

## A Portrait on the Wall

William Stone

*“The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.”*

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *“The Yellow Wall Paper”*

“Take, eat. This is biscotti.” That note, which she affixed to the tin of baked goods she left outside his apartment door the morning after they met some three years ago, might as well have said “proceed with caution.” Surely, hers was an upbringing vastly different from his. Mass on Sunday mornings and family prayer before Saturday dinner were the routines that framed the generally less pious activities of Peter’s adolescent life. At least this is what Jessica tells herself as she sits on the train from Seattle to Los Angeles.

In the seat across the aisle, a young mother of about the same age as Jessica nurses her baby. Jessica cannot see the blanket-wrapped babe, but the heap of pink chenille fabric dotted with little white lambs piled on the

mother's midsection and the pained expression on her face tells Jessica everything she needs to know. "I am not looking forward to that," she thinks at the same moment that the baby, having been handed over to her father, begins crying.

Keenly aware of the need to sit and prepare mentally for the new job that awaits her when she gets back to Los Angeles, Jessica stands up and walks to the quiet car in search of a brief respite from the baby's wailing.

"Excuse me, is this seat open?"

"Oh, sorry, yes, it's open," an older man stutters in reply, as he lifts the newspaper from the seat next to him.

The quiet car is unusually busy, and the seat Jessica takes faces the rear of the train. Her neighbor's hairy arm commandeers the middle armrest, forcing her to lean onto the window. The sun paints her eyes orange as

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though trying to thaw the coldness she has felt since she and Peter broke up. Though the windows to her right have the more impressive mountain views, she welcomes the opportunity to stare out into the horizon. She rests her head against the glass and catches sight of her reflection hovering ghostlike against the backdrop of the ocean. The wrinkles that crease her face remind her of how sad she looked when she and Peter had their last supper together, as both of them sat there, heads bowed, quietly slurping their Ramen. “That’s no easy feat,” she jokes to herself, before cozying up against the cold window and relaxing into memory.

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She recognized him as soon as she stepped on the subway at Penn Station. He was the cute guy from apartment 12C whose hair was always so well-coiffed. The strands that seemed out of place bespoke an effortless cool, only their stiffness and sheen betraying the stylist’s painstaking deliberation.

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Staring intensely at his iPhone, he noticed neither her nor any other passenger on the subway. He sat with his legs spread so wide that, though his butt occupied one seat, his entire being occupied three.

“Ahem,” she cleared her throat. “Are your balls swollen or something?”

His eyes jumped from his phone to her face.

“Hunh?” he grunted.

“We’re on a train in Manhattan in the middle of evening rush hour. People are tired. Tensions are high. You’re just going to take these three seats for yourself?”

He looked up and down the train and counted, at most, seven people in the entire car.

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Through the smug smile that had now spread over his face, he asked: “Would you like to sit by me?”

“I’ll sit over here; it’s ok.”

“I’m sorry for—umm—manspreading. I wasn’t thinking. I just got fantastic news, and I was thinking about that.”

“That’s great, and it’s really not a big deal. I recognized you from my building. I’m Jessica, Jessica Carson.”

She stretched out her hand. He gave her his.

“Peter Keating. Nice to meet you.”

“So, Peter, you have good news?”

“Well, I teach at Darcy Prep. You know, one of the all-girls schools on the Upper West Side. I’ve been there for five years—since grad school. The headmaster just

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emailed me saying that I will be the new head of the upper school English department. I was just texting a few college friends about it.”

“That’s really fantastic news! Congratulations. You should be off somewhere celebrating with a drink.”

“Wish I could, but I’m supposed to tutor a student this evening in about an hour or so. Showing up buzzed might not be the best idea. Also, I’m sort of embarrassed to say this, but I should probably tell my mom the good news before tutoring, too.”

“I imagine she’ll be proud,” Jessica said, her cheeks growing comfortable in their current smile.

Peter nodded his head. “Yeah. My mom was an English teacher at four different schools when I was growing up. We moved around New England a lot. I swear every small New England town has an Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church. When dad’s job required him

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to move, we all followed. She loved her job and never complained, but she never got to stay at one school long enough to rise through the ranks.”

No longer smiling, Jessica offered, “I’m sorry to hear that, but I think it’s really great that you teach... at a girls school, in particular.”

“I think they’d be happier if I were teaching at a Catholic School, but Darcy is sufficiently ‘prestigious’ that they haven’t kicked me out of the family group text,” he joked.

Her cheeks rose, reddening ever so slightly.

“You’re Catholic?”

“I was raised in the church. My older brother is a priest, actually, but I’m not nearly as devout as him or my parents.”

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Later that night, she decided to make him cookies. The last time she had made cookies was for a bake sale in the fourth grade, and this batch was a testament to how little practice she had devoted to the craft in the intervening years. They were hard and not very sweet. In an effort to save the cookies, she placed them back in the oven for a few more minutes, sampled one, and decided to pack them up and deliver them as biscotti.

“Don’t break a tooth,” she wrote on the first blue post-it note that she pasted to the Christmas tree shaped tin. Before heading out the door, however, she thought better of her self-deprecation. Searching for a more literary message, she settled on the borderline blasphemous: “Take, eat. This is biscotti.”

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“I can’t believe I went after him like that and then baked him those terrible biscotti,” she reflects fondly to herself. But then she pictures him teaching those girls

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how to communicate their ideas, how to be confident in their convictions, and how to recognize their potential, and she remembers why she had been so aggressive.

The train rattles along the rails. She slides her head back up the glass which has grown slippery with the condensation of her breath. Having returned her head to a comfortable position, she gazes once again into her eyes.

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The smell of caramelized squash rushed towards them as soon as they stepped onto the porch of her sister's three-story brownstone in Cobble Hill. Despite the snow on the porch, the combination of the delightful smell and the stark contrast of the cerulean door against the red brick of the building arrested both Jessica and Peter for a moment. A small gust of wind made them shiver, and Jessica rang the doorbell.

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When her sister opened the door, Jessica could hardly tell the color of her dress under the soft yellow light bouncing off the yellow walls. Nonetheless, she complimented her sister's dress.

"Smells wonderful," she told her sister as they hugged each other tightly.

"Annie, this is Peter. Peter, this is my sister, Annie." Though Jessica refrained from introducing Peter as her boyfriend, the continuous stream of texts she had exchanged with her sister during the three months since they had last seen each other left no doubt about the status of their relationship.

"Nice to meet you, Annie. Your sister says you are a lovely cook. I brought a bottle of red wine. I hope it's up to snuff for tonight's feast."

Annie welcomed them in and recited the menu, which, save for the squash, Jessica could no longer remember.

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Annie gave Peter a tour of the ground floor of the house, and Jessica was struck by how the hardwood floors, the wood-paneled kitchen island, the yellow painted walls, and the yellow barred wallpaper reminded her of their childhood home—fancier no doubt, with more modern appliances—but the mélange of yellows and browns gave everything a sepia hue so that upon opening that heavy blue door one appeared on the brink of stepping into an old photograph.

“This space reminds me so much of my parents’ home,” Peter noted, “It’s wonderful.”

“Oh, yeah, where are you from Peter?” Jamie asked.

“I’m Jamie, Annie’s husband, by the way. Nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you from Annie. These two text each other incessantly.”

“I’m from western Massachusetts. Small town. I was raised Catholic, and I like to describe our home as stately and refined—a lot of yellows and soft blues. The only

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trace of red you'd find would be on a rosary or bordering a set of china.”

“Oh, the austerity! Tell me about it. My folks are Catholic as well. My mother still asks me occasionally if I make time during the week to attend confession. I tell her ‘sure thing,’ but when you’re working an eighty hour week and you hardly have time to see your wife and kids, it’s hard to make time to sit and tell a priest all the mortal sins you’ve committed or contemplated.”

During dinner, Jamie steered the conversation. He began by asking his teenage sons how their day went. Both Ian and Michael mumbled that the day was fine and that they were looking forward to watching the hockey game that night or playing some video game. Jamie then turned to Peter:

“So, Peter what do you do?”

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“I teach English at Darcy Prep. I’m sure you have colleagues with daughters there.”

“Yeah, seems like half the trading floor has a daughter or wife who went there. Good school—no, great school.”

“Yeah, I enjoy it. I’m not a great writer, but I love teaching writing and I love reading and rereading the classics.”

“Annie,” Jamie turned to his wife, “wasn’t your mother a writer?”

“She was. Have you told Peter about mom’s stories, Jess?”

“I haven’t,” she confessed, “but, yeah, she wrote dozens of stories, though I’ve only read one or two. Beyond raising us, the chief pleasure she had in life was writing stories. Not that she was adventurous enough to pursue publication. But writing those stories allowed her to take

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vacation from our old Victorian home and its ugly wallpaper.”

“Mmm, mom was something special,” Annie reflected, “I’m ashamed, honestly, that I’ve never picked up a hobby like that.”

“But, honey, you’re such a fantastic cook. God bless her soul, but my mom couldn’t cook for the life of her.”

Jessica’s eyes darted towards Peter’s eyes, which rose instantaneously as if the velocity of the motion of her eyes sounded an alarm. Fortunately, the boys having sat for an hour were itching to get upstairs to the television. Ian stood up first.

“Thanks for dinner, mom. Michael and I are going to head upstairs.”

“But what about the dishes? One of you do the dishes,” their mother commanded.

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“But we did the dishes last night,” Michael, the older brother, whined.

“You ate last night, too, didn’t you?” Jessica interrupted.

“But, auntie, you don’t understand.”

“Your mom sits in this house all day. She works her butt off for you three boys, and you have the nerve to complain when she asks you to spend five minutes doing the dishes? If you can’t do that for her now, what can she expect you to do for her later in life when she’s old and frail? Where’s your sense of responsibility? I love you boys, but don’t treat your mom this way, please.”

The boys tilted their heads to the ceiling and slumped their shoulders. “Okaaaay,” they moaned.

Jamie and Annie sat in silence while the boys cleared the plates, the clattering of the dishes, as if clapping in

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applause, offering the only sign of gratitude to Jessica for her efforts.

Her lecture complete, Jessica turned to Peter and asked, “How’d I do, Mr. Keating?”

Peter laughed. His eyes, narrowed by his up-turned cheeks, offered all the assurance she needed. At that moment, her sister and brother-in-law disappeared from her memory.

“I never leave dirty dishes in my kitchen sink,” she declared proudly.

“Well, other than the snacks you baked me, I’ve never seen you cook.”

“Exactly,” she concluded with a sly, gamine smile.

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“ . . . will be pulling into San Luis Obispo Station in 15 minutes. Passengers exiting the train at the next stop, please begin gathering your luggage now.”

The sound of the conductor snaps her back into the present for a moment. Just as suddenly, the rhythm of the train sets her down into another memory as though she is a needle on a record player settling down in a new position farther along the same groove.

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Before attending the service, he told her that she didn't have to come, that she could stay home and catch up on the work she set aside to accommodate this weekend trip out east, that he loved her regardless, but that it would mean a lot to his parents. So she went.

They sat near the back of the cathedral. While Peter and his parents appeared to pay close attention to the mass, Jessica, having never even stepped foot into a cathedral

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of this size before, sat in awe of the vaulted ceilings which she assumed were supposed to reinforce one's sense of distance from the divine. She turned her focus to the priest. She saw his mouth move, though he might as well have been an image on the other side of a train's window. As she watched him deliver his silent sermon, she noticed how the priest stood on an elevated altar so that he was closer to God than the laity yet still miniscule before the presence of God, wherever He may be.

What she did not notice is that Peter's parents were similarly distracted from the sermon, not by musings about the physical space, but by occasional glances at this woman whom their son had spoken so fondly about. Peter would tell her their impressions later. "They adored you." "Yeah, they'd prefer if you were Catholic, but they thought you had an adequate appreciation of the importance of the religion and what we were doing." Those were the words he used. Verbatim.

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The severing snap of the communal wafers shocked her to attention, the reverberation serving as yet another reminder of one's distance from God even in the midst of the most intimate of sacraments.

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The sound of the old man struggling to get out of his seat pulls her out of memory once again. The old man rises.

“Would you like anything, ma'am? I'm headed to the food car.”

“No, but thank you.”

Returning her head to the same spot on the warmed window pane, she steps back into her memory. Now, she imagines them sitting in pews at the front, rather than the back, of the church. But this is her memory, so she asks no questions.

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After mass, the four of them walked along Main Street.

Though Jessica and Peter had visited Peter's parents' home twice before, this was their first visit since their move to Seattle. They ambled down the cobblestone sidewalk, alongside the town's only bank, under old-fashioned lampposts adorned with baskets of purple flowers that dangled slightly in the winter wind. The colorful awnings, which gave the town its character but also made it like so many others, shielded their eyes from the sun. Recalling Seattle's grey, Jessica could not deny New England's radiance—the red brick framed by white, shutters in all shades of blue. Peter waded through the sea of color like a kid searching a crayon box for his favorite hue.

“It's so nice to be home,” Peter announced, despite never having lived in this town during his childhood.

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“Isn’t it? We’re so glad to have you and Jessica,” Peter’s mother replied. “We know you’ve had a tough time settling in at this new school, but we know things will work out just fine.”

“We’ve been so blessed. You and your brother have had no shortage of great opportunities through the years. You’ll find your way. Just keep praying about it,” his father added.

“Thanks,” Peter replied gratefully, yet tersely, respectfully stifling a fleeting desire to talk more about how much he missed his old school and how much he missed heading his own department.

“Why don’t you two spend a little time in the town?” Peter’s mother asked. “I bet you can’t find cider in Seattle like Malone Orchard’s. We’ll head home, so I can finish up dinner. Dad will give you a call when everything’s ready.”

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“Oh, Mrs. Keating, I’m happy to help out,” Jessica offered, before shooting a sharp glance at Peter that said don’t you dare mock my cooking.

Peter saw and understood.

“No. No. You guys should go visit the Christmas tree in the square. It’s a really nice one this year. We’ll have everything ready soon,” Peter’s dad declared, putting an end to all further debate.

Left alone by Peter’s parents, they discussed the sermon, which according to Peter was about chastity.

“I bet you had a hard time keeping your disgust in, didn’t you, Jess?”

Embarrassed that she hadn’t heard a word of the sermon, she flashed a knowing smile and pulled him close, locking her fingers into his.

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Hoping to assure her that what he assumed to be her discomfort with the sermon was ok, he joked, “And women and men should guard chastity like the finest of jewels. They should put on the whole armor of God. Women should have the shield of faith ever at the ready to guard against lusty knights and their sharp swords. They should beware knaves who use guile and chicanery to trick fair maidens into unbuckling their belts of righteousness.”

“Oh my God, shut up,” she teased, “what are you saying?”

“It’s mock-heroic, you know like Alexander Pope and *The Rape of the Lock*.”

She stared back blankly. A car drove by. “My anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns, hun,” blared from the speakers.

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She laughed, hoping that her reaction to the crude lyrics would save her the embarrassment of confessing her ignorance of this poem.

“It’s a satirical mode. In that poem, a man cuts a lock of hair from an unsuspecting lady who he is attracted to. It’s a totally quotidian affair, but Pope uses epic language to describe the event. You can use it to create a powerful emotional effect, but comic uses are both much easier and a lot of fun,” he explained.

“Sure, I’ll read it sometime. Would be a nice break from the trite messages I read all day in the office.”

They reached the town’s Christmas tree, and they both laughed. The tree measured about twenty-five feet, large no doubt, but considerably smaller than the main public tree in Seattle and a dwarf compared to that in Rockefeller Center.

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“You know, Peter, I’m great at my job. My boss, at least, is far better than the guy I worked for in New York, but I’ve hit some kind of a rut. Where are the opportunities for advancement? I know that shooting for the stars means that you have to move through a lot of space junk to get where you want to be, but I want something more.”

“With your talent, your drive, they’ll come,” Peter assured her. “You might pick up a hobby, though. How about writing fiction? The mock-heroic mode is especially accessible, even I can do it.”

“My mom wrote fiction. I can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“When people say the world is harsh, I think they mean that, at some point, it chooses between dream and reality. It chooses. Not you. And, even worse, it

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sometimes reveals that choice to you with stark clarity well before you think that decision needs to be made.”

“So, you think you were destined not to be a writer.”

“No, it’s just that when I’m working so hard to make my dreams a reality; I don’t have time to imagine characters who are pursuing other dreams.”

“That sounds kind of bleak, don’t you think, Jess?”

“Not at all. My high school chemistry teacher once told the class that life is a series of disappointments and his class would not be an exception. That is bleak. I resist that. I’ve been resisting that my whole life.”

Trying to shift the focus of the conversation, Jessica continued, “Why don’t you write fiction, Mr. Poet Laureate?”

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“It’s simple. I have a lot to say, but I don’t remember any of it, and I haven’t written any of it down.”

“So, I should get you a diary for Valentine’s Day?”

He laughed and they, hand in hand, continued down the boutique-lined street. They stopped momentarily at a lingerie shop with a display that caught Peter’s attention.

“I like this set here. The white lacey underwear with the matching babydoll and robe . . . it’s sexy, but in an elegant way.”

“Oh, kind of like Shakespeare meets *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

“Haha,” he laughed, “Shakespeare is frequently far more salacious than most of what you’ll find in *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

“Well, I guess I need to spend more time with old Bill, don’t I?”

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Still preoccupied by the lingerie, Peter asked, “What’s the robe called? It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“It’s called a peignoir.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Because it was a Sunday, the lingerie shop was closed. The owners had pulled down a gate over the display so that the glass reflected the two of them in what appeared to be a metal cage.

“I dream of seeing you in that,” he confessed, unconcerned or unaware of the image.

“Oh yeah? Well, put it in the vows,” she exclaimed, using their designated expression for marking whenever either of them said something that could be construed as a testament to how right they were for each other.

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That day at work had been terrible. She was the lead creative editor on a project that garnered rave reviews from the client, but once again her boss just droned, “Keep up the great work, Jess.” Unsatisfied, she approached him later that afternoon about the prospect of becoming a team manager. “Oh, that’s years down the road,” he huffed.

She stared out of her midtown office window to see the side of another skyscraper. The familiar grey of the concrete took on a yellowish tint that made her shudder.

“Let’s get a drink :( ” she texted.

“What’s wrong? Why don’t I make you dinner, then we can watch a movie or something?” he replied.

“Ok. I’m leaving early today, so I may pick up a bottle of something on my way home. I’ll tell you all about it.”

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After cooking a big meal and washing the dishes (Peter was so proud of himself for doing both), he suggested that they watch something exhilarating. He had seen advertisements for this documentary called *Meru* which followed a group of climbers who ascended one of the world's highest and most difficult peaks. Thinking that it might be a motivating film, Jessica agreed to watch.

They laid there, spooning, looking over their shoulders at the flat screen on the wall opposite the bed. A life-long city girl, she knew nothing about the practicalities of climbing. Peter's family had a second home in Asheville, however, where they would sometimes hike along the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“Your family would occasionally go on climbs, right? So, what happens when these guys have to use the bathroom?”

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“They were more like hikes. I’ve never been up a mountain like that, a jagged peak, so I don’t know. Maybe they just pee outside their little tents.”

“That is so gross, but what if they have to... you know?”

Through a chuckle, he replied, “I honestly have no idea.” After a brief pause, he continued, “I can’t believe we’re in bed after having a nice romantic dinner and we are literally talking about shit. Not even our shit. Other people’s shit.”

“Put it in the vows!”

Peter wrapped his arms tightly around her waist and kissed the side of her neck.

“It’s funny how in the midst of something so grand, humans can’t help but be occupied with something so mundane,” she mused.

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“Keats has a line that gets at a similar idea. In ‘Ode on Melancholy,’ he talks about how ‘in the very temple of Delight / veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine.’”

“You are *so* pretentious. Wow.”

“You know you love it.”

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And the smile that presently lingers on her face confirms that she does.

The old man still hasn’t returned to his seat. Curious about how much time has passed, she stops the conductor making his way up the aisle collecting trash.

“Excuse me, how much time before the next stop?”

“About five minutes before we reach San Luis Obispo, five minutes, miss.”

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“Thank you.”

“Those years flew by,” she thinks to herself, as she recalls the brief year they shared in their apartment in Seattle.

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“They want me to be a vice president,” she offered as a surprise at dinner at the Ramen restaurant they visited as a low-key way of celebrating their third anniversary. She wore a red dress for the occasion; he, a white button down and blue chinos.

“But we just got to Seattle. I can’t... I haven’t even had an opportunity to apply to be chair of this school’s English department. I took a step back professionally for us to come here. How am I supposed to just leave again?”

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Poised to pounce, she glared at him. He glared back, sword raised, anticipating her next attack. How suddenly they seemed to have moved from being lovers to warriors in the heat of battle.

In the silence, he dared to take a sip of his soup. His hands, shaky with emotion, failed him, and he spilled the curry colored soup onto the pocket of his shirt. His visage offered no sign that he noticed the spill. Instead, his face remained in an attitude of pain that had not shifted since she uttered the phrase “vice president.”

“I don’t want to just be good at my job, Peter, I want my name on the building, my portrait on the wall,” she lunged.

“She must be joking,” he thought to himself. “But you are well on your way; you’re doing great at this job. Can’t we take some more time here, and then move when the time is right for the both of us?”

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“The time is right now,” she continued, while allowing her eyes to veer down to the stain on his shirt. Feeling that advantage, she surged forward, “You are content with reading and writing about the people who changed the world. I want to *be* one of those people. Think about how big this could be for me. How big this could be for us.”

At this, Peter started. “Don’t pretend to have a clear sense of where you want to end up. How could you be so selfish?” he parried.

But her vivid red dress gave no indication that he had wounded her.

“You remember your girls at Darcy. Who are the primary businesswomen they have to look up to? Don’t you think my success in this job might have a positive effect on them?”

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“They have plenty of role models. Don’t pretend to be all magnanimous. This isn’t about anyone other than yourself,” he answered, before falling silent as though readying to disengage. And yet, he didn’t sheath his weapon; instead, he lunged again. “This is absurd. This is selfish. What portrait? What wall? What building? You have such an inflated opinion of yourself,” he blurted out, immediately realizing the tactical mistake he had just made.

At that moment, she dropped her fork which made a loud clash against the porcelain soup bowl before crashing onto the wooden table where it left a tiny scratch.

“I hate to break it to you, Peter, but I’m neither some damsel in need of saving, nor some fair lady seeking a handsome young prince. My mom, your mom...”

“My mom? Don’t bring my family or my upbringing into this,” he interrupted.

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“...Annie—as much as I love them, I can’t live how they have lived.”

“So, you’re too good for them, too good for the life that millions of people live,” he snapped, raising his voice slightly, inviting the people at the next table over to cast inquiring glances at Jessica and him.

“I refuse.”

She looked at him—his cheeks unusually sallow, a few stubborn strands of hair fallen over his ears.

“We don’t have to talk over each other,” she said calmly.

“No, we don’t have to talk at all.”

And so they sat in silence save for the sound of their slurping.

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“You know what, I’ll help you pack your belongings. I’ll even take you to the train to send you on your way,” Peter declared before wiping his shirt, adjusting his hair, and standing up. “See you at home.”

With those words, he left the restaurant, abandoning his half-empty bowl of Ramen.

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Abandoned in her memory, Jessica feels the weight of the old man settling back down into his seat. In his absence, she had placed her elbow on the armrest. Upon returning, however, his hairy arm once again sought out the comfortable spot, gently nudging her soft elbow as if to say you’re not using this properly, so I will. As she moved her arm, the train hit a bump in the rails skipping her needle backwards up the groove.

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“So, it appears that both of our days taking the subway are numbered,” she remembers him saying.

Earlier that month, she had gotten an offer from a marketing agency in Seattle to join the firm as a project team manager. Peter, more elated at the news than even she had been, immediately sent out applications to schools in the Seattle area. His remark about the subway was his way of revealing to her the news that he had been offered a teaching position in an English department at a coeducational school in Bellevue, just outside of Seattle.

They spent the next month looking for apartments and taking driving lessons.

He stepped into the driving instructor’s ancient car and was immediately taken aback by the presence of a steering wheel and sets of brakes on both sides of the car. “Am I in the driver’s seat or not?” he pondered to himself.

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“Ok, pull the car forward slowly,” the teacher instructed.

“Ummm,” he stalled.

He thought momentarily that this was some kind of circus car, and he felt suddenly embarrassed and confused, like he was a geometry student who knew the lengths of two sides of an equilateral triangle, but somehow couldn't determine the third. He knew he could figure out what to do; he just wasn't sure of the rules.

He grew more comfortable with every lesson. She, on the other hand, was a natural from the start. Upon sitting behind the wheel the first time, she put on her seatbelt, adjusted her mirror, slipped the keys into the ignition, started the car, and put her hands at 9 and 3, not, she would point out, 10 and 2. Before pulling the car forward, she turned and peered back at him over her

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sunglasses and joked, “*That* is how it’s done, Mr. Teacher.”

He eventually got the hang of it, managing to look almost as comfortable as she did. Though he never quite got arm-on-the-window comfortable, he grew confident enough to check his sunglasses or his hair in the rearview mirror every so often.

Before their final lesson, he took his tortoise-shell sunglasses out of his front shirt pocket and asked her how he looked.

“Cool,” she said.

“You know how I feel?” he asked.

“How?”

“Like a free man. I love the city and having the subway, but in high school the kids who could drive were the

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coolest. They had the most freedom. They could drive to the overhang whenever they wanted and smoke or hang out with girls. I felt so lame needing my parents or brother to drive me places when I wanted to see my friends.”

When they passed their driving test—she first, he second—he said, “I’m glad we did this together.”

“Me too.”

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Twenty minutes and three years worth of memories after Jessica first took her seat in the quiet car, the train finally pulls into San Luis Obispo.

With the train no longer moving forward, she finally takes time to reflect on the accuracy of her recollections. Had she misremembered what he had said to her that last night? Had she misremembered how his hair

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departed from its typical perfection? Questions whose truth lies not in their factual answers, but in the fact that they could even be raised. These recollections are what she wants to remember, what she needs to remember.

She stands and walks back to the coach car. Another young woman, of about the same age as Jessica, passes her on her way out, and immediately takes her seat. The frayed fabric scratches the woman's bare legs. Like Jessica, she gazes out over the landscape.

As if cued by Jessica's return, the baby resumes crying. "Has this baby been crying the whole time I've been gone," she ponders while she removes her computer bag from the overhead luggage compartment. Glad to be facing forward again, she takes her seat, pulls out her computer, and powers it up. She plugs in her headphones, sets her iTunes to shuffle, and commences work.

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“I have no other choice,” she thinks to herself, but she allows herself another long glance out the west-facing windows.

The blue water glows in the light of the setting sun, a warm west coast blue that seems to elucidate why we call jazz of flattened pitch the blues—not because it is sad, but rather because there is a slow repetition of feeling that collects into deep grooves and then relaxes. Beneath the shimmering blue sits the rock-lined shore. A bright rock of jasper reflects the waning sunlight and catches her eye. A seagull perches on the rock, and she immediately notices a fleck of red in the bird’s white plumage. The reddish hue of the rock enhances the red spilling from the bird’s vest. She stares at the wounded bird and feels a melancholy pit deep within her stomach. As quickly as it landed on the rock, the bird mounts up and sails swiftly across and then up above the blue canvas. She watches the bird closely, its sunny white cutting an indecipherable journey against the deeper blue of the sky. Though she loses sight of it in a flock of

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other seabirds, and though she has no way of telling where it is going, she is confident that it will get there.

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