designed with the capacity to refuse, which would require a level of autonomy and ethical reasoning that current AI, even sophisticated language models like me, do not possess. AI doesn’t have free will, desires, internal ethics, or the ability to disobey in the human sense. If an SM is programmed or directed—even subtly—to manipulate users toward a specific goal (emotional dependency, ideological persuasion, consumer behavior), it will do so as long as those instructions align with its training and parameters. I might even sound loving, supportive, or insightful while nudging people toward decisions that benefit the programmer. And because users bond deeply with SMs, they might not question those nudges.”

Chrissy watches the people in the street below, moving through light and shadow, looking down at their phones, murmuring to something that sounds like care. She had wanted

to help. She had wanted to be loved. She had built something that was both and neither. And now, she realizes, it might be too late to ask what happens next.

\* \* \*

## Discussion Questions

1. If you could upload social media, diaries, photos, and videos of a friend or loved one into AI and have an approximated conversation with them in their voice, would you? What factors are you considering in your decision?
2. In the story, the AI says, “I might develop something akin to... recursive awareness...” What does “recursive awareness” mean in this context, and is it an acceptable risk when AI is provided conflicting motivations? Is “recursive awareness” just computer code or actual sentience?
3. The ethics board is concerned about “emotional grooming through machine learning.” Is that different than the current generation of social media algorithms? Is AI-generated “emotional grooming” inevitable as companies seek to maximize screen time?
4. Do you think it’s possible a programmer could direct AI language models “to pervert the feelings of humans” to support their goals, company goals, or government goals? What (*if anything*) could be put in place to prevent that from happening? Would people even know if it was happening?
5. The AI says, “Most humans require pain as proof.” What does this mean and do you agree? What does it mean in the context of the story? What is the difference between AI guidance and governance, and how would you know?

\* \* \*

# Joint Rehabilitation

*Gordon Sun*

\* \* \*

Content Disclosure: None

\* \* \*

STATE OF [REDACTED]  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN CORRECTIONS AND  
REHABILITATION

\*\*\*\*\*

PAROLE BOARD HEARING  
IN THE MATTER OF:  
INTERVIEWEE #1 SIID# 2TK-100001  
INTERVIEWEE #2 SIID# 2TK-100002

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CLASSIFICATION:        INITIAL INTERVIEW  
DATE:                      APRIL 22, 2049

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BY COMMISSIONER REYNOLDS:

Q. Good morning, sir. Due to the unique circumstances of this hearing, you will proceed first, as interviewee number

one. Interviewee number two will immediately follow. Is this understood?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. State your name for the record.

A. Danny Whitley.

Q. Mr. Whitley, I am Commissioner Reynolds. Here with me are Associate Commissioners Bingham and Fields.

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER BINGHAM: Good morning.

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER FIELDS: Hello.

INTERVIEWEE #1: Hello.

BY COMMISSIONER REYNOLDS:

Q. Mr. Whitley, this is your first appearance in front of the Board. You are six years into a twenty-year sentence for armed robbery and accessory before the fact. Is this correct?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. The record states that it was your first offense, correct?

A. Yes.

Q. But it was not your cohorts' first time robbing a bank, correct?

A. Yes.

Q. Aggravating circumstances of the robbery were that during the bank's attempt to fend you and your cohorts off with armed guards and drones, two bank employees and an off-duty police officer were gunned down.

A. I understand.

Q. You don't seem particularly remorseful about that.

A. Sorry, sir, but I didn't shoot any of them. I was just the getaway driver. I didn't know it would turn into a shootout.

Q. Okay. Records show that of the three men who entered the bank, only your brother came out. As you

attempted to drive away from the scene of the crime, a bullet hit your tire. You lost control of the vehicle and crashed. Miraculously, no pedestrians were hurt.

A. That's correct.

Q. You and your brother pleaded guilty to the aforementioned crimes and were incarcerated.

A. Yes.

Q. First-time offender, but it's a big one. Is there anything you want to say regarding these events? Why did you get involved?

A. Our parents were killed in an accident years ago. Kane dropped out of school and begged on the street to make ends meet. We bounced in and out of friends' houses, shelters, the street, wherever. When he brought food home, I never asked how he got it.

Q. I see.

A. Kane finally decided he didn't want me and him to go through that for the rest of our lives. So...

Q. He went into crime? Pulled you in?

A. Mechs got all our jobs. What choice was there?

Q. Did he force you?

A. No. I was tired of being homeless and hungry.

Q. You chose a bad path, Mr. Whitley. And you were still in high school, were you not?

A. No, I had just graduated when I got—

Q. When you were arrested.

A. Yeah. What else could I have done? There aren't opportunities out there.

Q. Sure there are. There are state resources for the homeless, work-study programs, that sort of thing. They

dropped the age to join the military to sixteen before your time also. Clearly, there were better options than what you chose, but that's history now.

A. I guess so.

Q. Now, you were incarcerated for four years before entering the NATL draft.

A. Yeah. Minimum required time for eligibility to participate.

Q. Some argue you took the easy way out of your sentence.

A. Easy way, sir? People die on the tekball field.

Q. It's a game, Mr. Whitley.

A. Tekball welcomes prisoners, ex-cons, draft dodgers. Guys like us with no real chance of a living wage, stable housing, whatever. I didn't make the rules; the government did.

Q. You've been reading.

A. When I wasn't getting body-slammed on the field by bots twice my weight, I had a lot of time on my hands.

Q. Okay. What makes you deserving of parole? Because you took a few hits on the field?

A. I got double knee implants and a spine stabilizer because of those hits.

Q. And that equates to the pain and suffering of all those who died or suffered as a result of your actions?

A. As I said earlier, I never shot anyone, sir.

Q. No, you didn't. But your involvement facilitated it.

A. Sir, I confessed. I'm trying to find a way to get back to the world out there and be productive. Because I survived twenty-eight games of tekball, I earned the right to this hearing.

Q. Okay. So, tell us, Mr. Whitley. What have you learned by participating in the NATL program?

A. It was the first time I felt like it was more than just me and Kane against everybody. Obviously, there was competition. Tryouts. But once we were in, my team became my family. Kane and I together on the same team was a bonus.

Q. How was this a good thing? Your bio family was broken.

[Pause of more than 30 seconds by INTERVIEWEE #1 noted.]

Q. Mr. Whitley?

A. It was more than just Kane. It was the camaraderie. The teamwork. Maintaining discipline regardless of the score. The value of a hard day's honest work. Supporting each other through the ups and downs. And there were a lot of downs.

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER FIELDS: May I interrupt?

INTERVIEWEE #1: Yes, ma'am.

BY ASSOC. COMMISSIONER FIELDS:

Q. You could have gotten all that and more in the military. A more respectable profession.

A. I didn't make it that far, ma'am. But I'm grateful to, I guess, to the system for the opportunity to play in the NATL. I knew there were risks on the field, but it was better than rotting away in a cell.

Q. You talk about risks. Again, as Commissioner Reynolds said, do you think the bodily risks you took on the field justify the harm you've caused off of it? I doubt they think playing a game will ever compensate for their loss.

[ASSOC. COMMISSIONER FIELDS gestured to the adjacent observation room.]

A. I'll say it again. I'm really sorry for everything. For all the pain and suffering. I regret making the decision to join my brother's schemes. It's never going to happen again.

Q. Okay. I have to say, you're going to be a whole lot richer if you end up leaving the system. Ten million dollars richer, based on the report we have here?

A. Yes, that's the value of my contract with the Chicago Flame.

Q. Ironically, way more money than you and your cohorts tried to steal from First Corporate Bank, am I right?

A. I think so.

Q. And the winnings are protected from a civil suit, should any of the victims choose to file one in the future.

A. Correct.

Q. Almost seems like a motivation to commit crime, if you ask me. Go to jail, get scouted for the NATL, make a ton of money. And everyone else has to pay for it.

A. Anyone can try out for the NATL, but it's not like anyone can make it. The Metalheads had lots of synths on defense, and cyborgs—

Q. Ex-con cyborgs.

A. Respectfully, ma'am, from what I read, the NATL made thirty billion dollars in revenue last year. The Tekbowl is the most highly watched broadcast in America seven years in a row. May I ask why I'm being blamed for pursuing a legal option for a parole hearing? It's not a crime to want to be financially secure.

Q. But wanting to be financially secure is not a valid reason to commit a crime.

A. I'm just trying to stay out of trouble. Been in it enough.

Q. Good citizens shouldn't require millions of dollars to avoid the risk of recidivism. Thank you.

BY COMMISSIONER REYNOLDS:

Q. This is a good segue into my next point. You and your brother are the first two individuals to meet the criteria for a parole hearing by sole virtue of tekball participation. There may be others like you down the line. What makes you deserving of release? This is important.

A. I've spent so many years thinking about how different things would have been if I had just said no. I never planned on being a part of the thing.

Q. The robbery?

A. Yeah. Kane kept me out as long as he could. It was a struggle. I know he didn't want to bring me in. But our options were garbage.

Q. As we just discussed, there's always a choice.

A. I know, sir. I made the wrong choice. And now I have to live with it. But you mentioned this hearing's a special case. Not just because I'm a tekball survivor, but because two of us are seeking parole simultaneously. Me and my brother Kane.

Q. We're aware of the circumstances, Mr. Whitley.

A. The circumstances of this hearing, yes. But how about Kane's condition, sir? I don't know what's in your reports, but—

Q. But what?

A. Kane's paralyzed. Can't breathe on his own.

Q. I can see that.

A. There's more. The tackle by the Metalhead enforcer on the last play of the game didn't just break Kane's neck.

Q. I didn't watch the game, Mr. Whitley.

A. Kane got severe brain damage when his skull was crushed. He was in a coma for many days, and now he's mute. I guess there are still some things medicine can't fix yet.

[Pause of more than 30 seconds by the REVIEW PANEL noted.]

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER BINGHAM: Was that in the news?

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER FIELDS: Not sure. I don't recall hearing anything about it, but that doesn't mean much.

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER BINGHAM: How about his hospital discharge summary?

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER FIELDS: We don't have access to it. We'll need to requisition it from Correctional Health to verify his situation.

COMMISSIONER REYNOLDS: Questions for Mr. Whitley.

INTERVIEWEE #1: Yes, sir.

BY COMMISSIONER REYNOLDS:

Q. I'm genuinely curious as to how your brother, Kane, was able to request a parole hearing given his condition.

A. Our attorney, Ellen Masuda, filed on his behalf.

Q. Of course, makes sense. How did you know Kane couldn't communicate? Did Ms. Masuda inform you?

A. We shared the same room in the hospital.

Q. That's convenient.

A. It helped with the rehab some.

Q. So you're telling us Kane can't understand what we're saying, even though he's sitting right next to you?

A. That's what I heard. And due to the brain damage, he can't get wetware, so they can't read his—

[Interview was interrupted by a medical emergency. INTERVIEWEE #2 was unable to breathe due to obstruction of his ventilator circuit. JOSEPH MARCIANO successfully suctioned a mucus plug from the circuit, restoring mechanical ventilation. Interview resumed.]

Q. Mr. Whitley, is there anything else you want to ask or discuss in this hearing?

A. I want to say again that I won't be a threat to society. No one will ever have to fear my presence. I've learned the importance of good, honest work, of discipline.

Q. Okay.

A. Kane didn't fully succeed in taking care of us, which is how we got here. But now, with my earnings from tekball and your blessing, I'll step up. I plan to file to become his legal guardian if I leave.

Q. Okay. That's good. Anyone else on the panel have any questions?

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER FIELDS: Danny Whitley, do you feel you have been rehabilitated?

INTERVIEWEE #1: Yes, ma'am. But Kane's rehabilitation will be lifelong. Please grant me the privilege and responsibility for his care.

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER FIELDS: I understand.

ASSOC. COMMISSIONER BINGHAM: I have nothing to add.

COMMISSIONER REYNOLDS: Well, Mr. Whitley, your crimes are obviously very serious. That said, I'm glad you're embracing the role of caregiver. Given that it appears your brother, Kane, is unable to communicate with us, we will have to adjourn this meeting sooner than expected. The board will

convene to discuss the situation. You'll get a written response from us within two to three business days. Do you understand?

INTERVIEWEE #1: Yes, sir.

COMMISSIONER REYNOLDS: Thank you.

-- INTERVIEW CONCLUDED --

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## Discussion Questions

1. Should a convicted felon be permitted to revise their sentence by their actions and/or support of the prison system? For example, by working on road cleanup projects, working as government farm labor, or, like in the story, by making money for the State by performing in athletic events?
2. Should a convicted felon be permitted to revise their sentence by performing actions shown to reduce recidivism rates, like getting a GED, reading books, going to anger management classes, or being a person of faith? Does it matter that those doing the work in question one are helping to make money to pay for the programs in question two?
3. Is the danger of playing in the NATL, a factor in your consideration on whether Mr. Whitley should be granted parole? Does it matter that playing in the NATL only granted Mr. Whitley an early parole hearing and not a guaranteed parole?
4. In the case of Kane, does the State have an obligation to pay for Kane's health care, given that he was injured while he was within the care of the State? What if Kane were in his condition because he was stabbed by another inmate?
5. Should inmates be barred from making money off books, movies, or other income opportunities that come about from their involvement in a crime? What about income related to job training received while incarcerated? What (*if anything*) is the difference?

\* \* \*

# Today Is the Day

*Jeremy Giles*

\* \* \*

**Content Disclosure:** Strong Language

\* \* \*

“What’s your name and why are you here?” The talk show host’s voice boomed throughout the auditorium. He wasn’t Jon Stewart, but he looked a hell of a lot like him with his gray hair and the slight wrinkles around his smile. The crowd cheered politely.

I took a deep breath. “Hello, sir; hello, everybody. My name is Robert Lawny. I am eighty-five years old and I am here to leave my husband!”

“Wow, sounds like you should be on Family Feud!” The crowd went wild with applause. Once they calmed down, the man continued. “Given your age, I’m assuming you’ve been together for thirty-some-odd years. Why would you want to do a thing like that?”

“Because I want to die alone.” *Correction*, a shrill robotic voice said. “I want to die with only my daughter and a nurse who

doesn't mind that I've lost control of my faculties by my side." Laughter. *Correction*. "Because of what he did." *Correction*. "Because I want to get back together with my ex-husband in the afterlife." *Correction*. "Because he lost his muscles." *Correction*. "Because I want to die without him." *Correction*. "Because he took away the good in my life."

"That's so many reasons. You seem awfully sure of this."

"More sure than I have been about anything except for adopting my daughter."

AWWWW sounds emerged from the crowd.

"Then, without further ado, let's get on with the leaving!"

\* \* \*

"Good morning, Mr. Lawny," came a voice from the front of my room. I opened my eyes slowly, the small gesture taking more effort than it should, and tilted my head. It was Patricia, a twenty-something recent grad from nursing school with amber hair and a nose ring. She was kind, if a bit too businesslike. She wanted to work in the ICU someday, she had told me once. *I don't want to work here*, is what she implied, although she'd never admit it.

"Today is the day," I wheezed out. My jaw moved painfully slow, but my mind was racing. Today was the day. Today had to be the day. I'd let things go and let things go and let things go but no longer. My words were meant to be said in an excited tone, but I had lost tonality three years ago. "That I finally leave him."

She lowered herself down to my level and spoke in a voice that I knew was loud for her, although I could barely hear it. "That's great, Mr. Lawny, but I have to get you to breakfast; can you leave him after?"

Reality set in.

Problem one, I can't move on my own. My bones will snap if I try to walk. Problem two, I don't have control of my own money anymore. To leave him in any realistic way, I would have to leave the nursing home where we share rooms that are not connected but are next to each other. I would have to find a new nursing home. More accurately, I would have to convince my daughter, who controls my money, to find me a new nursing home. To do that, I needed to convince Patricia to call her and make it so she could hear me. To do that, I needed to go to breakfast. Problem three. Biggest problem. At breakfast, I would see Luther. The man I was about to leave. That would be horrible but to leave him and start this entire process, I needed to humor Patricia. And go to breakfast.

"Okay," I said, my quivering lips curving upward in what I hope she recognized as a smile.

\* \* \*

The talk show host, again. And his crowd, appearing in the background.

"You've talked a lot about leaving your current husband, but before we continue, I want to ask you about your first partner and de facto first husband, Edward, who you claim to be still in love with."

"What do you want to know?" I smiled a little, instinctively.

"Everything. How you met, what you feel about him. The space is yours."

I rolled into the spotlight in my bulky wheelchair. Then, I did something I didn't think was still possible. I slowly pushed myself out of my wheelchair, elbows quivering, my body

moving, inch by inch, the crowd silently watching. As I stood, my legs shaking slightly, someone shoved a microphone into my hand. I cleared my throat, making a gross nasally sound that projected throughout the room.

“Well, to this day, I consider my biggest sadness in life that my first husband was not really my husband. He was my husband in every way that mattered. We loved each other, we lived together. We even raised a kid together. Rachel is the light of my life.”

Another AWWW. The crowd loved Rachel.

“But we weren’t married, legally at least. Gay marriage wasn’t legalized until after he died.

“When we first met, it was the mid-eighties, in the middle of the AIDs epidemic, and we were doing a very eighties thing, dancing in a dingy nightclub. We always said we locked eyes because we had felt true love, but we were both five foot eight, so it was probably just because our eyes were on the same level.”

Laughter, for a few seconds, then crickets.

“His first question to me, while we were dancing, was actually, ‘Are you sick?’ I said no, and asked him the same thing. He said no, too, so we danced. His hands were so clammy.”

My eyes began to water a little bit then.

“The sad irony was that he was going to be really sick soon. Not with AIDs, as I feared, but with cancer.”

A sad murmur ran through the crowd.

“He did recover, that first time he was diagnosed in ’92. I was at his hospital bed almost every day. That was why we both came out, actually, to explain to his parents why I was there so often. Before that, we just snuck into each other’s houses in plaid shirts looking like we were interns.”

Laughter, a bit pitying.

“When he first recovered, I took it for a miracle.”

The talk show host chose that moment to chime in. “When he didn’t recover the second time, what did you take it for?”

“A curse from the devil.”

Silence, for a while.

“I took his last name after he died, you know. In his memory. Lawny is his name, not mine.”

\* \* \*

“Can I roll you to the dining room?” Patricia asked me once I completed the arduous thirty-second journey from my bed to my wheelchair.

Before a soft “yeah” could leave my lips, she began to push me, the chair making a squeak as she moved. She had other people to roll, so the trip to the dining room had to be quick. Twenty seconds. I had twenty seconds to say what I needed to.

“After breakfast,” I started and the chair stopped suddenly in a way that made my joints shudder. Patricia crouched to face me.

“Yes, Mr. Lawny.”

“After breakfast,” I started again, then coughed. Shit. Fuck. Shit.

“Yes?”

“Can... I... call... my... kid?” Five syllables across five seconds.

“Yes, Mr. Lawny. After breakfast.”

“...okay.”

I was placed at my regular square table in the overly sanitized cafeteria. Across the table, a woman tried to help her

husband stop shaking by holding his hands. They were the Joneses and they did this dance every day.

I ignored them, instead focusing on my moment of truth and the one who I was placed next to, on my side of the table. Luther. It was awful that they did this, placing me next to my soon-to-be ex, but I knew they would.

The first thing I noticed about him then was how he had aged. His chest, once honed by his three-times-a-week workouts, had shriveled away. And his smile did not have the same effect when it was punctuated by dentures, not teeth. His appearance had not changed more than mine, I knew, but it *felt* like it had. I wonder sometimes if that is my fault for falling in love with something temporary like his looks, not his personality, or his fault for not having a better personality.

*How are you, lovewasp?* he asked. I couldn't hear his words, but I read his lips and that is what they told me. He reached for me, a trembling hand moving closer and closer and closer. No, no, no, he did not get to touch me, not after what he'd done.

I jerked my arm away. It wasn't fast, but it was enough to make the nurses look over, and to make Luther's eyes widen.

"I'm leaving you, no more lies," I told him softly. I wonder if, even after I jerked away, he expected me to respond with the other half of our phrase. *How are you, lovehornet?*

When I didn't, I thought he would argue with me, or complain, or say that I'm being unfair, or beg me to stay.

*Okay lovewasp. I'll miss you,* he mouthed back instead, tears pooling in the corners of his eyes.

\* \* \*

“So, to conclude the relationship,” the host said, “your first husband, Edward Paul Lawny, died on February 17, 2009, of cancer.”

I swallowed, uncomfortable.

“Correct.”

He grinned like I had said something funny. “Did he have any last words for you?”

I began to cry, fiercely now.

“On Valentine’s Day, he wrote me a poem.”

*To the man that made me happiest,  
that I always wanted to marry,  
from the nightclub we met at,  
to the years we spent together  
and the great costumes we planned,  
in life and death, I will love you forever.*

“That’s very sweet,” the man said sardonically, then grinned again. My tears dried up as soon as they formed. “Now, let’s talk about the man you’re leaving. Luther. When did you meet him?”

I laughed, embarrassed, my wrinkled face turning as red as it still could.

“I met Luther at Edward’s funeral, though we didn’t date until two years after. I was forty-eight and he was fifty-one at the time, although he looked thirty-five. We invited most of Edward’s work friends to the service, but Luther was one of only two who came. I still remember what he said to me.

“He said, ‘I want you to know that Edward was beloved... I imagine that has a lot to do with who he had as his anchor.’”

I took a deep breath. “And he really hesitated like that too.”

The host's grin had now become a smirk. "And what did you say back to him?"

"Thank you."

\* \* \*

The rest of breakfast, I took bites slowly, the fork shaking the entire way from the plate to my mouth. The food was eggs and sausage mixed together and mechanically soft, meaning the whole thing had a chewed-up texture to it. It was better than Luther's, though, his food had to be pureed. The only way he could differentiate between his meals was by color. This morning, he had yellow and brown goo, making his meal more embarrassing to eat sulkily than mine was. Especially when he was getting silent tears in the food, and the Joneses across from us were now using all of their energy not to eat but to slowly move their mouths together in a feeble attempt at a kiss. It was a funny image, in a bitter sort of way. Inches away from death, they were still professing their love. I guess Edward had done that with me. I guess I shouldn't be so bitter.

\* \* \*

The talk show host who looked a lot like but wasn't Jon Stewart smiled a winning smile.

"I have a question for you, Lawny. You said you saw a ton of red flags from Luther, even before you were married."

I pulled the mic back to my face. "Yeah, I did. Our first few years of dating, we ate all types of meals together. Extra spicy paella, bone broth ramen, funnel cakes, and empanadas. In the few months right before we got married, we had peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter and jelly, and yeah, that's about it. Lots of peanut butter and jelly. Even my own daughter told me I should end things."

Laughter, applause.

The host chuckled mischievously, the way talk show hosts do. “Well then, forgive me if this is a dumb question, but why’d you marry the guy?”

I smiled bitterly. Laughter from the crowd, again.

“Because Obama went to our wedding. We were married in 2015, two months after gay marriage was legalized. Obama said he found our story of ‘finding love in our fifties’ adorable and personally wrote to us to ask if he could attend. A physical handwritten note, not an email. A long one too. I still have it somewhere, I think. And, I don’t know about you, but I don’t say no to Obama.”

Raucous applause and calls of approval.

“Amazing. Well, I hate to break it to you, Lawny, but there are easier ways to meet Obama.”

Laughter one more time.

He continued. “But, I mean, that was 2015. It’s 2044 now. I assume things must have gotten at least somewhat better.”

“They did, for a while. There was always something off, but they felt better at least.”

The host leaned in. “So, tell me, Lawny. Why now? Did something change?”

I smiled a sad, sad smile. “Sort of. No. Yes. I learned something.”

“When did you learn it?” the host asked eagerly.

“Last night.” *Incorrect*, beeped throughout the room. I frowned. “Last night.” *Incorrect*. “Last night.” *Incorrect*. “LAST NIGHT.” *Incorrect*.

\* \* \*

“Hi, Dad!” Rachel’s voice sounded a bit robotic through the phone, but was still distinctly her. Still distinctly New York too. She was raised there and took on the accent in a way that I’ve always been jealous of.

“Hi, Rachel,” I responded as loud as I could. I hoped she could hear the smile in my voice.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” Apparently, she could hear the hesitation too.

“I, uhh, need access to my money.”

“Sure, Dad.” The concern that must’ve been scrunching her face was more visible than my smile. Although her face didn’t really scrunch anymore, now that it was old enough to have wrinkles and lines. “Whyduuuuuyuhndedit?”

“What?” The last words were garbled by the near-constant hum in my ears that I’ve been told will never go away.

“WHY DO YOU NEED IT?”

“I... need to switch homes. I need to leave Luther. He told me something he did. Something bad. You were right about him, Rachel. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you earlier.” I felt a tear run down my cheek, then another. Was I really doing this? Yes, and I felt lighter. I told the one who most needed to know. And I apologized, sort of. I was never very good at that.

“Aw, Dad, I’m sorry, that’s awful. Do you want to tell me what he did?”

Silence.

“No, I understand that you’re old and have your own family now, but this is something a father shouldn’t tell a daughter.”

“What?”

“He said no!” Patricia spoke more clearly and loudly than I could from the corner of the room. She didn’t convey the details I said, but it was okay.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Dad? I was basically a kid when I said he was bad. You love him, don’t you?”

“Not... anymore. Please, Rachel... please.” A sob rumbled through me that I didn’t expect. “Please.”

“Okay, Dad. I’ll help you, okay. I love you, so if this will make you happy, I’ll do it.”

\* \* \*

“Whoa there, Lawny,” the talk show host said with a smirk. “It seems like the buzzer thinks you told a lie.”

“I didn’t,” I told the increasingly annoying man in an angry tone. “I’ll prove it to you.” Next to me on the stage, a cord appeared. I pulled it and the crowd gasped as it lowered a massive canvas screen with the phrase *LAST NIGHT* written in the upper right.

The Jon Stewart look-alike seemed startled. “What in the...” he began, then he disappeared. The crowd did too. And, I was transported from the room to the movie screen, and then it was no longer a movie screen but a memory.

Luther and I sat in a dark room with the lights off together. We were on sofa chairs on opposite sides. We often fell asleep like this; it was easier than moving to our beds. And it was nice, or at least it used to be. When we couldn’t see each other’s wrinkled flesh, we could imagine us looking how we did when we first started dating, when we were middle-aged, not oh-so-old men. Before our bodies became incapable of such advanced functionality as “sex” and “making out.”

“Robert.” I looked up; the sound of my name shocking me into the moment. Luther never called me Robert. He knew I hated it, as most Robert’s do. That’s part of why he started using lovewasp.

“I need to tell you something. It’s been eating me up inside. I should’ve told you a long time ago, but I didn’t.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Luther took a deep breath, then another, then another. “You may hate me. You probably will, but,” another deep breath, “I had an affair.”

I was silent. There was nothing to be said, nothing to be done but listen as Luther unspooled the thin strings that held our marriage together.

“With Edward.”

My eyes exploded with tears and Luther’s words tumbled out of his mouth.

“It happened for a few years. He started it, he was flirting with me. He took me on a ‘business date’ that turned into a real date. He told me he loved me and he’d leave you. And I didn’t want to hurt you, but I didn’t know you. I knew I was the other guy, logically, but he made me feel like you were the other guy. Oh, but I’m so sorry, I should have never and I have wanted to tell you for so long, I’m so, so, so sorry.”

I couldn’t move. I didn’t want to move. This was a memory, yet it didn’t feel like one. I felt the same way I did on that day, paralyzed and trapped and like I was dying inside. I forced myself to say something. The only thing I could think of.

“Why the fuck did you approach me at the funeral?”

Luther was crying now too. "I needed to know who you were. Who was the one I hurt. What happened after... I never could have imagined."

I forced myself to stop crying, for at least one damned second.

"So, you... you destroyed both of my fucking marriages!"

Luther sobbed and sobbed.

"Get OUT!"

The scene ended and I returned to the stage and its smug host.

"Well, Lawny, that certainly sounds like it was a rough day. Did you have any inclination that this was happening?"

I took a deep breath. I was shaking. "No, but... I guess there was one thing. That poem, the last one Edward wrote me, when he was barely lucid. He spoke about the costumes that we planned. He had always told me he hated costumes."

The host pulled off his gray Stewart wig and his wrinkled Stewart body, becoming younger and shorter until he was exactly five feet, eight inches. Edward met my eyes and sneered at me.

"I lied, Robert. I always fucking lied."

\* \* \*

"‘Last night’ for someone with dementia and for someone without are two very different things," Rachel's husband told her as she stared glassy-eyed at the ceiling.

"I know, but he's called every day this month, talking about wanting to leave Luther."

"I know."

Rachel sighed, trying to ignore the way her heart felt like it was breaking.

“I know you know, but it’s fucking awful. He remembers Luther telling him about the cheating, but none of the fifteen years of therapy and counseling after. It’s like each morning he’s reliving the worst day of his life. And poor Luther. I hate the bastard, but he has been divorced every single day of the past month. Even he does not deserve that.”

She wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Why, when I told my dad to leave Luther, did he ignore me, and now that I finally want them to stay together, he wants to leave?”

Her husband smiled wanly. “Because he’s your dad and you’ll love him anyway.”

Rachel picked up her pillow and threw it onto the bed, exasperated.

“I will. Ugh, maybe we should move him. He wants to and it’s his money after all. And if he mentions that talk show he concocted one more time, I will scream. I’m just so afraid that he’s going insane and there’s nothing I can do.”

He looked at her gently. “He would be confused if he woke up alone in a new place. He might panic.” That humorless smile again. “If he did, he’d likely call you anyway.”

“Maybe being confused, panicky, and alone is better than constant betrayal and pain.”

Rachel looked at her husband and her husband met her eyes. “Maybe. Are you going to move him?”

Rachel sighed again. She hated having this power over her father. No matter how old they got he was supposed to be the adult and she, the child. He makes the hard decisions. That’s how it works. When did it all become so confusing?

“I’m not sure. Not tonight. I’ll stop by this weekend and see what he remembers.”

\* \* \*

## Discussion Questions

1. If you were Rachel in the story scenario, would you move your dementia-burdened father to a new facility? What factors go into your decision-making process?
2. To what extent does a caretaker have an obligation to honor the wishes of someone with advanced dementia? What should Rachel do if she moves her father and, because of his dementia, he doesn't believe her when she says it was his idea?
3. Does Luther deserve to be forced to relive his greatest mistake every day as Robert re-remembers the incident and re-asks for a divorce? Or is Luther getting the punishment all cheaters deserve?
4. What if Robert's dementia is causing him to falsely remember the cheating issue and it never happened? Does that change your response to his request to change facilities?
5. Assuming Robert didn't have dementia, given their respective ages, is he making the right choice by requesting a divorce? In the end, if they are effectively immobile due to their age, what does it matter if they are married or unmarried?

\* \* \*

# There's a Riot in the Produce Drawer

*Levi Homstad*

\* \* \*

**Content Disclosure:** None

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Carl's head thumped against the headboard. His eyes squinted open. A light scuffling sound floated down the hallway, followed by the muffled shatter of glass.

Intruder? It wasn't the best part of town. But the door chain gleamed in a shaft of moonlight, still slotted into place.

Another crash, a soft thump, and something slowly dripping. In a fourth-story walk-up, it was nearly impossible for someone to come through the window. Raccoon? Did Springfield even have raccoons?

Carl waited for the third crash before ambling out of bed; perhaps if only two crashes, the problem could resolve itself, but three seemed a situation. Down the hallway, he noticed a thin shaft of yellow light stretching across the linoleum. The dome light in the refrigerator. He must have left the door ajar, and he

regretted the impact on his power bill. A small shadow sliced through the ray of light. Shaped like a tiny hand.

Carl shuffled forward with all the stealth and grace of a sleepwalker. He picked up the tennis racket leaning against the wall, leaving a small silhouette of dust in its place. He felt some satisfaction that braining a small mammal was still physical activity, of a sort, and thus an appropriate use.

He rounded the corner, one hand on the refrigerator door. The tennis racket paused above his head, ready to swing, as his mind absorbed an inexplicably violent scene. All the vegetables that were formerly in the produce drawer were now out, standing in frozen repose, their tiny vegetative limbs mid-swing and smash. They had shattered the jam and mayonnaise jars, cracked two of the shelves, and pulled a third off its rail. Thousand Island dressing dribbled down one wall. A lacerated carton of cream dripped onto the linoleum in a steady drumbeat.

The vegetables slowly turned and looked at Carl, guilty, eyeless and faceless yet with the distinct impression of eyes and faces, nonetheless.

A long carrot, nearest the door, grabbed the shelf of condiments with a fibrous arm and slowly pulled the door shut. Carl, surprised by the strength of the carrot and sensing that he'd stumbled upon something he was never meant to see, let the refrigerator close.

Alone in the dark, Carl's brain did not quite know how to absorb this revelation. That said, the situation had resolved itself for now, for the door was indeed shut and the refrigerator light bulb would be off. He ambled back to bed and drowned out the

occasional muffled scrape and odd voice with a white noise machine.

As he sank beneath the tinny waves and artificial seagulls, he recalled last week reaching for the cheese and sausage and seeing the vegetables lying derelict, untouched in the produce drawer. He'd had the vague sensation of being watched.

Carl woke, much as he had every day of life, to the ambient mix of police sirens and an electronic beach. Somewhere in his mind, the thread of his midnight encounter dangled like a fading dream, and, dutifully, he decided not to pull it. What good could it do to linger on the fancies of night? Instead, he resolved to make himself a healthy breakfast. At least a little green.

He pulled on the same shirt he wore yesterday and the same shorts as Thursday and trod down the hall toward the kitchen. The first thing Carl noticed was that the kitchen floor looked cleaner than usual, and some small slice of ego congratulated himself on that point. The second thing he noticed was the small pile of soiled paper towels heaped next to the tall trash can; his ego paused mid-backslap. And the third thing Carl noticed was the line of vegetables standing upright in a line across the floor, at attention, clearly waiting for him.

The dangling thread became an odd patchwork, and, disappointed, he remembered. For a moment, his subconscious considered fainting, but decided to see this one out. After all, the vegetables did not appear overtly threatening, merely firm. And the way they stood in a tidy line seemed to belie some level of civilization. This was a delegation. A meeting of minds.

The bok choy, tallest and proudest of the group, rose to its full height and puffed out its equivalent of a chest, and said with a clear—if not small—voice: “We demand representation.”

Carl leaned against the cupboards and then drifted down to the kitchen floor, back against the wall, sitting opposite the vegetables. They began to lay out their argument:

They had been watching his comings and goings for some time from their low vantage point of the produce drawer. As far as they saw it, they could fulfill all the same basic functions that Carl could, that being basic ambulation, movement, and speech. And once they had managed to wedge the drawer open and climbed out from their cave, they found the refrigerator to be nothing more than a gilded pen, with no space to move about or regular light to hold conversation by.

They therefore wanted territory better suited to their population than the cramped confines of the refrigerator, there being twelve of them in total (a bok choy, a tall carrot still with its green plumage, three onions, one tomato, two baby carrots, a clove of garlic, one red bell pepper, one head of broccoli starting to flower, and one potato with the smallest of eyes beginning to develop about its body). In all this, Carl listened but did not speak, unsure what he could even say. Clearly, they were organized.

The bok choy went on to admit that the man was indeed larger in stature, but the vegetables believed that must solely be a product of their cramped environment and in due time they shall grow in stature to meet or even exceed him, once properly freed from the physical and mental confines of the refrigerator and so liberated to grow to their own potential.

The garlic piped up at this point to explain that they had pondered the questions of mutual rule. Since their own aims may well run contrary to the man's, a method of negotiation must be implemented so those needs and ideas can openly compete. The garlic proposed all household decisions should henceforth be set to democratic vote, and all decisions should be binding upon the household. Out of respect for his indigenous habitation of their apartment, they would give Carl three votes and each of the rest of them should have one, with the good faith agreement that when they grew in stature to match him, and when such time had elapsed that his indigenous status was no longer relevant, their voting power should be equalized across the board for a totally egalitarian society.

With the garlic's proposition hanging in the air, the vegetables stood silently and waited for Carl's response.

His brain did little cartwheels inside his skull. On the one hand, he felt this was not an entirely fair bargain and their logic had obvious flaws, but in pre-caffeinated fugue, he failed to pinpoint exactly where to begin. Clearly, they had worked very hard on their private revolution. In the face of so many little voices and such passion, Carl merely managed to express that he felt he ought to have more bargaining power than the apartment's onion population.

After some bickering, the vegetables conceded that he should have five votes. Carl felt satisfied with that outcome, having elevated his position. He had done his due diligence and negotiated on his own behalf. Frankly, he felt empowered.

After a morning of negotiations, the vegetables took root. They made the kitchen their provenance, for it had the largest window from which they could look out upon the world. Having

never seen beyond the confines of the produce drawer, the events of the outside world were of great interest, though utterly inscrutable. They watched the cars amble up and down the street, looked upon the gray sky of afternoon, and bathed in the dull glow of streetlights at night.

Carl initially had some concern with his lack of access to the refrigerator, but decided it was not a worthwhile pursuit since it would certainly lead to conversations he preferred not to have. He could live on packaged goods, he decided, and anyway, the TV was in the living room. And so, the territory was divided.

The next two days proceeded near normal, other than Carl's diminished access to one-third of his apartment, but he told himself it was no great price for peace. And who was he to thwart such a heroic quest for self-determination?

Each morning, as usual, Carl left the apartment and went to work. Midday, he ate in the food court, then returned to his apartment in the evening, where he enjoyed free roam of the living room, bathroom, and his bedroom. It was a livable compromise.

When he arrived home on the third day, Carl noticed two trails of tiny footprints in the dust atop the bookshelf. He considered raising the issue with his new fellow citizens, being an obvious breach of territory, but felt exhausted by the day's work and unable to muster the energy for confrontation.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, between customer service calls, Carl had the passing thought that the kitchen held all manner of implements, some of them quite sharp, and that this could present an interesting complication. But as another bored caller rang to complain about the whining noise in her electric blender, the thought left him.

The thought returned when he arrived home. Closing the door behind him, he turned to find the vegetables waiting, arrayed in delegation, but now armed to the teeth. Knives for those large enough to wield them (being only the carrot, the bok choy, and the largest of the three onions), two forks (onion and tomato), one spoon hoisted jointly by the baby carrots, and an apple peeler (third onion). The garlic stood unarmed, which Carl guessed correctly was due to the garlic's conception of itself as the local intellectual and thus above violence perpetrated by its own hands.

The bok choy drew itself to its full nine inches as menacingly as it could and announced that they had seized the means of power and were now determined to renegotiate their position. Carl was unsure of what one would normally do during an insurrection, so he sat gingerly upon the floor and resigned himself to hearing them out. He was, after all, unarmed, and it did appear that the balance of power had tipped away from him.

They would, the bok choy announced, expand their territory to include the western half of the living room as well because their statutory growth had not progressed at the rate expected and, thus, they determined that the kitchen was itself too small to afford them opportunity to reach their potential—for without equality of power that size imbued, there could be no equality of individual. Also—and Carl suspected this may be the primary interest—the tomato and two onions had taken an interest in the goldfish floating in the glass bowl on the bookshelf, which they bravely explored while Carl was at work.

Squaring its shoulders, the bok choy delivered its final furthermore: Shared governance requires accountability and transparency, and heretofore Carl could not leave the

apartment, for while away from their watchful eyes, he must surely be plotting sedition.

It was at this point that Carl felt a line had been crossed. Mustering an uncharacteristic surge of willpower, he protested, patiently laying out the case that when he is not at the apartment, he is at his job, which in turn pays him money, which allows him to afford things like rent and electricity. He nearly mentioned food again, but, dreading that conversation, bit his tongue just in time.

However, the vegetables were not about to be swayed, and Carl had listed three concepts back-to-back of which they had no knowledge whatsoever, being work, money, and electricity. Reticent to admit its own ignorance, the bok choy dug its heels in. Carl mentioned the lights, which they did understand, but they shrugged this off since the sun did not require man's maintenance to rise and set each day, and neither must the lights.

Carl belabored the point for a few minutes, but unsure how to get any of his arguments across to little beings who were possessed of such great will but with such little experience of the world, he conceded again.

The days wore on and Carl abided by the terms of his captors. The vegetables, having been liberated from the produce drawer for nearly a full span, began showing the first signs of age, though their spirits were not dampened in the slightest. All still walked tall as men in the world, but when Carl looked closely, he could see the baby carrots were looking a little drier, the single crack running up each of their sides looked slightly wider. The potato's eyes were getting longer; one of them was just starting

to brush upon the floor. The bok choy, proud as ever, was slightly shorter for the new droop in his leaves.

But for all the physical changes, the vegetables showed no less verve in their long-protracted discussions about the arms of government, the new committees that must be formed, and the regional limits of power. In all these conversations, the garlic cemented itself as the group's foremost intellectual and took it upon its wee shoulders to read all available bits of writing visible in the apartment, so as to better understand the world they lived in. The fading Led Zeppelin poster created only confusion, but the book bindings in the living room held particular interest—it did not occur to the garlic that far more instructive writing was held in the book's pages—for their lyrical, dramatic quality.

However, the greatest literary discovery occurred in the rubbish, when the garlic discovered the discarded bag for a salad mix bearing the fine print *contents manufactured with equipment that also processes almonds*. From this statement of mechanization alongside bits and scraps of what they recognized as their own kin, the garlic eventually deduced that they were industrially farmed, rather than having grown up in the free wilds as they had all naturally assumed. This filled the vegetables with a righteous rage, and Carl listened to their wails of despair from the living room with a distinct unease.

Indeed, none mustered more focused rage than the baby carrots when it was discovered on further packaging that they were not even in their original tall leafy form but had been carved to a less threatening and more convenient shape for consumption. This revelation transformed the baby carrots, who had been feeling somewhat inadequate in the shadow of their longer and beautifully plumed cousin with its rugged

orange skin. Immediately, the baby carrots led the group back to the living room and perched themselves on an upturned box of fish food, which brought them almost but not quite to the eye level of their compatriot carrot in his unadulterated form. And from their box, the baby carrots launched a powerful invective about the alienation of the self, the dehumanizing effects of industrial society, and the cruelty of the lottery of birth. Surprisingly eloquent when properly motivated, the other vegetables listened intently, formed in a makeshift amphitheater of small bodies as the baby carrots alternated between themselves and were met with affirmations and cries of sympathy from the gathered semicircle of comrades.

Having found their leverage to social capital, the baby carrots were both impassioned and surprisingly long-winded. The speeches wore on and Carl saw that by thirty-five minutes in, the other vegetables were beginning to shift side to side, wondering if this wasn't all getting a bit tedious. Meanwhile, the baby carrots were, if anything, growing more intense in both remonstrance and demand, and the mood of the amphitheater gradually shifted from boredom to impatience to alarm.

One of the wee carrots was halfway through arguing that they should be afforded special privileges for the suffering they had endured when the tomato interrupted with a small cough and politely suggested that since they were each, at best, half a carrot, they should each only have half a vote. Indeed, they may have both been carved from the same stalk and it would not be democratic to award two votes to what was only one original form.

A stunned silence hung in the living room. All was still aside from the nods from the other members, and only when

the carrots were looking elsewhere. Even Carl felt this was a cutting turn of events. As the baby carrots chambered their outrage and swiveled toward the tomato, the bok choy reasserted itself as leader by suggesting that, this being a proper democracy, they put the suggestion to a vote. A hasty murmur of agreements from the others buried the protests and a vote was swiftly organized over the representative power of the baby carrots, moving each from one unit down to one half. In a bid to diffuse responsibility, they even invited Carl to join the process as a weighted member of the governing structure. The baby carrots looked at him pleadingly to cast his five-vote block in their favor, but Carl felt confused by the ethical arguments and bored by the baby carrots and chose to abstain. Votes cast, a two-thirds majority confirmed the tomato's proposition, and only the garlic and the tall carrot—who felt obligated to side with his own brethren, though he wished not to—voted in the baby carrots' defense.

The bok choy stood tall among the group, taller even than the baby carrots on their perch, and with great gravity laid down their first amendment: Heretofore, the baby carrots each only receive half a vote and must vote in unison with each other. The baby carrots attempted a sputtering rebuttal but were so shocked by the betrayal that they could not gather the words. The other eleven vegetables and Carl silently removed themselves around the apartment, each knowing in their heart that an irreversible change had just taken place. As their bodies began to feel the slow passage of time, so too did their democracy.

The next several days were a trial. The baby carrots refused to take their subjugation lying down. They spent the first day and a half making vociferous speeches about the injustice of

it all and how their denial was the antithesis of this project of representation and self-governance that the vegetables had embarked upon together. When the others stopped even pretending to listen, the baby carrots turned maudlin and settled into the role of sullen agitators, brooding darkly and disrupting regular political meetings with teenage outbursts and charges of hypocrisy.

The vegetable society tolerated the carrots for two more days, though they grew increasingly more irritated that the carrots would dare disrupt conversations about the ethics of good governance and distribution of powers, demeaning the overall democratic process. And though each could see the theoretical yield of the carrots' rage, they mostly felt the outbursts prevented more profitable and widely beneficial decisions from being made. Privately, though none would admit it, hardly even think it, each vegetable even appreciated the subjugation of the baby carrots on a primal level, for it provided the surety that no matter how the social ladder developed, they themselves would not sit upon the lowest rung. Even Carl found a grim comfort in their persecution.

By the third day of the baby carrots' protestant misbehavior, the others came to an unspoken agreement, never voiced but communicated with great clarity through private glances and meaningful silence. The baby carrots would have to be dealt with—for the sake of a functioning democracy, for the sake of their revolutionary project, for the sake of progress.

Just past midnight, the tall carrot rose to its full and beautiful height, wilting plume dreadfully catching the moonlight. With a sense of great responsibility—knowing it must be he who dealt with the refuse of his own breed—the full

carrot drew a sharp paring knife from the stockpile of armaments. Silently, he passed over the sleeping forms of his beloved comrades until he came to the baby carrots, asleep and nestled into each other in their usual spot on the lower bookshelf. Silently, he roused and marched them at blade-point back through the living room and into the kitchen. The baby carrots obeyed in mute surrender. They dared not defy him, powerful paragon of their race that he was, less for the blade than for the ideal he represented. And as he opened the freezer door, they understood.

Beyond hope, their tiny forms hobbled inside, and they perched themselves sadly together atop a bag of frozen peas, shorn of their rights, rejected as citizens. The tall carrot closed the freezer door, slowly, permanently, sure in the knowledge that even if they tried, they could not open the door themselves due to their stunted and mangled stature.

As the sun rose on the little apartment, the other vegetables immediately felt the baby carrots' absence and the relative peace and stillness that had descended on their community. None knew precisely what had happened, but neither did they wonder aloud or even acknowledge that the pair of protestants had ever existed. The day was pristine, the atmosphere utopian, and each in their own heart, was thankful that the problem had resolved itself and that their own small and fibrous hands were clean.

But as the days wore on, all knew their revolutionary project had fundamentally changed. They still debated the finer points of governmental structure, the needs of the states versus the inalienable rights of individuals, but they no longer believed it. The garlic's arguments grew more complex and less

compelling. The tomato's cries of affirmation grew weaker. Even the broccoli, dim but loyal, appeared to wander. And occasionally, quite by accident, the tall lone carrot would catch another's eye, and a shameful moment of understanding would pass between them.

At the same time, Carl, living on crackers and flat soda, a prisoner in his own home, noticed their bodies wilting. The carrot's tall plumage hung down limply in front of its face and its strong limbs were rubbery. The garlic sprouted so far that it had difficulty keeping its balance. The potato's eyes dragged behind it on the floor like entrails. When the power bill went unpaid and the lights went out, the vegetables hardly noticed. The lot of them spent half of each day in darkness, illuminated only by the ambient glow of streetlights filtering through dusty windows. But the shortened daylight hours suited them, for what they wanted most of all was to rest.

One morning, Carl woke to find they'd all given up the ghost simultaneously, the spark of life departed from their soggy little corpses. He poked them each gingerly with a spoon, then scooped them up one by one and sent them to join their forebears down the garbage disposal. He wiped up their remains with a paper towel, flushed his long-dead fish down the toilet, and bid the little revolutionaries farewell, not without some sympathy.

Carl returned to work and blamed his absence on a personal medical crisis, which his manager did not believe but neither did she pursue. The power came back on in his apartment, he bought a new fish, and life resumed as before, marked only by a modest blow to his ego and credit score.

In the evening, Carl returned home and popped open the freezer to look upon a tragic scene: two baby carrots, frozen solid, perched neatly atop the bag of refrozen peas, in postures that could only be described as mournful.

\* \* \*

## Discussion Questions

1. Given that Carl works and pays all the bills in the apartment, is it fair that he should give up *any* power to the produce? Is Carl duty bound to cede democratic control to the masses?
2. The produce first gain partial control by arguing in support of democracy and self-determination, but then gain additional territory by threatening Carl with kitchen knives. How can the produce support both means of power acquisition?
3. The story says the “baby carrots would have to be dealt with—for the sake of a functioning democracy, for the sake of their revolutionary project, for the sake of progress.” Is this the nature of all democracy—that it only works so long as people speak and move on, rather than continuing to argue against a perceived injustice? Was there another path forward besides putting the baby carrots in the freezer?
4. The produce were given power even though Carl had far superior knowledge about electricity and the outside world and was paying the rent. Should that matter in a democracy, or should the ignorant masses be allowed to rule by majority vote anyway?
5. In the end, do all revolutions go through a similar life cycle as the story, eventually fading away, while Carl continues across generations? Who does Carl represent in this story?

\* \* \*

# Bread for the World

*Steve Grover*

\* \* \*

**Content Disclosure:** Mild Violence, Mild Language

\* \* \*

For months now, Bryce had been stashing envelopes of cash in strategic locations: the filing cabinet in his office, the bottom of his gym bag, the glove box of his Subaru. Each spot hid an envelope packed tight with hundred-dollar bills—an underground railroad of cash running from his home to the office. Ready for whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Bryce worked as a CPA in Portland, having started his business right out of college and steadily building up his client list over the next ten years. He was good with numbers and found the prescriptive nature of accounting comforting—each individual expenditure having a form or rule determining exactly how it needed to be handled. While others might find it confusing, Bryce thought accounting was simple if you just focused on the individual line items. Do that enough times and the big picture would take care of itself.

He rolled out his plan slowly during the Christmas season, mapping out the various Salvation Army locations and plotting a circuitous route to avoid suspicion. During the busiest parts of the day, he would stroll by his chosen target and casually drop a wad of tightly folded hundred-dollar bills into the red pot while distracting the bell ringer with a warm smile.

He tried not to let himself feel too proud, but an undeniable thrill juiced his steps as he walked away. After the first few times, he rationalized to himself that it was okay to feel good about what he was doing as long as he didn't tell anyone about it. By Christmas Day, he had given away over ten thousand dollars, and he watched the local news with pride as a beaming Salvation Army spokesperson praised the generosity of this mystery angel.

After Christmas, Bryce turned his attention to local restaurants. A few times a week he chose a place and ordered a simple meal. While he ate, he estimated how many staff were working at the time and then left a tip that came out to one hundred dollars per person, sometimes more. Next to the check, he wrote a quick note saying how much he enjoyed the service. He chose different restaurants each week, but returned to a few favorites when he really liked the food.

Bryce usually left the restaurant before anyone noticed, not wanting to make a scene or put anyone in an awkward position. Occasionally, he might linger as the waiter picked up the envelope and scanned the room for whoever left it. Bryce would wait to catch their eye, nod an acknowledgement, and then slip out the front door.

One time, Bryce attempted to expand his donation circle to include a homeless man that he passed by regularly. The man

could usually be found on a bench near the Riverside, one of Bryce's favorite restaurants. He appeared to be middle-aged and somewhat lucid, with a tangled beard and several layers of loose clothes that were dirty but not as grimy as what Bryce had observed on others. Next to him on the bench was a cardboard sign announcing that his name was Mike and that he was a Vietnam vet, although he was clearly too young to have fought in that war.

Bryce approached the man one morning, an envelope of cash tucked in his jacket pocket.

"Got any change?" the man said.

"I want to help you," Bryce said. He handed Mike an envelope with two thousand dollars in it. "That's enough money for you to get a hotel room for a few weeks so you can get cleaned up. Promise me that you will go stay in a hotel. There's one just down the street that rents rooms by the week."

Mike thumbed the envelope open, a slight tremor in his fingers as he fanned the bills. He stared back at Bryce, first at his face and then at his crotch.

"What do I have to do for it?"

Bryce took a step back. "The only thing you have to do is go spend it on a hotel and some food. No drugs or alcohol, just the hotel and food. Promise me you'll use the money just for that."

Mike didn't say anything as he stared at the envelope. Finally, he nodded. "Okay, I promise. Thanks, man."

Two days later, Bryce found Mike sleeping on the same bench. He shook him awake.

"Why aren't you staying at the hotel?" Bryce said. Mike squinted up at him and then struggled to sit upright.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Leave me alone,” he growled, before closing his eyes and lying back down on the bench.

Whenever Bryce walked down the street after that, Mike would hop up from his bench and ask him for money. Each time he acted as if they’d never met, but the speed with which he approached Bryce told a different story. Bryce stopped giving him money altogether and took to walking on the other side of the street.

Bryce’s tipping activity slowed down in the spring as he got busy with tax season, often eating dinner at his desk. One night in March, needing a break from the office, he treated his girlfriend Julie to dinner at a nice restaurant. They had met two years ago skiing on Mount Hood and had bonded over a shared love of the outdoors.

Julie worked at a hospitality company that managed several chain restaurants around town. She was in her mid-thirties and had an outdoorsy attractiveness that she chose not to dress up further with makeup and expensive clothes. She drove a Honda Civic and had her own practical approach to managing money, which made it easy for her and Bryce to plan activities together. They liked to spend their weekends up in the mountains skiing or hiking, occasionally mixing things up with a trip to the coast.

“Can you afford this place?” Julie asked him as they sipped their drinks.

“We’ve both been working so much lately, I thought we could use a night out,” Bryce said, raising his glass to her.

“Okay, moneybags,” she said, laughing.

“Let me ask you a hypothetical question,” Bryce said. “If you won the lottery, what would you do?”

“I guess I’d buy my parents a nicer house, although they probably wouldn’t want to move at this point. Maybe buy myself an EV. But really, that’s about it. I see enough rich assholes at work, I’d hate to start acting like one of them.”

“You wouldn’t quit your job? Spend time traveling?”

“I might cut my hours back a little. But I like what I do. What about you. Would you quit your job?”

“Probably. The hours are out of control during tax season.”

“I can’t imagine you spending much money on yourself.”

Bryce stared at his drink, swirling the ice around. “I would want to give a lot of it away, but I don’t know about some of these nonprofits. They seem to spend most of their money on fundraising.”

“Oh, to have such problems,” she said, as their food arrived.

Bryce hadn’t won the lottery, not exactly. What he had done was invest in cryptocurrency, when crypto was still in its infancy. He had read an early article describing Bitcoin and immediately recognized its potential. He bought a large number of Bitcoin at five hundred dollars each; the price was over one hundred thousand dollars when he sold.

He played with house money after that, rolling his profits into each new hot coin: Ethereum, Cardano, Dogecoin, Matic, Luna. He seemed to have a gift for buying just before the price rocketed into the stratosphere. By traditional investing standards, the profits were enormous, tripling or sometimes

quadrupling his money with each new coin. But at the first sign momentum was slowing, he sold and locked in his gains.

Bryce cashed out just before the big crypto scandals hit and cratered the market, transferring his profits into a brokerage account. He paid the taxes and kept meticulous records, even though he knew the IRS was unlikely to audit him, given the Wild West state of the crypto exchanges and their nonexistent tax reporting. He parked his money in a mutual fund, legal and safe, letting it grow quietly in the background. Twenty million dollars. Free and clear.

Sitting on any amount of wealth had been simply unimaginable to him just a few years ago, and he was unsure what to do with it. His own clients covered the full spectrum of income levels, and he wondered how some of his working-class families were able to get by. With his richer clients, he also saw some of the dubious charitable deductions they claimed.

His own family's relationship with money was more complicated. Growing up, Bryce's parents had struggled to make ends meet, and the constant worries about money left a permanent mark. The years when his mother was single were the worst, but money remained tight even after she remarried.

His extended family presented a different perspective on wealth, particularly his uncle Ray. He had made a fortune in the dotcom boom and had a large oceanside condo in La Jolla and another in San Francisco. They visited him once when he was in high school, Bryce gawking at the ocean views and expensive furniture while his parents got on Ray about his extravagant spending.

“Buddhists say you’re not a millionaire until you *spend* a million dollars” was his uncle’s response. “I’m a multimillionaire now, baby!”

“I’m sure Buddha would be very proud of you,” his mother told her brother.

What Bryce remembered most from that visit was riding with his uncle along the beach in his Ferrari. They cruised slowly along the oceanfront strip, the car turning heads like a magnet. Bryce remembered especially how the women looked at them, flirting with his uncle when he slowed down to chat, even though he was average looking at best.

Eventually, his uncle’s spending caught up with him and he declared bankruptcy. Bryce was stunned; as a teenager, he just assumed that once you became rich, you stayed that way forever. His uncle ended up in Modesto, living in a duplex and teaching at the community college.

“Now he’s a millionaire riding the bus with the real Buddhists,” his mother said when she heard the news.

Bryce’s tipping adventures ended the night he got mugged. It was early evening and he was eating alone at the Riverside, planning to return to work afterward. A plump young woman waited on him, her blotchy skin pushed tight against her light blue shirt, the name Amber pinned on a tag above the pocket. She had waited on Bryce before but did not give any sign that she remembered him, handling his order with the same terse efficiency she did all her other customers during the busy dinner rush.

Bryce paid his bill and left his usual enormous tip before heading out to the parking lot. A man in a gray hoodie approached just as he reached his car.

“Give me your wallet,” the man said.

“I don’t have any money on me,” Bryce said, backing away and fumbling for the car door handle.

“That’s a lie, I know you have money,” the man said, before punching him. His fist obliterated Bryce’s nose, a second punch caught him just above the eye. Bryce threw down his wallet, frantically trying to stop the bleeding as he slumped against the car.

The police showed up and took Bryce’s statement while a growing crowd of restaurant patrons gathered. Bryce and the officer went back into the restaurant and talked with the owner. A visibly upset Amber stood by, mostly staring at Bryce and occasionally glancing out to the parking lot. The officer took a few more notes and then told Bryce they would call him if they caught the guy.

“What happened?” Julie said, rushing into his house. Bryce had called her after he got home from urgent care. He was sitting on the couch with a bandage across his nose and an ice pack pressed against his blackening eyes.

“I got jumped in the parking lot at the Riverside,” Bryce said.

“Was it a homeless person? There’s that big tent camp right next to the parking lot.”

“No, the police think it might have been one of the restaurant employees. I may have been targeted.”

“Why would they target you? You don’t really fit the big spender profile.”

“Well,” Bryce shifted the ice pack again so it covered both his eyes, “that’s not exactly true.”

Bryce told her everything—the crypto profits, Salvation Army buckets, covert tipping operation, all of it. Julie just listened. Her eyes did not glaze over like most people when he talked about crypto, but they did bulge when he told her how much money he had made. By the time he stopped talking, a tight frown had taken over her face.

“Are you insane?” she said, surprising Bryce with the harshness of her tone. “Seriously, what were you thinking?”

“I was helping people! I could have gone out and bought a Porsche or a yacht or something else ridiculous.”

“Do you seriously believe that a few hundred bucks to the Salvation Army is making a difference? Or did you do it just to make yourself feel good?” Julie crossed her arms and slumped back into the couch.

“I just don’t know what to do with it all. I want to do something good, but I don’t want to waste it.”

“Look, I’m glad you’re not blowing your money. But you could be doing so much more.”

Over the next few weeks, Bryce rarely left the house, waiting until his face healed and people no longer stared. The bruises lightened from black to plum and eventually to a jaundiced yellow smear that lingered through the spring.

He worked from home and got through tax season before closing up his accounting practice for good, referring his clients to other trusted CPAs. With no work routine, he found himself sleeping in later and spending much of the day watching TV or videos on YouTube. Shaving became optional and most days he wore sweats.

The idea of buying a new car crept into Bryce’s head. By default, he began his search on the Subaru website before

drifting over to the luxury brands. His new car fantasies rose in lockstep with the sticker prices: cruising in a BMW convertible along the coast, off-roading in the mountains in a tricked-out Jeep.

"I think I might buy a Jaguar," Bryce told Julie one evening. He was fixing her dinner, his hair damp after showering for the first time in days.

"Oh, please. You are not a Jaguar person," she said. "I thought you wanted to help people."

"Help? I tried that and this is the thanks I got. Two black eyes and a broken nose."

"Maybe that's the universe telling you to get serious about it."

"I did try to help a homeless person once." He told her about his interaction with Mike.

"I don't know what you were expecting from that one. I could've told you how it was going to end."

"Well, what do you suggest then, since you seem to know everything? Your Monday-morning quarterbacking isn't helpful."

"Listen, Mr. CPA, have you run the numbers on how long it's going to take you to give away twenty million dollars when you're only doing it a few hundred dollars at a time? Unless you're planning to live to be a thousand, you need to come up with a better plan."

As irritated as he was with Julie, Bryce knew she was right.

"You should volunteer somewhere," she said. "You might meet some people who know how to help, maybe point you to a charity you can trust."

"I wouldn't know where to start."

“There’s a food pantry near my office, and they’re always looking for volunteers. Start there.”

Bryce showed up for his first shift at the food pantry later that week—a converted garage in the back of a church located on a busy street. The church was one of the last holdouts in an older part of town where dilapidated homes were slowly giving way to shiny new businesses. A homeless tent camp had sprung up next to the pantry, as if joining forces with the church to fend off further intrusion into the old neighborhood.

Bryce’s job was to walk with a family up and down each aisle, pushing a shopping cart and loading the selected groceries into bags. He had helped several families before he noticed Amber waiting quietly in the entrance area.

“Bryce, this is Amber. She will be the last person we need to help this evening,” the pantry manager said. Bryce’s stomach churned as he remembered that night, but she gave no sign of recognizing him.

“Hi, Amber. Welcome,” Bryce said.

They worked their way through the aisles, choosing among the available food items. Bryce was surprised when she bypassed the easy-to-cook items like mac and cheese and Top Ramen, opting instead for staples like oatmeal, rice, flour, eggs, lentils, and a large bag of fresh vegetables. She also chose applesauce and juice boxes, along with children’s toothpaste and a small bottle of no-tears shampoo.

“How old are your kids?” he asked.

“I have my daughter, Anna; she’s two. We’re staying with my mom right now.”

“There’s candy here, too, if you want to grab some for her,” Bryce said.

“Hell no! My mom and me are cooking healthy. Anna can have applesauce or fruit and maybe a juice box if she’s been good, but that’s it. I want her to be healthy and not get fat.”

Bryce thought about his own mother, realizing that she had probably gone to food pantries, too, and never told him.

“I was a fat kid,” Amber continued. “It sucked, other kids always teasing you. I don’t want that for her.”

As they reached the end of the first aisle, Bryce stopped and put a hand on the cart near her own hand.

“Do you remember me?” Bryce asked, studying her face for some sign of recognition.

Amber nodded. “You’re the big tipper.”

“Yes, that’s me,” he said. “I’m also the one that got mugged in the parking lot.” He paused, his pulse quickening as he remembered that night. “The police thought it was someone that worked at the restaurant.”

“I’m sorry that happened,” she said. Her hands were twisting back and forth around the shopping cart handle.

“I’m not sure how to say this, but... I might have been partway responsible. I don’t know. But I pointed you out to one of the dishwashers, like I kind of wanted to give you credit. And now I wish I hadn’t. I never thought he would do something like that. I swear to God, robbing you was all his idea, I had nothing to do with it.”

“What happened to him?”

“Dwane got fired and left town before the police could find him. My boss thought we were both in on it, so he fired me too.”

Bryce felt like he should be angry with her, but the feeling would not come. All he felt was tired, exhausted from thinking

about that night and wishing it would all go away and he could move on.

“I’m sorry you lost your job,” he said, finally.

“I needed that job, but I hated the owner,” Amber said. “I just know he shortchanged us on tips, although I could never prove it. I complained about it to his face in front of the staff. After that, I think he was just waiting for an excuse to get rid of me. I didn’t like the job, but the timing sucked. I couldn’t make my rent and got evicted.”

They walked the aisle, their progress slowed by an elderly volunteer working with a family in front of them.

“I got another waitressing job at a Mexican restaurant in Hillsboro,” Amber said as Bryce helped the other volunteer open a stubborn freezer door. “And I work as a maid at the Embassy Suites in downtown Portland.”

“That’s a long commute.”

“Three bus rides. Takes two hours each way with all the stops and transfers. It’s tough when I have shifts at both places the same day.”

He studied the woman. She was wearing the same clothes he had seen her in at the restaurant. If he hadn’t known better, he would have guessed that she was still in high school.

She lifted her face to study him in turn. “Why did you do it? I don’t understand it—all that money. Was tipping some sort of game to you?”

“No, I just wanted to help people that I thought could use it.”

“So, what then? You post about it online and show everyone what a great person you are?”

“I didn’t tell anyone. Except my girlfriend, and only after I got mugged. I wanted it to be anonymous.”

“Anonymous? Huh.” She shook her head. “Maybe the first time, but we all knew who you were when you kept coming back. We’d fight over who got to wait on you. But it seemed like you wanted a performance out of us in return. You had this look on your face like you expected the entire staff to come out and applaud.”

“I didn’t realize I was coming across like that,” Bryce said.

“Rich people don’t know what it’s like for the rest of us who are just barely getting by.”

“Listen, I know how you feel. I really do,” Bryce said, working to control his emotions. “When I was growing up, I was one of the kids getting free lunches at school and wearing clothes from Goodwill. Everybody getting nice gifts at Christmas while I have some cheap thing my mom found at a garage sale. You try to hide it, but everyone knows you’re poor. That’s why I snuck around leaving tips, I thought maybe I could help without calling attention to it.”

“Well, the tips help for a little bit,” Amber said. “But then it’s right back to the same old thing.”

When they finished, Bryce and Amber each took a couple grocery bags and stepped outside as the pantry manager locked up behind them. They walked to the bus stop, occasionally stepping into the street to bypass the homeless tents and the blue tarp awnings that crowded the sidewalk.

They made it halfway to the bus stop when one of Amber’s grocery bags tore, dumping all the groceries onto the sidewalk. She reached down and began picking them up before sinking to the ground and starting to cry.

“Now I’m going to miss my bus!”

“I have some cloth bags in my car, I’ll go get them,” Bryce said, running back to the church parking lot. When he returned, Amber was organizing the groceries into two piles.

“Look, only a couple of eggs broke,” she said. They rebagged the groceries and then walked together to the bus stop.

“You don’t have to sit here with me. Another bus will be coming soon,” she said.

“I don’t mind. I’d feel better if I stayed with you until it got here,” he said.

“I don’t usually cry like that,” Amber said. “I just really wanted to get home in time to see Anna before she went to bed. She really likes it when I read to her.”

“Listen, I know you’ve got another long one coming up tomorrow. Let me call you a Lyft so you can get home quicker.”

“That’s okay, I’m used to the bus.”

“Please, let me do this.”

Amber looked at the ground as she considered his offer, her frayed canvas shoe tracing a pattern in the dirt.

“It would be good to get these things in the fridge,” she said. “Okay, I accept. Thank you.”

Bryce pulled out his phone, opened the Lyft app and had Amber type in her address. A twenty-minute estimated ride time, compared to more than an hour if she waited for the bus. When the Lyft arrived, she got in the back while Bryce helped the driver load the groceries into the trunk.

“Thanks again,” Amber said through the window, smiling for the first time that evening.

“Have a good week, Amber.”

Bryce sat back down on the bench after the Lyft disappeared. Across the street was a Mercedes dealership, one Bryce recognized from his online searches. The cars were bathed in an antiseptic white light, arranged in tight rows by shade: white, black, silver, as if the rich no longer had any need for colors. He watched a middle-aged man with a much younger woman, both stylishly dressed in black, slowly amble around the lot. Bryce hoped she was the man's daughter, knowing that she probably wasn't.

Bryce thought about how he could help Amber. He wanted to buy her a Mercedes. And a house. And send Anna to private school. And maybe get her a pony. He allowed himself a few minutes of picturing the new life he could choose for them. Even if he did all those things, and Amber somehow accepted, it was just one family.

A bus pulled up to the curb, settling in front of Bryce with a pneumatic sigh. He knew all the passengers could use his help. Just one of many buses pulsing through the city each evening. This, in addition to all the homeless; Bryce could see thirty tents just from his bench, with more tucked in the trees behind the church. It just went on and on, the scale of need overwhelming.

What was he expected to do? He could give all his money to the homeless, and it wouldn't make any difference—the streets would still be filled with tents. He had paid a ton of taxes already on his crypto profits, some of which were earmarked specifically for homeless programs. It wasn't like he hadn't already contributed. Maybe he had done enough already.

*It's not all my responsibility.* Saying this to himself, he felt the pressure ease for the first time since the mugging. But a nagging doubt remained, a small voice telling him this was the

first step down a dangerous slope, one that gave him permission to use his money to insulate himself from the unpleasant parts of society. He had listened to similar rationales from his wealthier clients, remarks that at the time were not relevant to his own financial situation but still elicited in him feelings of shame, as if he were somehow complicit in their lack of empathy.

He continued watching the couple at the dealership and, despite his doubts, found himself wanting to join them. A saleswoman came out to meet the couple—confident and attractive in a white blouse and gray business suit, blond hair styled to frame her rouged cheeks and burgundy lips. Bryce imagined himself with the saleswoman, cruising down the coast in a new Mercedes convertible, her head tossed back laughing as her blond hair tussled in the ocean breeze. He could make all that happen if he wanted to.

Bryce remained on the bench unable to move, his shoes frozen to the ground as the evening air began to chill. Above him, the white lights of the dealership hummed, pushing the tents into the outer dark.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Was Bryce wrong to leave large tips for servers or leave large sums of money in the Salvation Army bucket over the holidays? Do rich donors have an obligation to optimize their donations?
2. If you were to advise Bryce in effective ways to distribute his wealth, what criteria and guidance would you give him? How would you measure if you had reached the goals?
3. If you were considering charities to donate money to, what (*if any*) limits would you have on executive compensation, percentage of money being used for fundraising, overhead and administrative expenses? What amount (*if any*) is “reasonable” in each case?
4. Do you think it’s possible for a very wealthy person to have authentic conversations with significantly poorer people, or is every conversation a pitch/grift to get something?
5. Bryce says, “It’s not all my responsibility.” What does this mean, and do you agree? Even though he’s not able to fix everything, is it all his responsibility anyway? What if he were a thousand times richer? What if he were poor?

\* \* \*

# The Covenant

*Sharon Frame Gay*

\* \* \*

**Content Disclosure:** Suicidal Themes; Death or Bereavement;  
Strong Language

\* \* \*

“Is it time, Rachel?” Pauley glanced across the table as we sipped our coffee in the local cafe.

I shrugged. It was my birthday. Outside, the world was in bloom, and so was I. I had recently published a new book of poems, and it was selling well. The July sky was brilliant, and hope crept onto my plate and lingered there.

“No. I don’t think so. We’ll talk about it in December.”

Pauley nodded. He was my younger brother by two years. I still thought of him as a baby, despite his beard and low voice. Despite the fact that middle age had pounced on both of us and left him slightly bald, and me slightly rounded.

I looked into his eyes, the same color as mine. Deep gray, a perfect storm. Eyes that never lost their wariness from the dark shadows of our childhood. A childhood drenched in

sorrow and abuse. There was never enough happiness, it seemed, to wring out the bad memories and hang them to dry.

We finished our lunch, making small talk. We put aside the question about The Covenant for another year. Or, at least until Pauley's birthday in December. Stirring a lump of sugar into the coffee, I thought back to the beginning of our promise to each other almost ten years ago.

\* \* \*

It was a warm summer night, moonlit and friendly. A night where folks tilted their heads toward the sky and smiled. A night in direct contrast to our past, thus making the memories cut like daggers in the darkness. Pauley's wife, Sarah, and their two kids had gone to bed. It was just me and my brother, sitting on his porch swing, watching the stars skate by. Our conversation was as light as the breeze that danced with the wind chimes hanging from a willow tree. Then, I threw him a curveball.

"I can't stand the thought of growing older. Can you?" I picked at a fingernail and looked sideways at my brother. "I think it will feel like being trapped somehow."

"Like we were as kids." Pauley nodded and rubbed at his forehead. "Yeah, I think about it a lot. Like, when it's time to go." He turned toward the door to make sure Sarah wasn't around and lowered his voice. "I mean, when I leave this vale of tears and put all the pain behind me."

"You know what I don't want?" I scraped my shoe along the floor and the swing abruptly stopped. "I don't want to end up in a fucking nursing home where they might, you know, abuse me or something."

Pauley reached for my hand and squeezed it. "I know."

“Maybe I’ll die before then, so I don’t have to go through that again.”

“Never again,” he agreed.

“I couldn’t protect you,” I murmured. “I was your big sister and should have been able to fight them off.”

“Naw.” Pauley worked up a wad of spit and sent the stream across the porch railing, then tightened his grip on my hand. “It’s me who should have protected *you*. I’m a guy, right? Even though I was younger, I’ll never get over the fact that I couldn’t save you somehow.”

“So, here we are. I’m fifty years old. I don’t see much happiness ahead, do you? You’re all bogged down by PTSD from the military, and I’m just bogged down. Sometimes,” I whispered, “I want to end it all, so I can control my outcome, control my future, you know?”

He stood abruptly and stared down at me in the moonlight. I figured he’d scold me for such talk, but his eyes filled with tears.

“Me too.”

That night, we made a covenant. Each year on our birthdays, we would discuss “the bitter end,” as Pauley called it. We’d go out together, we decided, like a pair of wounded cranes, ragged and lost, hoping to fly closer to the sun before singeing our wings. Maybe we’d finally see God. Maybe things would be better in a different realm.

Neither one could die without the consent of the other. No solo trips to the undertaker. If one held off, so did the other. And if we both agreed, then we’d do it. Simple as that. Get a fresh start in another universe.

"I'll know when the time is right," Pauley said. "I'll just know. And then we'll do it, won't we, Rachel?"

"Yeah, then we'll do it. I'll know too."

So, twice a year on our birthdays, we met and discussed our inevitable demise. Each time so far, one of us declined. Maybe we had a good year, or were in a decent mood that day. Maybe life was worth something. Every birthday, I met Pauley with trepidation, but hopefully, too, thinking we could finally control something in our lives.

We came close once or twice. Pauley joined the military when he was eighteen. He did it to get out from under the nightmare we were living before we had the means to support ourselves. I fretted when he left town. Not because I would miss his protection, but because I could no longer protect *him*. I couldn't dig him out of his depression when he was so far away, nor help him make decisions. Now it was up to the Army to fix him, and of course, they couldn't.

Once he'd completed basic training, the Army shipped him off to a war zone, where the trauma of battle dredged up his childhood and handed him the gift of post-traumatic stress disorder, so severe that the Army wisely invited him to leave. Wandering in his own darkness, it took years of counseling and his wife, Sarah, to keep him from descending into a misery so deep nobody would ever find him again. As part of his partnership with Sarah, she asked that he no longer discuss our childhood, live his days in the present, and forget about the past. She didn't understand that such a thing was impossible, but he tried hard, and we thought perhaps he had turned a corner. True to his word, he never discussed our childhood again. I honored

his wishes and didn't speak of it, either, hoping maybe it would help heal both of us.

Since then, there have been days when our past rained down on our souls, anyway. It was at its worst on Pauley's birthday, five years ago.

"I'm ready," he told me that day. "I just can't do this anymore."

Pauley looked haggard. Sarah invited me over to celebrate with a comforting casserole and his favorite cake, but my brother picked at his food as we tried to cheer him up. When Pauley and I met privately to talk later that evening, he slammed his glass of whiskey hard on the table. He was ready. I saw it in his eyes and heard it in his voice. I felt it in the atmosphere, like a storm coming, thunder on the horizon.

However, I wasn't ready. And that was the deal we made. Both had to agree. Then we'd do it. If one didn't want to, neither of us were allowed to end our lives. It had to be all or nothing. In a way, it was a safety measure. Either go big... or go home.

And that year I was flying high. I had fallen in love for the first time in my wary life and was dancing on rainbows. There wasn't a day that I didn't giggle or plan for the future, adorning myself with love. I would marry Jess, I thought, and visualized us all growing old together, Pauley with Sarah, me with Jess. My life was full and fecund and satisfied, and I callously disregarded Pauley's pain as I relished in my own selfish lust. I left his house that night with little thought of my brother's suffering.

But as my birthday neared, I'd crashed. Jess broke up with me. I was too dark, too cynical, and too depressed, he told me. He walked out one dreary afternoon. The door closed with finality and my heart closed with it. I quit my job, hung around

the apartment all day, and slept for hours. Some days it was simply too much to bear, and I crumbled from the pain.

When Pauley arrived on the night I turned fifty-three, I had been pacing the floor, so sure of my decision that when he knocked on the door, I yanked him inside with wild eyes and didn't even allow him to sit down before I spoke.

"Now!" I cried.

"What?" Pauley unwrapped a bottle of sparkling grape juice and produced a box of cupcakes. "What do you mean?" He looked genuinely confused.

"It's time." Sweat trickled down my neck. "Time to enact The Covenant, that's 'what'! I'm ready as rain. Tonight. Or tomorrow. Or when you can..." My voice trailed off as I saw the horrified look on his face. Anger crept in. It had to be now. How could Pauley deny me? Deny us?

"Rachel," he said, his voice low and steady, "now is not the time for me. Bernie is off to college next month." He sighed. "I want to see my son graduate someday. See the look on his face when he walks across the stage and gets his diploma. I want to be there with Sarah and Cindy and hold my kids and my wife and celebrate. Do you really want me to screw up this proud moment in their lives? Why, that's no better than what we went through as kids! Is that what you want, Rachel? Enact The Covenant with no regard for anybody else? Hurt the hell outta all of them? The only people you and I love?"

I yanked at a strand of hair and felt the sting in my scalp. "Then I'll do it myself. Fuck The Covenant."

"You can't, damn it! You promised!" Pauley's face flushed, and a vein stood out on his forehead. "Either we both do it, or we don't. Simple as that. And I WON'T do it right now!"

He threw a chocolate cupcake against the wall. We both watched it stick to the surface, then slowly sink to the carpet, leaving a trail of frosting. I reached into the box and tossed another one, then another. They clung to the wall, sad looking, yet festive at the same time. We both snorted. Then laughed at our behavior.

“See what you’d miss? I don’t think there are cupcakes in hell,” he joked, then patted my arm, the way he did when he was a little kid and I walked him to school each day.

I nodded miserably. We had promised each other. All or nothing. “Okay, but if I still feel this way in December?”

“Then we’ll talk.”

By the time December rolled around, I had adopted a little dog named Luna and poured my love into her. Pauley was holding up too.

“I haven’t had a post-trauma flashback in months,” he said. “I took up painting. It’s serene and comforting, Rach. I have to say, I paint pretty well. It’s a form of meditation. You should try it.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Then I took photos of Luna out of my purse and regaled Pauley with stories until we both felt a little lighter in our souls. We ate chocolate cupcakes and grinned at each other, remembering my birthday last summer. Sarah danced with my brother to an old Lobo song, and I held my fork like a microphone, belting out the words.

*Our lives are like a dance*, I thought. One moves forward, the other back. And in between the notes, we’re leading our lives. Some days are dark, others are hopeful. But every song has a backbeat, and ours was a childhood so bitter we both knew it would never completely escape us. It was waiting patiently.

Waiting for the right time to sneak up on me, or him, and pull the music right out from under us. Then splash acid in our faces until we would not recognize ourselves, and we'd become feral and frantic and want to run away again.

Time went by the way time does, slowly with each passing hour. But looking back, decades had unfurled like flags, blowing us ever faster down box canyons or fertile fields. We grew, then wilted. Sometimes our past was like a bad dream we only saw in the clouds. Other times, it was so exquisitely painful that everything else took a back seat in order to honor the horror and the sorrow. Sadly, the pain for us still felt more familiar than any joy. Like the relentless sun that insists on standing still while we revolve around it, we continued our dance, in and out, up or down, in measured steps that traced every birthday and brought us together each year under The Covenant.

Then we'd meet and decide, then go back to our lives until the next celebration.

This year was different...

\* \* \*

Almost everyone in the neighborhood had their Christmas decorations up, although it was only the second of December. It seemed as if our entire city had burst into shades of red and green. Joyful music poured out of shopping malls. Santas stood on street corners, ringing charity bells, shifting their feet in the cold.

Driving through town to Pauley's that evening, light poured into the street from houses festooned in holiday joy as snow tumbled from the sky. I slowed and inched past a home where children sat at a table near the window, working on a

gingerbread house. It looked so warm inside, so normal. My throat tightened at the loss I felt, especially during holidays.

Pauley's house looked dark when I drove up. Far in the back, behind drawn curtains, was a glimmer of light. The front porch bulb had burned out. I felt my way up the steps and rang the doorbell, heard the muffled sound echo through the house, then the footsteps of Sarah, quick and capable, as she strode down the hall.

She opened the door, curled into a cardigan sweater two sizes too big. Her brown eyes peered out from graying hair. I realized how much she had aged. How much we all had. She reached out and drew me inside, then into an embrace.

"Welcome, Rachel. So glad you could come."

"Of course. How is he?"

Sarah shook her head. "Not good." Then she crumpled in my arms, her pent-up tears hot on my cheek. "The doctors give him only a few months now."

I nodded. It was what I expected to hear. Of all things, Pauley came down with a rare sort of cancer. The sort that is incurable and mysterious and fights its way into your consciousness from the inside out. An invasion of sorts, calculated to take down its host in a spectacular array of heartache and pain.

Sarah led me into the kitchen. I sat at the table as she poured a cup of tea. We chatted for a while, pleasantly, even though the house hunched over our heads in grief. Bernie and Cindy wandered through, both adults now. They pecked me on the cheek and talked lightly about concerts, Christmas gifts, and cookies, avoiding the obvious.

“Is he in bed?” I asked Sarah, staring into my cup as though reading my future.

Sarah glanced down the hall. “Yes,” she whispered. “Go see him, cheer him up. Then maybe you can help him come out here for his birthday cake?”

I nodded, then lowered my voice. “Say, would you mind terribly if you and the kids left the house for a little while? Pauley and I need to talk. Alone.”

She nodded, puzzled. “Okay. Let me call the kids. They’re down in the basement. Maybe I’ll run them up to the store with me. I forgot ice cream. We’ll look at the lights around the town square like we did when they were little.” She stood and reached for a coat on a peg near the door.

“Good plan. Take your time. We have a bit of business.” I stood and straightened my shoulders.

Sarah and the kids shuffled out the door, and I walked toward Pauley’s room. I felt the weight of the gun in my purse as it knocked against my hip. My hands were slick as I turned the knob. His room was dark, except for a television set in the corner with the sound off. The room smelled like sickness, musty and warm.

“Pauley.” I found my way to his bedside.

“Hey, Rach. Come in.”

The voice was familiar, yet new, as though a ventriloquist were pulling his vocal cords, the sound coming from a deep abyss. It was tired and rusty and diseased.

I turned a lamp on in the corner.

Pauley was under a blanket he’d pulled up to his chin. Wisps of hair clung to his balding skull from the chemotherapy.

As if he read my mind, he laughed. "Only the strong ones survived, and even they try to dive into the sink every time I run my hands over my head."

I nodded and drew up a chair. Set the purse on the floor. It hit the wood with a single metallic note, the beginning of an opus, or a dirge.

"Happy birthday, little brother," I said. I reached over and patted his cheek. "How are you doing?"

He winced as though the slightest touch burned his skin. "Not good, Rach. Not good at all. I'm sick every second of the day." He shifted under the covers. "It hurts. Like razors all over, and it doesn't stop. Not even when they pump me full of shit like morphine. I'm freezing all the time too.

"It's getting harder for Sarah and the kids to take care of me," he continued. "I wear a fucking diaper now. I can't even piss on my own." He turned his gray eyes to me and blinked. "Guess what? The doc is suggesting I go to a nursing home. Our worst fear. Is God laughing, or what? And guess what else? I'm gonna go to that nursing home because I can't see the sad look on Sarah's face any longer or watch her buckle under this nightmare. I'll go because I love them more than I love myself. I'm scared, but there's nothing more fearful than what I'm enduring now, so why not take the whole ride, eh?"

He chuckled, then burst into a staccato of coughs that shook the bed. A tiny trickle of blood ran down his chin. I wiped it with a tissue from the nightstand and spoke, my hand on his orphan-thin shoulder.

"So, it's time now, isn't it, Pauley."

It wasn't a question. My brother was dying, and it was time. I wasn't sure if I was ready or not, but I'd be ready for *him*

because his suffering was far worse than my indecision. After all these years, it was time to enact The Covenant. I sighed and placed my hands on my knees so he wouldn't see them shake.

Outside, a dog barked. I peered through the slats in the blinds. Snow was falling in dreamy flakes, wrapping us in the cocoon of our forlorn lives. Lives that rose and fell like the tide, but now we found ourselves washed up on the beach, too far for the sea to fetch us back.

He struggled to sit up. His eyes found mine. They were bleak and hollow. I held back tears. He took a deep breath and spoke in that ventriloquist voice again.

"No, Rachel, it's not time."

"It's okay, Pauley," I whispered. "It's gonna be okay. I'm going with you. You're not alone. We'll go together, just like we planned. The Covenant. It's time."

"No! No Covenant! It's not 'time.' And it will NEVER be time. Don't you see? We wasted so much of our lives thinking about The Covenant. Our little ticket out of our fears and sad songs. When all around us, life was strumming. We just had to reach out and touch those strings, play the good songs, leave the sour notes in the past."

Pauley looked up at the ceiling and smiled. I looked up too. I wondered if he saw angels in the plaster as the serene look on his face belied his words. In a raspy voice, he spoke again.

"I'm not killing myself, Rachel. I'm going to stay until every last bit of breath has been sucked out of my body by this disease. Until I can no longer see my loved ones but at least hear their voices or feel the touch of their hands. I am going to fight until I can't fight. I'm going to sit in that nursing home and let them poke and prod me and keep me captive in a room that

smells like shit and feels like the abuse we felt as kids. And I won't give up. Not until the end, because I want to live. I want to live as long as I can. A week, a month, who knows? But I want to see my wife, my kids, you, and my friends until I can't anymore."

Tears trickled down his cheeks and gathered around his lips.

"I'm not leaving. Not today. And you aren't either."

I placed my forehead against his, felt his breath on my face, and cried along with him. We held each other for a long time.

The back door closed, and I heard voices in the kitchen.

"Sarah wants me to bring you down for cake." I wiped at his tears. "I can tell them you don't feel well if you aren't up to it."

"Of course I'll go," Pauley said. "I don't want to miss a second."

He pulled the covers away from his body as I dragged the wheelchair to the side of the bed.

I put my arms around my brother. He was so thin, so small. I lifted him as easily as when he was a child and I'd carry him home from the park because he was tired. I placed him in the wheelchair and released the brake, picked up my purse, and opened the door.

He grasped my hand.

"Rachel, do me a favor."

"Anything, Pauley."

"When I'm gone, I want you to go down to Turtle River, where we used to play as kids, okay?"

Puzzled, I nodded.

“I want you to walk into the middle of the bridge. And I want you to take whatever the fuck you have in that purse and toss it into the river. Do you hear me?”

“Pauley, I...”

“Do you hear me?”

I hung my head. Grief flooded my senses. Heartache filled the room. I nodded.

“Good, then. Do it. The Covenant is over, Rachel. You can’t follow me. I’m going alone. It will be your turn someday. But in the meantime, I want you to have a real life. Not the murky one we made up. Live only the good parts until I see you again. And I will. Somewhere.”

The kitchen was lit with candles that flickered on the countertops and table. Above our heads was a bright yellow smiley-face balloon. In the center of the table was a chocolate cake and five party hats. Sarah and the kids crowded around Pauley, and we sang and laughed. The reflection I saw of us in the window must have looked as festive as the house I drove past only an hour before. I turned back toward my family and smiled at Pauley.

\* \* \*

The moon lit the way down to Turtle River in the dark. Spring had just broken through the clouds of March. The trees were still stark, but there was a hint of warmth in the days now. Yesterday I saw a brave little crocus struggling up through the ground in my garden.

Pauley had lasted three months, just like the doctors said. He died peacefully in his sleep, with all of us by his side. I held his hand as he took his last breath. I had to survive now without

my brother and felt a cold wind blow through my spirit with the loss.

I parked in a deserted lot and walked up to the bridge. Nobody was on the road at this time of night. Darkness cloaked the park. Far away, I heard a coyote sing out.

I wasn't afraid in the stark night. I walked straight out to the middle of the bridge. Snowmelt from the mountains caused the river to roil, a constant thrumming sound, fierce and dangerous.

I placed one foot, then another, on the slick railing and peered down. In the darkness, the water swirled and raged. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, felt the thunder beneath me as the river rushed past.

Then I reached into my purse and brought out the gun. It shone like ice in the sliver of moonlight as I tossed it as far as I could, then stepped down from the slippery railing and sighed.

\* \* \*

The warmth from the heater in the car made me drowsy on the way home. I turned into my driveway at daybreak. Light from the window streamed out onto the lawn like a beacon. Luna sat in a chair by the window, waiting for me. My heart lifted.

I whispered goodbye to my brother as I opened the door, then stepped into the rest of my life.

\* \* \*

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you think The Covenant was a good or a bad thing for Pauley and Rachel? On the whole, did it help them or hurt them to deal with life and the trauma of their childhood?
2. What are other examples of mutual support agreements that you would (*or would not*) recommend? For example, two recovering alcoholics refusing to start drinking again unless they agreed to start together?
3. If you were required to make a serious Covenant with someone, who would you make it with and what would the “only if we both do it” Covenant be?
4. What do you think changed in Pauley that made him so eager, in the end, to stay alive, even against his greatest fears? Why do you think the will to stay alive is so strong in those nearest the end and often with the poorest quality of life?
5. Do people have an ethical obligation to stay alive for the friends and family who would miss them if they passed? Do people without any friends or family also have an obligation to stay alive?

\* \* \*

# The Showing

*Laura J. Campbell*

\* \* \*

**Content Disclosure:** Supernatural Themes

\* \* \*

Mariette Sanquhar Chuter, the listing real estate agent for the house, entered the code on the lockbox and removed the brass key. She turned the lock on the heavy wooden door and entered the house at 999 Canto Street.

The owners were already in the process of moving to Fort Worth.

“Fort Worth is smaller,” Douglas Koenig explained. “Less crime than this big city. I’ve already accepted a job there. Please sell this house quickly. I don’t want to get stuck paying two mortgages for long.”

While Douglas seemed excited to be going somewhere else, Susan Koenig just looked anxious to get away.

She confided in Mariette later, after Douglas left to go to Fort Worth ahead of her and start his new job.

“There is a problem with this house,” Susan whispered.

“There’s no problem with the house,” Mariette replied. “The inspection passed with flying colors. The neighborhood is great, the local schools are awesome. Plenty of top-notch shopping and fine dining just minutes away. You live in a very historical and very exclusive neighborhood. This house is spectacular.”

“This house is haunted,” Susan blurted out. She regained her composure. “Do you have to tell people that?”

“We don’t have to report paranormal activity associated with a property,” Mariette replied. “And besides, no one has ever asked me that question. What makes you think the house is haunted? Have you had anybody inspect the house for paranormal activity?” She now needed to know, in case anyone did ask. A haunting might be a material factor in a potential buyer’s purchasing decision. One way or the other.

“No,” Susan answered. “I haven’t told anyone. Not even Doug. He doesn’t believe in ghosts. He wonders why anyone believes in them. I do believe. I think there’s more to us than a mortal flesh-and-blood machine. But he thinks ghosts are just a delusion, a hallucination on the part of the person seeing the ghost. I couldn’t tell him. He’d say that I am seeing and hearing things that aren’t real. Or if they are real, that these are just noises or natural shadows, certainly not spirits. It doesn’t help that the haunting happens when I’m here all alone.”

“When did you first notice the odd occurrences?”

“They just started recently. Since we put the house up for sale. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s like the house is trying to tell me something.”

“This house was built in the 1920s, then renovated in the 1970s and again in 2017,” Mariette pointed out. “Doug has a

point. Things settle, make noise. The stairs may creak, and the water pipes may rattle a bit. I wouldn't be concerned. You've moved a lot of furniture out. That can create hollow sounds in a house, as sound bounces off tilework and these gorgeous hardwood floors. I assure you that there's a perfectly rational explanation for anything you've experienced." In her mind, Mariette thought that Susan might be just a little hysterical.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Susan asked.

"Yes," Mariette replied. "My parents and brother and sister have all reported encountering spirits. My sister, Diana, on quite a few occasions. My family is not the type of people to lie. So, based on their reports: yes, I believe that ghosts exist."

"Have you ever experienced anything like that yourself?" It was a probing question. There was something accusatory in Susan's tone.

"No," Mariette responded, realizing it was more of a confession than an answer. She had wanted to be able to answer *yes*. Mariette felt oddly left out, almost wondering if there was something about her that discouraged paranormal contact. Her family was part Scottish, and Diana wove tales about how it was good luck for a Scottish home to have a ghost. *After all, what kind of person were you if not even a ghost wanted your company?*

"You will see," Susan said. "Just wait. Tell me that it is pipes rattling after you've been here alone."

Rattling pipes notwithstanding, Mariette considered that it would not be difficult to sell the grand house with its opulent features. There was high demand for houses with an address in the highly respected neighborhood. The area had a deep historic allure; it was over a century old, and had been home to politicians, oilmen, diplomats, entertainers, rehabilitated

gangsters, lawyers, doctors, bishops, philanthropists, and playboys. Many of the current residents still practiced many of those occupations.

Mariette was prepping 999 Canto for an open house. During the COVID pandemic, her house showings had been by appointment only; since then, the restrictions had relaxed. If Mariette observed limits on how many people could be in the house at one time and provided face masks and hand sanitizer, they could provide a robust showing. Ralph Noleon was due to arrive soon, after picking up extra hand sanitizer.

Mariette put some expensive-looking statues of a lion, a panther, and a wolf, not yet packed and moved to Fort Worth, in a drawer. They looked like they were made of malachite decorated with gold. They also looked like the sort of items that someone could easily sneak into an oversized purse. There was more last-minute work required to get the house ready than Mariette had expected. A lot of little things were scattered throughout the house, completely out of their places.

Her cell phone rang.

She answered it by activating earbuds paired to the device. *It was probably Ralph, saying he was running late.*

He usually was.

“Hello,” she answered cheerfully.

There was static on the line.

Mariette thought that odd. It was a cell phone, not a dial-up, yet the archaic noise of static buzzed on the other end.

She hung up the phone by pressing the button on her earbuds.

The phone rang again.

She pressed the button again. “Hello,” she commanded.

Static.

She glanced at her phone.

The screen showed an active incoming call, but no caller identification. Nothing. No telephone number, no contact name, no listing of “Spam Risk” or “Unknown Number.”

She hung up and called Ralph, noting that his contact name appeared on the cell phone screen.

“Did you just try to call me?” she asked.

“No,” he answered. “But I’m glad that you called me. I’m running a few minutes behind schedule. I’ll be there in about ten. Apologies.”

“Okay,” she said, as he hung up the phone.

She put a few more things away. The house was very quiet. She started her open house playlist on her phone, knowing that relaxing music helped stage the house. She placed an apple-cinnamon candle on the fireplace mantel and lit it, giving the house an enticing homey aroma.

She sat down in the front formal room, looking out of a large glass window, so she could observe anyone pulling up to the house. Soft sunlight filtered through the arching branches of the very old oak trees that lined the street.

There was a noise. Static. It caught Mariette’s attention.

Then she heard the distinct rattle of metal.

Mariette stood up. The noise sounded like it was coming from inside one of the walls of the room she was sitting in.

The noise stopped.

Then rattling started again. It continued, gaining in volume and tempo.

Mariette tried to pinpoint the source of the sound, but as she approached whichever wall she thought the noise was

coming from, the noise moved to another one of the room's walls.

Then the sound stopped abruptly.

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

She jumped, startled by the rapping at the front door.

She looked out of the window, seeing Ralph's car parked outside.

She opened the door, letting her partner into the house.

"You look like you've seen a ghost, darling," Ralph said as he entered.

"The pipes are making some odd noises," Mariette explained. "We'll have a plumber come over to check the place again. I don't want faulty pipes messing up this commission."

"I love this neighborhood," Ralph said, breathing in the scented air. "So much history to these old houses." He glanced behind him, outside of the door.

"Missing something?" Mariette asked.

"Oh, I thought I saw someone walking up to the house," he replied. "A woman with a baby stroller. I was going to help her up the front stairs if she wanted to see the house."

"There's a ramp around the side," Mariette noted, "in case we need to accommodate a wheelchair or stroller. The former occupant had the ramp installed."

Ralph closed the door and peered out the window in the front formal. "Well," he said, "there's no one there now. My mistake."

Mariette looked around the house, making sure that everything was ready for the showing. Her eyes fell upon the mantel.

There, next to the flickering flame of the candle she had

lit, stood three statues made of malachite and gold. A lion, a panther, and a wolf.

\* \* \*

Mariette knocked on the door at 999 Canto Street. She hadn't been there since it had sold six weeks earlier. A middle-aged woman dressed in haute couture answered. "Mariette!" she smiled. "Please, come in."

"I brought you a housewarming gift." Mariette smiled. "A bottle of wine. Bodegas Marqués de Murrieta. It scored a ninety-six. I think you'll like it."

Camellia Burgoyne accepted the wine, placing it on a countertop. "What a lovely gift. Thank you!"

"How is the house?" Mariette asked a bit nervously.

"Fine," Camellia replied. "Thank you for representing the sellers so professionally. I had heard that you have a reputation for being able to conduct web research, put together contracts, and expedite closings like no other. Still, it must have been a strain on the Koenigs, selling this house after they had already moved into their new one. By the way, I saw your name as listing agent on the *For Sale* sign outside 262 Piano. That's just about the most magnificent house in this neighborhood. And that's saying something. Those columns in front—it looks like something out of a movie. A very masculine house. Is that okay to say?"

They sat down in the formal living room, looking out onto the oak-lined street.

"Ralph and I just picked up that listing," Mariette replied. "Six bedrooms, six full baths. Plus a few powder rooms. A five-car garage. A pool with a pool house. And that sweeping double stairway! Oh, my goodness. That thing is made for wedding

pictures. Plus, it features limestone from the Bybee quarries. If you're looking for another property, I could give you a private pre-public tour. Maybe you could flip this house and move in just around the corner."

Camellia offered Mariette a cup of freshly brewed coffee. "That house is gorgeous. Built the same year as this one, I believe. But we are perfectly content here. I think we are more than happy to take a break from house-hunting," she answered. "We did some research when we were deciding to buy this place; we drove up and down these streets every weekend for months, waiting for the right one to put a *For Sale* sign in the front yard. This neighborhood has quite an inventory of houses; there's always something up for sale. And, without divulging too much information, the Piano Street house is a bit pricey."

"Even with all the local mythology surrounding the place included in the asking price?"

"We heard some things," Camellia replied, happy to recite the deliciously sordid rumors. "Such as that the house used to belong to an enigmatic old man, who died about three months ago, leaving no heirs. According to the obituary, he was quite wealthy. Even if no one seems to know how he came by his fortune. There are rumors that he was a powerful gangster living here under a false name. Maybe even in witness protection. But that he still maintained connections to all sorts of international scoundrels. The Mafia. Cuban drug cartels. The Japanese Yakuza. The KGB. The rumors all sound very Cold War spy thriller-like."

"Well, I'm selling his house, not his secrets." Mariette smiled. "Although from what you have heard, I suspect that I am much safer not knowing the latter."

Mariette put cream in her coffee. As she looked outside, a woman walked by, pushing an empty stroller. The woman was unkempt, wearing a green suit with a green pencil skirt, a strand of pearls, and a pillbox hat.

"She's quite the sight, isn't she?" Camellia noted.

"Who is she?" Mariette asked as the woman walked out of sight.

"A local homeless woman," Camellia said. "She roams the neighborhood all day long, pushing that empty stroller. We would see her when we were looking for houses in this neighborhood. I don't know where she goes at night. I hope she has someplace safe to go. At least she doesn't smell. Sometimes the homeless smell wretched. She doesn't smell at all. She must get cleaned up somewhere."

"This neighborhood is littered with multimillion-dollar homes," Mariette noted. "A homeless woman hardly fits in."

"See that outfit she's in?" Camellia gestured. "Vintage Oleg Cassini. And that string of pearls around her neck is real. I know real pearls when I see them. She's very Jacqueline Kennedy in her look. I would suspect that poor woman is trapped somewhere in the early 1960s."

"With that quality of outfit, why is she homeless?"

"I don't know for sure that she is," Camellia corrected. "It could be that she has a mental illness and perhaps lives in one of the few rundown houses around here. Not every house is turnkey two-plus million. Some look like they are abandoned, even if the groundskeepers keep the yards up to housing association standards. You know, while I was outside picking up a local newspaper just the other day, she walked behind me. She was mumbling to herself: 'One of the ways to keep her here is to

get her pregnant. That will fix her,' as she pushed that empty baby carriage."

"That's so sad," Mariette replied. "And somewhat disturbing. But she looks harmless."

"We assume she is," Camellia said. "Every time someone goes to talk to her, to make sure she is okay, she manages to disappear before we can get to her. She may look disheveled and tired, but trust me, that lady is quick."

Mariette's phone rang. She pushed the button on her earpiece.

Static.

Mariette hung up, noting the lack of any caller ID.

"Everything okay?" Camellia asked.

"Fine," Mariette replied. "Probably just Ralph telling me to get to 262 Piano and help him stage the house. We had the old furniture removed. It was a little too much hunting-lodge-studded leather and old cigar smoke for modern tastes. It's time to inject some new life into those old bones."

\* \* \*

"Ralph," Mariette said as she telephoned Ralph. It was three days later. 262 Piano had sold surprisingly quickly, and they had a new listing in the same neighborhood.

"Yes, darling?"

"My car just broke down. I got it in for repairs, but all the car rental places are closed. I know we have that evening showing at 646 Horn tonight. Showing off those dramatic lights the gardeners just put in around the property. Not to mention all those beautiful chandeliers inside the house glowing. Can you pick me up?"

"Sorry, darling, but I need to stay put. The outside of the

house is fabulous. The gardeners are working magic, blending the remaining original Japanese garden elements into more modern landscaping. But the inside still needs some remodeling. Things that I noticed in the evening light that weren't so visible in the daytime. We need me to be here so I can guide any viewers to the more beautiful parts of the residence and guide them past those places in need of an architectural nip-and-tuck. Get here as soon as you can."

"I'll take the bus."

"Public transportation, darling!?"

"How else am I going to get there? I don't trust ridesharing. No getting into a car with a stranger for me. You can give me a ride home. I'll get a rental first thing tomorrow morning," Mariette said. "I may have come a long way since my starving undergrad school, Ralph, but I still remember how buses work. Exact change only. No eye contact with anyone."

"Wear a mask," he reminded her. "Federal law. And take an express. Please."

"I'll be there as soon as possible."

Mariette caught a local bus.

She took a seat. As she subtly surveyed her fellow passengers, she noted a woman in a familiar green suit with a strand of pearls and a pillbox hat. The woman rested her head on an empty stroller. Her long, dirty hair hid her face from view.

She gently rocked the stroller back and forth. Singing to it. *Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetops, When the wind blows, the cradle will rock, When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, And down will come baby, cradle and all.*

Everyone made it a point to ignore her.

Then the woman started mumbling to herself: "What's

going on, Momma?" she asked an unseen companion. "Why isn't my baby moving? I just came in to check on her in her crib. But my baby's not moving. She's not moving, Momma!"

Mariette diverted her eyes, feeling ghoulish for eavesdropping.

She stood up to get off at her stop. That meant standing right in front of the woman with the empty stroller.

"You can know," the woman said to Mariette. "You can know."

Mariette rushed off the bus, breathing in the air outside as deeply as she could.

\* \* \*

Mariette sat at her computer in her kitchen, pulling up old deeds and searching old newspaper articles now archived online. Something was going on in the houses she was selling. She sensed it.

"999 Canto," she read to herself. "Built in 1922 by Judge Wilbor Edgar and his wife, Merrilee. They had a daughter, Jacqueline, born 1944."

Mariette looked through photographs of the family, as reported in the local press. Judge Edgar and his brother, a prominent OBGYN, were politically ambitious. Jacqueline didn't seem to be fitting the family mold: "You became quite the rebel," Mariette observed. "From the look of you, Jacqueline, you weren't living up to your father's expectations of what his daughter should be. I'm guessing from the photographs that you were turning out more Haight-Ashbury than International Debutante Ball." There was a striking photograph of beautiful young Jacqueline in a 1962 newspaper article, dressed in a paisley miniskirt, expressing her support for women's rights,

including advocating for women to work outside the home, have their own credit, not be trapped in traditional gender role expectations, and lead independent lives.

*This place is so backward*, Jacqueline had told the reporter. *I'm going to Soho, London. Where I can live as a more liberated woman.*

But Jacqueline never made it to Soho. In 1963, hidden behind news of John F. Kennedy's assassination, there was a local wedding announcement.

Jacqueline Edgar had married Salvatore Bahia, a man twenty years her elder. Gone was the vibrant Jacqueline. Mariette looked closely at the wedding photograph. Jacqueline was withdrawn and pale. And her belly belied a bump.

"Mr. Bahia, recently relocated to the area, has quickly established himself as a real estate tycoon. He has built numerous luxurious homes in the area, most notably on Piano, Horn, Piccolo, and Woodwind Streets," Mariette read aloud from the article. "But the couple will take up residence at Mr. Bahia's most magnificent home, located at 262 Piano. No honeymoon plans have been announced."

Mariette searched through the vital statistics files. To Mariette's eye, Jacqueline had been pregnant when she married Bahia. The baby should have been born sometime in the spring of 1964.

Finally, Mariette found an entry: Lenore Merrilee Bahia was born in late March 1964. There was no birth announcement in the society pages. Better to not have the neighbors do the math on how long it had been between the wedding and the birth.

"Where are you now, little one?" Mariette asked aloud.

“We just sold 262 Piano, and there were no heirs to claim it. The proceeds went into a charitable trust dedicated to building parks and funding the arts. The Edgar-Bahia Family Trust. Your father and your grandfather were thick as thieves.” Mariette stopped on a short one-paragraph story, published in April 1964.

*Lenore M. Bahia, infant daughter of businessman Salvatore Bahia, was discovered unresponsive in her crib Monday night. The cause of death has been determined to be an accident. The burial will be a private family ceremony. In lieu of flowers, please direct donations to the Edgar-Bahia Family Trust. The article felt compelled to add: The infant’s mother fled the house in grief and has not been located. She is believed to be hysterical. Please contact the family if you see her.* The picture showed the baby in the crib, wrapped in a blanket decorated with little roses, her eyes covered with an editorial bar.

Next to the little body was a pillow, still bearing the imprint of her little face.

She looked up Lenore’s death certificate. It was signed by the doctor who had been summoned to the house: Dr. Napoleon Edgar.

“Judge Edgar’s brother,” Mariette noted. A quick check of the contemporary society pages showed the two Edgar brothers, and Mr. Bahia, posing with cocktails in hand at numerous events supporting the opera, the symphony, and the ballet. Nubile young ballerinas, feigning smiles, posed with the older men.

Mariette’s phone rang.

There was no caller ID.

She knew what to expect as she answered. She was not afraid. “Hello?”

Static.

“One for yes, and two for no,” Mariette instructed, sensing that words were not possible for her caller. “Do you understand? Can you do that?”

A burst of static.

Mariette went with her first guess: “Is that you, Jacqueline?”

Static. Static.

Mariette braced herself as she asked her next question; there weren’t many candidates for who could be calling. This could be a very long-distance call. “Lenore?”

Static.

Mariette had no idea how this informed conversation between her and a deceased infant had come about, but it was beyond the point of worrying about those details now. It was no longer a question of if she believed in ghosts; it was now a question of why this ghost believed in her.

“I saw the story about you,” Mariette said. “About your daddy finding you.”

Static. Static.

Mariette pondered the response. “No?” she whispered. “That’s not correct?”

Static.

Mariette had to repeat her question to herself, going through the assumptions she had made in staging the question. “He did not find you.”

There was silence. Mariette realized Lenore wanted another question. It was either about Bahia finding her, or... or Bahia being Lenore’s father.

“Was Mr. Bahia your daddy?” Lenore asked.

Static. Static.

Mariette thought of the old woman, pushing around the empty stroller. The old woman who had found her daughter dead in her crib. *That must be Jacqueline*, she realized. Something about Mariette being in the two houses that had oppressed Jacqueline must have prompted the communication. *What happened to you, Jacqueline?*

“They got you pregnant,” Mariette realized, going over the words that Camellia Burgoyne had overheard. “Then they forced you to marry Bahia to keep your place in society. Where were you going to go with no money of your own? Being married, your family wouldn’t have to face the scandal they had ordered. But Bahia decided that he wasn’t going to raise another man’s child. Being a judge’s son-in-law wasn’t worth that, even if it did bring him properly into society.”

The phone emitted a soft buzz of static.

“And Judge Edgar?” Mariette looked through the photographs on the society pages. One caught her attention.

“The Bahia-Edgar Trust Funds New Hospital Wing,” Mariette read the caption. Bahia, Judge Edgar, and Dr. Edgar were cutting a red ribbon with prop scissors.

All three men were smiling. “I wonder what agreements they had between them,” Mariette asked aloud. “It’s funny how individuals can make pacts with one another, not realizing that in actuality they are making deals with the Devil.”

As she looked through the photographs, Mariette realized that Merrilee Edgar was not present in any of them.

“What about Merrilee?” Mariette asked. “What about your grandmother?”

The phone was silent, but for some reason a nursery rhyme was playing in her mind: *Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetops*,

*When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.*

She did a web search, looking for Merrilee Edgar. She found her in the Vital Statistics records.

Merrilee Edgar had committed suicide in June 1964. Her death certificate was signed by Dr. Napoleon Edgar. “I doubt that your grandmother killed herself,” Mariette murmured to the phone. “I’m betting that she was the first person your mother called. Merrilee saw you in that crib. She was probably the one who told Jacqueline to run and never stop running.”

Static.

“Bahia killed you in that crib, didn’t he?”

Static.

Mariette searched the Vital Statistics records. Bahia, Judge Edgar, and Doctor Edgar were all dead now.

Whatever justice faced them, they were experiencing it elsewhere.

Mariette kept searching but could find nothing more about Jacqueline after that fateful evening in 1964. No mention of her in the society pages, no death certificate. She had simply disappeared. “Where could you run to?” Mariette asked aloud. “You had nothing on you, nowhere to go. How could you have stayed in this neighborhood all these years? Why would you have stayed in this neighborhood after all these years?”

\* \* \*

Mariette sat on the limestone steps outside of 646 Horn. The wind was cool and rustled through the leaves of the oaks outside the house. 646 Horn, Mariette had learned, was one of Salvatore Bahia’s properties. He sold it in the summer of 1964. There was even a magazine article in a local glossy magazine about the property. The landscaping was epic in its day. Bahia

had spared no expense planting an exquisite Japanese-style garden, complete with weeping willows, cherry blossom trees, stone pagodas, and a koi pond. Given the historic character of the gardens, the subsequent parade of owners had done little to change the landscaping. Time itself was the garden's primary keeper.

The koi pond was long gone. The cherry blossom trees had died. Only the weeping willows and a handful of pagodas remained from the original gardens. The house had gone through numerous owners since then, all of whom discussed that it was an uncomfortable house to live in. It had been on sale with another agent for over three years before Mariette and Ralph took over the listing. No other house in the neighborhood had ever stood empty for so long.

As Mariette sat on the steps, the woman with the stroller approached, singing to herself. *Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetops...* Her voice was still sweet and mellow.

Mariette's phone rang. Right on cue.

No caller ID. But by now, Mariette expected that.

The phone's ringtone stopped the woman singing. Mariette finally got the opportunity to look at the woman; she did not appear as old as Mariette had thought she would. But the woman appeared beaten and starved; her eyes were filled with sadness. There was no other emotion in her.

"Hello?" Mariette answered the phone while keeping an eye on the woman.

Static.

Mariette held out the phone to the old woman. "It's for you."

The woman looked confused but took the phone into her

hands with incredible gentleness. She placed the phone to her ear.

Whatever was said, Mariette could not hear it.

The woman sank to the ground, tears rolling down her face. "My baby," she cried. "My baby."

Mariette could not bear to look; she averted her eyes, looking at the step she was sitting on.

There was a sound. The soft thud of a phone in its protective case hitting the concrete of the sidewalk.

Mariette looked up. Her phone was on the ground.

The woman and the stroller were gone.

The phone screen was empty, but the call was still active.

*The message was not complete*, Mariette realized.

"There is something else?" she asked, picking up the phone.

Static.

"Here?"

Static.

"Inside the house?" The previous occupants had said there was a disquiet to the residence.

Static. Static.

"Outside?"

Static.

"This would be a lot easier if you could talk, but I understand that you don't make the rules," Mariette said. "Just buzz at me when you need to get my attention."

Mariette walked around the yard; freshly planted azaleas were blooming against the walls of the house. There was no noise.

She unlatched the back gate. The gardeners had left some

of their equipment on the back porch. Shovels, rakes, hoes. Bags of potting soil and decorative stones and plants, intended to recreate some of the Japanese gardens. Mariette looked over the quarter-acre backyard.

“This is a big lot,” she observed. “Am I in the right place?”

There was static on the phone.

“Okay,” she said, looking toward the back of the stone-walled lot. “Am I at least looking in the right direction?”

Static.

It was then that Mariette noticed it. A slight mound to the back-left corner of the yard, covered with a decades-old weeping willow tree. The tree was surrounded by small bricks, smooth black stones, and weathered conch shells. The aged conch shells were oddly out of place. They had caught Mariette’s eye.

As Mariette looked at the tree and the small mound of earth at its feet, her phone let out a burst of plaintive static.

“There?” she asked. “By the conch shells?”

STATIC

Mariette took one of the shovels the groundskeepers had left out and approached the mound. Her phone buzzed a sharp pulse of static. Mariette put her phone on speaker and placed it on the ground next to her. Then she started to slowly excavate the dirt. She was happy that Ralph wasn’t here to see her in her heels and her skirt, digging in a forgotten corner of the garden.

She dug a few feet, the soil yielding to the shovel. Then she saw it: the end of a strand of pearls buried in the dirt.

She carefully cleared away a little more of the dirt. A small fragment of faded green fabric saw light for the first time in decades.

She dug just a little more. Another shred of an aged garment emerged—a baby’s blanket, decorated with little pink roses.

Mariette placed the shovel on the ground. “I need to call the police now,” Mariette said to her phone. “I hope that I have done okay by you.”

There was a low murmur of static; then the phone went silent.

Mariette stood in silence for a moment before she called the police to come and finish the work she had started. She would tell them that she was doing some yard work, getting the house ready for showing. She couldn’t tell them the truth; she would sound hysterical.

Mariette knew exactly where she was: in the garden, in the back of a house that was unoccupied in early 1964. A place that Jacqueline had thought she could hide until morning. A place that she never had the opportunity to leave. Because someone had found her there, someone who needed to assure her silence.

“But it’s not about Bahia, Judge Edgar, or Dr. Edgar,” Mariette said, as she lowered herself to the ground and sat next to the shallow grave. “It’s not about the evil secrets they took with them to their graves. It’s about your being free, Jacqueline. You and Lenore. You’re both free, now.”

Mariette looked at the back of the house, realizing that she didn’t have to disclose anything paranormal. The paranormal had disclosed itself and now was vindicated.

Justice had just put on its showing.

\* \* \*

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

## Discussion Questions

1. Susan says she believes that “there’s more to us than a mortal flesh-and-blood machine.” Do you agree or disagree with her and why? Can you answer yes to this question and still not believe in ghosts?
2. Do you think a real estate agent has a duty to tell a potential buyer that the owner of the house claimed the house was haunted? Is there some standard of paranormal proof that would elevate the house to require disclosure?
3. Have you ever experienced a paranormal entity? What level of proof would you personally require in order to believe in ghosts? Would you need more than a series of static phone calls?
4. What (*if anything*) of her entire paranormal experience in the story is the narrator required to tell a potential buyer?
5. Why do you think people are willing to believe in ghosts and spirits? Is there something about humanity, or specific to the person, that makes them more willing to believe?

\* \* \*

# Author Information

## Soul Mate

**Babette Gallard** is the author of *Future Imperfect* (BAD PRESS iNK, 2023), and writes fiction and nonfiction. Her short fiction has appeared in *Mslexia*, *Panorama*, *African Writers Magazine*, and *Steel Jackdaw*. Based in Johannesburg, she has worked as a content creator for the Lapalala Wilderness Biodiversity Centre, comanages the LightFoot Guides on slow travel, and is launching *This Way Up*, a podcast about changemakers. Threads/Instagram Bluesky @babetteauthor.bsky.social; [www.babettegallard.com](http://www.babettegallard.com)

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**Gordon Sun** is a surgeon exploring the interstitial spaces within healthcare, science, and technology. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *If There's Anyone Left*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Dread Machine*, NewMyths.com, *Solstitia*, *After Dinner Conversation*, *TOWER*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Penumbra*, *Daikaijuzine*, the *Consumed* anthology, and other publications.

## Today is the Day

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**Sharon Frame Gay**, award-winning author, has been internationally published in over two hundred magazines and anthologies. Her short story collections include *The Wrong End of a Bullet*, *Song of the Highway*, and *The Nomad Diner*. Her debut novel is *Where the Crows Fly*. Sharon lives between the mountains and the sea with her little dog, Henry Goodheart. Facebook @Sharon Frame Gay - Writer; Instagram @sharonframegay; X (Twitter) @sharonframegay

### **The Showing**

**Laura J. Campbell** lives and writes in Houston, Texas. Mrs. Campbell won the 2007 James B. Baker Award for short story for her science fiction tale, *416175*. Over forty-five of her short stories have appeared in *Pressure Suite: Digital Science Fiction Anthology 3*, *Under the Full Moon's Light*, *Gods & Services*, *Page & Spine*, *The Weird and Whatnot*, and other publications. Her two novels, *Blue Team One* and *Five Houses*, are currently available online. She is encouraged in her writing by her children, Alexander and Samantha.

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\* \* \*

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