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NEGATIVE NANCY

M. Andrew Bodinger

Mr. John Wyatt flipped the page of the morning paper with a flamboyant crinkly flap. He already scanned every article at least three times and his wife eyed him as he took a miniscule sip of his cold coffee. He scratched his head, not because it itched but because he knew that he was so deep in thought that acting natural required conscious effort. His eggs and sausage were almost in the same position as they were when served 45 minutes prior. The Wyatts sat on opposite sides of their oak kitchen table in their matching, plain yellow pajamas silently. The muted, tiny television on the counter soundlessly displayed a program about the South African wildlife.

"What's on your mind, John?" Mrs. Sarah Wyatt finally chimed. A lot was on his mind, in fact. He was thinking of his daughters who, in exactly one week both were to graduate high school. He was remembering fondly upon the time where they sat at that same table almost a decade and a half earlier when Nancy, the slightly younger of the two fraternal twins, declared that she could finish her pancakes exclusively with her mouth and, when she came up for air, had maple syrup sticking in webs to her forehead and hair and her smile protruded her cheeks and Mr. Wyatt's fond memories. He scattered his memories on the table before him, like pictures for a scrapbook. Mr. Wyatt remained silent for several moments, and then responded:

"Our girls have lived a good life, right?"

"I believe so, but—" Mrs. Wyatt started to reply but was interrupted by her husband.

"I mean, everyone is sad sometimes," Mr. Wyatt continued, "but our girls seem to have maximized their fun and minimized their pain. They have a good handle of the world and were able to put themselves out there and worked hard and made good decisions and—"

"Get to the point honey," Mrs. Wyatt interrupted, sipping her third cup of coffee.

"I think— Well, I think we should kill our daughters," Mr. Wyatt finally declared. Mrs. Wyatt took another sip. He pushed his plate away, slid his chair in, and sat with an improved posture. He continued: "They've lived such good lives," he placed his elbows on the table and made tiny motions with his hands as he spoke. "We were good parents and we managed to avoid tragedies like disease, crime, natural disasters. We did our best, the girls did their best, and we had luck on our side."

"Honey, I know what you're saying but—"

Mr. Wyatt cut her off, "And we can't be sure that it will stay that way. Things could get worse."

"Things could get better," Mrs. Wyatt replied, curtly.

"Yes, but," Mr. Wyatt adjusted his glasses and leaned forward on the table with his

hands out, starring his wife down. "Even if that was likely, you have to remember that things will always seem worse than they actually are. Nancy could, provided she got enough sleep, thrive if the conditions were right. But Penelope, she is a bit of a, well, she is a bit of a Negative Nancy." Mrs. Wyatt's eyes glanced upwards as her brain processed, and she conceded a slight nod.

"The people that are out there," he pointed out the window without looking away, "can do awful things, *do* do awful things. There are killers, there are guys that would—"

"And girls out there, too."

"Y-yes, but that's not, I mean yeah," his eloquence lost both due to his wife's untimely interruption and the slow digestion of his wife's implication. "I'm just trying to say that—"

"If things do get worse, it'll be our fault." Mrs. Wyatt finished her husband's meandering thought. She too pushed away her plate and leaned forward, engrossed in the sentiments of pure utilitarianism.

"How will we do it?" she added.

"I was thinking poison; you know they consume it while they're eating. They won't notice a thing. It is not unlike gently falling asleep."

Ostensibly, Mrs. Wyatt thought, fully aware of his lack of both primary and secondary sources on the matter. In lieu of pointing out her husband's oversight and flustering him unnecessarily, she redirected him.

"I think that it is a good idea, but don't you think we should ask them?"

Mr. Wyatt scratched his unevenly shaven chin in thought and then concluded, "You're right, you're right, it's only fair, after all. They worked hard in school, they have made smart choices, and they're very rational, especially for eighteen year olds. Yeah, you're right, they can think for themselves." As he got up to collect the dishes, Mrs. Wyatt stood up and reached for his newspaper and began to peruse it.

"What if they don't want to, though?" Mrs. Wyatt asked without looking away from the article on the world's waning lion population.

"I don't think we'll have to worry about that. They'll make the right choice." Mr. Wyatt responded before turning on the faucet.

Over the next several hours both John and Sarah Wyatt preformed their daily routines and prepared the house. Mr. Wyatt insisted upon cooking dinner, and Mrs. Wyatt insisted that their daughter's last supper be memorable. Mr. Wyatt went to a local butchers followed by a grocer. Mrs. Wyatt prepared an old recipe that her older sister formulated a decade or so ago. It was simply a steak, but the recipe

demanded exact temperature and precise amount of seasoning and mushrooms. It was a secret Bellow family recipe, although the secret largely stemmed from the fact that the rest of the Wyatt's never cared to look it up. The daughters went to their friend Juliet's after school, giving Mrs. Wyatt more time to prepare and Mr. Wyatt the time to do his crossword.

The girls arrived several minutes before six o'clock, fully aware that a moment later would produce a night of familiar lectures. Nancy walked through the front door and dropped her purse on the table next to their worn couch. Penelope followed inside, making sure the door was shut, and put the chain on it as habit dictated before putting her purse next to her sister's. They walked mechanically with stone faces that avoided the other's glances. The girls were almost identical, save several features. Penelope had a freckle on her right cheek and Nancy's hair was a about a shade darker due to her frequent experiments in dye, among a few other minor nuances that were not immediately recognizable. Penelope, the Valedictorian for their class, had been accepted to the University of Chicago for Anthropology and was even to compete on the women's track team. Nancy, who complained constantly of being tired but stayed up late doing what amounted to absolutely nothing, was also a successful high school student and bound for the University of Iowa to major in some discipline of business. Nancy wore a vertical striped black and white striped shirt and jeans while her sister wore a white dress with a small, black sweater. Nancy walked straight into the kitchen and took her place, between her parents and opposite Penelope's seat, while Penelope hesitated in deciding between the bathroom and the dinner table. She decided her urge was minor and could wait and went to the oak kitchen table with muttered greetings followed by an unmemorable grace with her self-proclaimed overbearing parents.

Penelope, her sister's senior by mere minutes, stared at the meal and gave a dirty look when no one was looking. She was a vegetarian when possible, but her parents still ate meat and strongly believed that one must eat what one is presented regardless of their sensibilities. One time Penelope protested, asking her parents what they would do if served one of their now deceased pets, but was met with scorn and the request to not bring up such uncomfortable thoughts.

As they feasted on their freshly cooked prey, Mr. Wyatt looked up, gracefully made contact with his wife's eyes, and nodded in affirmation. While only several minutes into their silent meal, Mr. Wyatt put his silverware down, brushed the palms of his hands together, and uncharacteristically made a Wyatt dinner time announcement: "Girls, we have something to tell you," Mr. Wyatt bellowed in an unnecessarily

loud and confident tone.

"You're having a baby?" Nancy smirked.

"No, no, quite the opposite," Mrs. Wyatt replied breathing in a laugh and leaving a smile.

"We," Mr. Wyatt and Mrs. Wyatt glanced at one another in concert, "We're going to kill you!" The air in the room retreated outwards and the invisible sounds that distill silence ceased, save the clanging of Nancy's silverware and movement of her blouse as she shrugged. Penelope's heart murmured and every organ and cell momentarily ceased functioning to listen to their creators' declaration.

"Wait, what?" Penelope said, after waiting for several moments for a misplaced explanation.

Nancy glanced in her direction. "It's pretty obvious, Penelope. They just told you," she snarled quietly.

"Oh, Penelope, don't you worry about the details, we've planned it all out. It'll be painless. We'll put poison in your food, or your drink; we haven't already mind you," she said when she noticed Penelope eying her meal, "but you won't taste a thing. It'll be like going to sleep; wouldn't that be nice for a change, Nancy?" Mrs. Wyatt laughed. Nancy actually stifled a laugh, usually annoyed with her parents' prodding humor but was able to muster some subdued appreciation in that instance.

"Mom, Dad, no. I get what you're doing, I really do. But—no. It's just—it's not necessary." She stood up with her hands on the table, leaned over and pleaded, "My college has a lot of security and I take good care of myself! I will—"

"Penelope, I'm surprised at you," Mrs. Wyatt gently scolded. "We thought you would at least think it through before protesting. Remember how you never liked mushrooms till just a few years ago? You refused to look at them meal after meal. And then one day when we ordered pizza, you know during that big storm and the power went out? It was the weekend before that big science fair you almost won. Anyway, one of the pizzas had mushrooms on it and you accidentally tried a slice in the faint candlelight and you absolutely adored it! And look, you're eating them now!" Penelope looked at her meal and dropped her fork, too perturbed to consider sustenance. She felt trapped. Mrs. Wyatt hid her disappointment behind a heavy smile. Penelope's hands and thoughts were shaking uncontrollably. She wasn't sure what to say; arguing with her parents always was an uphill battle, even under trite circumstances.

"But—" she uttered weakly.

"Penelope, this is just how things work," Mr. Wyatt explained, impatiently. "Just

the way the world works. It isn't perfect; I'll give you that. So sometimes we have to do things that we don't want to do, but are necessary. If something unthinkable happened we would be completely crushed and you would blame us and yourself for not doing the right thing earlier. You're fretting, I know, but in doing so you are simply... procrastinating." He overestimated Penelope, he realized.

"But Dad, listen—" Penelope cried.

"No buts. Leave us. Go to your room!" Mr. Wyatt interrupted with a roar, his hands massaging his temple as he tried to contain his volume. The disheartened growl circled the room and trapped Penelope's equilibrium in a cage barred by parental guidance. Her hands quivering, she got up and began to walk away slowly.

"Push your chair in!" Mr. Wyatt exclaimed without looking up from his half-eaten meal. Nancy muttered something inaudible about her sister's dramatics under her breath. She looked at her sister, but the only thing she noticed was her freckle adjacent to her lips. Nancy was not certain why, but that freckle was an instigator of envy. Penelope at school was always "Penelope," while she was nothing more than "Penelope's twin." When the two were in elementary school, Penelope used to brag about it to her saying that it made her "more pretty" than her sister. It angered Nancy so much that she would obsess over that single freckle, even resorting to drawing on herself. Nancy attributed her sister's popularity to that brown circle; she felt that it gave her face a character that made her significantly more attractive. As the gap between their academic and athletic feats widened, Nancy subconsciously concluded that the freckle forged the distance, and her corner in Penelope's shadow was genetic. In high school Penelope would cover it up out of what Nancy saw as ill-suited distress.

"You understand what we're trying to do, right, Nancy? That we are only trying to help you?" Mrs. Wyatt cooed as Penelope pushed in her chair.

"Yes, Mother," Nancy replied in a disinterested tone. She had large bags under her eyes and her mood was particularly distant. Penelope was walking away as demanded, but then rebelled. She turned towards her sister.

"Nancy, you always just do what you're told and you never think for yourself. Mom and Dad chose your college, your major, and your clothes even," she made a motion with her hand towards her striped shirt. "What do you want?" Penelope pleaded with her distant sister.

"She wants what her family wants!" Mr. Wyatt boomed, slamming his fist on the wooden table. Mrs. Wyatt jumped. Usually one to avoid her husband when he was in such a mood, she remained silent. Penelope maintained a desperate stare

towards her sister. Everyone's thoughts turned inwards for several moments and the dinner time *banter* congealed into calm.

Finally, Nancy turned her head towards Penelope. "You know what I wanted for myself? I wanted to ask someone to prom. To dye my hair green. To take a year off of school and visit Europe. But who asked Juliet first? Who canceled my appointment, and who told Mom and Dad my plans before I could? You think everyone should live life as expected in obnoxious quietude. You look at your expansive shadow at sunset, but ignore the ball of light that creates both you and your dark passenger. Sometimes the right decision is to just stop hiding behind yourself, to fall in line and see where it takes you." Penelope was flabbergasted. The absurdity of the situation took hold of her brain and produced primal fear unlike she had ever felt before. She felt surrounded on all sides by predators. Her shaking thoughts produced only one logical response: run. She bolted to the door but her father pounced with the precision of lightning and intercepted her before she could touch the knob.

"Damn it, Penelope!" Mr. Wyatt thunderously exclaimed. Mrs. Wyatt scurried over to witness the commotion, but kept her distance. Nancy stayed in place and continued to gnaw on the cooked cow corpse. Mr. Wyatt was able to quickly grab hold around Penelope's arms and carried her over to the living room couch with ease. Penelope struggled and flung her legs up and around in a desperate attempt to break free.

"Penelope!" Mrs. Wyatt chastised, "I've never seen you act so unladylike," referring to her daughters violent motions that allowed her wrinkled dress to come up. Penelope looked over to her mother wide-eyed and bewildered in the face of her callousness. She weakened her resistance. It was clear that she wouldn't be able to break free as the circumstances were, but perhaps, she thought, if she feigned docility her father would be unprepared for a sudden burst of energy and she could escape. In addition, she was not entirely convinced her parents were serious. Before tonight, they never so much as laid a hand on either of their children. Maybe it was some test, or some extreme example they wanted to set so they would be prepared for the real world. Penelope knew those reasons hardly justified even the most protective of parents to act. Then again, her parent's actions could not be explained by conventional logic. And so, she reduced her aggression to simple observation in order to collect information and await an opening.

"Why don't you just break her neck?" Nancy half-heartedly shouted with a drizzle of greasy spit. Her words dripped onto the heads of her family and carelessly soaked into their frazzled brains.

"Don't be ridiculous, Nancy!" Mr. Wyatt replied with a shout that shook the leash on his temper, which was becoming increasingly loose by the moment. He looked over to his wife, and they both nodded in silent affirmation. Mrs. Wyatt, with a gust of energy, returned to the kitchen.

"Don't say such awful things, Nancy. Come on now, you know better than that," Mrs. Wyatt told her daughter in a cross manner. Mrs. Wyatt's words fell upon Nancy's hunched shoulders, which simply shrugged them away. Nancy already finished her plate, and went to work upon her sister's. She developed a pool of sauce on the side of her mouth to which Mrs. Wyatt hurriedly went over to Nancy's side to clean it off with an untainted napkin.

"We aren't animals," she continued as Nancy pushed her away, embarrassed. Mrs. Wyatt walked over to the cabinets near the refrigerator. She opened one. "Nancy, this is a mess! It's like a whirlwind came through here. I thought I told you last week to tidy this up?" Mrs. Wyatt put her hands on her hips in an anger that was slowly beginning to match that of her husband. Nancy, again, shrugged. She missed the steak with her knife and started cutting at the air as her eyelids instinctively fluttered shut.

"You and your sister have been acting so childish lately. What's gotten into you two?"

Nancy remained silent, although she wanted to tell her mother that there was no "lately." They were both logical extensions of themselves; she soured by a spider web of optimism that failed to catch the buzzing fears and inadequacy, and her sister with the tendency to chew pieces out of any hand that dare feed her. Furthermore, it was not so much irresponsibility as it was an unnecessary delegation of tasks to begin with. However, she decided to just continue to keep to herself as it was much easier to play dumb than to argue. Nancy learned long ago that the less she challenged her parents, even if they perceived that she was in the wrong, the lighter her shoulders felt.

Mrs. Wyatt continued to search through the disorganized cabinet until she found the unlabeled white bottle full of deadly cyanide pills. A decade earlier, Mr. Wyatt returned home with a slamming door, exhaling whiskey. In his pocket he had a bottle labeled as ibuprofen, but was filled with cyanide capsules purchased from a black market dealer several towns over. Mr. Wyatt was officially unemployed. He sat down at their new kitchen table where a wrapped chicken sandwich showed his reflection. He knocked it off the table, shattering the porcelain and ruining dinner. Their dog, Ulysses, sensing his owner's distress, walked over and began licking his owner's frenzied hands. The world's depravity set in upon Mr. Wyatt, and he began

sorting tablets on the table before him. He set aside one for himself, one for his wife, one for Penelope, one for Nancy, and one for Ulysses. He fed it to the dog, who shook his tail wildly in excitement for several moments. Immediately after, Mr. Wyatt received a phone call from his future employer.

Like a kite that finally caught a magnificent breeze, Mrs. Wyatt glided out of the kitchen, forgetting to close the very cabinet she stressed over moments ago. Mrs. Wyatt walked over to her gloomy daughter, opened the cap, and pulled out the brown pea-shaped capsule. At this moment Penelope's heart sank. Her dwindling doubt completely dissipated. She knew that her parents meant well and, to them, this was a calculated and logical decision, a manmade squall looming over uncertain shores, which made her mother's approaching figure all the more frightening. To them there was only one decision. So, Penelope made her own.

Suddenly, Penelope's purse began buzzing. Its vibrations stole the attention of her parents. Penelope, gracious for her caller's sense of timing, seized the opportunity and with a burst of strength kicked her mother with both legs, who wobbled back and fell into an adjacent chair, and then pushed against her father's limp arms with her upper body and successfully broke his grip. Unfettered, she tried once again to open the door. Her forcefulness shook the room and the buzzing purse fell to the floor. She pulled the door open, but the chain allowed only a brief, crisp breeze to escape. She closed it and, with shaking hands, took the chain and unattached it. She started to swing open the door to her freedom and safety. Before the door opened a crack, however, her father once again grabbed her with a powerful bear hug, tearing his daughter's hand off the bronzed knob. The pull caused the door to open quickly, but Mr. Wyatt closed it with his foot as he brought his daughter back into the living room. Mrs. Wyatt, red in the face and with tears in her eyes, walked over resolutely and with broad shoulders and disorderly hair to grab her daughter's legs. Penelope was trapped, surrounded on all sides by primal viciousness, benign pragmatism, and distinguished indifference. The two of them carried Penelope over to the living room chair, the green, leather loveseat that Mrs. Wyatt fell into a moment earlier, in perfect wordless synchronization. They placed her on the chair. Mr. Wyatt quickly went around it and reached behind the back of the shiny cushion to hold Penelope in place. The phone fell silent.

Mrs. Wyatt held Penelope's legs and screamed, "Nancy! We need your help, fill up a glass of water and get the pills off the ground." Nancy rolled her eyes stood up and emptied her sister's dinner cup and filled it with clear water from the fridge.

"Nancy, hurry up!" Mr. Wyatt called.

"I'm coming," she replied, muttering the name of a long lost religious figure under her breath. She strolled into the living room, picked up the overturned bottle, leaving the wayward cyanide in its place, and went to her sister's side.

"Give her the pill, Nancy," Mrs. Wyatt demanded.

"And make sure she swallows it!" Mr. Wyatt exclaimed. Nancy held out the lone pill to her sister's mouth. Penelope's face was expressionless. Although her parents were putting all their energy into preventing a repeat escape attempt, Penelope no longer put up a fight. She knew what it was like to be a zebra exposed in the wild, or a lamb caught between a wolf and barbed wire. They know at a cellular level that it's over before the blade comes down or the teeth set in, and while they may fight back, she realized, it's merely out of helpless habit. She looked at her sister's face and saw her own, minus a single brown dot. She looked into her sister's eyes and saw sanguine nothingness.

"Nancy," Penelope uttered voicelessly, "I'm sorry about Juliet."

"Don't be," she replied. "It was never about her, not really. We're sisters, we can feud but I would never do anything that would hurt you." Penelope spent the past several years of her life trying to erase her freckle. But humility is its own sort of pride, and regardless, Penelope, deep down, always felt that life owed her something: the envy of others; their compliments; their concern. If the freckle made her better, it also made her life more stringent, and so balancing praise with practicality was not unlike an elephant balancing on a ball at a carnival. When the world conceded, it wasn't what she imagined. Penelope forgot all about the world and, in that moment, decided that if she couldn't be right, someone ought to be.

"I was born first, so I guess it only makes sense that..." her voice trailed off. Nancy looked at her sister's face again and barely could see her freckle, as if its declining affluence also reduced its perceived size. Nancy figured that, notwithstanding all of her accomplishments and her intelligence, she did not realize that some things in life are simple and commonsense. Nancy put the pill in her sister's mouth, and then put the glass of water to her lips. Penelope, trapped, her heart fallen, her strength drained, found but one decision left to make: for the prey to move out of hiding and into the center of the raging tempest. Penelope took a drink and swallowed without moving her face. In seconds, all possible future misfortunes disappeared. The Wyatt parents stood up and the intensity started to fade from their faces. After several moments of calm following the hunt, they noticed a rancid smell emanating from their disorderly daughter. Quickly calculating that it was

not early onset decay, Nancy snickered and started looking for her camera phone inside her faux designer purse.

"I need to take a picture of this—she is always so dramatic. And I'm supposed to be the younger one?" Nancy giggled to herself.

"No, this isn't the time for that, Nancy. Leave your sister alone," Mrs. Wyatt looked at her watch, "and get ready for bed. You're falling asleep as it is and you have an early morning tomorrow." Nancy stopped wading through her purse, mildly annoyed, and placed it back on the table and went to walk up the stairs opposite the front door. Just then, the bag released a stifled rumble. Mr. Wyatt picked up the drifted corpse and kissed it on the forehead.

"I remember their first steps up those stairs," John whispered to his wife, proud. "I'm so disappointed that Penelope acted so resentful. We're her parents; we want what is best for her. Maybe if she was just a little more mature, I would've been able to watch both my daughters walk up those stairs for the last time, too."

"This is the only decision," Mrs. Wyatt declared as she unzipped Nancy's purse. "It's the only way to be sure they never have to limp up those stairs, that they aren't eaten alive..." she said, thinking aloud. The screen declared that Nancy received a text message from Juliet.

"Two lambs saved from the slaughter." A tear began to form in Mr. Wyatt's eye. "Hey," he said, wiping it away and attempting to change the mood, "with the kids out of our hair this weekend, would you want to go up north to the cabin?"

The next morning Sarah and John Wyatt sat opposite each other and ate chocolate chip pancakes with their lone daughter feasting amid the bemused table. The only child, surrounded by words of disillusionment that echoed faint optimism, fell face first into syrupy memories.