

ff

INTERMEZZO

**SALLY
ROONEY**

COVER TO BE REVEALED

I was in the waiting room. Then I was in the examination room. There was a chair, and another chair, and a hydraulic doctor bed. Sit down, the doctor said. I didn't know where. Not on the bed, he said. I sat on a chair.

'I think I have a concussion,' I said.

'Why do you think that?' the doctor said.

'My nephew hit me.'

'He hit you?'

'In the nose. Then in the back of the head.'

'How old is he?' the doctor said.

'Fourteen,' I said.

'Okay,' he said, 'take off your shirt.'

'Really?' I said.

'Sure,' the doctor said. I unbuttoned my shirt.

He shone a light in my eyes.

The light was on the end of a cone. The cone was set at ninety degrees on the end of a metal rod. It looked like a thing dentists use for looking at mouths.

'No concussion,' the doctor said. It didn't seem like he could tell that just by shining a cone in my eyes.

'Looks like you have a little eczema here, though,' he said. He pointed to my chest then spun away in his chair.



I looked down at myself. There was a red patch, and what looked like a slightly raised piece of dead skin in the centre of my chest. Just to the right of where I assumed my heart was.

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said, looking at his computer, ‘very treatable. I’m writing you a prescription. For hydrocortisol cream.’

‘Don’t you mean hydrocortisone?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘hydrocortisone. That is what I said.’

My brother's wife, when I was back at the house, said I shouldn't have provoked him.

'He's very sensitive,' she said.

'What?' I said. 'I didn't provoke him.'

'He loved your dad,' my brother's wife said. 'They had a real connection.'

'I don't see what that has to do with anything.'

'Are you really going to wear that outfit?' she said. I was wearing a T-shirt with lots of Phils on it: Phil Leotardo, Phil Neville, the Philippines, the concept of 'Philanthropy', Philadelphia (the spread), the London Philharmonic, Prince Philip.

'What?' I said. 'No. I am going to wear a suit.'

'It has a stain on it. You can't wear that.'

'I am going to change,' I said.

My brother walked into the kitchen and kissed his wife on the forehead as she walked out of it. He started doing something in a cupboard.

'You should wear the Phil T-shirt to Dad's funeral,' he said.

'I am going to change,' I said, and left the room.

I looked at myself in the half-steamed bathroom mirror. This was the house I grew up in.

The doctor was right about the skin on my chest, just to the right of where I assumed my heart was. It looked all weird.

I picked at the skin. It came away painlessly.

Just a little at first. It made a thick and translucent white flap. I flicked at it with my fingernail. I pulled at it. More pulled away like damp paper. Over my left nipple, then right up to my armpit.

It started to sting a little like it was meant to stay on. I stopped tearing myself. The skin just hung there.

Then I kept going.

I couldn't walk around with half my chest hanging off me.

Once I'd torn it mostly off, I had an alarmingly large piece of skin in my hands. I looked at it.

It was me but losing its shape, still slightly ridged where it had run over my ribcage.

I looked at my body in the mirror.

There was a long rift where I'd removed the dead skin. It poked outwards, up the side of me, almost imperceptibly, like the unfindable edge of a Sellotape roll.

I didn't know what to do with the skin that had come off. I couldn't leave it in the bathroom bin where my brother or his wife would find it. And I didn't want to flush it, either.

I thought about putting it in my pocket and taking it downstairs and wrapping it in a plastic bag and disposing of it secretly. But that felt insane. And I didn't want to get caught doing it.

I dropped the skin into the bathtub. It made a slap sound.

I turned the showerhead on all the way. I pointed it at the skin. After a moment it began to break apart, as if decomposing, and the tiny pieces of it were carried by the spiralling water down the sloping porcelain, down into the plughole.

After the funeral, at the wake, which was at the house, my nephew apologised for punching me.

‘I’m sorry for punching you in your head,’ he said.

‘No problem,’ I said.

‘I just get so angry sometimes,’ he said.

‘Right,’ I said.

‘Don’t you?’ he said.

I poured myself more wine from the bottle I was guarding from everyone else. The new skin was tender under my shirt, under my jacket.

The living room was large but full of mourners. My uncle by marriage was holding court on refreshments.

‘Yes, I borrowed it from work,’ he said. ‘From the work canteen.’

He was talking about a large metal urn that stored and dispensed near-boiling water.

‘I thought a lot of people would want tea,’ my uncle said, ‘and that this would make it easier.’

‘It must have been hard to get here,’ I said, ‘with all the hot water in.’

‘What?’ he said.

‘Imagine if it spilled on someone,’ I said. ‘They’d get all burnt.’

‘No,’ he said, ‘you don’t transport it full. That’d be dangerous.’

‘That’s what I’m saying,’ I said.

‘What are you doing for work at the moment?’ he said. ‘Still writing? Like your parents?’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

‘And the money’s alright? I read an article about how books don’t make money anymore. Barely any of you make any money.’

My brother walked over. He was holding a glass of wine and a beer.

‘I see you have two drinks,’ I said, to him. ‘Nice.’

He tried to hand the beer to my uncle, who put his palms up and made a goofy face, then mimed driving a car.

‘Thanks for apologising to your nephew,’ my brother said, to me.

‘I didn’t,’ I said.

‘He really appreciated it.’

‘I didn’t apologise. He apologised to me.’

‘Sure,’ my brother said.

‘Hey,’ I said. ‘Some of my skin came off earlier.’

My brother was a plastic surgeon. That was his job.

‘What?’ he said.

‘In the shower. Like a reptile.’

‘Your skin came off?’

‘Like a reptile,’ I repeated.

‘That sounds like eczema. You should see a doctor.’

‘You are a doctor.’

‘I’m not a skin doctor.’

‘You are a skin doctor.’

‘No, I’m not. I’m a surgeon. I’m not looking at your eczema skin.’

‘I saw a doctor today,’ I said, ‘and he gave me a cream.’
I tried to pour myself more wine from my bottle but it was empty.

‘So use the cream,’ my brother said.

I walked away to get another drink.

Back in the kitchen, a neighbour from down the road said it had been a beautiful ceremony.

‘That was a beautiful ceremony,’ she said.

She was older than sixty and wore purple all the time. Even to funerals.

‘It was?’ I said. But she thought I was just agreeing.

‘He would have loved it.’

‘He would have?’

‘He would have found it very moving.’

‘I thought he might have found it disappointing,’ I said, ‘being dead.’

‘Yes, he would have found it very moving,’ she said. ‘He was a very emotional man. A true artist.’

I thought about my father in the audience of my brother’s school flute recital, holding a biro and the photocopied programme, ticking off each act as it finished.

I thought about my father in the audience of my brother’s school prize-giving, slumped. I thought about him sitting up, suddenly, when a small girl, maybe nine, won an award for ‘dance’. I thought about him saying loudly, incredulously – loud enough for parents to shush him – ‘Darts?’

‘You knew him pretty well,’ I said.



‘We had a connection,’ she said. ‘He was a true artist.’

I looked around for a different conversation.

‘And so kind,’ she said, ‘staying with your mother. After everything.’

I drank the last of my new glass of wine. I put the glass down on the counter hard.

‘Listen, you stupid purple bitch,’ I said. ‘Shut the fuck up about my dad.’

I woke up hungover in my childhood bedroom. I was still wearing my shoes and trousers.

My white shirt had quite a lot of blood on it. My head hurt under my face.

I took my shoes off and went downstairs to make coffee. My brother's wife was in the kitchen already.

'Coffee?' I said. I gestured at her with a mug. She didn't say anything. She just made a sound and left the room.

My brother walked in as she walked out. He kissed her on the forehead as they passed each other.

'Got some blood on you,' he said. 'Make me some coffee.'

I sat down at the breakfast island in the middle of the kitchen. The tea urn was gone. But there were glasses and mugs everywhere. The foily remains of wake snacks.

I took my cigarettes out and lit one.

'Jesus Christ,' my brother said.

'My head hurts,' I said.

'She got you good,' he said.

'I should have hit her back,' I said.

'As if you could,' he said. 'She made you look like a little bitch.'



'Yeah,' I said.

'You are a little bitch,' my brother's wife shouted, from another room.

I heard my brother and his wife leave to get some air or something. So I called my girlfriend.

It rang once. Then the line went dead. There was no option for voicemail.

I let myself count the days in my head. I had last seen her three weeks ago tomorrow.

Maybe she had blocked my number now.

The wood felt cold and crumb-covered against my forehead.

My brother drove me and his wife to our mother's nursing home. My brother's wife made sure she sat up front so I sat in the back of their car, which was small, but new, and expensive-seeming.

'How was the funeral?' my mother said, from her chair, which was disgusting.

'It was beautiful,' my brother's wife said. 'It was a really beautiful ceremony, Rebecca. Everyone said so.'

'I'm so glad,' my mother said.

'Have you got everything you need, Mum? Do you need us to bring anything?' my brother said, louder than necessary. My mother ignored him.

'What happened to your face?' she said.

'Cheryl hit me,' I said.

'Why would she do that?' my mother said.

'I was defending Dad's honour.'

'He called her a stupid purple bitch,' my brother said.

'Shut up,' I said.

'Oh, no,' my mother said.

'I didn't,' I said.

'Oh, no,' my mother said.

'And my skin is peeling off, Mum,' I said. 'I'm very frightened.'

'What?' my mother said.

'Nothing,' my brother said. 'He is just joking. He has some eczema. He is just joking.'

'I hope you didn't hit her back,' my mother said.

'I got her good. Spark out,' I said. I mimed a jab with my right. 'Cheryl's in the hospital.'

'Oh, no,' my mother said.

'No, he didn't,' my brother's wife said. 'He's just trying to upset you. He didn't hit her.'

'She's messed up,' I said. 'She'll never look the same.'

'Oh, no,' my mother said.

‘Maybe we should just kill Mum,’ I said, in the foyer of the nursing home, as we were leaving. ‘No parents, no rules. Clean break.’

‘Shut up,’ my brother’s wife said.

‘What did you say the advance on your book was?’ my brother said.

He meant my second book, the book I had told everyone I was writing, and got paid an advance on.

I had told everyone it was about an elderly gardener. The gardener lives near Chernobyl, in Soviet times.

The gardener dies because he’s so old. In the middle of the gardener’s funeral rites, the nearby power plant explodes. The funeral is abandoned halfway through.

The gardener becomes a *dybbuk*, which was a kind of Jewish ghost I’d seen in a movie. He has to wander around the Earth endlessly, gardening or something, until something gets sorted out.

That was as far as I’d gotten. I hadn’t actually written any of it yet.

I had tried. But every time I tried I just didn’t.

‘Fifty five thou,’ I said. ‘Clean, non-sequential bills.’

‘Fucking hell,’ my brother said.

‘That’s wonderful news,’ my brother’s wife said, ‘congratulations. You won’t need to be in London. You can help get the house in order. For the sale.’

‘Yes, good idea,’ I said, thinking about not having to pay rent anymore.

It was the autumn and there were leaves everywhere. I decided to go back to London to get things. On the train I sat facing the wrong direction and looked out the window. The air was full of rain. I was carried backwards into it.

In my flat the furniture was still there. The sofa, the television, the stereo, the gifted soft-furnishings.

But when I opened the wardrobe to get a clean jumper it was empty. Or, two-thirds empty. All my girlfriend's things had disappeared. Her dresses, blouses, skirts. Her floating light-fabricked trousers. Her multiple, heavy winter coats. I went to the dresser and checked the drawers that belonged to her.

But they were empty, too. All that was left was lint, and the decrepit sprigs of lavender she believed would ward off moths.

Then I noticed the bookshelves. They were also mainly empty. So was the bathroom. All the stupid and expensive houseplants had disappeared.

I was surprised at how few of the things we owned together belonged to me. There were outlines of dust all around the places her things used to live.

The air smelt different somehow.

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I looked around for a note or something. But there wasn't one. So I tried calling her phone again and it rang once and then went silent.

I went out onto the balcony for a while.

The sun was setting grey.

When I woke, it felt like someone was watching me.

I sat up in bed for a second. Then I turned on the lights. But there was nobody in the room. And the curtains were closed.

I noticed that in my sleep I'd built a person out of pillows next to me. Maybe so it felt as if she was still in the bed.

I could feel my heart pushing my chest.

When I couldn't get back to sleep I dressed and had a drink. My girlfriend had taken some of the wine but left the spirits. After that I felt a bit better.

I started packing possessions into the suitcase she hadn't taken. It was the ugliest one. We had named it 'Ugly Green'.

By the time dawn was done I was ready to leave. I wrote an email on my phone to the estate agent saying we were vacating the flat; that they could dispose of the remaining contents, at our expense, as they saw fit.

Then I tried calling her again. But it rang out.

I rolled Ugly Green to the door. I turned around and began to wipe the dust outlines of her possessions from the shelves and counters and other furniture surfaces. But then I decided I did not feel like it. So I gave up.

The train back to the house was half-filled with commuters, in various states of rained-on, all umbrellas and ugly laptops. They thinned out as we got further out of the city, until I was alone, in the train carriage, in the countryside.

From the outside, once I was back at it, the house looked very empty.

The plants around it seemed to have gotten bigger.

There were vines growing up one of the walls. They were almost touching the glass of a ground floor window.

My key was loud in the door. Nobody shouted hello.

In the bathroom, I picked at the skin on my hand. It felt dry and funny.

The skin pulled upwards, from my wrist, all the way from my palms and fingers, and then across the back of my hand.

I just kept pulling, until it had come away from all my fingers and shifting hand veins. The skin came away in a single piece. It didn't hurt. I looked at it. It looked like a glove of myself.

I threw the skin into the bathtub. I turned the showerhead on and aimed at the skin and watched as it disintegrated and was carried down the drain.

My brother and his wife were back in their big and increasingly valuable house in London. So I was alone in this one.

It was mid-afternoon. I got drunk. Then I went to bed and slept dreamlessly.

It was almost afternoon again. I was not sure how I had slept so long.

I wrote a message to my brother and his wife to confirm that I would be living in the house, ostensibly to help clear it out for the sale.

I did not want to do that. But saying it would make them feel okay with me living in the house.

After I wrote that message I looked at Twitter. My girlfriend had a new story out. In *Guernica*. She still had me blocked. But the story was all over everyone else's Twitters. So I saw it anyway. Everyone was calling the story excellent, dark, funny, astute, etc.

I opened my laptop to look at it on there. I scrolled all the way to the bottom.

I didn't recognise her new author photo. Her hair was shorter than it was. Beside the photo it said: *Kei Kagirinaku is a writer from London*.

Downstairs, I heard the television say: *the magnetic North Pole is moving increasingly towards Siberia, away from Canada*. I didn't remember turning it on.

Again I had the feeling someone was watching me. So I

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stood up and closed the bedroom door. But I couldn't shake the feeling. So I sat back down and started reading. The story was called Cum Tributo.

CUM TRIBUTO

Vladislav Surkov, Russian oligarch, was mid-orgasm when the alarm at the National Gallery went off.

The alarm went off and a red light began to flash in the room he was in and then in the rooms adjacent and then the alarm made alarm noise, too.

Vladislav was alone. But then he wasn't. He was with the woman in the blue-black painting opposite him, now covered in his ejaculate, looking up, and to the left, and then, looking around, there were other faces too, painted.

And then the face of a female security attendant, eyes wide, face oscillating red and white. She looked frightened. But then she painted her face composed, and then she was stepping silently

towards him, her hand heading to the two-way radio that hung on the side of her hip.

*

Vladislav Surkov was not just any oligarch. He was a top oligarch. He was the eighth richest and second most popular of all the oligarchs. Born in Saint Petersburg, Vladislav resided

in Moscow on the top floors of a seventeen-storey apartment complex. But he also lived in London, where he owned a Premier League football club. And he was regularly pictured on his superyacht too.

He'd had four beautiful, long-term, non-overlapping girlfriends, and each girlfriend had in turn borne him a beautiful blonde, blue-eyed child. Vladislav's four children were photographed regularly. They were photographed together at major sporting events, smiling. Or they were photographed posed in perfect lobbies, their father standing behind them. Or they were photographed leaving some hotel, headed, holding hands, towards some subtly armoured car.

Vladislav made his money in oil, like all oligarchs. But he had diversified. He was in pharmaceuticals, and real estate, and infrastructure construction also. This was all carefully arranged. Nothing was in writing. But the appropriate kick-backs to the higher-ups – Putin – were kept in place. He felt safe from the Russians and from the Americans and from the British, too. Not that the British cared.

Like all oligarchs, Vladislav was a collector of art and other treasures.

And, like all oligarchs, Vladislav had a terrible, terrible secret.

*

The secret started when Vladislav was just a young oligarch. Thirty-odd.

Vladislav did not remember the girl. Vladislav did not remember the party, really.

But Vladislav did remember the room. The floor,



half-covered in construction dust, the furniture all wrapped in taped-up transparent plastic.

Paintings leant against the wall, unhung.

Vladislav remembered the paintings.

Vladislav remembered the paintings, and sneaking the girl out of the party. Half sneaking. Sneaking because it was fun. Not because anyone would stop him.

He snuck the girl in the stairwell. Then he snuck her upstairs, unclasped her.

‘Not here,’ she said, in English.

So he snuck her into the unfinished room with the construction dust and the party below and the furniture wrapped in plastic and the paintings all on the floor, all leant against walls.

He pushed her into the wall. She pushed back, but only with the middle of her. Didn’t he know his lips were so dry?

Then she was satisfied that they’d gone far enough. So she knelt for him.

And when he came he came hard and quickly. She tried to catch it in her mouth but missed.

Vladislav had his eyes closed.

In his head he counted the soft snaps that happened in the middle of him.

Seven, eight, nine.

He slipped his shoulders in. He opened his eyes.

The girl was still there, knelt in front of him. But he had barely hit her, overshot. Some was in her mouth and on her chin and on her collarbone.

But most of him was behind her, and to the right. He had not landed on the dust floor or some plastic-covered furniture or the wall.

He had landed right on one of the paintings. A portrait. A pretty, young fat-faced woman dressed in blue, looking up and to the left into some yellow light. And Vladislav had shot himself all over her.

And Vladislav, right then, realised that it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He looked at it and looked at it and looked at it.

The most beautiful thing he'd seen in his whole life.

He looked at it and looked at it and looked at it.

It was so beautiful.

He looked at it and looked at it and looked at it.

And he felt his insides collapse.

And when the girl returned with a previously concealed wet wipe and removed the drying ejaculate from the painted woman's face, Vladislav's heart broke forever.

*

All oligarchs are art collectors, but Vladislav began to buy in earnest. He became obsessive. He studied the catalogues from Christie's and Sotheby's with religious and sexual fervour, purchasing everything he desired.

Vladislav loved the auctions, but due to the nature of his lifestyle could rarely attend them in person. Instead he sent representatives with instructions to outbid any other suitor. And Vladislav never lost.

Word grew about his collection. He bought a Caravaggio



and two Botticellis, a young man by Peter Paul Rubens. A penitent Magdalene by Gerrit Dou. Works by Vermeer and Antiveduto Grammatica, Paolo Veronese. All portraits.

Rumours circulated. Not only had he started buying art in vast quantities, but instead of shipping the works to private climate-controlled storage facilities in tax havens (like other sensible investors), Vladislav was having the art handling companies bring the work to his homes in London, and Moscow, and even – inadvisably – to his superyacht, wherever it was moored. As a result he paid wildly over the odds for insurance services and taxation. People thought Vladislav Surkov was showing off his collection. It became fashionable to describe Vladislav Surkov as gaudy, uneducated, compulsive.

Vladislav did not care.

*

In private, Vladislav ejaculated onto each one. He loved the ceremony of it: the prior shower, the several white towels, the preparation of wet wipes and lighting and lubricant. The first time with each painted woman was always the very most perfect. Or close, but never quite.

Vladislav bought a very old and very very beautiful wooden easel. He would place the painting on it and stand facing, stark naked, door locked. Vladislav instructed his staff that he was not to be disturbed.

After he came he wiped the cum away carefully.

People began to wonder why he never sold any of the paintings he purchased.

Only Vladislav knew.

When he was done with a painting, and the arrival of a new painting was imminent, he'd hang the used one in a room that he did not visit often in one of his residences that he did not visit often.

Then he would never look at it ever again.

Vladislav hated to look at them after.

*

Decades passed. Soon Vladislav bored of even the paintings he could afford. He needed more. He obsessively visited public galleries, making generous donations and learning everything there was to learn about their collections.

His reputation in the art world shifted. Though he was still thought of as tasteless and gaudy, Vladislav had donated so much money to galleries and other Art World institutions that he could be described as a philanthropist first, and collector second.

People forgot Vladislav was an oligarch. The Whitechapel Gallery opened a whole wing in the building next door, which he paid for. The Serpentine's summer season was subtitled with his surname, after the Sacklers were sent packing. Parties were hosted in his honour. And when debates were held over the influence of bad money on good culture, his name was never mentioned out of deference.

*

And this is how Vladislav Surkov came to be alone, after dark, in the National Gallery in London.

To be alone after dark in the National Gallery is a privilege – one afforded to friends of higher-level staff and



generous benefactors. And Vladislav was now both. And, leaving his assigned assistant in the North Wing with some lesser Dutch work from the seventeenth century, he walked alone, heels clipping the cold and silent gallery floors.

And then he saw her.

In the Mond Room. *The Virgin in Prayer*, by Sassoferrato. She was perfect.

Blue and pink and white like stained glass, or sweet wrappers, and full of her own light in the near-dark room.

Vladislav felt himself growing erect underneath his soft and expensive blue jeans. He touched himself through the fabric. He felt himself push back against his own touch.

He took a step closer to the painting.

Then another.

She was so perfect.

How had he never seen her before?

*

Vladislav could hear nothing but his heartbeat. He felt it pushing against his chest, the pulsing in his temples. He inched as far into the painting as the ankle-height wire barrier allowed. His toes crossed underneath it.

He unzipped his jeans and moved his penis out into the carefully conditioned air. He gripped it with his right hand and started masturbating himself. Slowly, at first, then faster.

He looked around for security cameras and saw them, watching him looking back at them, and for a moment the spell was broken.

But then he looked back at the painting and blood rushed back to him.

So he continued.

The orgasm came fast. It was uncontrollable and huge. Vladislav shot his ejaculate onto his hand, and onto the floor in front of him, and onto the painting itself. Great waves shook his body. He leant back. The ejaculate covered the canvas. The frame, the foreground, and the face at the centre of it.

And for that moment, everything was so perfect.

So perfect and beautiful.

And to avoid falling over backwards Vladislav stepped forward, into the wire security barrier, and a red light began to flash in the room he was in, then in other rooms too, and then an alarm sound filled all of the rooms.

Vladislav looked around panicked. He was alone. But then he wasn't. There was the face in the painting, opposite him, now covered in his ejaculate, looking down, and then, looking around, there were other faces too, painted, and then the face of a female security attendant, eyes wide, face oscillating red and white, then painting her face composed, and stepping silently towards him, her hand heading to the two-way radio that hung on the side of her hip.

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If anyone else had ejaculated onto a priceless work of art, they would have been arrested. But Vladislav was not anyone else. The incident was, in fact, never spoken of, and Vladislav died a few years later in a boating accident.



There were suspicions of foul play, but those in the know knew it was a simple accident.

These things happen.

People die in the strangest ways, once they're done living.

Vladislav's art collection was divided up between his differently-mothered children.

Many galleries around the world still bear his name.

But even now, when art handlers go to move paintings in the Mond Room and shine their ultraviolet lights at the white walls to read the secret guidance written there in ultraviolet pen by past art handlers, they notice a strange stain on *The Virgin in Prayer*, invisible to the naked eye but still there, now, and probably for hundreds or thousands of years in the future.

The indelible ugliness of it.

The stain of something that was briefly perfect.

I looked again at the photo of my girlfriend. My body felt bad and full of movement.

I had not written anything in so long. This was a real story. She had never mentioned working on it.

And when I looked inside myself there were no finished stories. Just bad feelings, and movements I could make with my body, and in the middle of me all I could feel was a big black-blue constantly shifting geometric shape that had nothing inside. That was what was in the middle of me.

I thought about that for a bit. The bit inside me where there wasn't anything.

I did not feel like anyone was watching me then.

I noticed that I didn't feel like that because I just felt alone.

I lit a cigarette. I closed my laptop.

Then I opened it again and closed the tab so her face would not be there when I next opened my laptop.

Then I closed my laptop again.

I know I slept on the sofa that night because I woke up there. And because I came conscious two or three or four times, once the television had turned itself off and the room was dark. I had the feeling that there was someone in the room or at the window watching me sleep. But each time I would switch the dust-lined lamp on and see that I was alone in there and that all there was outside were windowpane-touching plants and quickly I would be pulled backwards again, into my own eyelids.

I could hear the sound of something moving against the window. It was light now. At first I thought the sound was plant sound, vines knocking against glass. But as I became more awake it sounded more like animal sound. Or person sound.

The curtains were kind of open.

I turned my head on the sofa so I could see out of the window.

At first I saw nothing.

But then I saw some movement, at the corner of a curtain, outside the window. Something brown and tall.

Then it disappeared behind the curtain.

I stopped moving at all.

I kept watching the window for the brown tall thing.

I looked around the room for something I could hit someone with. I stood up but crouched.

I felt stupid. Like I was overreacting to nothing.

But I kept on creeping just the same.

It felt better to be prepared. And if it was a delivery man, or other visitor, I didn't want to have to talk to them right then. So it was better if they didn't see me.

I moved low to the window seat. But I still couldn't see anything out there.



I moved my head so I could see the edge of the front of the house. And there it was.

A person. The figure of one.

I only saw it for a moment. It was walking around the side of the house, down the overgrown path that went to the back garden.

I thought about how the back door of the house was not locked.

I went fast to the kitchen with its window onto the garden.

I thought about the person walking in the same direction as me, but outside the house.

I took a knife from the breakfast-bar knife block.

I listened for the sound of the back door opening. But it didn't.

I listened and waited.

Then I went over to the window.

I couldn't see anyone in the garden.

I looked very hard and for a very long time.

But I didn't see anything. Just the fucked-up garden shed's door swinging on its hinges in the wind at the bottom of the garden, and the also-moving shadows of the trees of the woods at the bottom of the garden on the overgrown grass, left there by morningish autumn light.

My parents' bedroom occupied the third floor of the house. The attic was there, too, behind another door. Then behind that attic there was another attic, which was really the underneath roof of the house.

On my parents' dresser were around thirteen pouches of tobacco. They warned in Spanish or South American against *fumar durante la lactancia*.

I was out of cigarettes. This was what I'd come upstairs for.

Next to the tobacco stood four sealed, glass jars. They were all half full of stems and flowers.

From the attic door there was a silent buzzing sound. And an artificial breeze, too. But warm, not cold.

I opened the door to the attic.

Inside were four tiny and forgotten cannabis plants in a chest-high grow tent. The grow tent was made of plastic sheeting. It was unzipped. An almost transparent blue light came from inside.

I could see the plants. They looked drooping, dehydrated, browning. My father had been dead three weeks now.

I had no idea how the plants were still alive.

I closed the attic door. Then I felt bad for the plants.



On the bookcase nearest the attic door was a watering can. Next to the watering can was some kind of tool for testing the pH of soil, and six bottles of some sort of food for plants, and an oversized horticultural syringe. And then, on the bottom shelf, was an unopened bag of purchased compost.

I took the watering can all the way downstairs to the big sink and filled it. Then I went back upstairs twice and opened the attic door again and poured some water into the soil the plants were growing in. Then I gave them all a capful of their food.

Plants drowned easy. I knew that. Especially babyish plants, like these. So I stood there a while watching, as if there was a way to take water back out of the soil if I had put too much in there.

I thought about what to do with the plants once the house was all cleaned out and sold.

I had no ideas.

So I decided not to think about that right then.

Again I had the feeling someone was watching me. I turned all around. There was nobody there. All I could hear was bird noise, and outside-plants against the walls of the house, and the extractor fan hum, and the faraway sound of a nearby motorway.

I noticed that the door to the next attic – the roof area, the rafters, full of my mother and father's extremely old possessions – looked ajar. I leant deep into the first attic and pushed it shut.

Then I shut the door to the first plant attic room as well.
So the attic was all closed.

I sat on my parents' bed for a bit, staring at nothing, except
my father's disgusting bathrobe, still hanging on the back of
the bedroom door.

I couldn't shake the sense that I was being watched.

Once I was stoned and in my coat I walked to my grandmother's house and knocked.

She always took a long time to answer the door because she was putting on a scarf, or something, so she would look smart.

She opened the door. She hugged me. She smelt good.

My grandmother made coffee and we sat in her living room. She sat in her chair. I sat on the sofa, close to her.

The room was dark because there were so many books in it. I liked that.

The room smelt good, like her. I worried I smelt bad. I felt too big for her house, as if I was an ugly and overgrown houseplant.

I looked around for something to say.

I said, 'How's work?'

My grandmother put her hands up to her head and went arrrgkhhhh.

I grinned at her. She grinned back. Then she explained that her publisher, or someone, wanted her to write a memoir about being a teen sensation in the sixties.

She had been a teen sensation in the sixties because she was very beautiful and very very young when her first

novel came out. And because she liked to say controversial things to journalists about politics and women and the Royal Family.

‘I like *Speak, Memory*,’ I said. ‘Just do it like that one.’

‘Good idea,’ she said, then grinned again. ‘I’ve just been reading his letters today.’

‘I didn’t know he wrote to you,’ I said. But she didn’t laugh. She just rolled her eyes.

‘I don’t know how one person had so many clever things to say,’ she said. ‘I have five things to say a day, if I’m lucky.’

‘Same,’ I said.

‘And fewer and fewer, it seems.’

‘You always get there in the end,’ I said. She rolled her eyes but in a meaner way. I grinned.

She looked into the garden for a while. To distract her I told her about a whale that had been sighted in Norway.

The whale was wearing some kind of harness. On the harness it said ‘PROPERTY ST. PETERSBURG’.

‘The Norwegians think it was a Russian spy whale. That it had been trained by the Russians to spy on people.’

‘Oh, no,’ my grandmother said. ‘Whale watching.’

‘Now it lives in a harbour in Norway. It does tricks so the Norwegians will feed it. But—’

I got distracted by my grandmother’s cat. It was in her front garden eating grass with the side of its face. It had started raining slightly.

‘It’s good,’ my grandmother said, ‘they’re feeding it.’

I started laughing.



'They have to stop feeding it. So it can learn to feed itself.
And then maybe make friends with some non-spy whales.
A herd, or whatever.'

'Civilian whales,' said my grandmother. Then she started
laughing, too.

We walked together to a specific field that she liked to walk to. She liked to walk to that field because sometimes there were deer in it. Usually, small women deer, but sometimes a single stag. My grandmother preferred the small women deer. She liked to stand on the first rung of the field fence and look for, then at, the deer.

She walked so slowly that I didn't know what to do with my legs. I could either take normal-sized steps in slow motion, or I could take extremely small, regular-speed steps. I alternated. It must have looked weird. I could feel myself getting less stoned.

There were no deer in the field that day. My grandmother seemed disappointed.

'They must have heard us coming,' I told her.

She stood on her fence rung and kept looking just in case.

'They have their spies,' she said, into the field.

'Watch out everyone,' I said, 'it's those creeps who always stare at us.'

She laughed.

'How did the Russians talk to the spy whale?' she said.

'In Russian,' I said.

'Scandinavians are a very paranoid people,' she said.



‘Two whales walk into a bar,’ I said. ‘One whale goes hur-
rrrggggnnhhhh weeeooooooooow klik clk clk hrrnnnggg.’

‘Very good,’ my grandmother said.

‘The other whale goes: are you okay, man? You sound
pretty drunk.’

‘Yes,’ my grandmother said, ‘very good.’

I walked back via the shop. It was dark now. But I wanted proper cigarettes.

I used the torch on my phone for the parts of the path that had no streetlights. Behind me I was sure that I heard footsteps on the damp early-dropped leaves.

But when I turned around there was never anyone there.

A boy and girl stopped me before I could go in. The girl asked me to buy them cigarettes.

‘Can you buy us some cigarettes?’ she said. ‘I am eighteen. I am nineteen. But I forgot my identification.’

‘Alcohol, too. We are nineteen,’ the boy said.

They were leaning against the closed doors of a parked car.

Their voices were very quiet. But not a whisper. Just like someone had turned their volumes down, or something.

I said, ‘Is that your car?’

The boy turned his head slightly to look at it. The parts of the car the streetlight hit were a deep metallic blue. It looked as old as they were.

‘Yeah,’ the girl said.

‘Nice,’ I said.

There was no real food in the shop so I bought garlic bread, a frozen pizza, diet cola, alcohol.



The girl didn't say what brand of cigarettes she liked. So I just bought three packs of the brand I liked. I paid and dropped them into the transparent blue plastic bag with all of the other groceries.

Outside, the girl with the turned-down voice asked me what happened to my face.

I said, 'My skin keeps coming off.'

'Like eczema?' the boy said. 'It looks bruised.'

'Yeah,' I said, 'someone hit me.'

'Why?' said the girl.

'Do you know Cheryl? She wears purple. All the time. She hit me.'

'We don't know her,' the boy said.

'Right,' I said. Then I handed the girl what I'd bought them.

'We don't have any money,' the boy said.

'You don't have any money,' I said. The girl stepped back. The boy went into his pocket.

'We have these,' said the boy. He held up around three dozen red-pink Xanax bars in a transparent ziplock bag. The transparent ziplock bag was stained red-pink with the dust of the bars.

'You do not have any money,' I said.

'We'll give you three of these. For the stuff.' I looked up at the sky, then at the boy.

He nudged his hand towards me as if he was the scary ghost in *Spirited Away*. Or a child attempting to feed a farm animal.

'Five,' I said.

He handed me three pills loose, one by one. I could feel that the inside of my hand was sweating.

'Xanax?' I said.

'Yeah,' the girl said.

'How strong?'

'Five milligrams on each bar. So do half one.'

'Right,' I said.

I put the bars loose in my coat. My fingernails were long and caught the lining of my pocket. I felt last year's lint in there, getting all up in with the pills.

'Don't get into any more fights,' the girl said.

'You should see the other guy,' I said.

'I thought you said it was a lady,' the boy said.

'Yeah,' I said.

I moved slightly to show I was walking away. I looked at the blue-black sky. I thought about the dark and scary path back to the house.

I said, 'Can you drive me home?'

At the house I invited them in.

I made three drinks with some vodka and some diet cola and some ice. I stored the vodka in the freezer section of the fridge-freezer, which was huge, and expensive, and dispensed its own ice, like fridge-freezers did on American television shows.

The boy and the girl sat on stools at the breakfast bar.

I put the drinks in front of them. Then I bowed a bit in a butler-type way.

They said, 'Thanks.'

'Are you hungry?' I said. 'I have fake food. Like garlic bread.'

'No,' the girl said, for both of them. 'But thanks.'

I looked around the room.

I said, 'We could smoke a joint.'

The boy smiled and said, 'Sure.'

I nodded and left the room.

I went up both sets of stairs to my parents' bedroom to collect one of my father's jars of cannabis.

While I was up there I opened the first attic to check on the plants.

They seemed less wilted, but it was hard to tell.

I thought about pouring more water on the plants. But I didn't. I didn't want to drown them.

I closed the attic back up tight.

I went back downstairs.

'Cool,' the girl said. I sat down at the breakfast bar with them. Then I did finger guns at her.

'Your parents aren't in,' the boy said.

I nodded. I started making a giant Rizla from several regular-sized Rizla. My fingers were cold. And they felt too damp to do a good job.

'Yeah,' I said.

'Can we put the heating on?' the girl said.

I thought about it.

'I don't know,' I said. The girl laughed.

'You don't know?' she said. She laughed again. I started laughing, too.

'No,' I said. 'I don't know how. It just comes on sometimes.'

The girl laughed harder.

'Is this even your house?' the boy said. I laughed some more. I lit the joint and inhaled.

'No,' I said, 'I broke in. It's a secret.'

The girl said, 'We do that, too.'

'We should team up,' I said, 'you can live here.'

'It's too cold,' the boy said. I laughed.

I inhaled more of the joint then passed it to the girl.

Halfway through the boy handed me half a red-pink pill. I chewed it to wet dust.



The vodka and diet cola and ice were too cold and my teeth hurt in my gums so I drank more.

I ashed the joint into a blue-and-white patterned dish in the centre of the breakfast bar. Then I passed it back to the girl.

Later, in the bathroom, I braced my hand against a wall and stuck my finger into my throat. The muscles of my stomach jerked and warm fluid came out. As waves of it passed through my chest and belly, sour blue lumps lodged in my throat and mouth, and when I pushed them with my tongue they numbed my gums and dropped into the water.

I woke up in the bathroom when it was light. I stayed there a while. When I felt like it I stood up and put my mouth under the cold tap. I let it run and lapped water into my mouth, like a cat.

I moved the water around my mouth. Then I spat it into the sink. It was yellow.

In the bathroom mirror, I saw yellow vomit stains on my white T-shirt.

Upstairs, in the attic, I could hear the extractor fans and some other, second, wind sound, different to the sound the fans made.

At the breakfast bar I smoked a cigarette.

The dish we had been using as an ashtray was full of ash and roaches and cigarette butts. There were maybe seven used glasses on the breakfast bar, too, some surrounded by small puddles of sticky-seeming dry liquid, some with half-floating cigarette ends.

I looked at my phone but there was nothing on it. Like it was broken, or dead.

The car belonging to the boy and girl was outside still. But they did not seem to be in the house anymore.

I looked around the house a little bit in case they were hiding somewhere.

BRAT

I ate a quarter of one of the coffee table Xanax bars and went upstairs and slept on the bed in my childhood bedroom.

It was dark. Outside I could hear the sound of a garden animal, or something. I took off my clothes with the vomit on and went to the bathroom and showered. The fresh skin on my chest and left hand stung a little under the hot water.

I put on a T-shirt with an anthropomorphised broccoli on it. The broccoli was wearing sunglasses and doing finger guns and below him it said 'BRO' in big black letters. On the back of the T-shirt was another broccoli, also anthropomorphised. This broccoli was wearing ski gear, and sunglasses, and the black writing this time said 'FRO-BRO'. I put on some blue jeans and socks.

Downstairs I started cleaning. Then I gave up. Instead I opened the fridge and took a sugar-free Red Bull that was in there for some reason and drank it.

My father's study was on the ground floor of the house. My mother's study was on the first floor. They both had big windows. But there were so many books in them that they were dark inside.

I had music on that I could hear from upstairs.

In our London flat, mine and my girlfriend's, we couldn't play music loud because of the neighbours. But there were no neighbours here. Except Cheryl. But her house was far away. And she probably wouldn't be coming round again anytime soon.

My mother's study was messy. It didn't seem like my dad had cleaned it since my mother moved out of the house into the care home. Maybe he thought she wasn't done yet.

But then my study would have been a mess, too, if I had one.

There were books everywhere, and loose papers, and photocopies of materials from her teaching at the university, with underlining, and notes in almost illegible handwriting. There was a very old laptop with a slightly newer printer beside it.

On the desk was a neatly stacked pile of paper. It was the only neat thing in there. I went over to it.



I had the feeling that I was being watched. But I brushed it off. I had locked all the doors.

Just in case I checked the windows. But I couldn't see anyone out there.

I lit a cigarette.

The neatly stacked pile of paper was a manuscript. It had a title page and everything. It was very white and had less dust on than everything else in the room.

The title on the manuscript was *A Bit of Earth*.

I was full of caffeine and not-sugar from the Red Bull and didn't know what to do with myself. So I started reading it.

A BIT OF EARTH

Rebecca Smith

CHAPTER ONE

An organ would be too loud for a child's funeral. As the pianist played Morningtown Ride the coffin was carried out, tiny and horribly small. He was a slight boy. He couldn't have made it past three stone.

*Maybe it is raining
where our train shall ride,
all the little travellers are warm and snug inside . . .*

I stopped reading. I stood up and moved around the room a little bit. I remembered my mother singing that song to me softly on night drives back from visiting relatives, both of us in the backseat, my dad driving and my brother sometimes up front with him, me drifting in and out of sleep with my head on my mother's shoulder or in her lap.

I thought about how that was the song she would probably have played at my funeral, if I'd died then.

She must have thought about it or she wouldn't have written it. But I guessed that was probably a normal thing for mothers to think about.

I moved around the room a bit more.

I checked the window.

Then I sat back down and started reading again.

CHAPTER ONE

An organ would be too loud for a child's funeral. As the pianist played Morningtown Ride the coffin was carried out, tiny and horribly small. He was a slight boy. He couldn't have made it past four stone.

*Maybe it is raining
where our train shall ride,
all the little travellers are warm and snug inside . . .*

There were flower arrangements of a yellow digger and the White Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland, with a watch that had now stopped forever. The sun streamed through the stained glass, casting lozenges of light in sweet-wrapper colours across the flagstones.

Rebecca woke, clutching at her pillow, finding that here it was sunshine and day. She lurched out of bed and across the landing to Felix and Joanna's bedroom. They were asleep, and the sunshine could not penetrate the curtains she had made for their windows. They had thermal as well

as blackout linings. She gently sat down at the end of Felix's bed and picked up Marmalade, his toy cat.

Rebecca and Felix and Joanna were never late for nursery. They took a shortcut across the university, past the Department of Medicine, often walking that far with Daddy, whose name was Guy. He was Doctor Guy Misselthwaite, head of Dermatology in the Medicine department.

I read quickly. In the manuscript, Rebecca dropped her children off at nursery. She needed to buy polo shirts for Felix, the boy, who was starting school imminently. So she walked to a bus stop and waited for a bus to take her into the city centre.

As Rebecca reached the bus stop, after leaving Felix and Joanna at the nursery, she saw a bus pulling away. No matter: she had plenty of time. Another bus would arrive soon. She could get round the shops and be back in time to collect Felix and Joanna. She was the only person waiting at the bus stop. Perhaps it was worth having missed that bus to avoid waiting with a group of students.

Rebecca saw Professor Lovage, History of Art, walking towards her, smiling and swinging her bag in a girlish, care-free way. Rebecca smiled back.

‘Off into town?’ Professor Lovage asked.

‘Felix needs a few things for starting school. White polo shirts.’

‘A big step. Is he looking forward to it?’

‘I don’t know; he doesn’t seem to have much of a sense of time, so I don’t think he thinks about it that much. Some of the children from his nursery that he knows are going too, though.’

‘That’ll make it easier. I’m sure he’ll be alright. He’s such a charming boy.’

Rebecca smiled.

‘Thank you. He is. I’ve no idea where he learnt it.’



‘Don’t be silly,’ Professor Lovage said. She raised her eyebrows and smiled. ‘Good luck with the shopping.’

She continued in the direction she was going, leaving Rebecca alone at the bus stop. A moment later, a car of astonishing beauty pulled up beside Rebecca: an Alfa Romeo in deep and metallic Mediterranean blue. The top was down. Rebecca saw that the driver was Julius East, Head of Spanish.

‘Where are you going, Rebecca?’

‘Shopping,’ she said, smiling.

‘Fancy a lift?’

She paused, too polite to accept eagerly, too polite to refuse.

‘I’m sure my bus will be along soon.’

‘You prefer a bus to this?’

He smiled at her slowly, knowing that she would accept. She stood there on the pavement a moment, unsure, until Julius got out of the car, leaving the engine running, and stepped around it to open the passenger-side door. It had been a while since anyone had done that for her.

The seats were made of the softest leather Rebecca had ever felt. She suspected that there was some glossy showroom brochure name for the colour of them. Tan seemed too pedestrian. And what kind of animal had it once been?

‘Relax,’ Julius said. ‘You have your knees all pulled up. You’re hugging them as though you’re a schoolgirl. Perhaps you are. You do look so young.’

‘Oh, I’m really very old,’ Rebecca said. But she stretched out her legs. ‘This is a beautiful car.’

‘It’s new. We’ll take a detour. So you can see what it’s really like.’

As Julius accelerated, Rebecca’s hair whipped into her eyes. It might be turned to string by the time they arrived. She pushed it behind her ears again and again.

‘In there,’ he indicated the glove compartment with a slight thrust of his chin, ‘there’s a scarf you can borrow.’

The scarf was a long thin rectangle of heavy white silk. She placed it over her head and knotted it at the nape of her neck, wondering who it belonged to. Perhaps Julius just kept it there for whatever woman (or, more likely, pretty student) he happened to pick up. She could feel his eyes on her legs. She placed her bag primly on her knees. She did not like feeling watched.

They were in the forest now. She wondered when they would turn back.

‘I have to get some polo shirts. For Felix. My son. He’s starting school.’

‘You will have plenty of time on your hands,’ he said.

Rebecca looked down at her hands crossed over her bag in her lap as if she might see time growing there, a silky golden fur. Or perhaps it would be thyme, with little stalks coiling around her fingers. She imagined pulling it out from the skin of her hands, stem by stem.

But Rebecca’s hands were unchanged, pink, slim and neat. She had a French manicure. The idea of having your nails painted to look like nails pleased her.

‘The sky is bluer out here, don’t you think?’ she said,



gazing upwards. There were three aeroplanes leaving wonderful paths across the sky. ‘Once, when Felix saw some of the vapour trails, he said: “Mummy, the clouds are lining up!”’

Julius East smiled. Rebecca could tell that he was smiling. But she didn’t look across. She just kept looking up. And that was why Rebecca didn’t see the deer, or know that Julius was going to swerve to avoid it. She never knew what happened.

I threw up the sugar-free Red Bull into the bathroom sink. I managed not to get any on my T-shirt this time.

The vomit was thin and watery and smelled strongly of Red Bull.

It stung my lips and the inside of my nose.

I wondered when was the last time I had eaten anything.

I ran the tap to wash it away. Then I ran water around my mouth. Then I brushed my teeth, swallowing a little water at the end to get the remaining vomit back down my throat.

I lit a cigarette and looked at myself in the mirror. The bruising on my face was fading now, forming an almost transparent blue-green blotch on my face, shining through my pink skin like sunlight through stained glass.

In the attic the plants looked healthier now. They were drooping less. They were standing up more straight. They looked like they had grown a little. I felt good about that.

I closed the attic and sat down on my parents' bed and looked at the internet on my phone for guides on caring for the plants. That seemed better than killing them. Or letting them die. And I would get more drugs if they turned to flowers.

From the guides and from how the plants looked and from the settings on the timer attached to the ultraviolet light I deduced that the plants were early in their lifecycle. They were young and thirsty.

I found a spray bottle on a different bookshelf and put a capful of the plant food in it. Then I went downstairs to the big sink and filled the spray bottle with water from the tap. Then I went back to the attic and misted all of the young plants with the mixture individually, liberally.

That night I was on a date with a girl in a windowless basement bar. Not my girlfriend. Some slightly wider, blonder, shorter girl.

We were maybe two drinks in. Me standing at a high table, her perched on a stool for ladies.

I looked down.

I saw I was dressed Winnie-the-Pooh style: an orange T-shirt, but no trousers or underwear or shoes.

I thought to myself: style it out, style it out.

So I said: oh, bother.

Then I woke up.

When I left the house the car that seemed to belong to the boy and girl was still there.

I noticed that a few house roof tiles had fallen, smashed to pieces on the gravel below.

I worried about rain getting in. But I didn't know what I could do about that.

I just started walking to the care home they kept my mother in.

My mother was sitting in her disgusting chair. I bent to hug her. Then I sat down opposite in a chair that was plastic and stackable. It made a bad sound when it moved against the floor.

‘What happened to your face?’ my mother said, to me.

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Nothing happened. My face is fine.’

I looked around for something to say before I asked her about the manuscript. Then I remembered the Russian spy whale. So I told her about that.

‘The Norwegians think it was a Russian spy whale. That it had been trained by the Russians to spy on people.’

‘Oh, no,’ my mother said.

‘Now it lives in a harbour in Norway. It does tricks so the Norwegians will feed it.’

‘That’s good. They’re feeding it.’

‘They have to stop. So it can learn to feed itself. And make friends with some normal whales.’

‘Civilian whales,’ my mother said. She smiled to herself and looked out of the window. Then she looked back at me.

‘What?’ I said. But she didn’t hear me.

‘It’s so nice to see you,’ she said. ‘I saw a deer from the window yesterday.’



She nodded slowly at the window. It faced onto a busy road. I hoped she was confused. Or misremembering.

‘Right,’ I said.

‘What?’ she said.

‘In your study,’ I said, ‘there’s a manuscript.’

‘I don’t have a study. This is a care home.’

‘At the house. Not here. Your study in the house.’

‘The house must be very valuable now,’ she said. ‘We paid the whole mortgage. You should sell it.’

‘There’s a manuscript in the study there. Were you writing a book? Before you came here. Dad didn’t say anything about it. You finished a book?’

My mother twisted her face up. I was talking too fast for her. So I stopped.

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘It’s important, Mum,’ I said.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘A woman dies at the beginning. A mother. In a car crash. You gave the character your name.’

My mother kept her face twisted up. It made me feel bad to see her do that.

‘I don’t remember,’ she said. ‘I wrote this? What happens after?’

‘I don’t know. I wanted to talk to you about it. Before I read any more.’

‘What?’

‘If you wrote a book I want people to read it,’ I said, ‘it’s important. But I wanted to ask you about it first.’

BRAT

My mother untwisted her face. But she did not look relieved. She looked down at her thin and swollen hands. She moved them about slightly. She looked very, very sad.

‘I was going to write so many books,’ she said.

'Why did you say you'd finished writing it if you hadn't even started?' my brother said, on the phone. I'd just come clean to him.

'I don't know,' I said.

'You're retarded,' my brother said, 'I am amazed they let retards like you write books.'

I said, 'You'd be surprised.'

'Just be honest,' he said.

'I guess they heard about Dad. Because they haven't emailed in a little while. He bought me some time.'

'You're retarded. My wife wants to talk to you.'

'Makes sense,' I said.

'Gabriel,' my brother's wife said, 'how are you?'

'Good,' I said.

It was around four in the afternoon. I was pretty sure it was Sunday. I had been asleep when the third call woke me. Lying on my back, now, I could feel imprints from the sofa fabric on my face. My mouth tasted like ash. The back of my throat felt all clogged.

My brother was a lot older than me. He and his wife got married when they were at university because she was pregnant. They had a son. He was my nephew.

My grandmother had had my mother when she was very young. And my mother had had me when she was very old.

Sometimes it felt like our whole family was in the wrong order, or something.

'How is the clear-out going?' my brother's wife said.

'The clear-out?' I said.

'Of the house. You are clearing out the house.'

'Yes, I am,' I said. 'It's going well. I'm worried about the house, though. Some roof tiles fell down.'

'Roof tiles?'

'And the plants are growing fast outside. Like, the weeds.'

'Do some gardening. What did you say about roof tiles?'

'Nothing, don't worry,' I said, worrying that they'd send someone to fix them. And then I'd have to deal with all that.

I said, 'It's all going really well.'

'That's so great,' she said. She was using her business voice. It made me feel stupid. 'We've asked an estate agent to do a valuation. They'll be round this week. Your brother will call again with the specifics.'

'Alright,' I said.

'We thought we'd drive down. Maybe this weekend or the weekend after. You should be almost done by then. We can go through the things.'

'Arrgkhhhh,' I said.

'What?'

'I said: alright,' I said.

Once they were off the phone I went on my laptop and looked again at my girlfriend's story, about the oligarch and the paintings.

I scrolled all the way down to the author photo I didn't recognise.

Then I scrolled around the story a bit more.

It made me feel the same kind of bad as before.

I ate some of the pink Xanax off the coffee table. I got a cold bottle of white wine from the fridge and took it to the bathroom. I smelt bad. I ran a bath.

I lay in the bath for a while and waited for the bar to kick. A layer of condensation formed on the wine bottle.

Once the bathwater was coldening – after the Xanax had kicked in and I'd drunk maybe a third of the bottle – I tried to masturbate.

My penis felt loose.

When I raised it above the waterline I saw that the skin on it was coming away.

I pulled at the dead skin.

It was tender and it came away in small pieces.

I tore away the entire skin around my crotch, penis, and upper thighs.

BRAT

The tiny pieces of me floated in the bathwater.
I got out of the bath and drained it. I finished the bottle of
wine while drying my new and remaining skin.

I was cold and I was not wearing any clothes. My hair was still wet. My phone said 4 a.m.

I didn't know how long I'd been asleep. The bottle of wine was beside me, empty.

I heard the television say, downstairs: *number seventeen on our list of twenty common misconceptions about the end of the world.*

I didn't remember turning it on.

Upstairs, in the attic, I could hear the extractor fans working overtime.

I put on a T-shirt that said 'RICKIE LAMBERT IS DA BEST' and went to check the plants. I didn't put trousers or underwear on. My skin felt too tender.

The house was dark and I did not turn on the landing light. Or the lights in my parents' bedroom. My father's disgusting bathrobe touched me on the arm as their bedroom door closed behind me.

The blue glow from under the first attic door meant that the grow lights were on. Which meant my father had programmed the timer wrong, maybe. It seemed bad that the lights were on in the night. The plants would be confused. Or maybe they wouldn't be.

Inside the attic, inside the grow tent, the plants seemed fine. They were much bigger now. Almost a foot tall. They were growing so fast.

I misted them lightly with the solution I'd made. I wanted to ask them if they were confused by the lights being on at nighttime.

But that was how the timer was set. It seemed better not to change anything.

What did I know about growing things?

I noticed that the door to the second attic was ajar. I was sure that I had closed it before. But now it was definitely open. And there was a cold draught coming from it. Maybe from the fallen roof tiles I had seen in the garden.

I did not want the plants to get cold.

I had never been into the second attic, really. It was dark and scary. I was scared. But I wanted to see what was in it.

I pulled the door to it open more. The draught got bigger and colder. The air smelt different, damper, badder.

I moved my body around the grow tent. I edged into the second attic. I found a light switch in the dark and switched it.

The lightbulb still worked. I did not know the last time someone had been up in here.

Everywhere was boxes, bits of small furniture, paintings leant against walls, books, dust-filled cobwebs.

In the bulb-light I saw more of the black mould growing on the attic walls. The same as I'd seen downstairs. It seemed bad.

Outside plants were growing in through the roof, somehow.

I tried not to inhale. Maybe there were bats living here. Bat droppings could make you sick. I knew that.

My feet were bare on the dusty floor. I thought about nails I might step on. I did not want a rusty nail in my foot. I worried about the attic-dust-air on the skin of my exposed penis, too. I did not want to get a dust allergy on my penis. I was very allergenic. I did not want to break out.

Again I had the feeling someone was watching me. I looked back out of the attic, through the grow tent area, into my parents' bedroom. But it was too dark to see anything.

There was nobody in the attic. Nobody I could see.

I held my breath. I did not want to breathe in.

I didn't want to touch anything, either. It all looked boring and dusty. I really did not want to have to clean it all out.

But I picked up one shoebox. It had 'REBECCA' written on it, in black permanent marker, in handwriting that looked like my mother's.

I shook the shoebox slightly so some of the dust slipped off. I heard a heavy plastic sound in it.

I looked around the attic again. Everything was still dusty and boring and scary. But I thought I would take that box downstairs.

So I got out of the second attic into the first attic and made sure the door to the second attic was shut very properly. So my plants wouldn't get cold.

I took the shoebox all the way downstairs to the living room.

The television was on. It was set to the History Channel. It was showing a programme about the various deaths of Nelson Mandela. I turned it off.

I turned the light on. I opened the box.

Inside was a videotape and some photographs and a small and ornate mirror and various pieces of brown and amber jewellery. A trapped insect in one of the necklaces.

I spread it all out on the coffee table and sat on the floor in front of it. I still didn't have any trousers or underwear on. I could feel the hairs on my new skin standing.

The photos were of my mother as a teenager.

She was with my grandmother and with her sisters and with people who I assumed were her friends. They had big hair and old clothes. The photos were dark and badly lit. Sometimes people were smiling and sometimes they were posing, not smiling, with eyeliner and hands against walls.

I looked at the videotape. It was in a tacky metallic-blue slip. I slipped it out.

I turned the television back on. There was a VHS player attached, still, so my father could watch his collection of old television shows and movies. For research or because he was bored or both.

I put the videotape into the player and rewound it. It made a sound I'd not heard in a long time. I sat cross-legged on the floor so I could control the player.

I pressed play.

At first there was just VHS snowstorm. Then a picture appeared. I recognised the legs as my mothers. The camera pointed into her lap. I heard her say: Okay, it's started, it's beginning.

The camera moved around the room. I recognised the house as this one. There was my father, sat beside her. He made a funny face into the camera. My mother laughed. My father grinned.

The camera pointed in a new direction. I saw my brother but very young, moving coloured shapes around an impossibly curved and useless abacus. Look, my mother said, you're on video. My brother looked confused and then came towards the camera grinning, but looking at my mother behind the camera, not into the camera at all.

Then the snowstorm reappeared and then a new image. My mother holding the camera again. But now in my brother's bedroom, before it was a study. My father shirtless, holding my brother in one arm, painting the walls of the bedroom. Just the sound of the camcorder whirring. My father turning to the camera and smiling sheepishly.

I paused the tape on that. The image stayed still and carouselled up and down.

I looked at my flickering dad for the longest time.

Then I pressed play again.

The snowstorm reappeared and stayed there. I thought about stopping the tape and rewinding it. I wanted to see my family again. But I wanted to see if there was anything else on the tape, too.

Eventually the snowstorm shifted into an image. At first it was too light and fucked to see anything properly. But then I saw my mother again. Older now, older than earlier in the video. Old enough that I recognised her from when I was a child. She was sitting on the bonnet of a metallic-blue Alfa Romeo Spider. The person holding the camera walked towards her. Whoever was holding it was tall. My mother put her hand up to the camera and laughed.

Snowstorm reappeared on the screen.

I looked around the room. I noticed light from the television reflecting off the small ornate mirror that had been in the shoebox. It bounced around the room somehow.

Another image appeared out of the snow.

It was my mother again, the same age, outdoors, sitting on a picnic blanket with a man I did not recognise. The camera was being held at child-height, moving more than it should. I could barely make out the man sitting beside my mother. He looked big and thin and Spanish

or South American. My body started to feel bad and full of movement.

The image cut to something else. There was minimal snowstorm this time, almost none. It was my mother again, a third time, the same age, embracing two smiling children. The children looked roughly the same age as each other. They looked familiar. But I did not recognise them. In the background was the same metallic-blue car as in the video before.

The video ended there.

I rewound it. I saw my father again. Then my mother with the car. And my mother with the big and thin Spanish or South American man. Then my mother embracing the smiling boy and girl.

I let the video stop.

I lit a cigarette and stood. My head rushed like unwinding.

I walked over to the huge and faded gold-framed mirror that hung on the wall of the living room. In my hand was the small ornate mirror from the shoebox. I stood in front of the huge mirror and held up the small mirror to it. I put my head in between the two mirrors. I tried to look into the big mirror to see the smaller mirror reflected back into it.

But the small mirror was too small and my head was too big and it was too dark to see anything anyway.

Before I went back to sleep I tried to masturbate. My body felt bad and full of movement. I wanted to make that stop. And I wanted to see if my penis still worked after losing the skin on it.

I got hard. But I felt sensitive when I touched myself slightly, and it stung badly when I put my hand around myself and moved my foreskin up and down.

I gave up and passed out.

I woke to the sound of the landline ringing.

I looked at my actual phone. There were missed calls from my brother on it.

I waited for the landline to ring out.

I heard my dad's voice say to leave a message. I thought about not calling my brother back. But I did.

'He speaks,' my brother said.

'What do you want?' I said, in a Robert De Niro mafia-guy voice. I took the phone away from my ear while my brother was talking to look at the clock on it. It said 1 p.m.

'What?' I said, when my phone was back on my ear.

'Were you asleep?'

'I was out.'

'Sure,' my brother said. 'The estate agent is coming the day after tomorrow. To do a valuation.'

'Evaluate what?' I said.

'A valuation. How's the clear-out going?'

'I found a VHS,' I said, 'in the attic.'

'The attic? You must be almost done, then.'

'It has Mum and Dad and you in it. The video. But also Mum with another family, I think.'



'He's coming at two. The day after tomorrow. Make sure everything looks valuable.'

'I don't know who the other family is. In the video. With Mum. I don't know if I can ask her. It's a whole other family.'

'I heard a story you'll like,' my brother said. 'A friend of mine works in the Job Centre. In the town where the house is. He had to tell a man that they were stopping his benefits. So he'd need to get a job.'

'And the man whose benefits they're stopping, he looks at my friend. Then he looks around. Then he clutches his chest, where his heart is, and he falls off the chair.'

'And he just lies there, on the ground. Dead of a heart attack, or something. So my friend rushes out of his little office to get help.'

'Oh, no,' I said.

'And the first person he sees, he says: this guy, he just died in my office.'

'And the person says: was it Frank Thingy?'

'And my friend goes: yeah. I think he's dead.'

'And the person just shakes their head and starts laughing. And my friend is panicking now, saying they need to call an ambulance, call for medical support, whatever. Because the guy is dead.'

'Oh, no,' I said.

'Yeah, so. My friend is panicking and the more he panics the more the other person laughs. And my friend is getting really worried now. Because this person is hysterical with laughter. But there is a dead guy in my friend's office.'

'So the person eventually stops laughing and takes my friend by the arm and walks him back to his office. And they just stand there watching the guy. From the doorway of the office. And they just stand there watching him. And my friend is panicking, but eventually he notices that the guy is still breathing.

'And his colleague laughs again, and says: get up, Frank.

'And Frank – who was dead – gets up, and doesn't look at them, and kind of dusts himself down, and then sits back down in the chair.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Yeah. So apparently this guy just does that. Plays dead when he hears something he doesn't like. That's his thing. He's known for it.'

'Pretending,' I said.

'Yeah. Pretending to be dead. Whenever he hears something he doesn't like.'

'Like if an estate agent came to value his childhood home?' I said.

'Or if his dickhead brother fucked up a house sale that could make him a lot of money,' my brother said.

'I don't like that story,' I said.

'Yeah, you do. You love it. You dirty little slut.'

'I've got to go, I'm dying,' I said, and hung up the phone.

I just sat there on my childhood bed a while staring into nothing. It had started raining slightly outside. I could hear it. I liked the sound it made. I opened the window so I could hear it better and heard the sound of the motorway, too, far away.

Downstairs I heard the television say: *welcome to the money-wellness revolution.*

The rain made the air coming through the window cold and I put the quilt from the bed around my shoulders.

Then I heard a different sound. From out the window. Like the sound of a garden animal but larger. So I looked out the window properly. But I couldn't see anything there.

I heard the sound again. It seemed to be coming from the old and fucked-up garden shed.

I knelt on the bed to look out of the window.

I saw the door to the shed open on its almost broken hinges.

The sound was the man. The figure I'd seen before. But he was not dressed as a man. I couldn't see what he was dressed as at first.

The man came out of the garden shed holding a pair of oversized rust-covered shears.

He pushed the door to the shed closed behind him.

I shouted.

And the man turned to the window slowly. And that's when I saw what he was dressed as.

The man was dressed in a horrible mud-covered brown costume.

The costume had its own fur. The fur was full of dried mud and attached plant matter, leaves, twigs, matted.

And on his head he had a mask of a deer face. A woman deer, without antlers. Covering his whole head.

I couldn't see eyeholes in the deer mask. Just glassy mask eyes. Far too far apart for him to see out of.

He stood there in the light rain looking at me in the window for a moment, still holding the rusted shears in one of his brown-gloved hands.

I wanted to shout again. But I didn't. We just stayed there looking at each other.

Then the man turned back towards the shed and opened the door to it. Then he looked back at me. Then he went into the shed and I heard the sound of tools in it.

Then I saw him come out of the shed. I shouted again.

I noticed he didn't have the shears anymore.

He closed the door to the shed without turning back to the window.

Then the man clomped off towards the trees at the end of the garden until I couldn't see him anymore.

I stayed at the window watching for a long time to see if the deer-man came back.

But he didn't.

So I put on dirty clothes, still watching the window.

I went downstairs to the kitchen. I took a big knife out of the knife block. Like I had before.

I thought about calling the police. But the house was full of drugs. And I wasn't a snitch.

I looked out of the kitchen window into the garden. It was still raining slightly. The door to the shed was slightly open.

I put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it.

I opened the back door and took my knife out into the garden.

I shouted a sound with the cigarette still in my mouth. I wanted to keep my hands free.

I couldn't hear anything.

I looked around everywhere and started walking down the long garden to the shed. I kept my eyes really wide.

At the shed, I stood away from it and pulled the door open with my non-knife hand. Just in case the deer-man had snuck back in there and was waiting to jump me with the rusted hedge-trimmers, or another garden implement.

The shed was empty.

I heard a sound from the trees at the bottom of the garden.

I didn't shout this time. I stepped back from the shed further. I walked quietly towards the trees.

At the trees there were no more sounds. And I couldn't see anything, either. But the trees at the end of the garden turned into a dense-ish patch of woodland.

There was a fucked up wire fence showing where the garden ended. It had been broken in one place. So you could easily jump it.

I stood looking into the woodland. The sound of rain on remaining leaves; birds.

I looked up at the biggest tree. I knew it was an ash. It had some kind of lesion on it. It looked dying.

I stood there with my knife a long time, moving my head around and shifting between feet quietly. But there were no more sounds. So eventually I gave up.

I went back to the house. On the way I looked into the shed again.

The shed was weirdly clean. I had been expecting more cobwebs. But there weren't many. All the garden tools were neatly arranged. The shears had been returned. They were in their spot.

I closed the door to the shed and went back to the house.

I found a padlock in the drawer of stuff with a key in it.

I took the padlock out to the shed and locked the door shut tight.

I turned to go back into the house. The house looked so



fucked up. Plants were growing all up it, flaking bricks.
Holes in the roof where tiles had fallen.

The walls were beginning to peel.

I went back into it.

I checked again that all the house doors were locked properly. And that the windows were closed, too.

I took half a Xanax and sat on my bed cross-legged. I watched the window and waited.

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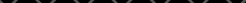
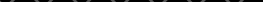
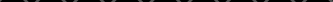
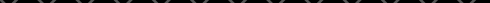
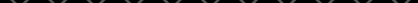
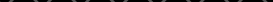
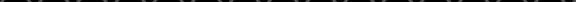
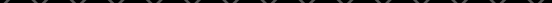
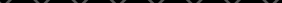
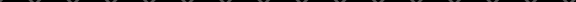
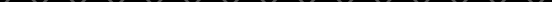
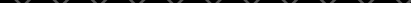
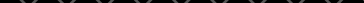
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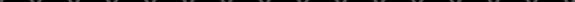
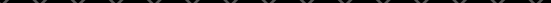
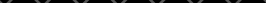
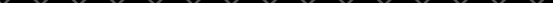
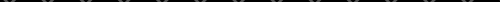
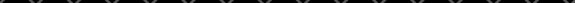
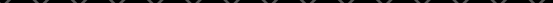
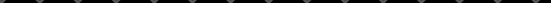
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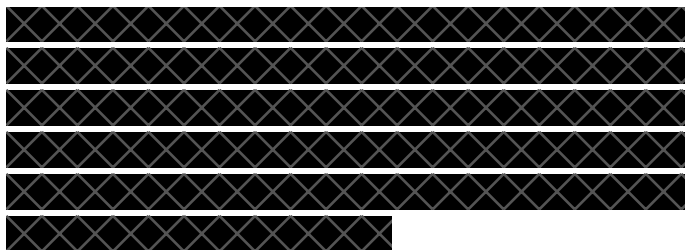
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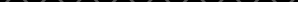
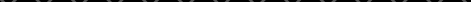
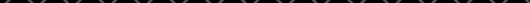
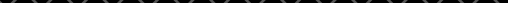
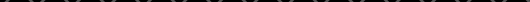
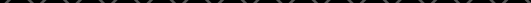
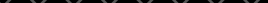
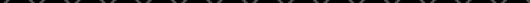
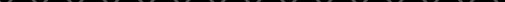
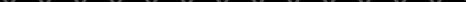
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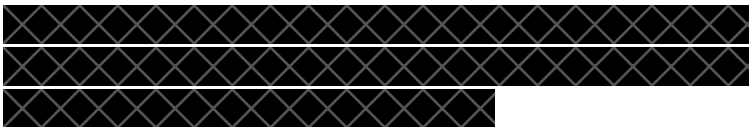
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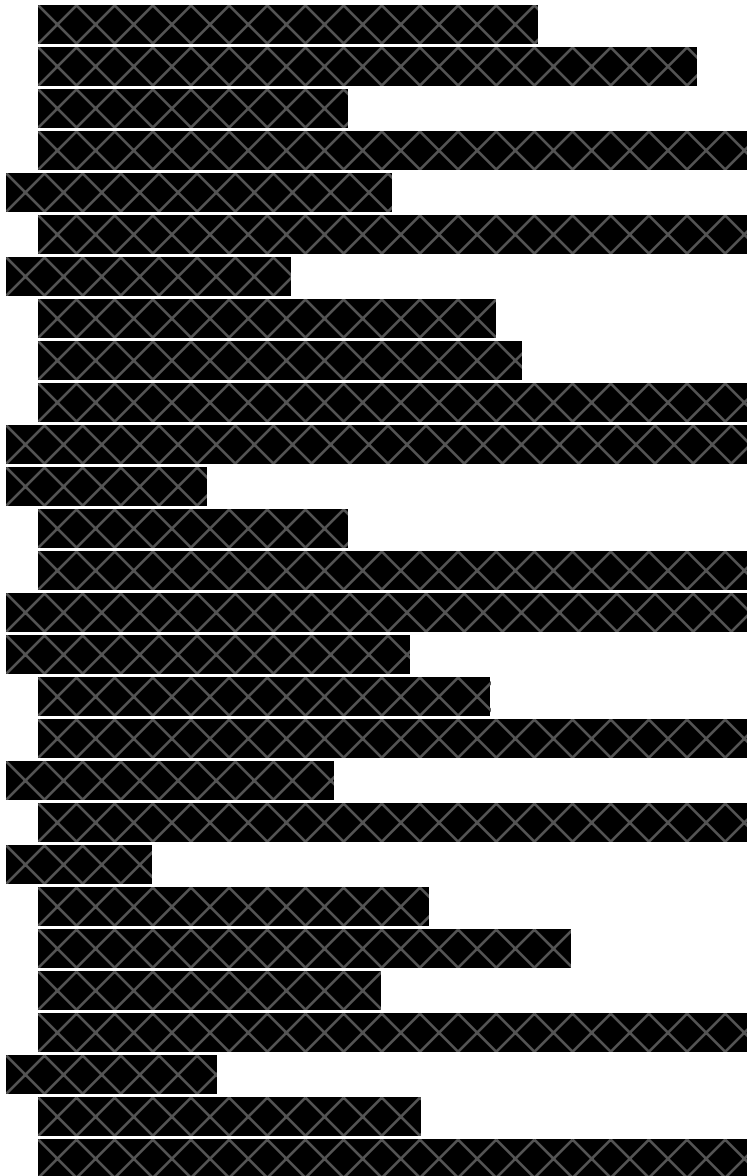
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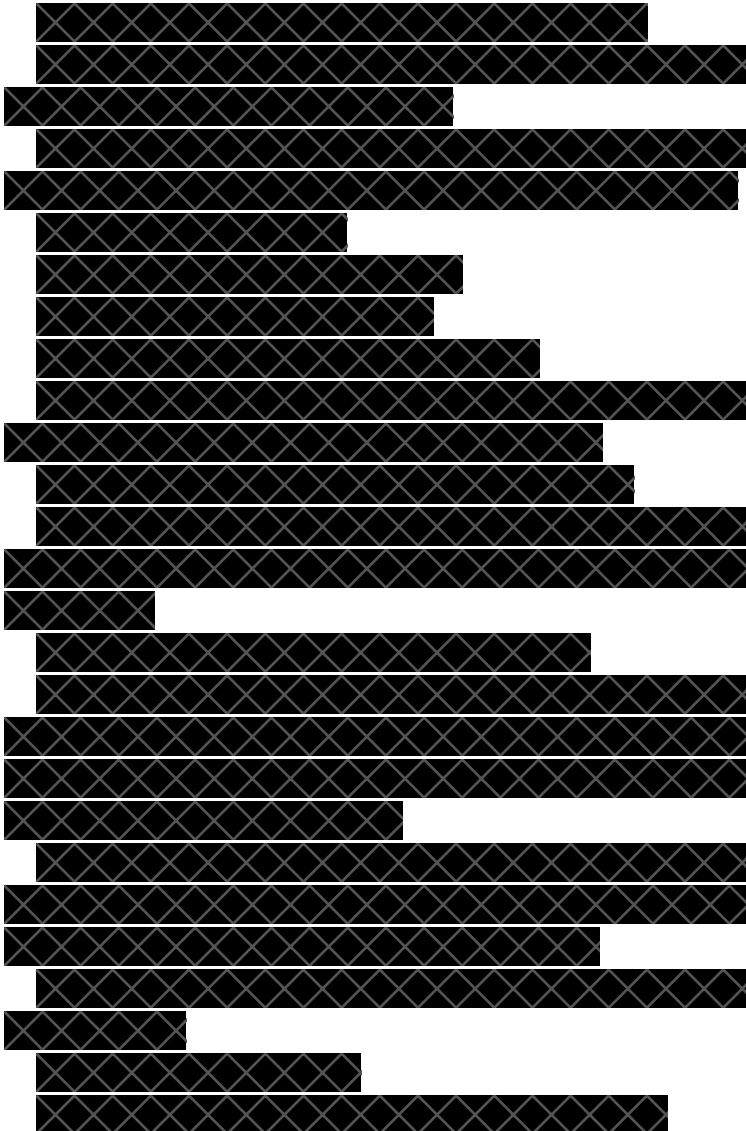
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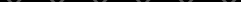
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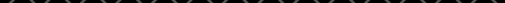
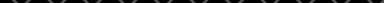
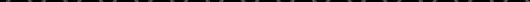
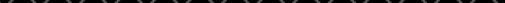
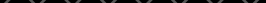
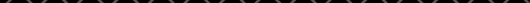
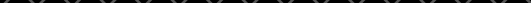
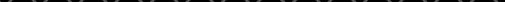
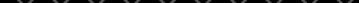
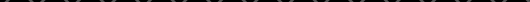
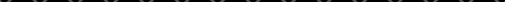
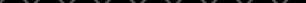
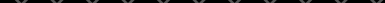
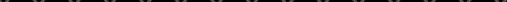
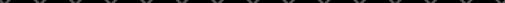
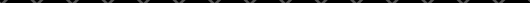
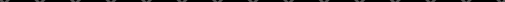
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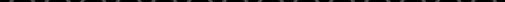
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Age Group	Percentage of Respondents
18-29	90%
30-49	85%
50-64	80%
65+	70%



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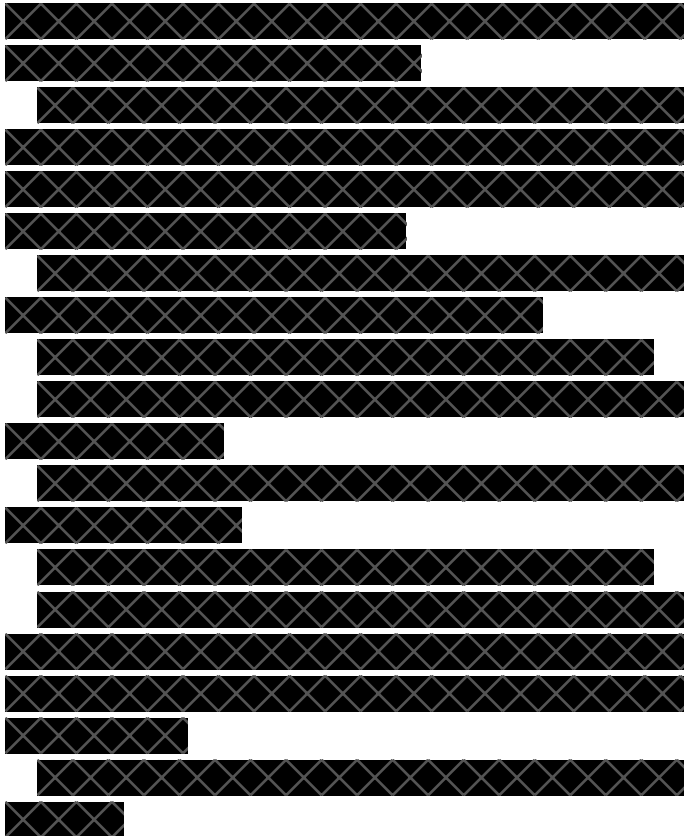
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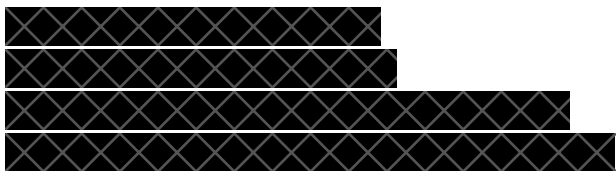
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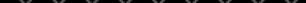
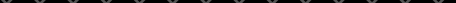
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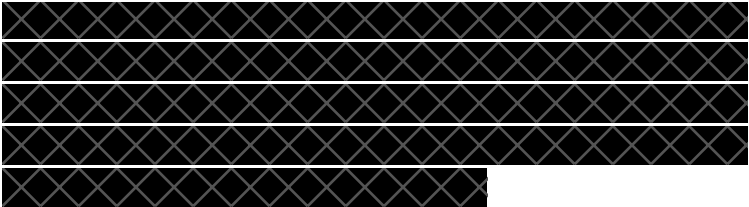
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