

Attachments for the Platonically Inclined



I'M NOT GOING to sugarcoat it or try to explain it away. I acted badly. In this era of the pandemic and social distancing, she was cleaning as a way to keep busy, use the time, and be productive at home, but I should mention that nearly every bad thing I have ever done happened when Francie was cleaning, even in the best of times, because, for her, cleaning means disposal rather than scrubbing or dusting or washing. Sometimes the frenzy becomes too much for her. And me. This is a fact that must be acknowledged and, in my case, accommodated. Over the years she has thrown or given away many, many things, but the castoffs for this particular moment have been especially telling: clothing (the plaid sport coat I wore when I received the Jablonski Prize as a high school senior); kitchen appliances (my George Foreman hamburger grill); and sports accessories (a Roto Grip bowling ball, with which I bowled my only 300 game). Don't get me wrong; she gets rid of her own things as well. These are merely the latest examples of the hundreds of items that have made their way to Goodwill, the Salvation Army, American Veterans, the hospice thrift store, not to mention our local landfills, and I name them only because they were once mine and I remember them. Sometimes with fondness, sometimes with regret.

The fury of her cleaning and disposal makes me nervous for reasons I don't entirely understand. I'm not threatened by the loss of my material possessions alone—I hadn't worn that jacket in nearly fifty years, for example, so its time was clearly past the expiration date—but I am threatened by what that loss represents: the memory of what lives within those objects and the sense that history is being scrubbed free of the presence of my past.

"Who could forget you?" she asked. "I mean, really. You're sixty-five years old, and you're in all the yearbooks, but for a man you make a good drama queen. You act like the child who hasn't been chosen."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Easy for you to say, Miss Easy Come, Easy Go. Little Miss Sophomore Girl."

I happen to know for a fact that she has jewelry she wore when she was ten. It's squirreled away in a bag at the bottom of a cedar chest, and she would no more wear it now than she would wear Mickey Mouse ears, but it would break her heart to see it go.

Maybe, though, maybe I take this too much to heart. We get stuff, we get rid of stuff, stuff is not us. I should be able to turn the page, right?

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So, the Jablonski Prize. Named for Morton and Wilda Jablonski and endowed by their children with proceeds from their estate, the Prize honored the high school senior deemed to have the most promise. The Jablonskis performed together for forty-five years in our local community theater scene. They owned Morda's, half theater space, half restaurant, neither of which was very good. The prime rib was overcooked or gelid, the drinks were weak, and the theater consisted of drawing-room farces and scripts considered racy in 1936, but they were a generous and warm-hearted pair. As I say, Morda's was nothing to get excited about, and it only became worse under the ownership of their children, who saw it as their own private slush fund, but it was a local institution and its time could be dated from the speakeasies. One more reminder that longevity can make up for any number of deficiencies. That's true for individuals as well as institutions, and I am a case in point.

I know most people point to junior high and high school as a gauntlet of zits and hormones, public awkwardness and romantic devastation, but I found a home there among the socially frightened and the intellectually callow, a home that I never found so accommodating again. Academics came easy, student government was a natural, and a spot on the football and baseball teams paved any number of bumpy interpersonal paths. I might as well have had a key of ownership since I was there each day and for longer stretches than the janitors. At the end of each academic year, I was up and down the stairs, to and from the stage, picking up my annual graft from the principal and the other too-eager-to-please faculty, as though the plaques, ribbons, medals, and certificates were my right. All of those ended up in a trunk in my parents' garage, and when they died, the trunk migrated to the attic, that cave where it has remained in hiding from Francie for the last fifteen years, awaiting the recycling bin and its final end.

At the end of my senior year, when I stood up at the awards assembly to accept the Jablonski from Morton and Wilda's oldest daughter, my plaid sport coat led the way. Pretty splashy, I was; I could have had a job at any used car lot in town at that moment, but I had bigger fish in mind. College, for one thing, and a bigger town in which to shine. That I went to college but then came back is part of the story; that Bernadette Jablonski, then in her forties, handed me my check and

kissed and kissed and kissed both my cheeks, leaving lip prints all over my face, is another. The moment gave me ideas, ideas that were no more sustainable, as it turned out, than they were original.

On the other hand, Francie didn't have it so easy; I have to admit that. Her parents split up when she was fourteen, and she was forced to witness all the shouting, money-grubbing, and vile adult behavior that ensued. Dishes were thrown, glasses were shattered, and murder-suicide threats were a daily occurrence. She lived on the other side of town and on the other side of the high school from me—it might as well have been the other side of the moon—and she was the oldest of seven, so she was constantly responsible for cleaning up somebody's mess. Sometimes it was one of her younger siblings who had thrown up in bed from the stress, but sometimes it was one or the other parent who had drunk too much the night before and was the culprit. She made breakfasts out of the demolished boxes in the pantry and dinners out of air. Given her circumstances, none of the teachers at school were surprised that Francie Peck didn't have her homework done, her assignments read, or her papers written, nor were they surprised when she showed up for tenth grade with her hair dyed green, black widows tattooed on each wrist, and her jaw clenched so tight that her lips didn't show. What that meant, I understand now, but then, given my own self-absorption, she was merely intriguing. As exotic and dangerous as one of those carnivorous plants.

So of course I asked her out that year. I was a senior and she was a sophomore, and while I might have had the edge by age, she was by far the cannier of the two of us.

"You're kidding, right?" she said when I said we should do something, just the two of us. "You think I'm dressing up for you?"

"No," I said. "What makes you think that?"

She held her arms out as though inviting inspection. "Take a guess, Mr. Hot Shot."

She was inviting me to look at her T-shirt with its baked-in-the-dryer soup stains and her paint-spattered blue jeans, all of which could have used a wash, and as oblivious as I was, I knew that the subtext was: (a) she had no better clothes than this; (b) even if she had better clothes, she wasn't about to put on anything finer just to engage in hand-to-hand combat in the tight back seat of a Camaro; and (c), what could we possibly have had in common?

I had no answers to either (a) or (b), so I answered (c) instead: "I'd like to get to know you," I said, which was equal parts evasion and truth.

I convinced her to go bowling, thinking that such a neutral activity would raise no objections, but I would be wrong. We had just gotten out of the car in the

parking lot of Rodeo Lanes when she stopped and crossed her arms over her fifteen-year-old, less-than-imposing chest.

"Nuh-uh," she said. "Nope."

She pointed to the bag that held my ball and shoes. The bag that I had pulled out from behind the driver's seat and now held in my right hand.

"You have your own ball, and you have your own shoes. You're going to make me wear those red and green clown shoes worn by Grandma Moses and Mother Jones and make me stick my fingers in holes where who knows whose boogers have gone, while you wear deck shoes and use a ball that you clean on every other throw? And you're going to say we had a good time? I don't think so. No thank you."

"I've been in junior leagues since I was seven," I said. "Is that my fault?"

"Take me home," she said. "I knew this was a bad idea. The last time I went bowling, it was someone else's birthday party when I was ten, and they put the bumpers in the gutters so we wouldn't cry."

"Look," I said. "I'll rent the clown shoes, I'll use a house ball, and I'll ask for bumpers if you want. If the lanes are quiet, they might even turn on the disco ball and the strobes."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Put the bag away, and we'll call it good."

I did as I was told: put the bag behind the front seat, wore the rentals, and rolled the Fred Flintstone ball with the holes made for sausages rather than fingers. I didn't bother to keep score since she said it wasn't important. That hurt me, but I did as I was told, and we got along just fine, even if it wasn't the game that I knew. We got along just fine for the rest of that year as well, even if now and again we retreated to the back seat of the Camaro.

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I guess what I'm saying is that I had it easier than most, easier than my wife for sure, and if I have my periods of regret it's only that I wish I had worked a little harder to earn the respect of others. I went away to college with my five hundred dollars of Jablonski money and the blessing of my parents, who underwrote the rest.

Francie came to see me the day before I left. She brought me a handmade card that said "Go ahead, take off, you jerk!" on the front. On the inside, it said, "Many, many happy, happy returns!" and then in smaller script, she had written, "assuming you come back, at all, that is." We had talked about this, and we knew that I was going to college while she was going into her junior year of high school; we had seen such relationships wither and die in the space of a month or two, so we had agreed we wouldn't put ourselves under that kind of pressure. Make a clean break of it, we said. Use the year to start over with new friends, and in a year or

so, when we'd caught our breath from everyone and everything new that we'd experienced, we'd see where things stood. We were very proud of ourselves for being so mature.

I went to college as a math major, but thanks to Bernadette Jablonski, I thought of myself as an actor. I had played bit parts in school productions, but that last summer, I played Kolenkhov in Morda's production of *You Can't Take It with You*, and I discovered that after graduation I wasn't done with applause or attention. Oh, no. My Kolenkhov was ripe with Russian alveolars and guttural disgust, and I enjoyed the process of dying my hair as black as Raskolnikov's heart and attaching a beard with spirit gum. I bellowed my part with gusto. If anyone had asked what the play was about, I would have said that it was the life and times of a displaced Russian ballet instructor who happens to meet an everyday American family. I was that much in love with myself and prisoner to the idea. If I were honest, however, I would have had to admit that I could never wrap myself inside the character, no matter how much spirit gum I applied, how much volume I used. I was too worried about forgetting my lines. Francie came to see my star turn twice, and both times she had to hedge her assessments.

"Well, that was interesting," she said the first time. "I'm not sure the beard is you." And, "You were very consistent," she said the second time. "Your beard stayed put both times." Not exactly the heartiest of endorsements.

I didn't let her reaction bother me; Bernadette had already cautioned me about critics. She said I was to pay no mind, which I didn't because she said this as she was taking off my beard with dabs of rubbing alcohol and cotton balls and touching me in places where my beard had never been. Besides, what would poor little Francie know about theater, she of the benighted family and unenriched life? She didn't even know how to bowl.

Bernadette had cast herself in the role of Essie Carmichael, for which she was clearly too old, while her husband Walter Schneiderman played Grandfather Vanderhof using an accent straight from a Down Easter's lobster boat. At one point in Act II, I was meant to hoist Bernadette-as-Essie in a lift, but she proved to be a little too heavy and I proved not to be up to the challenge, so we played it for laughs. Night after night, she fell to the stage in a whirl of silk tights, translucent panties, and a cartwheel of pancake tutu. Her legs stuck out like Raggedy Ann's, and she swore off-script, which made the laughs from our know-nothing audience that much louder.

On our closing night, Bernadette cleaned my face of beard and then delivered me from high school inexperience in the women's restroom of the middle school theater where our production had wrapped. She locked the door from the

inside to keep any latecomers at bay and then hopped onto the ledge of one of the sinks with a nimbleness that belied her supposed gracelessness on stage. The ups and downs of her tutu were as exhilarating as they were frightening and mysterious.

Her husband was, at that moment, striking the stage, and we could hear the sound of furniture and backdrops being loaded onto dollies.

When we were through, which took about as long as it took for my pants to drop, she removed her stage paint and touched up her shellacked hair.

"Honey," she said, "there will be others, but you'll never have better."

A lie wrapped in a truth, but I didn't know which was which, and that was as frightening as anything. I could replay what she had done, but I couldn't bring myself to use the words with which to name it. Was it any wonder I had to go to college?

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I didn't get my degree in math, and I didn't go on stage ever again despite my many auditions, and I could feel my star fading by the minute. College was a time of discovery, and one of my biggest discoveries was that not many cared what happened to me, award assemblies of the past notwithstanding. My high school teachers continued to award prizes to younger and younger students, and they no longer seemed to think much of my promise if they thought about me at all. They doted on the next years' crops instead like faithless lovers. So I became an English major with a teaching credential on the side, and I returned home like Ulysses without the fanfare or the slaughter, only the resignation of a sunbaked oar. Rather than the conquering hero, I was just another wet-behind-the-ears new hire with a less than exemplary degree. My chemistry teacher from five years earlier shook his head, and his eyes and his words betrayed his judgment. "English?" he said. "When you could manipulate differential equations? You could have worked for NASA."

"Well," I said in my own defense, "these things happen."

I could have kicked myself for not having something wittier to say. He was no summer's day, of course, while I had a true mind, and there was no impediment in my way of the truth of the human predicament, a truth that no number or derivative or launch angle ever could find. That's what I wanted to say, but I didn't because I didn't entirely believe it, even if the space program had come to the end of its Golden Age.

Even Bernadette Jablonski didn't seem entirely happy to see me on my return.

"You," she said. "Aren't you supposed to be making the world safe for technology?"

"I'm teaching now," I said, to which she replied: "Oh, my god. That's what they all do, isn't it?"

I had gone to see her at Morda's since I had heard they were rehearsing one of their chestnut revivals. She had cast herself as Aunt Abby in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, a role which was at least a little closer to her own age, even if she was clearly targeting the high schooler she had fingered for Mortimer Brewster. I no longer fit her preferred demographic, but given the number of her former prizewinners manning the other male parts, I could see that I was entirely outside her circle of admirers and no longer particularly welcome.

As if that weren't enough, I had lost touch with Francie, who was nowhere to be found. I heard from others that she had dropped out her senior year, then got her GED, and after that, left town with a bus ticket, no firm plans, and barely a hint of a goodbye. Who knew? I came back to resume my life only to find that nothing was different but everything was changed.

I threw myself into teaching since I had nothing else to do, and if I wasn't very good, I could organize my students into lockstep and make them march through the curriculum like a brigade of shell-shocked survivors. Discipline and attention to detail are not substitutes for charisma and love, but they will suffice for a paycheck and job security and statistical result. I wouldn't let the adolescents in my charge horse around with *Romeo and Juliet* any more than I'd let them off the hook for the correct use of there, their, and they're, and if I refused the invitation to teach the seniors, that was only due to my knowledge of what disappointments lay in wait for them. I gained a reputation, just as I gained a wife, a mortgage, two sons, and Caesar, the dumbest of dumb Labradors: slowly and over the course of years. Brick by brick. But then, just as quickly I lost it all.

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I blame the George Foreman grill.

And, yes, as silly as it sounds, the truth remains: without that grill, I might still be with the woman I met at church, the woman I married because it seemed the right thing to do, and I might still be father to the sons I sired. Houses can be bought and sold, and a Labrador is befuddled on the best of days, but I rue the loss of brick-and-mortar and swirling drifts of black fur as well.

The grill, well, that is gone now, too, the recent victim of Francie's most aggressive purge. She had nothing against it personally, except her general principle that appliances should be useful seven days a week and not just for the occasional one-off. And, for the record, they should also work.

"But I cooked on that exclusively," I argued. "For years."

"It's dead," she said. "And you clearly needed new recipes."

"Who needs recipes?" I said. "I got you. With all apologies to gender roles."

"Huh," she said. "I'm here now, and I've been here for years and years; the grill can go. Keep this up, and I'll be the one to leave."

The outside of it was black and scorched, the cord frayed, the wires exposed, and it had lived in the garage with the cobwebs and mice for thirty years or more; I never intended to use it again. I never could have used it again. I had kept it as a reminder of how tenuous life can be, but I guess such *memento mori* are no match for spring cleaning in a quarantine.

But I need to backtrack a bit.

Not long after I started teaching, I met Tiffany at church, one of those hotel convention center monstrosities at the white north end of town. I'll spare you the name and denomination in order to protect the innocent and the meaning-to-be-well-meaning. In my own mind I called it the Cheez Whiz and Lard Tabernacle, since that's the way the name of the Almighty sounded coming from the mouth of the pastor who had made his bones in Texas; he tended to get worked up at the conclusions of his sermons, and when the spit began to fly and he invoked the name of American undigestibles, we knew we were near the end, with the mass hysteria of the altar call soon to follow. I had gone there thinking that, in the absence of Francie, looking for love might be best fulfilled by numbers, and since this church had no shortage of single women, I wasn't far off in my estimation. What I hadn't expected was the kind of women I'd find. Very earnest, they were, and very quick to offer praise to the Lard. It should also be noted that the Tabernacle was something of a track meet for dating, since the most attractive of the single women got snapped up by the age of twenty-one, and they weren't shy about asking their prospective suitors for a resume and a paystub, if not references.

I'll say this for Tiffany: she was something of an outlier within her spiritual circle. She worked for her father's advertising outfit, and she made three times my teacher's salary; that, by itself, could have been a disqualification. Unlike the majority of her Evangelical sisters, though, she liked wearing J. Crew to work more than she liked wearing sweatpants at home, and she wasn't interested in nesting the moment she got married. Our wedding was a destination affair in Carmel, the décor was Martha Stewart, and the honeymoon was a quick four-day trip to Cabo because she had meetings the following Wednesday in her father's office, and, as she said, she had to be about his business. So she was all the more surprised when the pregnancy test came back positive three months later. She was more surprised than I was since, one Friday night after a few too many drinks, I knew we hadn't been as careful as we might have been. I had been expecting the result and she wasn't, which meant that I bore the brunt of her anger.

"How," she looked me in the eye, "did this happen?"

"I think," I said, "that you know how. We did this, and we did that, and there you have it."

"I mean," she said, "how did *you* let this happen?"

So it was my responsibility, and once Brandon was six weeks old, he was off to daycare half an hour before my first period at school, and I picked him up each weekday afternoon at five. I learned how to carry all the equipment and baggage that infants require these days, and I became as adept as any circus juggler with bulky bags and the brevity of time.

And then, it happened again; Tiffany accused me of irresponsibility, and we had Kyle just after Brandon turned three, and the luggage I carried became heavier and more elaborate while Tiffany's work days became longer and longer, which tempted me to think that she wanted to get away from me and the boys. The school year was complicated, with its drop-offs and pick-ups, and I can tell you that getting work done around the corners of baths and feedings, playtimes and bedtimes was a challenge. We managed, albeit barely. But when summer came, the boys and I found ways to enjoy ourselves in spite of their mother's absences. Her clients were mostly agricultural interests, and she was up and down Highway 99, along with the long-haul truckers. The food processors and pesticide manufacturers got a kick out of seeing her pull up in the BMW and get out wearing white while the dust swirled around her in their graveled parking lots. They were eager for her encouragement, and she prayed with them as often as she gave them new marketing strategies and advertising campaigns. Her clients swore by her, she spoke their language, and she was a fundamental feature of her father's overall revenue. She returned home late at the end of each day and peeled off what became my next day's trip to the dry cleaner.

We were happy. Happy enough. Or so I thought. Until that day in July when I sat down on the couch to watch the Giants lose a Wednesday afternoon game to Cincinnati. Brandon was playing with Duplos while Kyle rattled around in one of those roller contraptions with a seat and a tray and a circle of wheels that kept him upright and, as it turned out, too mobile. Caesar lay under the coffee table and drooled on the carpet. Hamburger patties were cooking in the grill for Brandon and me, and I must have fallen asleep to yet another Giant inning of anemic offense when Brandon grabbed my nose to get my attention.

"Daddy," he said, enunciating as well as a child twice his age, "Kyle is coughing."

"Okay," I said, coming to consciousness as slowly as a boot wades through mud. "Okay."

Caesar was barking in idiotic and frantic confusion, and I couldn't hear a thing. I looked this way and that from my place on the couch. On television, Candelstick looked like a ghost town surrounded by drizzle and fog, and I knew that on the radio Hank Greenwald would either be quoting Twain about the effects of a San Francisco summer or making another comment about fans disguised as empty seats. I didn't see Kyle or his roll-around chair. Not until Brandon pointed to the foyer with its slick terrazzo tiles and the potted silk plants in front of the entry way window.

He was coughing all right, and his face was red, and if he was banging his tiny fists on the tray table in front of him like Ginger Baker on drums, he also didn't appear to be breathing.

I did everything a parent is not supposed to do in such cases, but I think I might be excused if only for being under the influence of fear and adrenaline and the useless energy of panic. I picked him up, pounded his back, felt around in his mouth, which is when I touched the feathered end of one of the little plastic flower stems from the silk plants by the door. I contemplated tweezers as though they might be forceps. I kneed Caesar away whose help consisted of jumping as well as barking. I dangled Kyle upside down, hoping to dislodge the obstruction from his airway, and then I pounded his back again until he suddenly smiled and opened his arms to be hugged and said "Da, da, da, da," which to my frightened and now relieved ears sounded like Goddammit, Dad.

I should also mention that somewhere within that sequence of events—the feeling inside his mouth, the dangling, and the pounding, Caesar's barking and jumping—the smoke detector in the kitchen had begun to wail, smoke was billowing everywhere from the electric grill, and the air in the house had turned greasy and brown.

"Jeez Louise, and all the saints," I said. I held Kyle, who was now breathing like a yogi, while I ushered Brandon and the dog outside. "Stay here," I told my older boy, for in those days before cell phones, I either had to pound on a neighbor's door or go back inside to call the fire department. The fear of embarrassment told me that breathing a little smoke was just the thing for a Wednesday, and the 911 operator, after getting the street address, mentioned baking soda once she heard the words "electric grill" and "fire" and "grease." So, with one hand, I held Kyle, who was pounding me in the ear, and with the other, I dumped the Arm & Hammer on the grill and the fire, and then found a way to get the plug out of the wall. If the order in which I did things was backward, I still count it a victory and an achievement to have had the presence of mind at all.

Tiffany pulled into the garage just as the last of the fire trucks was leaving. The boys, the dog, and I were outside on the front porch waving to the firemen. She got out of the car and joined our little tableau.

"What did you burn down?" she said.

"You might well ask," I said. "But there won't be hamburgers tonight."

"I see," she said.

"And we need to give Kyle a heavy dose of sweet potato."

"I see," she said again, even though she didn't.

I had talked with one of the firemen who was also their EMT, who suggested that the more mashed food we fed him, the sooner we'd find the plastic parts in Kyle's diaper, so when I explained that to Tiffany, she held her head in both hands and took a deep breath and said, "I think you need to go."

"What?" I said.

"Go," she said and pointed toward the garage and my twelve-year-old Escort. "I can't have this anymore."

"What?" I said again. "What can't you have anymore?"

"This, this chaos," she said, even though we'd hardly made this any kind of routine. "I can't have it."

"So, what am I supposed to do? I live here," I said, since stating the obvious seemed my best line of defense. "I live here, you live here, and so do the boys. We're a family," I said. "But maybe that's not true anymore."

"Maybe not," she said. "And maybe if you leave, I'll be able to breathe again."

And here I had thought I had been the more beleaguered.

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I packed my things that night and went to a motel, and over the next couple of weeks, I moved the rest of my accumulated stuff, including the grill, which I had rescued from the trash out of some perverse notion that if I could fix it, I might be able to restore my marriage. I am not especially handy, though, so the outside of the case remained blackened by grease and smoke and flames, and the cord remained frayed and the wires exposed and broken, and my marriage remained equally kaput. I saw the boys and Caesar on weekends until Tiffany met the owner of a plumbing supply company, who was also likewise divorced. And when he decided to move his operation to Arizona, she and the boys went with him, no matter what that meant to her career in advertising at Daddy's firm. I guess it wasn't that important to her, after all, and she turned her affections toward real estate. I could have fought the move, but I didn't have the heart, and when I attended their eventual graduations and weddings, neither boy had much memory of me except as a

well-meaning stranger who showed up at appropriate moments with a card for the occasion and a check for less than they might have expected or hoped to receive. Kyle has no memory of silk geraniums, and Brandon does not remember eating hamburgers night after night. I should mention, they met at church, Tiffany and her plumbing mogul, just as we had done, but it seems to have been a better match; their every Christmas card and newsletter displays a larger and newer and more featureless house in a newer and more featureless suburb. On the other hand, the grill moved with me from apartment to house, from box to garage, a charred and guilty reminder of a former life.

If I now resist Francie's call to eradicate these objects of the past, it is only for the benefit such reminders can bring. To know that our imperfections and flaws have made of us who we are. Which brings me to how Francie and I met. Or re-met, as the case may be.

I taught my classes through our separation and divorce, and since Tiffany no longer trusted my fitness, I no longer had responsibility for our boys, and my schedule had hours open that I was unused to filling on my own. I went back to the bowling alleys of my youth and signed up for three leagues a week, one of which was stocked with former pros and those who were hopeful of becoming so. Crankers, strokers, and full rollers, you name it, we saw them all. Everyone had an idea about how to get the right path to the headpin.

One night I could do little wrong. I ended the first game with a 248 and five straight strikes. The second game I strung all twelve together for my first and only 300 game, and then in the third game I threw three more strikes before I left a seven pin in the fourth frame. The feeling was other-worldly: my feet, my arm and hand, the ball, the pins—all were connected and in harmony with each other. Twenty straight strikes. When it was all over, I sat in my spot on the molded plastic seats, held my head between my knees, and wept. One of the former professionals came by and put his gloved fist on my head and said that the first one was always special, but there would be more to come. As right as he was about the experience being special, he was that wrong about the 300 games in my future. There were close calls, but no others, and I had to content myself with that memory. The memory of a game and the memory of that moment in my life when I caught perfection in the midst of losing everything else.

That night was also the first time I felt what I would call a disturbance along my right shoulder blade. A week later a lump had formed. I felt it, spongy and hard, every time I rolled over in bed, and a week after that, I began to run a fever. I lasted another week by taking Ibuprofen by the shovelful, but then one night at midnight, I could no longer lie on my back or stay seated in a chair; even the slight-

est pressure was uncomfortable. I went to the emergency room, knowing that my case would no doubt be among the lowest of priorities, since I represented neither gunshot wound nor heart attack, broken bone nor stroke.

A bored receptionist took my information and insurance, and a bored technician took my vitals, and only my temperature of 103 provoked anything beyond mild interest. That was when Francie pushed aside the curtain and stood next to my bed. She was wearing blue scrubs, her hair was orange rather than green, and there were three rings looping through her left nostril, but I immediately recognized her and then confirmed my recognition by seeing the tattooed spiders peek out at each wrist underneath her long sleeve shirt.

"You," she said. "Joe College has returned."

"Me," I said. "Where have you been all of my life?"

"Here," she said, "working my ass off. Community college. Getting my RN and FNP. Where have you been?"

"Back at our old stomping grounds."

"You're kidding." She used a light to check my eyes and pointed to where I was to look.

"Nope, no kidding. English. Grades nine, ten, and eleven."

"Small world. We're what? Ten minutes away from each other, hospital to school?"

"I guess. How many minutes is that in life experience?"

"Light years," she said.

"Look," I said, "we can call the world big or small, but I think I have a tumor or an alien life form as parasite."

"Really." She told me to roll over onto my stomach and pressed on the slug-sized lump. "Does this hurt?"

After I came down from the ceiling, I said, "Yes," before I could begin to cry in earnest.

"Try having a baby," she said. "You big baby."

"You have kids?" I said.

"Are you kidding?" she said. "I know what's involved. Why would I do that to myself? But I've delivered my share, and I know who deserves my sympathy. Sit up."

I did as I was told. "I suppose I have back cancer," I said, "and I have two months to live. You can tell me."

"Don't be an idiot," she said. "It's no big deal. A sebaceous cyst, but I can only guarantee you one more hour of life. Because that's how long it's going to take to get this thing addressed."

She was going to have to core it out, she said, but then she'd bandage me up, put me on antibiotics, and send me on my way. If I got hit by a bus after leaving the ER, well, that was on me.

"I'll be sedated, right?" I said.

"Don't be a weenie," she said, cruel girl. "All you get is a little bit of lidocaine," which was when she pulled out a hypodermic that looked to have been made for animal husbandry, and then watched me faint away.

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I have no illusions regarding my pain threshold. If pain is a ladder, I won't make it past the first rung. I whimper *before* bad things can happen if I see them coming. I fainted when I saw the needle, and then Francie went to work. She hit me four or five times with the lidocaine in case I woke up, and then she got busy with the scalpel, opened up the lump, and then squeezed until the infection and the white, waxy gunk were gone. From what I was told, the smell was bad enough that patients three beds removed were complaining. If they didn't get some fresh air stat, they'd rather have their heart attacks at home, thank you very much. That's what they said, or so Francie swore.

I woke up while Francie was packing the hole in my back.

"I can't believe you fainted," she said.

"I get a little wobbly around blood," I said, "especially my own. And pain. I'm not a fan of pain."

She shook her head. "You probably shouldn't drive yourself home, then. Who can you call?"

"I'm woozy and in no mood for existential questions. A cab?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're lucky it's a slow night. Stay put and get some rest."

She woke me up at six, and then we walked to her car, one that was even older and dirtier and more dented than my own. In order to sit down, I had to scrape the sandwich wrappers to the floor with the Diet Coke cans and the Doritos bags.

"And to think," I said, "that our health care professionals are the ones advising us on diet."

"May I remind you," she said, "that walking is not out of the question?"

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She took me home, we shared our contact information, and a week later she called with an invitation.

"I'll bet you haven't gotten that thing repacked yet, have you?"

She had given me the address and a phone number of a wound clinic, but I hadn't yet gotten around to doing anything about it.

"No," I said, "but I was planning on it."

"Uh-huh. I didn't think so."

Her invitation was this: she'd pick me up, take me to a clinic where she had privileges, dress the wound, pick up my car, and then we could go out.

"The two of us," she said. "Like old times."

"Sure," I said. "What do you want to do?"

"Bowling," she said, which was the second time, and certainly not the last, that I caught a glint of cruelty in her eyes.

"Okay," I said, "but you know that I'm injured."

"You're scared of bowling a girl," she said.

"No," I said. "I'll have you know that I bowled a 300. Recently. A month ago."

"No," she said. "I didn't know, and I don't believe it. Bring your ball."

It turned out that she had begun to bowl in earnest not long after she got her first hospital job. She did it as something of a joke, in memory of our first date so long ago, but then she discovered that she had a competitive streak, one that had resided within her all this time, albeit dormant and untapped; when she let it emerge, she also discovered that she had to govern the impulse to yell "fucking hell, you son of a bitch" whenever she missed a spare or to kick the ball return when she left a 4-10 split. So we did as she suggested—or, should I say, I did as she directed—and we were bowling at Rodeo Lanes at ten o'clock on a Friday night. And if I tell you now that I lost to her 212 to 204 because I didn't pick up a simple 4-7 spare in the tenth, would you be surprised? Or that by the time we were done, I was sweating and my back was throbbing once again? Would you be surprised if I told you that one thing had nothing to do with the other, that I will not make that particular excuse? Even though my ball, which had been so accurate only a month before, slid past the four-pin by a whisper. Even though when that had happened and she had won, Francie yelled, loud enough for everyone to hear despite the crashing and banging going on around us. On the other hand, the wound packing that Francie had done two hours earlier was leaking, and not in a good way, so we made a return visit to the ER so she could pull out yards and yards of putrescent gauze. She cleaned me up once again, but this time I did not faint, hero that I was, no matter how nauseated I might have felt from the odor of mortality I now had opportunity to smell.

We got married a week or two later because we were both in our forties with no need to wait, but we mark our anniversary from our second date at a bowling alley rather than the date of the civil ceremony with cake. All of which is to say that I had my first adult sexual experience in the women's room of a middle school

theater, and I met the wife who divorced me at church and the wife who stayed with me when she stuck a knife in my back, and all of that is a reminder to me that nothing is ever as it is first reported.

Not long after we married, Francie changed jobs when the nurse's position came open at our high school. She got it, and of course the students loved her. They loved her hair and nose rings, and they loved her tattoos, and they love the way she can put them in their place with salt and sugar in equal measures. She makes them feel safe and special and smart, and because she was there, my stock rose, and when I retired, they pretended to love me for her sake. When she saw the job announcement, she said she was going to apply because why should I be the only one with a summer? But now I'm retired, so my summer is the rest of my life. And now, we are living and working at home, and no one knows what day of the week it is, much less the month or the season.

"Get a grip," Francie says, when she takes a break from Zoom faculty meetings and chat sessions with students who have questions about venereal disease. "Get a grip, and help me clean out the attic."

I had something of a temper tantrum, I admit it.

"This is my life," I said, or at least that's what I think I said. I went outside of my head for a time as I saw the objects departing, presumably never to return. "It's my life and you're trying to get rid of it, one shadow at a time."

There goes the plaid sport coat and the delusions and hormones of my high school years. *Poof!*

And there goes the George Foreman grill of my ill-fated first attempt at marriage and family. *Psst!*

But I balk at the thought of the Roto Grip leaving my life, no matter if I haven't been to a bowling alley in the past ten years, the victim of bad knees, the evolution of our interests, and the fact that she was beating me two games out of three when I quit for good. Still, when I look at it, I can't help but be reminded of perfection when perfection was difficult to find. And impossible to hold onto. Reminded that there are moments when everything works as it is supposed to, a harmony beyond applause or appreciation from others.

"Look," I'll say. "I'll trade you one bowling ball for a footlocker's worth of certificates of achievement. Who knows? When this is all over and we walk outside again, maybe we'll go bowling. It could happen."

She will sigh, I can hear it now. She will tug her long-sleeved T-shirt over her wrists, and she'll mutter words to the effect that she has been saddled with a drama queen of a husband, and of course, she will be right.