

She dug the plot of her garden with a hoe and a rake.

It was almost the first day of summer, and it was too late. She left her ring on the windowsill. She buried tendrils of seedlings. Their leaves wan, roots wispy, parched, the tray soil depleted.

Her knees. Her back ached. And she kept finding ticks escalating her forearms, squeezing them off her ankles and from the base of her hairline, armpits, and waist.

Other, all-but-invisible insects squirmed on her skin. She felt quiet burnings of venom. They swarmed the depressions of her moribund plants. Her nasal canal closed in allergic reaction.

She found her ring, pushed it loose and wobbly over her knuckle and took a long, hot, boring shower and lay down on the couch, where he was already lying.

—I'm pooped, she said.

The dog splayed on its back. Its legs curled. Its paws stretched in arcs. She tried to give it a belly rub, but it recoiled at her touch. She tried to hug the soft beast, but it sprung up and pressed its face to the door.

She let it out. It bolted after the cat, which clenched a spasming gopher, almost the size of itself, between bloody fangs.

The cat ran into the house. She tried to shoo it away, but it scratched her, gopher peeping, and wedged behind the couch.

—So disgusting, she screamed.

He looked up, then back at the crossword puzzle he was holding.

—Can't you do something? Your cat is hoarding dead rodents inside our house!

—You're overreacting, he said.

—It's a dead wild animal!

—Animals aren't the problem.

—What are you talking about? They carry disease.

—Uh, hello? People carry diseases. Better than animals even. Where have you been the past year and a half?

—Andrew, she moaned. —There's a gopher being decimated behind the couch right this second.

—Yeah?

—Aren't you worried our landlord will find the mess?

—Not really.

—Well you should be.

—I've got a plan, he said.

—You said you were going to help with my garden.

—I'm fucking studying for this goddamn game show you signed me up for.

He gritted his teeth.

—Can't you see I'm doing this for us?

—I was covered with ticks. Look at this rash!

She pulled up her shorts. He could see the faint white cotton edge of the seam of her panties. One of his thoughts wished he'd feel aroused.

—I don't see anything.

—I'm going to get Lyme disease!

—I mean, maybe. But that's not the cat's fault. It didn't tell you to go digging around in the grass.

—I'm just saying. There are dangers in the country. I need your help. I can't do it alone.
 —The Lying Show was your idea.
 —I don't know anything about it. I signed you up for The Quest. And I was just trying to have fun. I never meant for you to take it so seriously. I want my boyfriend back.
 —Boyfriend? Wow. I thought we were engaged.
 —You know what I mean!
 —We're miscommunicating, he said. —I don't want to spend time with you right now. She stared at him.
 He looked at his phone, put it on the arm of the couch.
 —I think you should go away, he said.
 She turned on the television.
 —Mouth harps and your children, it said. —Are you safe?
 —Since you usually get to watch whatever you want...
 She turned it off.
 —I feel like I should get to use the room with the couch to study today.
 —Andrew, she said.
 He dismissed her with the flutter of a wrist.
 She felt in a nightmare. She ran through the dead space, the kitchen, the mudroom, off the front porch, and found a tricked-out all-terrain vehicle idling in the driveway.
 The driver appeared no older than a child. He was wearing a mask and a hoodie that said, *When guns are outlawed...only outlaws will have guns*. He made an acknowledging nod and reversed, backing into the road.
 She began to hyperventilate.
 The driver waved.
 She clutched her throat.

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He collected her empty seed trays in the tarp. He dragged it out of their office, let it crumple downstairs.

He turned his desk ninety degrees, pushed it up to the window, rested his phone on the sill so it would get the best LTE signal, arranged his laptop on a pile of library books, and connected it to the two bars of hotspot his phone pinged.

He downloaded the Skype app, created an account, added *team96@thequestcasting.net* to his contacts, and waited fifteen minutes until they accepted his request.

His phone vibrated.

Hey Andrew! Just saw you on Skype, thanks for adding our production account! I got a note from the producer I wanted to share with you for today's interview- he would love for you to talk about how you're an artist and make up "wild" creations for a living, like being an artist is the ultimate lie and that's your selling point and why you would be good for the show 🍌! Does that make sense?

sure, he replied.

Are you ready? Our casting director Winston wants to give you a call. The interview should last about an hour or so.....

sure, he texted.

But the call only lasted ten minutes.

He and the director were immediately at odds. Winston had him retell the Legend of Hook Man Finger three times, then said it was taking too long.

—Don't you have a change of wardrobe?

—I forgot.

—You were supposed to have a few outfits ready.

—What's wrong with this one?

Winston rolled his eyes.

—It just seems like you're wearing a t-shirt. Not to mention you're clearly lying to me. It's like you don't even care.

—I was specifically instructed that a t-shirt would be the best option.

—But yours is all... Eh? Are those sweat stains?

—We don't have air conditioning. I'm upstairs. It's hot.

—Not quite shabby chic, is it? More like... Slobbery slob...

Winston snickered.

—Plus your WiFi connection's too weak. This quality is not going to cut it with the execs.

—We don't get great signal.

—A pity.

—Listen, he said. —I've been preparing all week. I've been practicing trivia and puzzles and rehearsing my story, just like you all said.

—How about let's try some more questions. Are you ready?

—Fine.

—Okay. Which Netflix show is the most popular? Is it A...

—I don't know, he shrieked. —We can't stream here! And that's not trivia, it's sponsored content.

—Actually, since The Lying Show was picked up by Netflix, it's just run of the mill self-promotion. Totally normal. You're the freak.

—I don't need this.

—You're in denial, Winston guffawed. —And also, I don't mean to be rude, but you seemed a lot hotter in the pictures you submitted to The Quest.

—I didn't submit those, my fiancée did.

—Oh. Oh my. You mean... You're telling me she's been privy to our patent-pending enlistment techniques?

—She just filled out and submitted an application on my behalf.

—Then she also signed your social security number and a nondisclosure release. This is serious business. We're talking about intellectual property.

—What do you want from me? I can tell you the Legend of Hook Man Finger again.

—I'm afraid I'll need to look into this. You may be disqualified from the casting regime. But with some luck I might be able to get it so you don't have to sit through a deposition.

—This is ridiculous.

—I'm not the one who broke rules.

—The entire show's about lying! What did you expect?

The casting director looked sad.

—I'm afraid we overlooked some potential legal entanglements. We'll get back to you, Andrew. But for now, it's adieu.

The screen went black.

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It started to rain.

He got in the bed in the room where they slept, but he couldn't. And the rain didn't stop.

He'd fucked up. Things had transpired in ways he hadn't predicted. What would the eagle say? Could they remain partners, friends? Could it manage the snags? Could the scheme still be pulled off?

—What's wrong, she said, joining him hours later.

Her neck was stiff. Her joints hurt. She'd been in the bath, watching the rash on her bikini line pulse.

He was shivering, twitching, keyed up, and ticked off.

—Nothing, he said.

She got in and pulled the blankets up to her chin. It had been eighty degrees before the rain. By then it was coming down in teaspoon size drops. The temperature hurtled to the forties. The plants in the back yard bent as in worship. The young couple was cold.

—I got in an argument with one of the game show producers. The whole thing's a scam. A shameless network commercial for itself. As if they don't have enough money and publicity as it is. Bullshit. It's a lie. Fucking waste of my time. I don't know how I let you talk me into it.

They stewed in silence.

Lighting flashed.

Thunder cracked.

A tree fell on the fence.

She slipped her ring off and rested it on the nightstand. She snuggled up and put her arms around him, spooning and sighing. She ran her fingers over the fresh scar on his back.

—What's this?

—What's what, he said.

—It seems like you got cut.

—You probably scraped me with your diamond. Why don't you have it on anyhow? Don't you appreciate me at all?

She closed her eyes and dozed off.

When she awoke, he was up by the door regarding the little rotting back porch. Thunder hummed. Hail showered and pelted the house on the hill in the country. It littered the back yard with glacial pits. The dog seized under the bed. Gales shook window glass in their frames. The cat cowered on the roof. Its claws dug into shingles. Air roared. The storm burned like a raid.

A light tapping emanated from the door to the porch. He unlatched the lock. He put his hand to the knob.

—What are you doing?

—Go back to bed, he said.

—Don't go out there.

Something knocked at the door.

—Don't you hear that?

She put her palms over her ears.

—It's the hail, she yawned. —It's a storm.

—Are you kidding?

—Please, she said.

—Someone's out there, he monotoned. —Toby needs our help.

—What?

She rubbed her eyes. She padded the nightstand for her glasses. The ring fell to the floor.

—What did you say?

—Nothing.

He opened the door.

Wind howled in.

It stung her face.

Blindly, she felt for the ring, for her glasses.

He was stepping outside.

—Don't, she yelled.

—I feel like we have a civic responsibility to help him. I'll be back in a minute.

—Wait!

—He's, like, soaked head to toe, but otherwise looks okay.

—I can't see anything!

—I know you're nervous, he recited. —He just needs to borrow my phone to get a ride home. He ran his car out of gas. Just go put on some tea.

—Please, Andrew, she cried. —You're scaring me.

—It's no big deal.

—Yes it is. What's going on?

—We're just miscommunicating, he said.

—But why are you lying?

She jumped up and staggered to the door as pulled it behind him. She was blown back by the force.

She dug her hands at the floor. She felt the ring and clung to it. Some semblance of solidity. Some mercy. Anchoring her to the world.

—Andrew, she called.

She opened the door.

All was black, wet, and wild.

—Andrew!

The wind bayed.

The torrent poured.

The dog whined from a corner.

She closed the door.

A glint of two yellow lights shone from the window. She waited for the accompanying thunderous crash. Yet they blinked, like eyes. Illumined longer than lightning should. Then went abruptly dark.

It would be fine, she thought. He'd said to put on some tea, she thought. So she would. It was just another thing they were going through. They'd been through worse.

Over the river and through the woods, she thought.

Into the Woods, she thought. Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

Into the Wild, she thought. Emile Hirsch.

Hirschsprung's disease involves missing nerve cells in the muscles of part or all of the large intestine.

They were not quite voices. The thoughts descended like the deluge outside. Uncontrollably, flooding her with associative murk.

She couldn't remember moving from the room where they slept to the kitchen. She couldn't remember boiling water. Dropping bags in to steep. She squeezed the ring in her hand. And she must've zoned out, because soon it was morning.

—Andrew, she said.

The tea stagnated in three cold mugs. She knew he'd come back, though. He always did. The palm of her hand hurt, tensed in a tight fist. Her knuckles ached as she loosened her grip.

She stared at her hand. Something wasn't right. The ring was misshapen. And missing something. Where the diamond had been, she saw only an arc. It looked stretched out and broken. The band thinner than she recalled. The gold's luster was gone, along with the stone.

Her glasses were on the kitchen island where she'd reposed through the night. She put them on, but she didn't understand. And wouldn't have believed if she did.

She lifted the object and turned it in dim daylight. It left a rounded impression burned into her skin. But it wasn't her ring.

Instead, she regarded the small, sharpened shape of a hook, like the end of a fishing lure.

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On the first day of summer, she stopped waiting for him to return.

On the second day, she stopped waiting for the hook to turn into a ring.

On the third day, she stopped waiting for her rash to get smaller.

On the fourth day, a package arrived for their landlord. She opened it. It was a badminton set.

On the fifth day, she kicked up all the plants in her garden. She spit on the soil and wept.

On the sixth day, she deleted the real estate app on her phone. She watched a Dateline about a masquerade ball gone awry. She watched the latest episode of The Trickster. He tricked her, and on the seventh day, she felt all right.

Her thoughts scattered. Her joints throbbed. She couldn't sleep. But another thought thought that none of it mattered.

Material reality was a dream.

His phone vibrated.

Her heart pounded in her mouth. Her hands shook, and she felt a trickle of sweat run down the base of her coccyx and into her intergluteal cleft as she picked up.

—Andrew, she murmured.

The librarian ran off a list of overdue checked-out items.

—I'm sorry, she choked. —New number. Who dis?

On the eighth day of summer, she went in the garage. She started the car. The check engine light flickered on, and she turned the key to the left.

On the ninth day, the television said, —How local police saved a child from drowning in a swimming pool. Tonight at eleven.

Uh, she thought, by pulling him out? Is that news?

Well actually, it wasn't so simple, she thought.

They couldn't pull him out.

Why?

Because he was too slippery.

In fact, they'd had to drain the pool before he succumbed to a watery grave.

They were working against the clock.

It was like that movie Speed.
 Except it was a pool instead of a bus.
 Good thing those cops were on the beat.
 But did you hear how he ended up in the pool in the first place, another thought queried.
 The cops were close by because they were killing his parents, the answer thought chimed.
 Famous mail agitators.
 Voyeurs really.
 They even might have deserved it. Had you considered that much?
 But the boy, the thought said.
 The boy was attempting to flee the scene of a crime.
 Then he thought he was flying.
 Kids, am I right?
 It was that split second nonsense, like, like, like when Wile E. Coyote shuffles his feet
 over clouds like a treadmill before it becomes clear the ground has given way.
 And our boy hit the deck.
 Which was water.
 The pool.
 No surprise he couldn't swim, a thought in a newscaster's voice added.
 Damn, she thought. This network isn't even trying to hide its inherently racist
 perspective.
 I'm depressed.
 I should die.
 Maybe I should protest.
 Maybe if it weren't banned.
 The resuscitated child was placed in police custody for resisting being a material witness
 to a federal offense.
 He's currently serving a life sentence on house arrest.
 A pity, she thought.
 She ate a dead tick.
 The cat threw up in the sink.
 She put her head in her hands.
 On the tenth day, she walked the road along the riverside hunting for cigarette ends.
 A pickup truck pulled up beside her. The Sack leaned out the passenger window. Fatigues
 flapped in the breeze.
 —Need a ride, baby?
 She laughed. She was relieved. He pushed the door open, and she sidled in next to him.
 The dog curled in the footwell at her feet.
 —Where you been, The Sack asked.
 —I haven't gone anywhere.
 —Your garage door's been shut for weeks. I figured you two had skipped town.
 —Andrew's been out, and I haven't been sleeping. I think something's wrong with the
 car.
 —Why don't you ask Toby to fix it?
 —I don't know him, she said.
 —Sure you do.
 —No, I don't.

As quickly as she'd been soothed, she was unsettled once more.

—I don't know anything about Toby. I don't know why you all keep asking about him. I've never seen him in my life.

—I wouldn't be so sure.

The Sack smirked.

—Let's have a look at that car...

He drove them to the house on the hill and idled in the driveway. She opened the garage door. The Sack jacked up the car and pulled a creeper trolley from the bed of his truck, laid supine, and wheeled beneath.

—Did you roll over anything recent like, he called from under the vehicle.

She tried to remember.

Suddenly a thought told her.

—There was this, like, tree branch, she intoned like a question. —I think I drove over like a tree branch thing a while back?

The Sack wheeled out and stood up, smacking oil and dirt from his hands.

—That would explain it. You've got a very, very slow fuel leak. Only way to fix it is to replace the whole system. Which'd cost you around a G.

He shifted his weight to his other leg.

—If you want my opinion, though, it ain't worth fixing. The rate it's been going, worst case scenario you'll lose a half gallon of gas once a month. Nothing much to write home about.

—But gas is flammable, she said. —Won't I be in danger?

—Well I'd certainly avoid driving through any fires.

The Sack grinned a tobacco-stained-toothed grin.

—Even then, chance of one of those fuel drips happening the exact moment you're directly on top an open flame. We're talking billions to one. You're more likely to hit a jackpot on The Quest.

—The Quest was canceled.

—That's what I'm saying.

—I loved that show.

—So did I, The Sack said.

They stood in the sun in the driveway on the hill in the country. The dog rested its chin on the old man's dusty boots. The Sack patted its head. She wondered if they'd kiss.

The Sack drew a cigarette from a crumpled pack in his pocket. He lit up and French-inhaled. He was elegant, she thought. He wasn't really that old.

—Do you mind, she stammered, lightheaded, flirtatious, and all out of sorts, like a girl. —Can I bum one of those?

—Sorry, The Sack said. —My last one.

He limped into his truck and drove off.

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On the thirteenth of the following month, the rash on her bikini line had spread in every direction. Its diameter was too stretched and unruly to measure. And it cleared in the middle, giving the impression of a bull's eye.

I need to go to the doctor, she thought.

She limped from the room where she slept through the room with the couch and the television and the room of dead space and the kitchen to the mudroom, where she found the dog's harness on a peg.

—Houdini, she tried to call from the back of her throat.

She was dehydrated, and the dog didn't come.

—Houdini, she tried to say louder.

The cat emerged from under a moldering laundry pile on the floor. It stared at her weary-eyed.

—Fancy a cup of tea, it purred.

—Not now.

—If not now, the cat hissed. —Then when?

She tried to kick it, and it swiped with its claws. It pawed a screen off a window. It bolted outside.

She limped back to the room where she slept. She crouched. The dog huddled under the bed.

—Come here, Dini, she coaxed.

It recoiled, and she crawled to the direction it faced.

She put out her hand.

—Oh my puppy. How I love you. I'm so sorry. I haven't been giving you enough attention. Let's go for a ride.

The dog uttered a low, guttural growl.

She reached further, attempting to pet its soft face.

The dog bared its teeth. Its jaw spotted with foam.

—Fine, she sobbed.

She lurched, opened the garage door, cranked the engine, pulled the handbrake, and accelerated in reverse.

She churned the wheel. The cat was licking itself in the driveway. It meowed and sprung to safety just in time, and she tried to google the nearest walk-in clinic, but her phone said, *No Service*, and she turned left at the road and navigated the turns adjacent the river and let out a wail of such total exasperation she didn't notice until she felt the strain in her trachea.

She drove to town. The car bucked and rumbled. The fuel tank leaked a drop of gas every number of minutes. A clicking-buzz sound erupted as she passed over potholes, until she reached a gas station, which she swung into and braked, and searched the GPS app she downloaded on her phone for local doctors' offices, and followed directions to the only one within a forty mile radius.

The parking spots were parallel. She didn't know how to parallel park. She drove up on the curb, heard a scrape, and saw sparks. She thought she might explode. She held her breath. Nothing happened.

She found a disintegrating blue paper mask in the glove compartment. It slumped down to her chin, and she held it up with one hand as she careened out the car to the office's door.

It was noon and sunny, a weekday, but when she pulled the knob, it wouldn't give. She squinted, naturally having forgotten her glasses at the house on the hill, and noticed the handwritten note affixed to the glass.

GONE TO ANNUAL TOWN MEETING, VOTE FOR ME FOR SELECT BOARD, BE BACK LATER AT SOME POINT ALMOST DEFINITELY

Yes, I'm paranoid, she thought.

No, she thought, that doesn't mean there's nothing to be paranoid about. Just because I can't prove anything is happening doesn't mean that it isn't. In fact, she thought. It's a fact.

Her phone showed three bars of LTE, and she googled the town meeting. She punched the address into the GPS app.

The car jolted. Its transmission whirred. She pressed down harder on the accelerator and twisted her neck, peering at the directions in the phone in her hand, which led her farther up the hill past their house to a massive, mostly abandoned fairground with a rusted miniature ferris wheel relenting to gravity, as well as a rodeo corral, around which three pickup trucks, a Jeep without doors, an all-terrain vehicle, and a dozen or so motorcycles were parked.

Shapes of bodies distributed. They slouched over the rafters. They leaned their elbows across the width of the paddock. In the center, a figure with a microphone was hopping around. The wire extended from one of the trucks being used as a generator.

She got out of the car and limped toward the commotion. The microphone pealed feedback, and the onlookers cheered. The figure was stirring up preacher-like fervor. She couldn't understand what it said. Its head rolled it was attached to its neck by a ball socket.

She was at the edge of the enclosure before she realized the figure simply wasn't making sense. It spoke in tongues and yowling quacks. The crowd ate it up.

—Yas, they chanted.

—Go off!

—Who loves the new start-up, the figure broke into coherence. —Who wants fresh internets?

The townspeople pumped their hips.

—All those in favor of shuttering the public schools and opting for education by pod for our children?

—Aye, the crowd boomed.

—Motion passes unanimously, the figure caterwauled. —Meeting adjourned! Everyone in the pit!

She could make out The Sack, the person with hair to his or her or their waist, and the child who'd idled an ATV in the house on the hill's driveway. He stripped off the hoodie that said, *When guns are outlawed...only outlaws will have guns*. Then the others started to take off their shirts.

She turned on her heel.

—Anna, she heard.

She limped toward the car.

—We found you a new place!

She proceeded to run.

—Something affordable and stylish and perfectly fits your taste!

She issued a whine-cum-subdued-guttural-scream.

—Something more permanent!

She began to hyperventilate.

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It rained for the next week.

She took every Klonopin. She emptied the freezer and fridge. Too distracted to cook by the time she saw their contents.

She sat cross-legged in the back yard, depositing handfuls of earth from her wasted plot to her lips. She mushed the dirt with her tongue and attempted to swallow. Her fever spiked. Her bikini line seared and twinged.

The cat killed dragonflies and shared them with the dog.

The world was broken, she thought.

Instead of her phone, she carried his. She waited for it to vibrate. She offered hers to the dog, who tried to download YouTube videos, but the signal was too weak. It wanted to learn how to levitate.

She knew she should do something. Her thoughts told her to wait. Sometimes she thought she knew what her father was thinking, but he'd been dead for five years, so why did he have so many opinions about the new president's hedge fund? Hadn't it not been established before he was elected? And why did she know so much about every city's mayoral race?

The thoughts were contagious. They kept shifting. She thought it couldn't last. It was a lot all at once, but she'd get used to it. She knew how easy it was to get caught.

She turned on the television and watched GAPE's Most Haunted Loyalties. She wanted an uncomplicated way out of her life, and she thought it was coming.

From the couch, she heard the crackling ricochet of the future. In the bed, she felt the sensation of burning. Her sex was on fire.

When the thunder picked up, she submitted. The tap-tapping on the door rang through mantraesque.

—I'll be right there, she said.

She clung the folds in the rug her father's thought voice estimated was worth seventeen dollars. She writhed to the door. Pulled herself to gnarled feet. She put her hand on the knob. The hook on her ring finger gleamed.

But when she pulled, nothing changed.

No one appeared on the little back rotting porch. The wind died down. So did the rain.

—Toby, she whispered into the dark.

Crickets.

—Toby?

She stepped out on the deck. The wood was cold. Paint flakes peeled underfoot. The air smelled heavy and rank.

—Is anyone there?

She took another step forward, and a motion-activated light she'd never noticed sparked on and blinded her. It was rigged from an awkward angle above and facing the porch. All she could make out was its dim, faint, electrical drone.

Then the cluttered sound of flapping.

Wind broke.

Something flew over her.

She threw up her hands.

Feathers whipped through her fingers.

—Andrew, she asked.

All was still.

After what felt like a thousand beats stacked up on top of one another, the motion-activated light extinguished. She took a step forward. It flared on, and illumined a cigarette butt half-stamped out but still smoldering in an old flower pot.

—Who's there, she whimpered.

Nothing stirred.

—I'm not here to deny anything. Nothing's true. I'm ready to admit it. I'm ready to be transmuted. Taken. Take the house. I'm ready for something...

She gulped.

—More permanent...

A tail swished in the bushes.

—Houdini?

The sound ceased. She quaked. And bent to the flower pot. The cigarette was barely fuming, but lit. She inhaled, and experienced the first sensation of relief.

Fractions of a second later, this was replaced by stark dread. The cigarette tasted wrong. Not, like, stale, exactly. It tasted like apple seeds.

She darted into the back yard, convulsing and spitting, jamming fingers down her throat.

She jumped over the fence, collapsed in dirt and rocks. The driveway contorted. The garage door was shut. She realized she was still holding the cigarette, and she threw it down before her.

She elbowed the sliding wood lever to open the side entrance of the garage and elbowed the button to release the electronic panel door.

The dog started to howl.

—Oh my god, oh my god, she was saying unconsciously. —What's happening? Oh god, Houdini, what's wrong?

Okay, she thought. Focus. There was still time. For what? She needed the keys to the car, and she needed the dog.

She heard its claws clacking the door to the room where she slept. But she hadn't closed the door behind her. Something was inside with it.

—Houdini, she cried.

Sounds splashed from all sides. She covered her ears with rankled, swollen, cupped hands. She made for the room where she slept, changed her mind, and backtracked around the other side of the house.

The front door was locked. But there was a key in the hole. She jostled it like he'd shown her, but like always it stuck.

—What do you want, she tried shout, but she could no longer breathe.

She banged the glass with balled fists, and it puckered and gave. Silicate shattered and came down in waves misting her face.

She felt for the peg in the mudroom. Grasped at the orange rope harness. No, she thought. The car keys. Her hands moved. They were there, swinging like a pendulum in her mad aura.

She felt removed from all bodies. The space between her and the dog an abyss. She observed phenomena as though she were in the front row of a movie theater mooning up at the screen, but all the movie theaters in the state had been closed for sixteen months and counting.

Her hand groped for the keys. They moved between her fingers, which closed. She held metal, which jingled. She couldn't remember the context for why she felt so confused.

Then she heard the dog snort and sprinted through the mudroom, the kitchen, the dead space, the room with the couch, the crate, and the television. She flung the light switch in the room where she slept and saw the dog curled in a ball dozing in the middle of the mattress.

—Houdini, she said, hoisting it up. —You're having a bad dream.

The dog yawned.

She limped its weight off the porch, where the motion-activated light spotted on them, and she kicked down the fence, keys digging into the tips of her knuckles, cutting into the skin. The hook on her finger withstood a terrible pressure. She thought, I could just drop the dog, drop the keys, and drop too. Go to sleep. Or whatever.

She waddled to the garage. She grew weaker.

Then somehow they were in the car. She and the dog and the keys doubled in bleeding digits.

It's okay, she thought.

—I don't mind, she said.

She'd managed to do something, and she was alive. Now she'd drive away. Go somewhere else. She'd find them the perfect pastoral sanctuary. They'd leave this place. Forever, should they so choose. They were a family. They'd protect each other. What had they got to lose?

She fit the key in the ignition. The car started up smoothly. She pulled the parking brake, checked her mirror, backed into the driveway, careful to turn the wheel, so she nosed out facing the road.

She took a breath to compose herself. She rested her foot on the brake. She turned to the dog.

Its tongue ran over its nose. It looked into her eyes like dogs' eyes tend to do. They shone bleary with sleep, then they closed.

She shifted from reverse to drive. She sighed. The dog lightly snored.

And as she lifted her bare foot off the brake, the fuel tank leaked, just a drop, which pooled dewlike for an instant before releasing directly over the still smoldering cigarette, which sparked and lit in a clean line of flame, which wriggled as if held by a string, connecting the gas to the car to the engine to the oil to the earth to the driveway, and they all burned as one in a great conflagrating explosion, and she and the dog were reduced to ashes in its blaze.

The cat watched from the porch until it too caught fire. The house consumed by inferno. It sauntered to the woods. Tail flicking, swishing. The brush rustled, and the cat didn't look back even once.

*

He was lying on a chaise lounge on the roof of the hotel ordering a grain-free protein bar and double espresso to the pool.

The waitress wore a mask and a bikini. She poured her cleavage like batter over his field of vision so he could sign her tablet screen.

He left a thirty-percent tip and grinned. He couldn't tell if she did back. He wondered if she was the one he'd shown his room the preceding weekend. Her bikini's synthetic fibers imitated water ripples. It matched her mask.

She shimmied off, and he felt teased and above it and aroused anyway. He picked at the crotch of his boxer shorts.

The tablet the network had comped him automatically updated the new day's crossword puzzle, as well as his schedule. It vibrated on the mosaic-tiled end table.

He slid it closer, held it over his oiled, bronze abs.

A new notification read, *Reiki massage. Today, from 11:15 AM to 12:15 PM. Traffic is moderate. It will take 28 min to get to Chateau Marmont from HOTEL*

It vibrated again.

Lying Program, S1E18. Today, from 2:30 PM to 6:30 PM. Traffic is moderate. It will take 12 min to get to TvTron Studios from Chateau Marmont

He removed his sunglasses, stretched, and glided to the diving board, performed a flip with no splash, swam twenty olympic size laps, and nuzzled into the towel flourished by a different bikini-clad waitress.

The protein bar perched on the end table atop a small satin pillow. He ate half in twelve bites, tossed back the espresso. He stood at the edge of the roof and regarded the skyline, the billboards, the desert, ocean, and palms.

His tablet vibrated.

He was getting a call, and he yawned.

—Yello?

—Andy baby, the voice came through crystal clear.

—What up, French?

—Just plinkin' in on my all time fav cli... Ent. You ready to drip some fresh fabricaciones today, Captain Decepsch?

—I'll do what I can.

—You get my invite for din-din at Spags?

—Uh, let me see.

His tablet vibrated.

Din-din. Today, from 9:45 PM to 1 AM. Traffic TBD. It will take 31 min to get to Spago from TvTron Studios

He scrolled through the other invitees. Bhad Bhabie, Bad Bunny, Bad Santa, Badou Jack, Bladee, and so forth.

—Yeah, he said. —On for dinner. I'll be there.

—That slaps, the voice beamed. —Now don't forget, at your massage, ask for Scintilla. I warned them ahead of time, but they're highly sought after these days. Don't let them pawn you off with Archimedes or Jorstine. We paid for Scintilla. They're going to knead out your nucleotides like it's nobody's biz. You dredge?

—That's fine, French. But I was wondering. Have you heard any news about the insurance settlement?

—Aw, Andy, you don't want to talk about that. We got it all taken care of. You're an asteroid, baby. You got folx around you to worry about the particularities. Most important thing you can do on a shoot day is relax.

—Okay, yeah I know, I just wanted to check if you had any updates.

—Nothin' you want to hark, kiddo.

—I guess it probably looks weird. Buying up property whereon a disaster took place. I don't want it to seem like I had anything to do with that though. And since the responsible party perished in the arson...

—Andy, Andy, you're getting worked up again.

—I just want to settle stuff with the previous owner and the insurance conglomerate. Just tell them I'll sign whatever they're asking. Money's no...

—I'll stop you right there. You're right. Money isn't an indirect object. It's much more fluid. Like time. To coin the phrase Lincoln coined. That's why they put him on the dime. Good fortune, good sense. But don't you forget it. He also couldn't tell a lie. It fucked up his entire debate with Frederick Douglass, and then that war... Nasty! You two are in totally different

postures. Money's a subject. And you'll get yours. Allow me to pump suck the minutiae. We got twelve more episodes of The Lying Program to tape this season even after today. What's the rush on a cinder heap three thousand miles away.

—That's my business, he said. —If I tell you've I've got my reasons, would you believe they're good enough?

—Andy baby, you know better than anyone that you can convince anyone of anything. You've got the medals to prove...

—Then believe it. I've got someone breathing down my neck. I need to close on that property ASAP.

—I'll see what I can do, kid.

—Thanks.

—Anything else?

—Nah. Guess I should haul ass to Hollywood.

—You're gonna kill, baby, kill. I'll ring later. Moshi moshi!

—So long.

He tapped his tablet in front of the elevator to the engage the kiosk. He plugged his code into the private access screen, which read, *Where Would You Like To Go, Captain Deception?*

—Penthouse, he stressed. —Private. Roof. Level. Apex.

The elevator ascended from the pool up ten floors. Two brand new never worn slippers awaited outside the parting doors.

He cast off his slides and stepped in the silk-lined house shoes. He shuffled through the apartment's ultrachrome decor.

Piano music emanated from invisible speakers. Each seamlessly fading in and out to maintain the semblance of a constant, uniform étude.

He approached the room where he slept and paused. He lightly rapped on the door frame before skulking inside.

The eagle splayed on the mattress. Its wings fanned. An empty bottle of tequila, cap missing, crooked into one pit. Its beak hung open, suspiring. It sported a black velvet mask over its eyes.

—Toby?

The bird groaned and rolled over.

—Toby...

It endeavored to flex itself in an upright position.

—I've got a massage appointment in an hour, he whispered.

—What's business that of mine?

—Well, I kind of just wanted to give you a heads-up. 'Cause after that we'll be taping. From two-thirty to six-thirty. I'll, like... I'll need you to be available around then...

—Oh yeah, the eagle griped. —To feed you answers, right?

—I mean...

A beat happened.

—Isn't that still the deal?

—The art of the deal.

The eagle burped.

It tipped back the bottle.

—Hey, what gives? *Dónde está el Patrón?*

—We hit it hard last night, bro.

—Don't give me that *we* shit, the eagle snapped. —I don't even want to be here. Place stinks like duck dick. You got that deed for me yet?

—I'm working on it. I talked to French this morning, and he seemed to imply there were still a lot of moving parts with the insurance...

—Insurance my cloaca!

—There's just a lot of red tape. But the money's down. We're preapproved, and I've been in touch with our old landlord. He'd just as soon settle yesterday, but when there's a crime of this nature... Plus it's not that easy to explain why I'm in such a rush to buy a piece of scorched rubble at the eastern edge of the Berkshires when I've got a job in L.A.

—Just tell them you need it! You're the celeb. Aren't they supposed to do whatever you say?

—Like I said, I think they will, but...

—Just lie for heaven's sake! You're Captain Deception, or did I misread Page 13?

The eagle flung a coned newspaper drenched with regurgitated bird seed and fake cocaine at his face.

He ducked.

—Just make something up!

—The thing with questionable arson and exploded cars and dead bodies is it can delay real estate...

—Well no one told me, the eagle fluttered its wings. —Back when I owned that house on the hill people in the country burned themselves down damn near every day. I never would've gone through the trouble if I'd've known I'd end up making things harder on myself.

—I'm sorry, he said.

He looked at his tablet.

—Andrew, a disembodied voice crooned.

—I'm kind of running late.

—Then why the fuck'd you wake me for? You mean we're not even going to smoke this angel dust?

The sounds of wheels and strides.

—I don't think it would help me relax.

Straps flapping.

He looked at his tablet.

—I've got a full agenda. I woke you because I needed to remind you about the taping. And... And because I wanted to make sure I could count on your...

The sing-song disembodied voice singing, —Where are you?

—My what?

The eagle was receding. Into something. Still with the velvet mask over its eyes. It was getting harder for him to see too.

—Your support. For the answers... For the thoughts...

Footsteps echoed throughout the chrome.

—I thought you knew how to lie better than anyone has before.

The eagle did air quotes.

—You know I can't without you, he said under his breath.

The eagle hopped to the bathroom.

—Get. Me. The. Deed.

—I will. I promise. Now can I count on you?

He heard the door slam, the lock turn.
 —What do you think?
 The nurses entered. Their masks matched their scrubs. They imitated water ripples.
 —There you are, they sang in unison.
 They dragged the cot by its four-point restraints. Wheels squeaked. The loosest lifting up every few inches and spinning.
 —Ready to roll, kiddo?
 He look at his piece of cardboard covered in scribbles.
 —Let me check my schedule.
 The nurses giggled.
 They touched his arms. Gently they hoisted him over the chrome side rails, tilted the upper body column fifteen degrees, and strapped his breast, wrists, shins, and ankles in place.
 The bed emitted a purr as the column descended.
 He was perfectly recumbent.
 Ready for his massage.
 He rattled around.
 —Aren't I supposed to be prone?
 Oh no, not for Reiki, he thought in the voice of French. Your aural pores must remain exposed to their chakral coordinates.
 —Sure, he said.
 The nurses conferred sotto voce.
 —Can you film while I tickle his feet, one inquired. —I met this guy on RimJok that'll pay in Ether.
 —I don't know, the other whispered. —I can't really risk losing my Medicaid rations again.
 —He'll transfer double if we can prove it's a patient in the ward.
 The other nurse hesitated.
 —I'll go get my kit.
 Paces reverberated down the hall.
 He stared at the ceiling.
 He yawned.
 —Now why'd you sneak off earlier, the other nurse cooed, preparing his eleven-fifteen a.m. injection. —You hadn't finished your lunch.
 —Toby, he monotoned.
 —Mr. Captain Deception. Always up to some ruse. Have you been a naughty boy?
 —Say yes, Toby answered from behind the bathroom door.
 —Sure.
 —You wouldn't lie to me now?
 —Thank you, he slurred.

*

The eagle had all the answers. The eagle saw through the murk. It had the eyes of a spirit. It covered them with the black velvet mask and tried to zonk.

—Goddamn it, it hissed. —The whole morning is ruined.

Of course the eagle knew there was a taping that afternoon. Did he really think it was going to up and desert its meal ticket? Until the property's title was rightly in Toby's name, signed over with annual taxes and fees paid for the next ten years in advance, and drawn after that from a replenishing account in perpetuity, he wasn't going anywhere.

After that, all right, the liar should worry some. His sneaking suspicions weren't without substantiation.

And yet, hadn't the eagle proven itself trustworthy? Had it not, when the young man had fucked up his interview and thrown the whole design into disarray, picked up the pieces, flown him literally on its back with outstretched golden wings, to the TvTron Studios's CEO's executive precinct?

Had it not patched every hiccup? Arranged every detail? The eagle had kept up more than its fair share of the bargain.

All it asked in return was to be shown some respect. Given it carried the eternal burden of the voices of the living and dead, this seemed like a reasonable request.

It hadn't always been that way. The eagle had once been a person. But it felt less and less kinship with Toby, the name, history, gender, and all the old friends.

Sure, when the eagle appeared before them, they went through motions of awe and worship, but really they were still just feeling guilty about rerouting the nuclear plant's runoff into the house on the hill's well, and thus rendering Toby dead.

Since the eagle had encountered every soul in the universe, it felt less attached to its legacy, at least as an individual, and more indebted to revenge.

In dying, it had learned empathy.

It's never too late, one spirit had said.

Being reincarnated as the symbol of the nation most devoted to evil, the eagle had vowed to take back the land from the man it had been.

It was an arduous process, with more snags than expected. All in all, though, its scheme was still going as planned. First the house on the hill in the country, then the town, the county, the state, and eventually the country itself.

One by one, it would buy up the land, destroy any home-life-centrism structures, and redistribute the wealth, shared among every animal and plant.

It now understood it had to follow strict instructions. It couldn't destroy the home-life-centrism structures before acquiring the properties line, sinker, and hook.

C'est la vie. It was a work-in-progress. And it's not like the whole enterprise was for nothing. The insurance company would come to a conclusion eventually. Plus it had succeeded in recruiting the cat.

There were other spirits working on other parts of the planet. The eagle would catch up with them at the continental convention slated for the summer a few decades hence.

It was particularly interested in talking to the bat stationed in China. Could it really have started the plague? The eagle doubted it. But if it had, then color this bird of prey impressed.

Hopefully it would have its own achievements to show off. It figured at worst it should own the state with the house on the hill by that time.

In the meanwhile, it was going to smoke a fat bowl of cannabis laced with phencyclidine and zone until the nurses were done exploiting their patient.

It had learned to be patient. It had learned to have faith. It had faith in the process. And it had learned that morality was relatively unimportant, and relative all the same.

*

And what had he learned?

You mean besides #MeToo being a Hollywood insiders' hit job less concerned with transparency, equality, and earnest conversations about the history of endemic sexist barbarity and corruption than to disrupt the Weinstein Company's production power and open the door for streaming services to swoop in?

Everyone in the industry knew that.

Well, he'd learned a lot. New stuff every day. Such as he had what it took to be famous. He was inspired, divine, could stand up against torture, chains, privy to the voices of the unreal and insane.

And oh yeah. He had learned men couldn't say anything. Not quite. So abashed by the unspeakable violence of their interiorities, they were constantly forced to hold their tongues or lie.

Women could, on the other hand, say whatever they wanted, but that didn't mean anyone would believe, let alone listen, to them.

The rest remained mutable. New information cascaded like rain.

Sometimes he thought of her in that bucolic ruin where they'd watched television and fantasized about real estate.

With her legendary ring.

Who says modern man's any worse than his predecessor? So he'd used every part of the buffalo? Now he's using up the dinosaur millions of years later.

Oil, plastic, diamonds. All crushed together. Forged in heat, hooked in pressure.

He had learned, given enough resources, people could produce unthinkable ends. But people hardly account for everyone. And resources are limited.

Take, for instance, I wanted to expound on the guy in the neck gator, the librarian, the young couple's landlord, their neighbors, the nuclear plant farther uphill, and the region's flora and fauna. I wanted to write about the indigenous settlers of the valley, their traditions and annals and myths, the disgrace of their depictions, and their relationships to territory, property, nature, and land. I wanted to know more. To make myself and you expand, to understand and be better. But I got too depressed.

He had learned there was more to learn yet. He tried to shrug. Life was seriously unfair.

*

And what of the cat?

Well, last I saw it, it was making off with a plastic bagful of some preteen's stillborn. But that was years from now, and a plot point in another story.

Cats exist on a separate relativism. From other animals, other characters. From you and me.

Forget wheelhouse, it's not even the same plane.

And since they're not reading this, I can be totally frank: they're more different from people and dogs and eagles than you think.

Cats are childs at heart. They shirk grammar, among other rules. They account for themselves. If you've known a few kids, you know they're disposed to warriors' streaks too. The

ability to remake images of the world, of extant creatures, their identities. Just as a child often acts before she thinks...

So what of the cat? I'm no authority. The eagle seemed convinced the cat shared in its conspiracy. Perhaps I'm more skeptical.

My cat and I have been growing apart. That's not a story at all, because life isn't narrative. Narrative is projected on life. That's something I've learned. And if you probe the right places, you'll learn life is fake, which is fine.

For our purposes, this tale is over. Our cat is gone. The mystery unfolds. Turns out it was a mystery all along.