

WIND on the MOON



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*In memory of Jeremy Herrmann, even though I can't
decide whether or not he would think it's weird.*

Wind on the Moon

We did it so America could feel proud again. That's what I tell myself whenever the silvery light shines through my window, going liar liar liar liar. I say, I have nothing to atone for. I say, No one should harbor guilt over what's done for America.

We didn't consider the ethical questions at the time. My creative partner, Jimbo, repurposed props left over from an elementary school play about the solar system. I built a lunar module from cardboard and aluminum foil. We interviewed dozens of struggling actors and asked how well they could keep secrets and would they like to be United States heroes. Any little flaws in the production didn't matter, since viewers were less sophisticated back then. People bought it because they wanted to. It went over so well that Jimbo suggested a sequel where the astronauts returned and discovered a race of tiny warlike men, but I'd gotten too busy at that point.

My superiors brought me in on several other projects. I joined the Round Earth Belief Maintenance Committee. I took over as head of Dinosaur Bone Placement Operations. I spearheaded a task force in charge of periodically releasing nude celebrity photos, to distract the public from things they didn't need to know about. I lost touch with Jimbo for a while. I think that's when his troubles began, when he lost his sense of purpose and started second-guessing our mission. Too much idleness will do that to a person.

Maybe I should have done the sequel. But asking what if won't bring Jimbo back.

My youngest son brags about how his dad runs covert ops, hinting that I assassinate dictators in foreign countries every weekend.

If only I did anything that clear cut and honest. I'm not sure if dictators really exist. Or foreign countries—I've never been to one, have you?

The last I heard from Jimbo was a postcard that read, The truth shall set you free. I tried calling, but his number had been disconnected. Oh, Jimbo, I whispered, what are you about to do? It's too late for the truth. A week later they found him in a hotel bathtub. Suicide, they claimed.

Tonight, as usual, I will wait until my wife and children fall asleep, and I will go outside. I will sit in my yard with a tumbler of whiskey, and I will stare at the moon, the big empty rock that's been lording it over us throughout the millennia, interfering with our tides and our gravity and our werewolves. And I will pick up whatever's handy—a brick, a stone, a broken bottle—and hurl it up at that glowing circle, never once disturbing its calm, untouched surface.

Variables

If Martha has five lollipops and buys three times that many, how many lollipops does she have in total? If Martha picked three flowers today, seven flowers yesterday, and five flowers the day before, how many flowers per day is that on average?

Min thinks it's "so stinking cute" the way Dad worked my name into the homeschool textbooks he coauthored. "I can't handle it!" she says as she flips through More Fun by the Numbers. "You're keeping these, right?"

I point at the "Donate" box.

It's about six months since he died, six months and a day since Mom and I started talking again, and almost two years since my parents refused to meet Min or attend our wedding. Show these data as a line graph.

Mom sticks her head in the door and asks, "Do you girls want cake?" She already fed us each a huge piece this morning. Before we can answer, she starts listing the things we can have with cake: coffee, tea, ginger ale. Then she disappears, probably to get us cake whether we want it or not.

"Faye is too adorable," Min says.

When I offered to come help Mom move into her new condo, I assumed she would refuse. The last time I was in this house, she kept blowing her nose and helplessly repeating how much she loved the sinner, while Dad stayed locked in his office. But she didn't refuse, which I guess means something. I'm not sure what. Solve for x .

I hesitated to ask Min to go with me, but so far she thinks everything is "cute" and "adorable," as if we're in one of her kitschy art installations.

We finish loading the truck after dinner. After Mom turns in, Min and I head up to my old room and inflate our air mattress. It's strange to see it empty in here, without my snow globes and Narnia books. We sit on the floor and lean against the window seat where I used to sit making friendship bracelets. Min pulls out a bottle of bourbon and some plastic cups from her overnight bag and pours two shots.

The door opens, and I scoot away from Min like I'm sixteen again. I try to hide my cup.

"Remember there's still cake if you're hungry," Mom says.

"We're having cocktails, Faye. Won't you join us?" Min holds the bottle up and waves it around, as if she and Faye are two besties having a girls' night.

"That sounds like exactly what I need," Mom says.

"Are you serious?" I say.

"Oh, Honey, we started drinking red wine ages ago for your father's heart."

"Cheers," Min says, and she hands Mom a shot.

They clink their cups.

Min chooses this vegan place for breakfast, which I expect Mom to grumble about, but she cleans her plate and finishes my hemp waffles. Before we leave, Min jumps up to ask the manager about a frog sculpture by the register.

"Min's a sweet girl," Mom says. "I'm glad you brought a friend."

"Friend. I see."

Mom sighs. "I'm trying. Okay? I'm trying."

I suppose she is. I don't know why this annoys me even more.

Eventually Dad quit putting my name in his books. I'd been caught kissing the pastor's daughter, but I don't know if that was why. I swore to my parents that we'd only been hugging, that our camp counselor had misunderstood what she saw, and they seemed to believe me. So that might not have been it. Maybe he just thought I was too old for it, that I wouldn't think it was cool anymore. We never discussed it. I only know one day I picked up his latest proof, and there were no Marthas converting grams of sugar to ounces, or building kites with two obtuse angles.

"Your mom was a lot more chill than I expected," Min says as she drives us home.

"It went fine," I say.

"From how you talk about her I thought she'd have an exorcist waiting for us or something."

I reach into the back seat and dig around for my water bottle. That's when I notice them—Min's brought all of Dad's books with us.

"Are you trying to brush up on your factor trees or something?" I ask.

Min sighs. "You can't give those away."

"That wasn't your fucking decision," I say. And at the same time, I'm so glad to see the books. My books, that I'm in.

Min sniffs, the way she does when she's trying not to cry. My tone was harsher than I meant it to be, but I don't apologize yet. I stare out the window, telling myself that we'll have a real discussion about all of this later, as soon as I can figure out where to start. But where do I start? There is not enough information to solve this problem.

The Emptiness Walks with You

You hate those stories. Out of everything in the two hundred dollar textbook your community college teacher assigned, the worst are those ones that go, You're walking down a dark road, thinking about emptiness, and you're like, No I'm not! I'm reading a story! Do they think they can fool you? It's stupid that you even have to learn this crap. You're here for an associate degree in business, so you can be a CEO; you don't need to know about Jane Austen or iambic pentameter or whatever for that. The only good thing about this class is Caitlyn J., who sits in front of you and wears lace thongs with low rise jeans, giving you the perfect view while Ms. Brookfield blathers about assonance. Ha. Assonance.

Today you get put in a group with Caitlyn J., Caitlyn R., and Kaitlyn. You're supposed to talk about symbolism and then share your ideas with the class. Ms. Brookfield pulls this stunt every day. You want to say, Excuse me, but aren't you the one being paid to teach here, and so shouldn't you tell us what the symbolism means?

Caitlyn J. says she thinks the sun symbolizes light, and Caitlyn R. nods her head. You roll your eyes and say, The sun is light. It doesn't symbolize light. That's not what symbolism is. The glare Caitlyn J. gives lets you know you've lost any chance of seeing the rest of her thong, but you can't just let someone be that incorrect.

Caitlyn R. says, Fine, what do you think the sun symbolizes? And you say, It doesn't symbolize anything. Not every single thing in the story is a symbol. And Kaitlyn says, Then what are we supposed to say when we present? You consider the story, which you barely skimmed, and say, The fog. It symbolizes the narrator's confusion. Caitlyn J. says, If the sun can't symbolize light, how can fog symbolize confusion? Fog makes things confusing, like the sun makes things

light. But Caitlyn R. says, Whatever, and writes it down. Fine, Kaitlyn says, but I'm not going to talk.

After class you have work, and then you head home. Or rather, you head to your friend Jeremy's apartment. Your mother had one of her nights again and kicked you out while you were in your pajamas. You need your own place, but you don't make enough at Smoothie Experience to even cover your car, which breaks down every other day. You'd have to drop out of school and work full time to even make enough for one of those studio apartments by the abandoned mall. So you couch surf and wait for your mom to call and say, Pick up chicken for tonight, as if nothing ever happened, which she always eventually does.

Jeremy breezes through and announces that his girlfriend is moving in, so you need to find a different place to crash. You say, No problem, but Jeremy was the last friend you could still ask favors from.

You call your father, who sighs when you describe how this time your mother accused you of planting microphones around her house.

Jesus, he says. That woman.

You hope he'll invite you out to his place in San Diego, although he never has before. The two of you could sit on the beach and drink beer, and you'll come up with a brilliant business idea that he'll invest in. The napkins at Smoothie Experience are all printed with the story of its founder, Bryce, whose dad gave him \$20,000 to start his first smoothie bar. You read those napkins at work, over and over.

Well, that's rough, your father says. But I know you can handle it. There's a pause. You hear him typing on his computer.

Um, you say, Could I come stay with you for a while?

The sound of typing continues. Hmm? Ah, now's not a good time. Maybe you could come for your spring break, though. That'd be fun, right?

Sure, you say.

On Monday you catch Ms. Brookfield in the parking lot. Her car looks even shittier than yours—that's what knowing about Jane Austen gets you. You tell her you've been enjoying her class, but you need to withdraw from school due to other obligations. You anticipate her pitying look, knowing she'll probably want to talk about it. Maybe she'll usher you into her office, where she'll offer you a cup of tea, and as you tell her about your situation she'll shed a single tear. You can't give up on your dreams, she'll say. You're the brightest student I've ever taught. You'll look wistful and say, I'll find some other way, somehow, and she'll admire your courage even as her heart breaks. The two of you then spend a memorable afternoon discussing great literature, which you still think is bullshit, but you impress her with your ideas—The fog symbolizes his confusion, she'll exclaim. Of course! I never even thought of it that way!

Ms. Brookfield takes the withdraw form and signs it without looking up. Have a good one, she says, getting into her shitty car.

You take your textbooks to the campus store and try to sell them back, and all you get for them is twenty-two dollars total, and they won't take your stupid literature book at all. A new edition is coming out, the cashier says. You sigh and flip through it, glancing at a random page—You're walking down a dark road, thinking about emptiness, how singular it is that there should be a word to describe a quantity of nothing, and soon you feel the emptiness around you, and the emptiness walks with you—and then you hurl the book into the nearest trash can. Shut up, you think. Shut up, you piece of shit story. You don't know me. You don't know the first thing about me.

Lawn of the Year

The Martins owned 107 Crater Lane, a Victorian surrounded by sugar maples and pink dogwoods. It had a stained-glass front door and a wraparound porch strewn with twinkle lights. The front yard had a tire swing and a statue of an angel. Mrs. Martin's garden was featured in the local newspaper twice.

Ours was number 105, the third boxy rental we'd lived in since my father drowned. It had vinyl siding, and our only tree was one scrawny crape myrtle.

We trespassed on a whim that first time. One October day Mom stared out at the Martins' brilliant red and gold foliage. Our crape myrtle had already lost all its leaves. The Martins were out, so she took me next door to jump in their leaves while she took pictures. A few weeks later I lost a tooth, and Mom thought wouldn't it be cute to get a shot of me grinning in the tire swing. Soon, whenever the Martins left for church or the girls' ballet recitals, Mom would break out the digital camera she'd won from a PTA raffle. I got into the spirit of it too, begging her to take my picture with the Martins' cat, Pud, whom I renamed Alexandra.

I must have been seven or eight the afternoon we decided to peek in their windows. The living room was straight out of Southern Living, with handmade quilts draped across weathered furniture, shelves of antique books, jars filled with dried flowers and pine cones—stuff that would look messy in our house but somehow looked homey in theirs

"Why don't you see if the back door is locked?" Mom said. "I bet it's not."

I knew this was probably taking it too far.

"I'll keep watch," she said. "It's fun to see how other people live, don't you think?"

My curiosity winning out, I slipped inside. Framed cross-stitch sayings, like "Mom's Bed & Breakfast—Make Your Own!" lined the walls. I pictured them repeating that joke every morning and laughing. I moved on to the kitchen, keen to see what was in the refrigerator. Fresh fruit. Half a cheesecake. A six-pack of beer with crescent moons on the labels. Diet dinners filled the freezer.

Upstairs, I found the Martin girls' rooms. I could tell whose was whose from the dolls that matched their coloring—a blonde for Celia and a redhead for Andrea, each lying atop a neatly made bed. They were close to my age, but we never spoke—just as well, since I'd have felt awkward if they came over and saw all our pictures of their house. Celia's dresser held exactly ten travel-sized bottles of lavender hand lotion, and I couldn't help taking one and putting it in my pocket. I kept it for years, never using any.

When I came out, Mom smiled and rubbed her hands together. "Did you see anything interesting? Or unusual?" she said.

"They have an old pinball game in their den," I said. "It still works. You don't even have to put a quarter in."

"Anything else? What about—"

Mrs. Martin's car pulled into the driveway. She jumped out and stalked over to us. "What's going on?"

I huddled behind my mother, grasping the lotion bottle in my pocket.

"I thought I saw smoke," Mom said. "Could you have left the stove on?"

I barely made out Mrs. Martin's words, which I wouldn't understand until years later, when similar words would be said to me: "He's through with you."

Mom took my hand and led me silently back home. We moved again a month later.

The man in my bed now asks about my childhood. I describe the garden, the twinkle lights, the pink dogwoods. I show him my photo album. The inkjet prints have faded, making me look like a ghost haunting the Martins' house.

"That's what I'd have guessed," he says. "That you grew up in some kind of magical fairy land."

I nod. "Every detail was perfect."

Egg Baby

We've had Addison and her egg all week. She named it Molly and drew its face with permanent marker: two gaping eyes and a mouth like a sideways capital "D." It's for a kindergarten class project on parenthood. At night Molly sleeps in a cardboard bassinet in the refrigerator.

"How does that teach her about parenthood?" says Jennifer, Addison's mom, with a snort. "I didn't get to keep her in the fridge all night after she was born."

We were only dropping Addison off at the lake house, but Jennifer insisted we stay for a drink. I asked Jake if my being here would be a problem, but he said everything's cordial with them now. Jennifer's seeing someone herself, a Unitarian pastor who fosters dogs and plays the guitar.

"They need an egg that wakes up and screams every hour," Jake says, pouring us each a glass of white wine.

Addison sits on the pier and dresses Molly in a paper tutu. I tell her Molly looks pretty.

"Want to do her hair?" Addison hands me a tiny plastic comb.

I say sure and pretend to style the egg's bald head.

"That's not how you do it," Addison says. "Here."

"They had us carry around bags of flour in middle school," Jennifer says. "To scare us out of getting pregnant. Isn't she too young for that?"

"There's no birds and bees stuff," Jake says. "It's about learning to be nurturing."

"Give her back," Addison says, and Molly slips from my grasp, landing in the water with a plop. Addison screams.

I dive in. Through the murky water I see the egg drifting away. I reach out and close my hands around it carefully. When I surface, Addison is weeping.

"She drowned her, Daddy. She did it on purpose."

I say Molly's okay and pretend to do CPR.

"It's too late," Addison wails. "Her ghost is coming out."

"I think someone's tired," Jake says, scooping Addison up and carrying her to the house.

"Poor you, you're soaked," Jennifer says. "You can borrow something of mine."

We go inside, and I change into Jennifer's jeans and charity 5K sweatshirt, nothing else. I draw the line at borrowing her underwear. I follow Jennifer around the kitchen while she hunts down a plastic bag for my wet things. Molly sits on a doll chair on the counter. I hitch up the jeans, which are loose around my hips, and avoid Molly's stare.

"Sorry I don't have anything that doesn't swallow you," Jennifer says, with a shrug. "So do you two have exciting plans?"

I say we might get takeout and watch TV.

"He can do better than that. On a Saturday night?"

I smile, unsure how to answer. I wonder what she considers exciting plans. Dancing? Box seats at the theater? Jake mentioned once that Jennifer likes "fancy-schmancy stuff." That's how he put it.

Jake comes out of Addison's room and says we should get going. As I turn around, my elbow knocks over Molly's chair. I pick her up and apologize, but I can't save her. Raw yolk covers my hands.

"I've got more eggs. Get me a pen," Jennifer says.

We watch as Jennifer draws Molly's face onto a new egg.

"Perfect," Jake says. "That's putting the old art degree to use."

"Think she'll guess?" she asks, squinting at her work.

"We'll deny everything."

They admire the egg cradled in Jennifer's hand, and I picture them in the hospital after Addison's birth, smiling and cooing, counting tiny fingers.

"Perfect," Jake says again.

Jennifer puts Molly II in her bassinet and offers me a washcloth.

"Out, damned spot," I say. "Ha-ha."

She gives me a closed-lipped smile and waits for me to finish wiping my hands. I apologize some more. I can't stop apologizing.

Jake rubs my shoulders, and I try not to think about him touching this same shirt back when it was on Jennifer. I lean back and breathe in his scent, like I did that night the whole office went to happy hour and I gave him a little hug before leaving. Not meaning anything by it, not really.

"It'll be fine," Jennifer says. "It was an accident."

The Chronicles of Steve

Look, I understand why their story gets so much press. She came from his rib, which is a nice meet cute—or should I say m-e-a-t cute, ha-ha. They both show a lot of skin, and they stir up drama wherever they go. They're basically reality show gold. So, sure, people feel invested in them as a couple, but the fact is, he was never happy with her.

Whenever she went off to gather fruit or hang out with her serpent friend, he'd come looking for me. I begged him to come clean. "She probably knows already," I said.

"I'm too scared," he said. "I worry what others will say."

"What others? The rhinoceros? The bear?"

"Bear," he whispered, stroking my beard. "That's a good nickname for you."

"You and your compulsion to name everything. Can't you stop with the labels?"

Finally one night I'd had enough. "I won't be your dirty little secret," I said. "I want to go out to dinner—in public. Maybe to that nice patch of ground over there."

He said maybe next time, and I said no, no more next times. He looked sad.

Then we heard her calling his name. She staggered over, hair a mess, mascara running down her face. "I see you two," she said. "I see you."

I'll admit, whenever I considered our situation, I pushed her out of my mind. I told myself destiny was on my side, and if she got hurt that was unfortunate, but not my fault.

She clutched a piece of fruit. I recognized it immediately. "Shit, did you eat that?" I said. "Hurry, we've got to induce vomiting." I'd never imagined she'd try something so drastic.

She pushed me away. "It's all your fault. You put these confusing thoughts in his head." She turned and ran. He followed.

"Make her cough it up," I called after him, "or she'll die."

I watched them fighting in the distance. And then I gasped as he took a bite of that same fruit. They always did encourage each other's destructive behavior. That's when I realized I couldn't fix him, the beautiful dumbass.

They moved away soon after, and last I heard they're more miserable than ever—he's turned into a workaholic, and she writes this insufferable mommy blog. She pressured him to give up vegetarianism, and I bet she's got him eating all sorts of horrible tuna casseroles and meatloaf and I don't know what.

As for me, I don't feel any bitterness. Several new guys moved into the neighborhood, and while I'm a private person, let's just say my social calendar is full. The area's pretty gentrified these days—we're a gated community now. Once in a while he comes back and lurks, hoping I'll buzz him in, but I resist that temptation. God created me, I tell myself, and I deserve better.

Like a Bull

In biology class you focus on the video, not that you need to, not while your teacher practices his putting stroke out in the hallway. Parents here frown on biology for the most part—all that Darwin and reproduction and whatnot—so your school doesn't stress it. Instead you watch tapes about drug abuse or personal hygiene or self-esteem while Mr. Davis hits balls into a plastic cup.

Craig Kimbell, who sits beside you, reaches across your desk to swat Missy Grant on the arm. "Hey," Craig says. "Hey. I talked to Nate this morning. He said he enjoyed last night."

Missy keeps her eyes on the video, as if anxious to know what happens next to the angel dust kid.

"He said you rode him like a bull."

Heads turn. Missy's jaw clenches. It takes you a second to understand. At first you hear it as "He says you rode him likeable," which makes no sense. Then you get it. The room falls quiet.

Craig grins. "Yeah. He said you rode him like a goddamn bull."

Missy whips around and glares. Her face reddens, but not, you think, from embarrassment. You slouch, trying to get out of their way, but neither of them even notices you.

"My sex life," Missy says, "is none of your business."

Craig laughs but can't seem to think of a comeback, other than to repeat himself. "Yeah," he says. "Nate said he enjoyed it."

Missy only rolls her eyes. People go back to their conversations and games of hangman. The moment ends, for everyone but you.

Baptist church has taught you that lusting in your heart counts as sin, which is why you automatically replace all your dirty thoughts with images of trees or the ocean. You know that Missy has gone astray; still, you can't help admiring her a little. My sex life is none of

your business. No denials, no shame. My sex life. Missy, who just like you is only fifteen, has had sex. Has a sex life.

Years later, in college, you find yourself entwined with your boyfriend in his narrow dorm bed, which smells of nachos and dirty socks. After months of wheedling, he's managed to get your top off.

"Baby, tell me your fantasies," whispers the naked, freckled boy, a sophomore in public relations.

Your actual fantasies, though, thanks to years of repression, tend toward the abstract. A single wave caressing the beach, the wind blowing against your skirt. Then you remember a certain phrase, one you sometimes repeat to yourself at night, the closest thing to a bona fide fantasy you can muster.

You say, "I want to ride you like a bull."

You expect it to please him, but he pulls away. He stares at you, as if some succubus has replaced the Baptist virgin he'd hoped to seduce. He goes limp.

"Or, you know, whatever," you say, pulling up the covers.

He kisses your forehead. "Look, you don't need to impress me," he says. "I love your innocence."

In two weeks, he will leave you for a nice Catholic girl. You won't miss him. As he falls asleep, you reach between your legs, thinking to yourself, like a bull. Like a bull.

My Friend Jeb

HR asked me to put together something for Jeb, probably because I was the closest thing he had to a friend at Zoom! Wellness Emporium. See, three years ago I gave him a pound of French roast for Secret Santa. Jeb was always the first one to make coffee in the mornings, so when I drew his name that was all I could think to get him. “You require caffeine to wake up every day”—that was literally all I knew about the guy. But his face when he opened it—it was like I’d looked into his soul or something. Every day afterwards he’d tell me how he’d made some of that delicious coffee, until he used it all up, and then he’d say he tried another brand but it wasn’t as good, so he’d gone back to the one I gave him. “Zach knows coffee,” he’d tell everyone, when really I don’t like it much.

So although we’d worked together for years at the same Zoom! branch at the Green Pond Mall, I didn’t know other things about him, like how he’d joined a class for people scared of flying. That is, not until his graduation flight crashed outside Tallahassee. The obituary mentioned only that he was born in Pensacola and survived by a stepbrother there, nothing about any kind of service being held anywhere. At first no one at the store was sure what to do. But everyone remembered me and the coffee, so I was tasked with honoring his memory.

I sat up that night Googling “deceased coworker ideas” and found a lot of stuff, like poems to read, but I couldn’t tell which ones were good. I drank a beer and then another beer. I read lists of different flowers and what they meant. I ran out of beer, so I poked around the kitchen and found a bottle of coconut rum left by my ex-girlfriend, Nika. It was old but still smelled coconutty, so I figured it was fine. It tasted fine. Then I decided to call Nika.

"What is it?" she said.

"I wanted to say hey," I said.

"Okay, you said hey."

"Have you ever heard of candytuft? It's a flower. Guess what it means."

"Goodbye, Zach."

"Wait," I said. "I need to tell someone about Jeb. He was in a plane crash."

"Oh my god—who?"

"Jeb. We worked together. He was an anxious flyer."

"I don't remember you ever mentioning a Jeb."

"Maybe he drank too much coffee. That can exacerbate anxiety."

"Jeb who?"

"Wilkins. I mean Wilcox. Jeb Wilcox. We were sort of friends."

"Look, Zach, I'm sorry. But it's late, and the kids wake up at like six."

I'd forgotten that the guy Nika moved in with had little kids. She was probably terrific with them. "Sure," I said. "Night."

Monday morning I printed out a picture of Jeb from when Zoom! had its last Presidents' Day Blowout Sale—his eyes were half-closed, and he had on a Lincoln hat, but it was all anyone could find. I affixed it to some cardboard and propped it up at customer service, along with a vase of silk flowers. I'd ended up picking random flowers that looked nice, all colors, because I got confused over the different flower meanings. I made a sign saying, "A member of our Zoom! family recently passed. We invite our guests to share a few words with his loved ones," and I left pens for people to sign the picture. HR said the stepbrother in Pensacola would be coming to pick up Jeb's last

paycheck, so I should give the picture, along with any belongings left in Jeb's locker, to him.

I watched as customers walked past Jeb's picture. A few stopped and made sad faces before going on to buy their yoga pants and balance balls. I tried to remember what, if anything, I'd said to Jeb the last time I saw him. Maybe some crack about our new uniforms, but that might have been to someone else. Over in vitamins, Jeb's usual section, a trainee was explaining to customers about the different protein powders we carried, nobody knowing or caring that it should have been Jeb doing it.

At closing time the stepbrother came in to pick up Jeb's things. He regarded the check disappointedly. I handed him a box with Jeb's stuff—some paperbacks and a pair of reading glasses—along with the signed picture. Customers had written a few Bible verses and a heart on it. "I'm sorry for your loss," I said. "Jeb was a terrific guy. We all loved him around here." The stepbrother nodded and shuffled off.

As I was leaving the mall I spotted Jeb's picture in the trash. Maybe Jeb and his stepbrother weren't close, but I thought Jeb deserved better than to be left like that. I took the picture home. I sat in front of the TV that night and drank the rest of the coconut rum. I called Nika again, but I got her voicemail. I tried to imagine Jeb's last moments, when they knew the plane was going down. Did he regret getting on it? Or did he think, if only for a second, I'm flying? No telling what he might have thought, or what else I didn't know about him.

I found an old frame I'd bought and never used, and I trimmed down the picture until it fit. I hung it up over the TV, thinking how one day people would come over and ask who that was, and I'd say, "That's Jeb. My friend. He was a great, great man."

If You Lived Here

No sign of the shooter yet, so I go on through the crowd and try not to draw attention to myself. I take in my surroundings, noting exits and hiding places. Behind a movie display or a rack of clothes, maybe under a food court table. Last month someone hid in the fountain, using a straw to breathe, which I thought was clever. Now that it's been done, though, I figure he'll remember to look there. I enter a store, and part of me doesn't know what I'm doing here. I'm taking this risk for what? New pajamas. A juicer some friends registered for that they'll maybe use once after their wedding. But they say we're supposed to keep living our lives normally, so here I am, making an effort. As I check out, the credit card reader keeps giving error messages, and the salesclerk laughs. Computers, right? He tries running the card himself. I ask if he could hurry. I tell him the shooter could show up. I try not to yell. He shrugs and says, I don't worry about things I can't control. He looks at me as if my worrying is the real problem. He fumbles with the machine, and I suspect now he's taking his time out of spite. Finally it goes through, and I run out to the parking lot. I freeze at the sound of footsteps behind me. It's my time. I wait for the blast, wondering how it will feel. Most survivors say it's a burning sensation, but the one yesterday said she barely noticed it. Although I think she might have just taken shrapnel. I look up at the shooter-shaped clouds. Nothing happens. I turn around and see only a man with my purse. Here, you dropped this. Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. As I drive, I look for the shooter in passing cars, on street corners, by the bumblebee sign outside an apartment complex. If you lived here, you'd be home now. Bullet holes in every other letter. I pull into the driveway and hop out. I leave my bags in the trunk for now and dart inside, where I go from room to room,

searching. I check under my bed and in the closet and underneath the couch cushions. All clear. I sigh. I flop down in front of the TV, thinking maybe I'll watch the news and see where the shooter turned up this time, but when I pick up the remote there he is, perched on top of the power button. He laughs at me and takes aim.

Workshop Notes on The Universe

Dear God,

First of all, thank You for sharing Your work with us. I think it has a lot of potential; there's some interesting imagery, and it flows well. There are a few things, though, that I think are working against it right now.

Like, when we start off, it's 13.7 billion years ago, and stuff is all hot and dense, so it starts expanding, and the rapid expansion cools everything off, resulting in a continuously expanding state. (Or everything is created from nothing six thousand years ago? There seems to be a discrepancy here.) Your descriptions are really good, but I'm left wondering why any of this is happening in the first place. What's it all for? You need to ask Yourself, "Why today?"

You're taking a risk by changing points of view so much. I mean, You've got Judaism, Buddhism, the one with that turtle carrying the world on its back—whose story is it? Maybe pick one POV and keep it in first person, so that readers won't get lost. I liked Scientology personally, but then again I'm into genre fiction. Go with whatever works for You.

So much of what You've put in is going to waste. For instance, the Andromeda Galaxy doesn't seem to have much to do here. And Pluto—is it even a planet or not? Maybe You should save some of these ideas for another project? (There's also a lot of extra space—if You're using Word, You can fix this by going into "Change Styles.") I liked how in your first draft everything revolved around Earth. That makes a lot more sense if the people there are going to be important.

Speaking of which, most of these human characters feel over-the-top and cartoony, and I don't think readers are going to find them

believable. Even for satire, the way they're rendered is too mean-spirited. They ought to have more redeeming features.

My main concern is that You're piling on the conflict to the point that it seems like overkill. These characters You've created, they have war, genocide, poverty, injustice, domestic abuse, rape, murder, gang violence, bullying, drugs, hate crimes, pollution, global warming, torture—it's already a lot. And then You add disease, drought, famine, birth defects, mental illness, tsunamis, mudslides, earthquakes, wildfires, blizzards, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc. It's like, we get it—it's a dark comedy. You don't have to hit us over the head.

Cockroaches—what's up with them? Were You going for absurdism?

Finally, I'd really love to see more of Your voice in here. We start off with this great narrative presence, and You even directly address the reader at times, which I hearted, but then You seem to get more distant around the eighteenth century. Keep it consistent.

So those are my major concerns. I didn't notice a whole lot of grammatical stuff, other than some lay/lie confusion, but I'm bad about that, too! Anyway, I thought you did a really great job overall.

Sincerely,
Katie

P.S. I notice You took the unicorns out of this draft. I miss them!

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