Good Looking in the Dark: A Narrative across Three Mediums

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GOOD LOOKING IN THE DARK: A NARRATIVE ACROSS THREE MEDIUMLS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
English
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GOOD LOOKING IN THE DARK: A NARRATIVE ACROSS THREE MEDIUMS

Aimee J. Valentine
Western Michigan University, 2017

Good Looking in the Dark: A Narrative Across Three Mediums is a single story presented in three distinct formats: short story, stage drama, and graphic narrative. This project is an exploration of the creative process and its relation to medium, reader anticipation, participation and response. Reflecting my position that narrative meaning is made primarily in the dark space of the reader’s mind, the story selected for this project is one that takes place almost entirely in the dark. In Good Looking in the Dark, two strangers are locked in a closet and engage one another without seeing the other—just as an author engages her reader without seeing her. Creation and reception are parties in an ongoing blind dialogue, a space in which author and audience are influenced by a variety of external factors. In presenting this multi-modal narrative, I am encouraging an aesthetic dialogue between author/reader and reader/reader. I am also confirming the ways in which narrative medium matters. An artistic medium carries with it material boundaries as well as historical and cultural values. Whether by crossing those boundaries or remaining constrained within them, an artist imparts a specific significance to the work. By adapting a single narrative across three mediums, this project engages with implicit and explicit reader expectations for each form, as well as expectations for the story being told. This work emphasizes that creative meaning, like the act of creation, is a process rather than a finite product.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging the influence of unnamed scores of visual artists and writers whose works combine philosophy, humor, and art, and who inspired me to approach this dissertation as an exercise in creative process.

Secondly, I would like to thank the members of my graduate committee who took time to discuss with me their perceptions of the work contained herein, specifically Professors Thisbe Nissen, Christopher Nagle, Nicolas Witschi, and Nick Sousanis. I also thank Professor Gwen Tarbox, playwright Peter Ullian, and author Peter Orner, who each offered early input regarding the medium-specific iterations of the narrative.

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Finally, I would like to thank my companion whose devout loyalty, patience, and selflessness has pushed me to engage with the world outside my head every day since I’ve known him. This gentle soul has sat beside me, uncomplaining for ten years. I dedicate this work to Michael Finnegan—my old man, my wire-haired angel, my beloved mutt—who saves me from the river itself.

Aimee J. Valentine
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CHAPTER I
CRITICAL ESSAY

Dear Reader,
I am writing this essay in the dark.
See me in the corner?
Why would anyone bother with the dark when the light switch is just there, near your hand?
Because.
Seeing in the dark is not easy.

Looking in the dark is not the same as looking into the dark. When we look INTO the dark we are gazing into the deep Nothing. Everything. The overwhelming Abyss.

We invite it, in turn, to look into us. Darkness becomes an abstraction and a metaphor for our existence.

It’s an exercise in looking.

Looking into the dark, we are looking into ourselves.
It is a spiritual act, a meditation. Our eyes need not open.

To look IN the dark, our eyes must be open.
We are exercising our ability to see, despite the difficult circumstance.

We strain our eyes.
To find a lost key under the stairs.
The way up.
To avoid a sharp corner.
Looking in the dark is a physical act.
A craft.
Bats don't naturally see in the dark.

They use echolocation to bounce sound off objects, and the sound returns to them in the form of a picture.

This is how they navigate the night sky.

We don't naturally see in the dark, either. But the longer we look, the more our eyes adjust. The depth of the darkness recedes. Our field of vision expands. Shapes make themselves known in shades of grey. Until we, too, have a picture.

Blurry edges harden. Perspective sharpens. And we navigate our way.
The Project

Good Looking in the Dark: A Narrative Across Three Mediums is a single story presented in three distinct formats: short story, stage drama, and graphic narrative. This project is an exploration of writing process, medium, and reader anticipation, participation and response. At its core, it is a simple tale about the chance encounter between two strangers who come together for a little while in the dark. In this way, the story also serves as a metaphor for the meeting of author and reader in the dark space of the mind.

The Premise

Penelope and Harry are guests at a fortieth birthday party where they have chosen the same coat closet in which to hide before jumping out to yell Surprise! When they find that they are trapped in the lightless closet and that their shouts for help are inaudible over the party music, the surprise is theirs. We learn that Penelope has come to the party on a blind date set-up to meet the Birthday Boy. She is dressed appropriately and has brought a bottle of wine as a gift. We learn that Harry has come to the party to present the Birthday Boy with a handmade urn for his recently deceased dog. Harry presumed that the party, so close to Halloween, was intended to be a costume party. He, too, is dressed appropriately. Over several hours, the two strangers become acquainted in the dark, sharing their bitter regrets, their crippling fears, and their deranged fantasies. By the end of the story, Penelope’s wine has been drunk, Harry’s urn has been shattered, and the two characters have imagined an entire future spent together.

Unbeknownst to either Harry or Penelope, a third character—the Birthday Boy himself—sits outside the closet door, also in the dark. His presence is acknowledged solely in the short story format, where he serves as an interlocuter for the audience. His is a thinking role, while the characters within the closet have speaking roles.
The Presentation

In each of the three mediums—short story, stage play, graphic narrative—the story is presented to the reader primarily as a dialogue. In the dark we look and we also listen. Employing a dialogue that takes place in the tight space of the closet is a tool for pulling the reader into the story and into the darkness, while the change of format allows readers to regard the work, and ideas about darkness, time, and space, from different perspectives.

The Title

As a title, *Good Looking in the Dark* is meant to evoke the following ideas: First, it is an acknowledgement of the efforts of its characters to look despite the difficulty of seeing. Here, as illustrated in this essay’s introduction, looking is privileged as a kind of visual engagement rather than a metaphysical act. Second, the title is a joke about physical, intellectual, and emotional attraction. The characters in this story each hope to be viewed as good-looking despite the dark. Finally, the title is a kind of invocation for the reader. Like Happy hunting! or Good luck! I wish the reader Good looking in the dark!

Background

How we understand art, how we read stories, view images, and look for meaning has always fascinated me. We each enter the dark with our own set of eyes, our own experiential lenses through which to perceive the world set before us. Seeing in this sense is less about the physicality of eyesight as it is the state of our minds. It is about personal perspective. You and I, straining our eyes together in the dark, may both agree that there is a flat, shiny and pointed object on the mantle. But while you may interpret the object as a banal letter opener, I may see it as a dagger.

Indeed, I usually see it as a dagger.
The dark for me is a dangerous place, a place where the statue on the top of a bookshelf teeters, threatening to brain the unsuspecting person below. The dark is an ironic place, where the unsuspecting person will no doubt be blindly fumbling for a dog-eared copy of a Beckett play. The dark is also a place of chance, a place where, upon claiming their prize of Beckett, the unsuspecting person stumbles to the right and the demented statue sails past them to the floor. Then again, maybe not. No prize. And no such luck.

This is the darkness of the human experience, a perverse and often horrifying random set of events which can best be survived by figuring out how to frame it. I frame it as comedy. Rather than shriek, I point at the absurdity of it. As Kierkegaard writes in his journals, “The only intelligent tactical response to life’s horror is to laugh defiantly at it” (Hannay, 1996).

On Genre

While literary genres merge and emerge with regularity, the urge to classify narratives into recognizable genres can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. Plato claimed three genres: dramatic dialogue, pure narrative, and epic (a combination of dialogue and narrative). Aristotle distinguished four types of genres: tragedy, epic, comedy, and parody. The limiting power of genre has posed problems for literary theorists, but Jacques Derrida in the “Law of Genre” states that, “Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (Ronell, 1980, p. 56). If genre is seen this way, as an act the text participates in, rather than a class it belongs to, we may also regard the creation of such a text as a participatory act, a process akin to performance. Likewise, by applying reader response theory which approaches genre as a performance of the reader upon the text, we may invite all parties—creator, text, and audience—to participate in the performance.
Responding to Derrida’s paradox of genre in which texts “belong without belonging,” a framework which positions critics to discuss a text within its genre whilst simultaneously unravelling the notion of genre, Ralph Cohen claims that genres are “open categories.” He notes in his essay “History and Genre” that “each member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or changing constituents” (p. 204). Cohen further writes that classifications of texts are empirical rather than logical, and that genres are historical assumptions constructed by authors, audiences and critics. (p. 210). Most relevant to this project, perhaps, is Cohen’s conclusion that the greatest potential for genre criticism exists in the examination of “a single narrative as it undergoes generic variations, becoming, in turn, a ballad, a prose fiction, a tragedy, a memoir, as well as a member of other genres” (214). Cohen rightly assumes that any author, in participating in a particular genre, is making an ideological choice. Similarly, the critic, in questioning or reassigning the genre of a text, makes choices related to ideologies within literary tradition.

While my project focuses on adaptation across mediums, rather than adaptation across genres, a shift in genre might be located through the perspective of the Birthday Boy, whose exposition-based narrative is included only in the short story form, and which engages with expectations in the classical genre of tragedy (in its focus on death). As the story weaves into the dramatic and graphic forms, however, both its exposition and its tragic perspective is put on hold, frozen in time. It exists outside of the narrative, in the periphery. Thus, the work might be said to participate in several genres, simultaneously.

Lest we question the value of genre, Fredric Jameson’s reminds us in his essay “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre,” that literary genres are a social contract between the writer and the audience (p. 135). Jonathan Culler takes a similar perspective and states that the act of writing is made possible by the existence of the genre, and while the writer may subvert the
genre’s convention, the genre itself is what gives his work context. Culler frames genre as a promise to the audience which the writer can either keep or fail to keep (p. 116). Not only is the author of a work exercising an ideological choice by engaging with a particular genre, but they are entering into a contract, a promise to the audience to fulfill social and historical expectations for that genre.

With these ideas in mind, the promise that \textit{Good Looking in the Dark} makes to the audience is that of the classical comedy (the story ends with a wedding). It is also a dialogue blended with the more contemporary romantic drama and the locked room drama. The story contains two characters in constant dialogue who are trapped together in a small space.

\textbf{On Dialogue and Genre}

Kilgore Trout once wrote a short story which was a dialogue between two pieces of yeast. They were discussing the possible purposes of life as they ate sugar and suffocated in their own excrement. Because of their limited intelligence, they never came close to guessing that they were making champagne.

\begin{center}
\end{center}

The characters in \textit{Good Looking in the Dark} are not unlike Trout’s two pieces of yeast. Through their dialogue, they are unwittingly participating in making something—a story. Audiences familiar with Louis Malle’s film \textit{My Dinner with Andre} (1981) will have an immediate sense of the two-character, dialogue-driven narrative; those familiar with Richard Linklater’s films \textit{Before Sunrise} (1995), \textit{Before Sunset} (2004) and \textit{Before Midnight} (2013), will easily locate the genre of romantic drama as dialogue; audiences familiar with Radha Bharadwaj’s film \textit{Closet Land} (1991) will be well acquainted with the implicit dramatic tension between two characters trapped in a confined space.

It may be important to note that while \textit{Good Looking in the Dark} involves a dramatic dialogue taking place in a closet, it is not a “closet drama.” This term refers to a genre of
playwriting in which the play is intended for private reading rather than public performance. Although presented to the reader in written format, the dramatic version of *Good Looking in the Dark* is intended to be performed. As a whole text, then, this project participates in the classical genres of epic, dialogue, tragedy and comedy.

**On Mode**

Often erroneously conflated with genre and medium is literary mode; that is, the mood, manner or style within a written work. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle is explicit about the difference between modes and mediums when he writes that kinds of poetry may be differentiated according to their medium of imitation, their objects of imitation, and their mode or manner of imitation. Examples of literary modes include texts written in the satiric, didactic, or comic styles, although it is important to note that modes are tied neither to a genre nor a medium. For example, a detective (genre) graphic narrative (medium) may be written in an ironic manner (mode).

In my study of literature and literary movements, I have encountered a variety of modes by which to frame and reflect the human experience to a reading audience. Repeated exposure to the following styles has prompted me to develop my own shorthand for reader expectation. These obvious over-simplifications are included solely to provide the reader of *Good Looking in the Dark* additional context for the material:

**Realism:** a bleak mode which represents human experience to the point of redundancy. The only escape from relentless banality, cruelty, and lack of meaning is death. As such, the characters are forever poisoning themselves or dashing in front of trains to get it over with.

*Motto:* Life’s terrible, but here we are.
Modernism: a fragmented—even schizophrenic—interrogation of the horrors of existence in which the point of view darts from character to character, voice to voice, often getting lodged within a manic, overpopulated stream of consciousness.

Motto: What is happening here?

Fantasy: an exercise in escapism and wish fulfillment, whether that wish is for romance or vengeance, zombies, aliens, or time travel with unicorns.

Motto: Let’s pretend we’re not here.

Absurdity: like modernism, it interrogates reality but also critiques it. For effect, the absurdist distorts a culturally perceived reality for the purpose of upending the reader. The writing may be campy or clever, meta or maniacal, ironic or flat-out weird. But it is weirdness as a commentary, proclaiming that there is no fate, no purpose. Just bizarre circumstances. We are all grappling in the dark.

Motto: There is no “here,” here.

I position myself in this latter camp with the knowledge that writing in this mode invites steep criticism. Absurdist writing may include satire, the surreal, the postmodern, and the transgressive. Authors employing this mode in their work include Kafka and Gogol, Vonnegut and Vidal, Irving and Palahniuk, Barthelme and Saunders, Beckett, Stoppard, and Albee. The steepest criticism absurdist authors suffer is the accusation that they have no heart. That they are heartless, not in the sense of cruel, but in not working to move the audience. Rather, absurdist work to distance the audience from a particular expectation. The work acts on an aesthetic or philosophical level, rather than an emotional one. Most absurdist works are darkly funny even if
they are not laugh-out-loud funny. Absurdist humor is existential. It is not a joyful, heartfelt funny, but funny as in odd. As in: it’s odd to be alive.

If realists hold a mirror up to our reality, and modernists hold up a fractured mirror, absurdist hold up a two-way fun house mirror. They distort the normal for an odd effect and snicker in a closet behind the glass. To become emotionally invested in the representation of existence is to act as if all this is real, to pretend we are not in a fun house. On a deep level, absurdist suspect that emotions of happiness and joy, sorrow and pain are an illusion. A story. A play. A comic strip. These three forms have something in common—there is an end for each. A final act, a denouement, a punchline. We will all die. Nothing lasts, and we cannot be sure that anything is real. Perhaps not even death.

Still, we can pretend. We can play our roles upon the stage. And we, as writers, can create those stories for others to watch, to play out, to believe. This is a meta experience for all involved. We recognize the unreality and we create further unrealities in which others may participate. Invented characters, invented scenarios. Is the purpose of creating this experience to remind the audience that life is precious? No, not for the absurdist. The intent is to engage the reader, to distract them, and to prompt them to think. For a moment, for an hour. As Woody Allen writes for a character playing Gertrude Stein, “The artist's job is not to succumb to despair but to find an antidote for the emptiness of existence” (Midnight in Paris, 2011).

To that end, I aim to inject a sliver of hope into my writing, however small. Until I read Vonnegut’s Cat’s Cradle (1963) and God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965), I did not see the purpose of hope in storytelling. I wanted my characters to die or fail, and as comically as possible. They, like the characters in John Irving’s The World According to Garp (1982) were not to be pitied or empathized with, but to be used and abused to point out the absurdity of
existence. I had a youthful fascination with the work of Edward Gorey, a writer and illustrator with a penchant for killing off small children in his books. As a child, I hung the illustrated poster from his 1963 classic *Gashlycrumb Tinies* on the back of my bedroom door and stared at it each night before going to sleep.

A is for Amy who fell down the stairs,

B is for Basil assaulted by bears…

E is for Earnest who choked on a peach,

F is for Fanny sucked dry by a leech…

M is for Maud who was swept out to sea,

N is for Neville who died of ennui…

There is no hope in the work of Gorey, funny as it is. For Vonnegut, however, hope is an essential tool in his postmodern absurd arsenal. Without hope the reader of absurdist narratives has no one and nothing to root for. But what is there to hope for, if there is no meaning?

Kindness was Vonnegut’s answer. A famed humanist, where other absurdists have given up on both God and man, Vonnegut’s ridiculous characters can often be seen performing tiny acts of unwarranted kindness. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, we meet Eliot Rosewater, a down-on-his-luck and possibly delusional alcoholic who is the disputed heir to a fortune. He lives in a tiny, dirty room, claims to be a volunteer firefighter, and answers the phone whenever it rings. There are no fires. Only tragic characters from the town, calling for advice about utterly profane matters. Rosewater doesn’t hang up. He dispenses advice and micro loans. Through reading Vonnegut, I came to understand that embracing absurdity doesn’t have to be a death sentence for meaning. If the characters possess redeeming qualities, the reader leaves the story feeling their time wasn’t wasted.
On Medium

The Short Story becomes The Short Story-in-Dialogue

I first developed the concept for *Good Looking in the Dark* in the medium I knew best, the short story. The story was written in past tense and in addition to dialogue, it included a third person narrator, exposition, scene description, thought, action, and summary—all the hallmarks of the traditional short story form epitomized by canonical work from Poe, Chekov, Hemingway. The more frequently I read the story, though, the more I understood that nothing but the dialogue was strictly necessary to communicate the tale. Thus, I stripped away superfluous party details such as the buffet spread in the kitchen, the tower of gifts in the living room, and even the perspective of the Birthday Boy. I let the dialogue stand alone, in present tense, using dialogue tags. The dialogue-only story has its roots in Socratic dialogues and, while rare in literature, it is not un-explored. Donald Barthelme’s “The Leap” (1978) is all dialogue, as is a subplot in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996). Most recently, Dave Eggers published a dialogue-only novel, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (2014).

Without a visual component to provide additional sensory information as in *My Dinner with Andre* and the *Before* film series, the reader of a novel-in-dialogue must be prepared for a long haul. Eggers’ novel poses the additional challenge of a larger cast of voices for the reader to internalize. In my case, *Good Looking in the Dark* in its short story form was a two-person dialogue, more intuitive for the reader, akin to an intimate personal exchange—a phone call, a conversation, a confession.

The Short Story-in-Dialogue Becomes the Radio Drama

Adapting *Good Looking in the Dark* as a play began with a contest. The BBC was holding an international competition for radio drama scripts. Though my knowledge of radio
dramas was based on a television episode of *Frasier* in which Frasier attempts to direct his colleagues in a tribute to radio mysteries, my dialogue story seemed highly suitable for such an adaption. Thinking about dialogue in terms of sound, and interested in format, I wanted to know how or if the story would change when the audience could hear the conversation, rather than read it as black marks on white paper. How wonderful, I thought, to be able to hear subtle fluctuations in the actors’ voices; to hear whispers, sighs, irony, anger, or chortling; to be able to hear other sounds in the closet; hangers moving, muffled noise, candy wrappers, or cork popping; and to hear the birthday party continuing in the distance with music and laughter!

In preparation for the adaptation, I read archived radio scripts and listened to produced radio plays. The scope for these stories was typically grand; they contained more action and ambition than could be carried off easily in a stage play. Horses trotted through the stories, locations changed frequently, aliens descended, and the drama unfolded on a larger scale than I’d imagined. In my search for a model of an entire audio play featuring just two characters in conversation, I stumbled across the radio drama “Love, Virtually” produced for BBC Radio 4 in 2012. The story had been adapted from Daniel Glattauer’s epistolary novel of the same name. The 45-minute radio production features two actors who read aloud their emails to each other. This blossoming romance has been described as the European version of the film *You’ve Got Mail* (1998). The radio play is engaging: funny, philosophical, romantic and dark. Encouraged by this example, I adapted my story for radio and sent the script.

It didn’t win. The process of changing formats, however, brought the idea of the audience into focus. I realized that I was writing for an audience who would likely be listening to the production alone, just as they had been alone while reading the epistolary novel version of the narrative. Gone are the days when families gather round the radio; instead, we listen to audio
files and podcasts on our computers or phones, through the speakers in our cars, like listening to a book on tape. Unlike our oral storytelling tradition, that communal experience around fire, the contemporary audio story is typically experienced individually. Further, its mobility facilitates multi-tasking, to wash dishes, to drive, to work on a power-point presentation while passively taking in the play. A passive medium invites distraction, and while I was closer to embodying the intimacy of the story through sound, I was still relying on the audience to participate in imagining the closeness and darkness of the closet while listening to the characters speak. I wondered how I could once again subvert the format, and audience expectation.

The Radio Play Becomes the Stage Play

I wondered if the play could be produced for stage. In search of a set of guidelines in the dramatic medium, I turned to classical Greek drama and located Aristotle’s theory of unities for drama. He believed drama required Unity of Action (meaning that a play should have one action that it follows with minimal subplots), Unity of Time (the action in a play should occur over a period of no more than twenty-four hours), and Unity of Place (a play should exist in a single space and not attempt to compress geography). These rules seem simple enough, yet the vast majority of my exposure to stage plays had been the work of William Shakespeare, a writer who routinely flouts the Aristotelean unities.

In reading and watching modern classics by Ibsen, Wilde, O’Neil, Wilder, and Miller, I found that Aristotle’s unities were observed only casually. Instead, I found that drama is a medium unbounded by rules outside of the immediacy of the theatrical space and timed performance. Plays, as opposed to short stories, are written to be performed. The staging and performance of a play has innumerable variables, including direction/interpretation. The truest formula of theatre seems to be that put forward by drama critic Eric Bentley when he states
“Theatre is A, personifying B, watched by C” (p. 128). A is the actor, who personifies B, a character, and is watched by C, the audience. Additionally, within the theatrical frame, there is a mutual understanding that both groups (actors, audience) are aware of their respective roles and it is the interaction of the two groups which creates the theatrical event. In this way, the process is the product. As my project seeks to emphasize process, adapting the story for the stage seemed a logical next step.

Because *Good Looking in the Dark* occurs entirely in a small dark space, there is nothing to see. I decided then to capitalize on a reversal—to emphasize the darkness. Not only would the audience hear the characters speaking as the actors stand side by side on a darkened stage, but the audience itself would be in the dark. Stage lights, which have the effect of partially lighting the audience, are dark. In a theatre, shoulder-to-shoulder with other audience members, you don’t see the others, but you are enclosed in a dark space with them, facing the same direction, expecting to watch a performance. By eliminating a viewable performance, the audience is trapped in a theoretical closet with the characters. This version of my play won a dramatic writing award in 2015 and the judge, playwright Peter Ullian commented:

I didn’t think the author could pull this off. A play that takes place entirely in pitch-black darkness? Not only does the author pull it off, but she pulls it off with panache and brio—and more importantly, with a big, generous heart. The dialogue is clever and sparkles, but also never fails to reveal character, layer by layer, and move the story forward. A kind of courtship story, *Good Looking in the Dark* also ventures in philosophical territory, but always manages to retain a sharp sense of humor.

While his comments praise the story concept within the form, it is Ullian’s mention of heart along with humor, and his acknowledgment of the narrative’s philosophical bent that signifies the success of the piece for me. As much as the entire project is about process and form, at its most basic level it is a tale about revealing ourselves to one another, layer by layer.
The Stage Play Becomes the Graphic Narrative

As a comics creator as well as a writer, it was natural for me to begin thinking about the story in terms of the graphic medium. Considering that comics are a medium known for hybridity between text and image, adapting *Good Looking in the Dark* as a graphic narrative might seem an odd choice. Yet I am drawn to the comics form. Like drama, comics present a vast potential for a variety of modes of representation. With comics, too, audience participation and interaction with the work is essential. In comics, meaning is made as the reader negotiates the boundaries between what is seen and what is unseen. The seen is that which is made visible—image, text—while the unseen takes place in the gutters, the spaces between panels.

In fiction, this gap is considered subtext, referring to meaning which is not directly stated but which can be inferred. Wolfgang Iser, in his essay “Interaction Between Text and Reader,” argues that all texts contain gaps, or blank spaces, which invite the reader to interact in order to make meaning (Leitch, 2001). In the dramatic form, those gaps exist as dialogue beats or pauses, as well as the formal gaps that appear between acts and scenes. In the novel or short story form we might see such gaps as chapters or as elisions between movements or shifts in point of view. Across texts, these gaps are read and interpreted individually. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud uses the term “closure” to describe the phenomenon of reading across the gaps in the graphic medium (p. 63). Though I have been studying and making comics for several years, I hadn’t truly experimented with gaps in the form nor had I ever attempted to adapt a prose piece into a comic.

Before this project, I had not regarded comics as an experimental medium but an inherited one with an established, universal language to be mastered. It hadn’t occurred to me that one could violate the format and still be speaking the language. My grounding in the
traditional language of comics came from early strips such as *The Yellow Kid*, *The Adventures of Tin Tin*, *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, and *Krazy Kat*, along with longer graphic classics like *A Contract with God*, *Maus*, and *Watchmen*. As one expects, the graphic narrative form uses text and image to varying extents. It also employs the tools of fiction (such as dialogue, exposition, and thought) through textual narration, word balloons and thought balloons, and action and physical description through image. My primary concern was how to create a graphic narrative that shifted its focus from what is seen to what is unseen.

The graphic form lends itself to creating visual metaphors; indeed, the comics medium is an embodiment of the metaphor made visual. Reflecting on this, I realized that the physical page of a comic as a four-sided space, along with the four-sided comics panels on the page, could serve as visual metaphors for the closet of the story. The question then became, Could I possibly tell the story with a series of black boxes? How would the reader understand time or space? Or the separate voices of the characters without a physical representation of them?

**On Encoding and Decoding**

Encoding the graphic narrative in a way that could be easily decoded become my primary goal. Encoding/decoding is a model of communication explained by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall in his 1973 essay “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse.” While Hall’s essay addresses the medium of television, comics creators communicate similarly by coding the text using signs and symbols that the reading audience can then decode to derive meaning. Decoding plays a vital role in reading comics, since comics are a sequential art and reading comics is not a linear activity. As Barbara Postema describes throughout *Narrative Structure in Comics* (2013), the comics reader weaves back and forth through the graphic text. It is a recursive process of meaning-making. The comics reader, through the act of interpreting
individual images, symbols and gaps, and then by weaving through them and finally joining them up, is attempting to reconstruct the narrative as a means of interpreting the message as a whole. In this way, graphic narratives demand audience interaction.

The comics medium is often compared to film, and certainly it shares the concept of individual images in frames which form a narrative when viewed sequentially. But as Marshall McLuhan (1995) asserts in _Understanding Media_, and as comics scholar Charles Hatfield (2005) agrees in _Alternative Comics_, film is a passive medium, while comics encourage active engagement and collaboration in meaning-making. Part of their complexity, according to Hatfield, is their reliance on different levels of coding to create meaning, and he refers to the medium as an art of tensions between codes.

Despite the creator’s best effort to encode the graphic text in a way which will be particularly understood by the reader, it is still possible for the reader to form their own meaning. The potential for disparate meaning-making brings us back to the concept of reader response from this essay’s introduction, and the concept of looking. We each have our own set of eyes, our own experiences, which inform our perceptions. You see a letter opener. I see a dagger. Reception theory, pioneered by Hans Jauß, focuses on the reader’s experience of a text rather than on the codes which govern that experience. Further, the reader is guided by their own “horizon of expectations”—the intrinsic biases that they bring to the text. In his essay “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” Jauß posits that the expectations with which readers approach a text not only vary from person to person, but change over time (Bahti, 1982). In other words, despite the coding present in a text, you may see a letter opener today. And tomorrow you may see a dagger.
To better inform my understanding of reader expectation for the graphic adaptation, I delved into experimental comics: Edson Oda’s *Malaria* (2013) which combines comics, origami, kirigami, time-lapse photography, and performance; Chris Ware’s *Building Stories* (2012) where readers are presented with a box containing various elements of the graphic narrative with which to assemble/read in any order; Warren Ellis and Matt Brooker’s *SVK* (2011) in which the inner thoughts of characters are only viewable under UV light; David Mazzucchelli’s *Asterios Polyp* (2009) which experiments with form, line, framing; and *Abstract Comics* (2009) an anthology of comics that contain no representative images and no written narrative. Unconstrained by format, material, narrative, or sequential images, experimental comics had upended my idea of what comics could be. Such limitlessness provoked feelings of freedom as well as unease.

I choose to begin the comics version of *Good Looking in the Dark* in a traditional manner, to ground the reader. Though I used no images, I employed predictable black panels on a dark grey background to immerse the reader in the dark. The voices exist as white text, with each speaker in their respective position within the closet. Left and right side, within the box. I further coded their speech by hand-designing a font for each character. Thus, by scanning the page, the reader instantly understands who is speaking, eliminating the need for dialogue tags, speech balloons, or physical representations of the characters. Instead, their words serve as visual representations of the characters.

As the adaptation progressed, I began to alter the shapes of the panels, even removing them, allowing the entire page to serve as the closet. Worried that this image-less presentation of the story would quickly overtax or bore the reader, I integrated pictures, though they do not act to illustrate the scene. They serve as projections of the characters’ imaginations within the context of the conversation. Penelope, a small-town, Christian librarian, projects historical
images, encyclopedia images, and images from old print media, all in sepia-tone. Harry, an urban, culturally Jewish artist, projects exuberant, full-color images that draw inspiration from the paintings of Chagall. Here again I have attempted to code the text. The reader, seeing an image on the page, understands from whose mind it originates. This approach reflects the interiority of each character and sidesteps the literal presentation of thought and feeling on the page. As Chagall wrote, “All our interior world is reality, and that, perhaps, more so than our apparent world” (Markovich, Harshav and Harshav, p. 81).

**On the Significance of the Intended Audience**

The term “media,” outside of fine arts, refers to channels of communication with an emphasis on the capability of the delivery system to communicate a message or narrative to an intended audience. Mass media exists as a collection of channels designed to communicate to a large audience, whereas a painting or sculpture may be executed for a private audience of one. The choice of an author/artist to work in a medium meant to be experienced privately by an individual (such as a personal Book of Hours), simultaneously by individuals (such as a published novel), or simultaneously by a collective (such as a stage play), influences its reception as a private or shared experience of the work. Just as a visual artist chooses her medium/media to communicate a concept, a storyteller chooses her medium/media to communicate a narrative to a specific audience. The intended audiences for the different incarnations of my project are different. The short story-as-dialogue is meant to be read privately, while the dramatic dialogue is meant for a public performance with a collective audience. Finally, the graphic narrative returns to the individual reader. Woven into a single narrative, as presented here, the three mediums challenge reader expectations regarding consistency. The reader is prompted to reevaluate and resituate their perspective regularly. At times, they are asked to imagine that they
are immersed in a theatrical experience. At other times, they are expected to make meaning from graphic images and irregular formatting of dialogue. At other times, they are presented with a character who exists only in a particular format—the prose story—and they must decide how (or if) they will incorporate his perspective into their understanding of the work as a whole.

**On the Vagaries of Adaptation and the Semiotics of Labeling**

Comparative media scholar Henry Jenkins, when defining the term *transmedia*, distinguishes between adaptation and extension in *Convergence Culture* (2008). An adaptation takes the same story from one medium and retells it in another, whereas an extension seeks to add something to the existing story as it moves from one medium to another. Transmedia, Jenkins argues, necessitates extension. By employing the phrase “a narrative across three mediums” in my project title, do I mean to say that the work is transmedia? The term is commonly used as an alternate for the term franchise, as in the Marvel Comics Universe where world-building extends to a multiplicity of interlinked comics, films, and merchandise, all designed to engage the audience on many levels. Jenkins argues that transmedia is more than marketing, and more than the use of multiple media platforms. Further, he states that transmedia works are dispersed across multiple delivery channels “for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (p. 93). In other words, transmedia allows the further development of the story through each new medium. Critic Christy Dena challenges this distinction in her essay “Transmedia as UnMixed Media Aesthetics” (2014), arguing that adaptations may be highly literal or deeply transformative. Rather than being a mere reproduction of the work, an adaptation is an interpretation of the work, and thus all adaptions add to the range of meanings attached to a story.
With both perspectives in mind, I don’t believe the work I present fits neatly into the category of transmedia narrative since the individual works were not composed for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Instead, the process was one of adaptation. That said, in its hybridized form it is, in fact, a unified and coordinated experience. Further, it meets Jenkins’ secondary criteria for transmedia in which each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.

*Good Looking in the Dark* is also an example of a multimodal text. According to the earlier definition of mode, one might assume a multimodal text is one in which several literary styles are used. In the larger semiotic sense, however, mode refers to the public venue for a text. Contemporary multimodal texts are strongly associated with digital communication, though a multimodal text can also be paper, digital, or live performance. Further, a multimodal text can also be transmedia, where the story is told across multiple delivery channels. According to Gunther Kress, a leading scholar in semiotics and multimodal theory, a multimodal text changes its effect by placing the work in a new context. He argues that readers understand information differently when written text is delivered in conjunction with a secondary medium, such as image or sound. Doing so draws the audience’s attention to “both the originating site and the site of recontextualization” (Bezemer and Kress, 2008, p. 166). By shifting the narrative from one medium to another, the audience perception of the work is altered. Creating a multimodal text, then, is an act of meaning-design.

As a final possible category for this project, *intermedia* works are those that exist as hybrids, such as a combination of drawing and poetry. Dick Higgins of the Fluxus art movement (or attitude, as Fluxus artists prefer) uses the term intermedia to describe art that crosses boundaries of recognized media, or fuses art with media. Higgins writes in his essay
“Intermedia” that, "Part of the reason that Duchamp's objects are fascinating while Picasso's voice is fading is that the Duchamp pieces are truly between media, between sculpture and something else, while a Picasso is readily classifiable as a painted ornament” (p. 49). In Fluxus, process is valued over product and Higgins’ intermedia chart below shows a multitude of collisions between forms:

Many of these so-called new forms will seem overly familiar to us now, and contemporary artists regularly mix media without drawing attention to the act of doing so. This raises the question, Does intermedia still matter as a way of discussing work? Does the fact of its hybridity, itself, lend additional significance to a work in our current environment? In the 1980s, Higgins revisited the concept of intermedia and amended his earlier essay, commenting:

It is harping on an irrelevance to point to its older intermedial status between visual art and text; we want to know what this or that visual novel is about and how it works, and the intermediality is no longer needed to see these things. Same with visual poetry and sound poetry...It is today, as it was in 1965, a useful way to approach some new work; one asks oneself, ‘what that I know does this new work lie between?’ But it is more useful at the outset of a critical process than at the later stages of it (Higgins, 2001, p. 49).
Addressing the proliferation of intermedial works and the need to further refine discussions around them, Irina Rajewsky, in her essay “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation” states “If the use of intermediality as a category for the description and analysis of particular phenomena is to be productive, we should, therefore, distinguish groups of phenomena, each of which exhibits a distinct intermedial quality” (p. 50). Rajewsky goes on to propose three intermedial subcategories, and the reader of Good Looking in the Dark may find that this project participates across all three subcategories, enabling an intermedial discussion on several fronts. Rajewsky describes the first subcategory, medial transposition, as the production-oriented “transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium” (p. 52). The narrative of this project began as short story prose, and has been transformed/adapted across two other mediums. Second, she offers the category of media combination, which includes “phenomena such as opera, film, theater, performances, illuminated manuscripts, computer or Sound Art installations, comics, and so on, or, to use another terminology, so-called multimedia, mixed media, and intermedia” (p. 52). Within this project, which employs both comics and theatrical performance, media combination is certainly apparent. Finally, Rajewsky subcategorizes intermediality in the sense of intermedial references, and uses examples such as references in a literary text to film, as well as references in film to painting, or painting in photography. She posits that “Intermedial references are thus to be understood as meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product’s overall signification” (p. 52).

While Rajewsky is speaking of intermedial references as imitational (the use of a painting-like approach within a photograph, or the use of filmic “close-ups” within a work of literature), the comics portion of Good Looking in the Dark contains literal intermedial
references when the characters’ imaginations project, in illustrated form, references to works of fine art. The paintings of Marc Chagall are referenced (and adapted) by Harry, and the drawings of Leonardo Da Vinci, John Keats, and others are referenced (and adapted, though less imaginatively) by Penelope. Though *Good Looking in the Dark* participates in all three intermedial subcategories, it does not participate in intermedial “remediation,” at least as Rajewsky defines it, as the *simulation* of one form within another. She notes that in the digital age, such simulations are often indistinguishable from the original media (p. 59). Of the three mediums used in this project, none attempt to replicate or simulate another form. The written text of the stage play cannot be said to simulate a stage play. It is only through reader participation that the theatrical event can be imagined.

**On Adaptation, Assemblage, and Presentation**

What is gained through adaptation? And given the complex nature of semiotics, how might this project as a creative unit be described? Perhaps my process will serve as a guide. The narrative of *Good Looking in the Dark* was individually executed from start to finish in three separate mediums. My initial creative impulse was to explore how a work changes when adapted for different formats. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) states that “When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works... Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (p. 7). She refers to a process of “transposition” and “transcoding” that takes place during a shift between mediums, between genres, and between points of view which can each create different interpretations of the work. Further, she sees adaptation as a creative process that involves re-interpretation and re-creation, also known as re-appropriation. Finally, she discusses adaptation as a form of intertextuality (p. 7-8). Perhaps most relevant to this project, Hutcheon addresses the transformative aspects of
adaptation especially when it regards a story moving from a “told” form to a “shown” form. She writes:

…to tell a story, as in novels, short stories, and even historical accounts, is to describe, explain, summarize, expand; the narrator has a point of view and great power to leap through time and space and sometimes to venture inside the minds of characters. To show a story, as in movies, ballets, radio and stage plays, musicals and operas, involves a direct aural and usually visual performance experienced in real time (p. 12-13).

Differing with Rajewsky in her definition of remediation, Hutcheon sees remediation as a translation from one sign system to another, and she uses the example of a text which moves from words to images (p. 16). Hutcheon is engagement-focused, interested in differences in modes of engagement between showing, telling, and interacting with stories (p. 27-28). Good Looking in the Dark, too, is engagement-focused, and the process of adaptation is an experiment in showing, telling, and encouraging reader interaction.

Important to note is that Hutcheon discusses the effects of adaptation in regards to previously published and culturally received works, whereas the project presented here assumes no prior knowledge of this narrative. The “original,” previously unpublished text (the short story prose) is presented interwoven with its adaptations into stage performance and graphic narrative. The reader might regard this work as a “spontaneous” or “simultaneous” adaptation across mediums. I have thusly titled the presentation of these materials Good Looking in the Dark: A Narrative Across Three Mediums. Implicit, then, is the use of several media which function together as a larger work, while simultaneously acknowledging their original, individual forms. The process of joining the mediums embraces intrinsic gaps in meaning as the narrative jumps like a flying shuttle on a loom, back and forth across three mediums to weave the story.

All the terms in this essay—medium, media, mode, genre, multimedia, multimodal, transmedia, intermedia, remediation and adaptation—exist only to provide a framework for
discussion, a point of reference. For ease of discussion, it may be helpful to refer to Good Looking in the Dark: A Narrative Across Three Mediums as a multimodal, intermedia project.

Conclusion

Narrative meaning is made primarily in the dark space of the reader’s mind, and the story selected for this project is one that takes place almost entirely in the dark. In Good Looking in the Dark, two strangers are locked in a closet and engage one another without seeing the other—just as an author engages her reader without seeing her. Creation and reception are parties in an ongoing blind dialogue, a space in which author and audience are influenced by a variety of external factors. Creative work does not exist in a vacuum, most especially creative work which aims to tell a story. Storytelling, as an act, presumes an audience.

In presenting Good Looking in the Dark across three mediums, I am entering and encouraging a dialogue between author/reader and reader/reader. I am also hoping to confirm the ways in which medium matters. The material aspect of a chosen medium informs the artist’s work physically as well as symbolically. An artistic medium carries with it material boundaries as well as intrinsic historical and cultural values. The way in which an artist confirms or defies those boundaries and values lends specific significance to the work. In this way, the artist’s choice of medium both dictates the form the work takes and influences the meaning the audience infers. By adapting a narrative across three mediums, this project engages with implicit and explicit reader expectations for each form, as well as expectations for the story being told.

Creative meaning, like the act of creation, is a process rather than a finite product. Our stories are continually shaped and reshaped by experience, context, intent, and form. Similarly, reader response evolves over time, influenced by experience, context, intent, and form. With that said, I wish you Good looking in the dark!
CHAPTER II
CREATIVE WORK

GOOD LOOKING
IN THE DARK
A Narrative Across Three Mediums
BY AIMEE VALENTINE
Saturday, 7:15 pm
October is the cruelest month for a man turning forty. It is especially cruel for such a man whose dog has recently died. The dog, which the man had kept since he was a youth of twenty-five, had known him when he was fully alive, when he was hopeful, when he was free. Though the man had not been aware of his own happy state at the time, he was keenly aware of it now.

Now the dog was dead and the late October air, which should have carried the perfume of bonfires, smelled only of damp and rot. Evening winds, once friendly, growled and nipped at the man’s ears. The dog had been his last souvenir of youth. Though the years had crippled its hind legs, tumored its corpulent body, and shrouded its vision beneath milky cataracts, the decrepit animal was proof that the man had lived. That he had loved and been loved. And now that proof was gone. Rusty leaves on their trees shuddered at each fetid gust. These autumn days which once had stirred within him a restless wanderlust had become hollow and short.

Now, the man never ambled further than to the car in his driveway as he could not walk the paths of his neighborhood without thinking of the dog. Each tree, each bush, each lamppost and iron fence reminded him of the strange way the dog had of stopping short along their evening strolls, raising his hind leg in a sideways salute and pausing—blinking around himself, the leg suspended in midair like a silent blimp. The dog appeared to be contemplating whether a particular spot was worthy of bestowing upon it the precious contents of his bladder. A moment would pass. And then another. The man and the dog, frozen in time. Finally, the dog would eke out a drop or two, having decided to divide his riches like a benevolent ruler, sprinkling golden droplets throughout the suburban kingdom until his purse was empty. The man had loved him for this unprovoked generosity. The man
was an architect and nothing in his life, outside the dog, was so forgiving, so open, or so free.

Now, with his tie still tight around his neck, the man drove aimless circles through the streets and considered never again returning to the empty, exquisite house he had designed for them to share. But where else could he go? Each day since the dog’s death had been a long, winding labyrinth with nothing at its center.

*

Inside his house, guests stacked gifts on the hall table. They tied black helium balloons to the backs of chairs and hung witty banners decorated with tombstones and skeletons. The skeletons spoke in word balloons. They said “R.I.P.” with bony glee. On the kitchen island sat the spread for a wake. A host of dried, fatted salamis and veined, moldy cheeses nestled between containers of smoked fish, brined olives, stewed pears, desiccated apricots. There was, of course, a cake. Flat, wide and brown, with white candied crosses stuck into the frosting at depressing angles. Edible flowers in bunches at every grave. A chocolate covered lump at the center of the cake marked a freshly buried soul. The plot belonged to the architect. This was not implied but explicit, as the grey taffy tombstone above the plot bore the man’s name in tiny piped letters.

The guests, delighted with their little joke, tittered through the living room pulling cotton batting apart, draping cobwebs between the furnishings, adding a further pall of death to the party. Someone thought it would be funny to play organ music on the stereo, but none could be located within the architect’s album collection. And anyway, someone said, music would ruin the surprise. The Birthday Boy would be home soon.
Satisfied with their efforts, the gathered guests flicked off the lights, stood giggling in the dark. Someone posted themselves behind the curtain at the front window, scanning the street for his approaching car.

A sharp rap at the door surprised them all and fifty guests gasped in unison. Unprepared to hide, they instinctively dove to the floor. To the man who opened the door, their piled bodies appeared like a mass open grave.

He was only a late guest.

The late guest was ushered in with urgent whispers. The crowd shuffled back to their feet and stood giggling again in the dark.

Moments later, the sentry at the window hissed, “He’s in the driveway!”

The guests scattered like buckshot then, behind the chairs, behind the sofas, behind the kitchen island, behind the curtains. When hiding places in the living room filled, the colony of guests flew bat-like down the house’s hallways into pantries and linen closets, bathrooms and bedrooms, bumping one another in sheer panic and delight as they took cover.

The late guest, tripping over his cape in the dark, opened door after door down the long hallway but was shooed away by sardined partygoers. Clutching his gift in one hand, and running his free hand along the wall, he finally grasped a strangely shaped knob, twisted it open, and stuffed himself into the little closet.
SCENE 2
Interior of closet
Stage and audience in darkness

PENELOPE:
Careful! Someone’s in here.

HARRY:
Sorry. You okay?

PENELOPE:
Fine. It’s just small. The first three closets were full.

HARRY:
Right. Me, too. Is there a light?

SOUND OF HANGERS MOVING

PENELOPE:
Watch it! That’s my--

HARRY:
Sorry, sorry! There’s no light. Where are you?

PENELOPE:
Behind the fur coat.

HARRY:
Oh. I thought that was your costume.
PENELOPE:
Why would I be wearing a costume? It’s not a costume party.

HARRY:
Oh. (BEAT) No?

PENELOPE:
Shh.

HARRY:
I don’t hear anything. We’re in Timbuktu back here. I ran down two halls to find this one.

PENELOPE:
SSHHH!

DISTANT SOUND OF LARGE CROWD SHOUTING SURPRISE

HARRY:
Suuh—oh.

DOOR HANDLE BEING JANGLED

Suuuuuuuuu…Uh-oh.

PENELOPE:
What’s wrong with you? Open it. Open it!

HARRY:
It’s stuck!
PENELOPE:
Just turn it hard. Like THIS.

HARRY:
Ow! You’re hurting my fingers! It feels...locked.

PENELOPE:
Move. Let me try.

SOUND OF HANGERS MOVING

HARRY:
I can’t move. Where can I go?

PENELOPE:
Just—put your shoulder into it and bang it. Like this.

DULL THUD

Ow.

HARRY:
I just did that.

PENELOPE:
It’s locked! Who has a closet that locks from the outside?
BETTER QUESTION-
WHAT KIND OF MAN OWNS A FUR COAT?

HE’S FORTY.
IT’S A LITTLE WEIRD.

IT’S NOT LOCKED.
Of course it’s not locked.
Why would it be locked?
I’ll just give it one more hard...
HELP!!!! We’re locked
in the closet!!
They banged on the closet door for fifteen minutes, but no one heard them. Someone had found the Birthday Boy’s collection of albums from the eighties and was playing them at full volume in an attempt to get the party going.

The architect had indeed been surprised, and he now found himself forcing smiles and nodding to acquaintances he’d not spoken to in at least a year. He had always been a solitary creature, apart from the dog. Several attempts to fix him up with someone’s friend had fallen flat. With the dog dead, he wondered if he should make more of an effort. It wasn’t possible, he understood, to make less of one.

In the kitchen he spotted an attractive woman bent behind the open refrigerator door. Her birch-thin legs ended in strappy heels. He followed the line of her calves up to her thighs, to the edge of her short skirt hem. The upper portion of her body was hidden behind the door and he found himself wondering if perhaps she was all leg. If, by some strange biology, she might be waistless, breastless, headless. Just a pair of legs, bending in midair. Perhaps the tops of her legs were mirrors of the bottoms: thighs and calves, ankles and feet, and were leaning into the fridge to cool and rest themselves on the shelf next to the lactose-free milk. He was thinking that he might like a woman made of legs who didn’t mind lactose-free milk when the woman’s hand emerged from the fridge holding a beer, followed by the rest of her. He saw that, in fact, she possessed a waist, a pair of breasts, and a head after all. When she caught him staring, she smiled. He quickly feigned interest in the cemetery cake, slipping his tombstone into his mouth before merging back into the crowd.

* 

The late guest shifted his weight in the locked closet. “How long has it been?”
“Three songs from the *Thriller* album,” the woman said.

“I can’t *believe* this isn’t a costume party,” he complained. “What kind of person throws a party the night before Halloween and doesn’t make it a costume party!” He adjusted his crotch and scratched his thighs.

“It’s a *surprise* party?” she said. “He had nothing to do with it.” She sighed and leaned against the closet wall. It had a warm texture and smelled of the woods. “You’re kind of fixated. Let me guess. You were hoping to hook up with a half-naked genie?”

“Uh, *no.*”

“Sexy fairy? Hot cop? Catwoman?” She’d left her lip gloss in her purse, which she’d left in the car. With the cell phone.

“No. It’s just…” He could feel the woman’s thigh against his own and he attempted to make himself smaller. This was unsuccessful, as the closet was no more than three feet wide. “I’m in costume,” he grumbled.

“Hilarious,” she said. “What are you?”

“Do any of us know what we are?”

“Okay, but really.”

“I’m just a man in a closet, waiting to come out.”

“Oh, *right.*”

“Hang on, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s probably better that way,” she said. Her last boyfriend had been in the closet for years and there was no sign of his ever coming out of it.

“Look, not that it matters,” he started to say. With his free hand, he tried loosening the knot around his neck.
“You’re right,” she said. “It doesn’t matter.” The underwire of her new bra dug mercilessly into her ribcage and its lace trim was already chafing her cleavage but there little she could do about it now.

“Okay,” the caped man said. “But just to be clear. I’m not actually in the closet. Or out of it.”

“Are you Schrodinger’s cat?” she asked.

“No. I’m definitely alive.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because my legs itch.”
IM SOO Hungry.
I was promised Food.

How long Now?

I don't know.
I'm not wearing my
Glow-in-the-dark
Watch. I can't go
with my Outfit.

We Neither.

Oh just tell me
what you came as.
Come on.

I'd rather not say.

I'm gonna find out
eventually.

Not if we die in
here. His house is
more we've never be
found.

We're not going to die.
This thing'll last a couple
hours tops. He's getting
old. He'll get tired. People
will start shuffling down
the hall to get their
coats from the back
bedroom.

We'll get out.

Listen.

They don't even sound like
they're having fun.

They're having fun if they're
in costume?

Hey! Stop that!
What are you doing?

Huh. Feels like Spandex.

It's not Spandex.

You came as a
SuperHero?

No, I didn't.

Which one?
WHAT ARE YOU WEARING?

SERIOUSLY? YOU'RE NOT EVEN GOING TO ASK MY NAME FIRST?

I'M GONNA FIND OUT EVENTUALLY.

HEY! GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!

MY BACK DOES NOT FEEL LIKE SPANDEX!

YOU'RE WEARING A SPANDEX DRESS.

IT'S SILK.

OBVIOUSLY, WHAT COLOR?

WHAT COLOR SHOULD IT BE?

OH, RELAX IT'S JUST YOUR BACK FEELS LIKE SPANDEX.

FOR A PARTY RED, BUT IT'S PROBABLY BLACK.

YOU'RE JUST SAYING RED BECAUSE YOU'RE A GUY.

YOU'RE JUST SAYING I'M A GUY BECAUSE I'M DRESSED LIKE SUPERMAN, I COULD BE A WOMAN, YOU KNOW.

I DON'T THINK YOU COULD ACTUALLY.

IF YOU DON'T MIND I'M JUST GOING TO TURN TO FACE YOU.

THAT'S MY GIFT!

ALL SAY.

IT'S FOR THE BIRTHDAY BOY!

OH MY.

YEAH, YEAH.

OKAY, SO NOT RED. NOT BLUE!

MAYBE.

WHERE'S YOUR HAND?

HERE, WHY?

I'M GOING TO SHAKE IT.

HARRY PENWOP.

PENWOP WHAT'S THAT SMELL?

SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT.
8:15 pm
SCENE 5.
MUSIC CHANGES TO EARLY 90s GRUNGE, THEN FADES OUT.

PENELOPE:
So how do you know him?

HARRY:
He’s a friend of a friend. But I’m mostly here because he saw a pot I made.

PENELOPE:
You make pots?

HARRY:
Well, not just pots. All sorts of ceramic things. But I make good pots.

PENELOPE:
Pots are nice. So. You’re a potter.

HARRY:
I also work in porcelain. So, I’m a ceramicist.

PENELOPE:
Oh! You’re Harry, comma, potter. You’re Harry Potter!

HARRY:
Except that I’m actually a ceramicist. Harry, comma, ceramicist.

PENELOPE:
Doesn’t have the same ring, does it?
HARRY:
How do YOU know him?

PENELOPE:
I don’t. My friend used to date him. She was trying to set us up.

HARRY:
Ew. Sloppy seconds.

PENELOPE:
(SIGH). It’s not like that with women. We just want each other to be happy. To find someone.

HARRY:
(SNORTING) Why do women always want to FIND someone? It’s not like men are HIDDEN. Everywhere you look, we’re there. On the bus, at a bar, in a café…At a party…In a CLOSET. I mean, you do have to leave your apartment to find us, but we’re probably in the elevator on the way down. You talk about finding men like we’re an endangered species. Like our nests are in sixty foot trees. We’re ground level, sister. We’re like mushrooms. We’re everywhere, if you bothered to look.

PENELOPE:
Yes, well…finding is more than seeing. We SEE men everywhere. We’re not blind.

HARRY:
You don’t want to find as much as you want to catch. Be honest. You want to CATCH men, in a big white net. And then stick a pin through us and put us, still flapping, in a box. Like butterflies.

PENELOPE:
That’s disgusting, Harry. And inaccurate.
IT'S MEN WHO HUNT AND CATCH! WHO DISPLAY WOMEN. IT'S CALLED A "TROPHY WIFE" FOR A REASON. YOU'D CUT OFF OUR HEADS IF YOU COULD. BRAINS ARE SUCH A BOTHER TO YOU. MOUNT AND STUFF US.

(snicker)

YOU SAID MOUNT AND STUFF.

NEVERMIND.

AND WHAT'S WRONG WITH HAVING AN ATTRACTIVE WIFE? MEN HAVE A BIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE TO COMPETE FOR BEAUTIFUL WOMEN IT'S IN OUR DNA.
BUT WOMEN?
IT'S ALL SOCIAL PROGRAMMING. YOU JUST WANT A KEN DOLL.
A SEXLESS ACCESSORY THAT BARBIE CAN TAKE SHOPPING.
YOU WANT SOME GUY WHO GRILLS STEAKS IN HIS SWIM
TRUNKS AND ANSWERS THE DOOR IN THE BARBIE DREAM
HOUSE AND DOESN'T HIT ON YOUR YOUNGER COUSIN.
BOTTOM LINE? YOU WANT AN ATTRACTIVE, IMPOTENT BUTLER.

WHAT?
WHY ARE YOU SO QUIET?
I'M TRYING NOT TO BE OFFENDED, SO I'M PICTURING YOU IN BLUE TIGHTS.
SCENE 5.
MUSIC CHANGES TO BOLLYWOOD SOUNDTRACK AND FADES OUT.

HARRY:
Favorite color.

PENELOPE:
Why?

HARRY:
Because…why not?

PENELOPE:
Uh…I don’t know. Black, maybe. You?

HARRY:
I knew it. You’re wearing a black dress.

PENELOPE:
Wrong.

HARRY:
Hmm. Hot pink.

PENELOPE:
Hot pink? Definitely not. It screams “trying too hard.”

HARRY:
No, I was saying hot pink--my favorite color.
PENELOPE:
Right. Of course.

HARRY:
Reminds me of India.

PENELOPE:
You’ve been?

HARRY:
Just for a year, after college.

PENELOPE:
Oh. JUST a year. Let me guess. Meditating? Finding yourself?

HARRY:
Digging wells, actually.

PENELOPE:
Oh. Right.

HARRY:
Favorite food.

PENELOPE:
God, I’m hungry. I feel like I can smell mini quiches. Is that weird? To smell mini quiches from the inside of a closet?

HARRY:
What’s weird is that you can tell how small they are from here. That’s a skill you can’t teach. That’s like some kind savant thing. How big is the cake? Enough for leftovers, if we ever get out?
PENELOPE:
Okay, favorite food. Yes. Good. So, like, stranded on a desert island, this is what you’re gonna eat every day for the rest of your life food, or just favorite food? Or dream food?

HARRY:
I don’t care. Just talk about food.

PENELOPE:

HARRY:
Fine, the potatoes have it. And regular favorite food? What do you like to eat when you go out?

PENELOPE:
Sushi. Oh! If I choose rice as my staple, I could fish on the island and MAKE sushi. Brilliant. Except I can’t really fish. And if I could, I’d keep throwing them back. You know, that whole thing about the fish who swallowed the ring.

HARRY:
You’re a strange bird, Penelope. What’s your dream food?

PENELOPE:
Something that shouldn’t be deep-fried. Like a deep-fried pizza. Or deep fried chocolate cake.

HARRY:
Does that exist? Deep-fried chocolate cake? Because I WANT that, right now.
PENELOPE:
Mmm. Deep-fried frosting. And maybe there’s also a layer of crème inside. Like a giant deep-fried Hostess Cupcake...oh. Yes, please. (PAUSE) How ‘bout you? Stranded.

HARRY:
Deep-fried chocolate cake, I think.

PENELOPE:
No, not for every day. Not for the rest of your life. You’d be sick of it after a week. After three bites, probably.

HARRY:
Fine. I’ll just have a Caesar salad.

PENELOPE:
You can have anything. Forever.

HARRY:
Caesar Salad. (PAUSE) What? It’s a salad. I don’t want to get fat on the desert island. If you give me potatoes, I’m just going to eat all day long. Salad’s the smart choice. I’ll probably be naked.

PENELOPE:
Really.

HARRY:
You will be too.

PENELOPE:
Of course. We’re on the island together. I didn’t realize.
HARRY:
Yep…naked. But if you ever want to get dressed up, like for a special occasion--like for an island award ceremony--like, “best survivor of a shipwreck” or anything, I’ll make you a dress out of palm leaves. It’s not gonna be fancy. It’ll probably be uncomfortable. It might give you a rash. You can take it off right after the ceremony.

PENELOPE:
You can sew?

HARRY:
I can weave. I can make a thatched roof. And jugs for carrying water from a waterfall. Or I can dig a well. And I can fish. I’ll be your sushi chef.

PENELOPE:
It’s tempting. And what will I do?

HARRY:
Just walk around naked, and keep me from eating too many potatoes.
Worst thing you’ve ever done to another person:

Jesus how we got to that? Is this because it’s pitch black? Is this a secret confection? Am I being recorded? There has got to be a light switch somewhere.

I told her eventually. How I felt about her. She turned me down anyway.

And your best friend:

Died.

Car crash, the next year:

Did you ever give her the letters?

Yes. At his funeral.

Oh, Harry. That’s...

I know:

I don’t know what to...

I’m just saying, you might not want to be on my desert island.

When did it happen all that?

We were twenty:

Well, that’s a while ago?

I’ll be forty soon.

How soon?

Five years:

That’s not so soon but I think it’s okay. There’s gotta be a statute of limitations for a thing like that.

Are you still on an island?

I’ll think about it.
CHILDREN OR NO CHILDREN?
YOU DIDN'T SAY YOUR WORST THING?

OH- NO CHILDREN, I THINK

YES, NO CHILDREN.

CITY OR COUNTRY?
I THOUGHT WE WERE ON AN ISLAND.

BUT IF WE WERE NOT?
IF WE WERE, WHAT? STRANDED IN A CITY OR THE COUNTRY TOGETHER?

OH.
WELL THEN, CITY.

REALLY? COUNTRY?

YEAH.
HUH.

I ONCE BROKE A COUPLE UP, WHEN I SUSPECTED THE GUY WAS INTERESTED IN ME.

REALLY?

WORST THING PROBABLY. YEAH. I TURNED ON THE CHARM AND CONVINCED HIM TO LEAVE HER.

AND THEN WHAT?

AND THEN HE DENIED IT, AND THEN I STILL WOULDN'T GO OUT WITH HIM. THE THING IS, AND THIS IS THE TERRIBLE PART- I WAS NEVER INTERESTED IN HIM. I JUST THOUGHT HE COULD DO BETTER THAN HER. AND THAT HE SHOULD.

DID HE?

NO. HE RATED A STRING OF GIRLS JUST LIKE HER. SHE THREATENED TO KILL ME. SHE WAS LIKE THAT.

SHE SOUNDS LIKE A PSYCHOPATH. I'M STILL ON YOUR SIDE.

IT WAS ARROGANT. I WAS PLAYING GOD.

YOU'RE RELIGIOUS?

NO. BUT THIS GOD THING. IT'S HARD TO RESIST. TRYING TO CONTROL THINGS, YOU KNOW? YOU CAN'T REALLY CONTROL PEOPLE. BUT IT FEELS LIKE YOU CAN AND FIXING, YOU CAN'T FIX THEM, EITHER. PEOPLE HAVE TO FIX THEMSELVES, AND YOU HAVE TO LET THEM, BUT IT'S HARD. YOU GET IMPATIENT. WAITING AROUND, WHEN MOST PEOPLE NEVER EVEN TRY.
Being the Birthday Boy was tiresome. He had tried. He really had. Two hours had passed since the celebration of his Over-The-Hill-ness had begun, and he’d managed to make brief eye contact with at least twenty guests. Social efforts exhausted him. When the music changed to Benedictine chanting, the guests were cued into philosophical conversations. The architect was thusly cued to escape to his home office. You couldn’t accuse him of not trying. It’s just that most people weren’t worth the effort. He preferred talking to the dog’s ashes, which sat in a black plastic bag at the corner of his drafting table. He wondered if that potter had shown up to the party after all. Such a person might be worth talking to, he thought. Still, he could hardly justify lingering unhappily amongst the rabble on the off-chance that he’d recognize a man he’d met only once before. He therefore made his escape, navigating the dark hallways from memory.

Harry shivered in his tights. “It’s freezing in here.”

“Cape not keeping you warm, Superman?”

“I bet they got hot dancing and turned on the air.”

Penelope felt the chill beneath her thin silk dress. The saleswoman at the store had described it as gossamer and Penelope had nodded, not knowing what she meant. She’d looked it up upon returning home, dressless. When she learned that gossamer was the substance spun by spiders on autumn mornings, those ethereal, elegant veils that dotted the cool landscape, she understood. She’d seen it with her own eyes. Entranced by the notion of sheathing herself in a spider’s veil, she bought the dress the next day even though silk was technically produced by worms. “Maybe we should dance,” she said.
“No room,” Harry said. “Maybe we should stand closer together.”

“I’m already pressed against you.” Her gossamer dress was, in fact, wrinkling from the contact.

“We could get naked,” Harry said.

* *

The Birthday Boy paused in the second hallway. He could have sworn he heard someone suggest getting naked. Nudity, he felt, was the last resort of a terrible party. But perhaps he’d been mistaken. Or hearing voices. He’d only had two scotches. Could it have been his own voice? Or the voice of his subconscious?

* *

“It’s a coat closet, Harry. Let’s just put on coats.”

“I was going to suggest that, but I didn’t want to seem obvious.”

“You’re worried about being obvious?” Penelope laughed.

* *

There! He heard it again! Two voices! But the dark hallway was empty. Something about a coat closet? He felt along the wall for the frame and put his ear to the door. A man’s voice within groaned before speaking.

* *

“Give me the fur coat. I’m in spandex. My testicles are the size of marbles. The little ones. Not the shooters.”

Penelope rustled back through the hangers, her hand seizing upon the mink. Although it might have been rabbit. Or fox. Or bear. Any numbers of animals could be responsible for one’s warmth. “Here,” she said, “Take it. I’ll put on this thing, whatever it is.”
The coat’s material was woven cotton, and felt like an artist’s canvas beneath her fingers. She wiggled into it and ran her hand down its front. “Feels like it’s got pockets all over.” She slipped her hand into one of them. “Oh look, a candy!”

“I’m starving!” Harry shouted.

“No, I’m starving.” Penelope was unaccustomed to sharing anything with anyone. The nature of this circumstance was indeed challenging. She relented. “Okay, if you can guess the color of my eyes, you can have it.”

* 

This was far more entertaining than the party banter, the architect thought, his ear to the door. He’d narrowly escaped becoming entangled in a conversation about the Middle East, to which he had nothing interesting nor informative to add. He noticed that this did not stop others from speaking freely. And though he was intrigued by the conversation in the closet, he was morally opposed to eavesdropping, an activity that violated the social contract. Perhaps, like him, the people in the closet were escaping the loathsome party. And though it was his own house, the Birthday Boy was obliged to respect his guests’ odd tete a tete. He continued down the corridor to his office, flicked on a small lamp, sat in his ergonomic drafting chair, and stared at his dog’s ashes. He could think of nothing to say.

* 

“Blue,” Harry said.

“Wrong.” She twisted the wrapper open.

He guessed again. “Red?”
“If I have red eyes,” Penelope said, “this closet isn’t your biggest problem.” She popped the candy into her mouth. “Mmm. Cherry.” Van Morrison’s song, “Brown-Eyed Girl” played in the distance. Penelope hummed and sucked.

*

The architect never imagined that the dead dog spoke to him. Were he to experience such a pedestrian delusion, he was convinced he would immediately seek a pharmaceutical solution. One mustn’t imagine that ghosts conversed. It was unseemly. Instead, the bag of ashes was merely a device. He found that staring long and hard into the deep black color of the funerary material could produce within him a profound sense of pleasing discomfort. He felt fright and awe. His surroundings dissolved. Staring into the abyss of the bag, time stood still. Here, in this expanded space, he could question his existence aloud.

Because the ashes couldn’t speak, his questions had remained, these many weeks, unanswered. And now he was forty. The architect heard distant music but could not make out its genre. And what was the point of genre, anyway, he asked the bag. When one thing was often another? Or many, depending on how you looked at it? Genre was ambiguous, and he had never supported ambiguity. Things should be exactly what they were, and nothing else. His house was a house. It was not also a forest. His dog was dead. He was not also alive.

The Birthday Boy unfixed his gaze and the room came into view. There were his awards, on the shelf. Glass and gold-dipped and bronze. There were his diplomas, on the wall. Matted and framed and sealed. There were his blueprints, in the corner. Rolled and stuffed and tubed. This efficient office, the host of hundreds of hours of planning and scaling, measuring and drafting, was now only cold and silent. A tomb.
He lifted the black bag. The dog’s ashes weighed less than the dog ever had. He wondered at that for a moment. At the way death imparted lightness, rather than density. People said death was heavy. But death was not as heavy, it seemed, as life. He tucked the bag under his arm, flicked off the light, and closed the door behind him. The architect navigated his diverging hallways in the dark. When he heard the voices again, he stopped. Leaning back against the closet frame, the architect slid down the wall until he was seated on the chilly flagstone. Carpeting, he’d always believed, was for the masses.

* 

“Could be worse,” Harry said. “We could be trapped in a mine.”

“At least it would be televised,” she said.

“You need a lot of attention, don’t you?”

“No.” She made a noise of disgust. After a moment, she explained. “If our entrapment were televised, people would be working to get us out. No one even knows we’re here. And that smell, Harry? It’s cedar. Because this is a storage closet. Not even a regular closet. Hello? You’re in fur. And this has got to be a fishing jacket. I can feel weird things dangling from it. And there’s a wetsuit behind me. I think. I hope that’s what that thing is. The point is, no one’s going to open this door. If we pass out, we’ll never be found.”

“Let’s not pass out then.”

“Agreed.”

They shifted to face the closet door, allowing their shoulders to touch, and let their respective weights sink into the connection.

*
Having arranged himself, feet outstretched, on the floor next to the closet, the Birthday Boy was faced with a dilemma. Should he open the door and release the strange guests into the fray? On the one hand, it seemed they were being held against their wills. On the other, they did not seem to be traumatized by this circumstance. They were not, for example, shouting for help or crying out in anguish. They did not even rattle the knob. Furthermore, he noted, the circumstance of their entrapment was entirely the consequence of their own actions. No one had forced them to come to a party thrown in poor taste. Certainly not himself. And no one had forced them to hide in the only locking closet on the ground floor. How they’d gotten into it was a mystery. But if by some generosity of thought the guests could not be blamed for this scenario, it was equally reasonable to conclude that he was not responsible for it, either. It was, after all, a mere coincidence that he’d walked past while they’d been speaking. Had they been silent, he would never have known of their existence. Indeed, if anyone was to blame, it was Fate. And who was he to meddle with such an unlikely and pernicious being? He worried, too, that upon being set free they might immediately join an ill-advised conversation about the Middle East and he liked them, too much already, to allow that to happen. Finally, and most convincing, he found their anonymous proximity both comforting and provoking. He hadn’t thought about the wetsuit in ages. The last time he’d worn it, he remembered, it had leaked and he’d suffered a terrible cold. He’d worn the fur coat, then, an inheritance from his grandfather, all through the summer. There were rumors, he knew, that he was emulating an eccentric writer by the name of Edward Gorey who made a fur coat the staple of his uniform. The architect found the notion of uniforms utterly repellent. He took some small pleasure in the knowledge that this aesthetic principle prevented his becoming a Nazi.
Still, could be worse.
We could be hiding under the floorboards
in a house in Poland,
with Nazis walking over us.

(a-choo)

And we just got shot.
Way to go.

That's not funny.
Sorry.

No.

My grandfather died there.

Really? God, I'm so sorry.

Yeah, a piano fell
on him.

Are you ever serious?

Life's too dreadful for
seriousness: tragedy for
breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Very boring things happen.
Penelope, splat! Clang!
The minor fail, the major lift.

A piano isn't a bad
death, considering.

It happened on his way to
the lake. The Nazis were
loading people into the
last train to Chelmno.

A bad train.

No.

Trains aren't bad.

Vans. Vans are bad.

Never get into a van.

Vans.

In Chelmno they killed
them by making them get
into vans.

Funny.

That's true. They passed
them in the vans.

That seems highly
indefensible. I mean, not
that-

I'm telling you.

Penelope, vans are bad.

News vans, though:
I love trains.

No.

Are you?

Why would I be Polish?

Why would I be?

You just sad your
grandfather.

Oh, right.

I guess that does
make me Polish.

I'm probably
Jewish, too.
HARRY:
(PAUSE) And you. You’re from California.

PENELOPE:
(SCOFFING) No. I’m not.

HARRY:
You don’t have to take offense. I just meant that you’re so laid back. Not uptight at all.

PENELOPE:
You’re being funny again.

HARRY:
Yes.

PENELOPE:
It’s hard to tell when you’re being funny. Especially in the dark.

HARRY:
I keep a straight face. It wouldn’t do you any good to see it.

PENELOPE:
Still, you should give a girl some notice. So she’ll know when to laugh. Like a cat.

HARRY:
A cat.

PENELOPE:
Yes. You should tie a bell around your jokes.

HARRY:
Which is what prevents cats from catching mice--?

PENELOPE:
Right. I don’t want to be caught.

HARRY:
So I should starve.

PENELOPE:
(RUSTLING) Here, I found another candy a minute ago. You can have it.

HARRY:
You were holding out on me.

PENELOPE:
I would’ve shared. Eventually.

HARRY:
Sure.

PENELOPE:
(CLEARING HER THROAT) I’m from Idaho, by the way.

HARRY:
(OPENCING CANDY WRAPPER) I’ll be honest, Penelope. I’m not sure I know where Idaho is.

PENELOPE:
It’s fine. No one does. (PAUSE)
WHAT ARE YOU GIVING HIM FOR HIS BIRTHDAY?

AN ASHTRAY

YOU'RE KIDDING?

YES

I'M GETTING BETTER AT THIS.

DAMN! I DROPPED IT.

THE ASHTRAY?

(wh)

THE CANDY

WHAT IS IT, REALLY? YOUR GIFT.

AN URN

YOU'RE NOT KIDDING.

NO

SO, ACTUALLY, IT KIND OF IS AN ASHTRAY.

IT'S WHAT HE WANTED.

REALLY.

HE WANTED AN URN FOR HIS FORTIETH BIRTHDAY? BE SERIOUS.
His dog died two months ago.

I heard about that. Everyone used to see them out together. What kind of dog was it?

He got her from the shelter, but you know what that's like?

People who rescue pitiful things.

What about them?

Like a cross between a pug and a chicken. I saw a picture of it. Ugliest thing I ever laid eyes on. A face only a mother could love. If she was high.

Aww.

They always say the same thing. I thought I was saving him, but it turns out, he saved me.

Ugh.
RIGHT LIKE THOSE SAVE-A-CHILD COMMERCIALS WITH THE KID WITH A PLY ON HIS EYEBALL. YOU KNOW.

"FOR FIVE CENTS A DAY, YOU CAN KEEP AN ENTIRE VILLAGE OF STARVING CHILDREN." EVERYONE WANTS YOU TO FEEL LIKE YOU CAN SAVE PEOPLE BUT YOU CANT.

IT'S ACTUALLY A DOLLAR A DAY. AND YES, YOU CAN SAVE PEOPLE.

WELL, I JUST MEAN...

NO, I GET IT. YOU'RE MUMP TO IT. THEY'RE USING THOSE SHOTS ON PURPOSE, TO MOVE YOU TO GET YOU TO ACT. BUT SEE IT ENOUGH TIMES, AND NOTHING WILL MOVE YOU. ALL YOU'LL FEEL IS MANIPULATED AND ANNOYED.

DOESN'T MEAN IT'S NOT TRUE, THOUGH. DOESN'T MEAN IT'S NOT REAL. SUFFERING EXISTS AND YOU CAN TRY TO HELP WITHOUT A COMMERCIAL TELLING YOU TO AND WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WHATEVER YOU DO, IT WON'T BE ENOUGH.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

WHAT? INDIA?

Yeah.

HARD. I HATED IT THE WHOLE TIME. I GO BACK FOR A MONTH EVERY COUPLE OF YEARS. I ALWAYS HATE IT.

YOU'RE A REAL POSTER CHILD FOR GOOD DEEDS.

I LOVE IT, TOO. IT'S HARD IN A GOOD WAY.
10:15 pm
PENELOPE:
It’s sweet that you made an urn for the dead dog of a man you don’t really know.

HARRY:
Wow. I think you’re starting to warm up to me…I hope it’s not too soon to ask--

PENELOPE:
Yes?

HARRY:
Do you think you could move a little to the left?

PENELOPE:
Oh, okay. Is this good?

HARRY:
So much better. Now, a little to the right?

PENELOPE:
What? Here? Oh! You’re just a total pervert.

HARRY:
This is the longest I’ve ever been with a woman in the dark.

PENELOPE:
What? That can’t be true.
HARRY: Well, conscious, anyway.

PENELOPE: Longest relationship you’ve ever had.

HARRY: About…two hours, now? Maybe three?

PENELOPE: Very funny. Oh, I think I have to pee.

HARRY: I was engaged once.

PENELOPE: Really??

HARRY: You don’t have to sound surprised. I’m very desirable.

PENELOPE: Of course you are. (PAUSE) What happened to her?

HARRY: She left me for my ceramics mentor.

PENELOPE: Ok, but really.
HARRY:
Really. He was this Zen dude, you couldn’t rattle him. He would make these stunning pieces, spend hours and hours on them. And then he’d break them, in front of us, to show us the insides. Or to prove a point. He was big on non-attachment. Obviously.

PENELOPE:
You’re not saying—you’re not saying he broke your RELATIONSHIP to teach you non-attachment?

HARRY:
Beautiful things break. He was right.

PENELOPE:
That’s it? That’s the takeaway?

HARRY:
And just because you’re invested in it, just because you made it doesn’t mean it’s yours.

PENELOPE:
That’s utter claptrap! Whose is it then, when you make something, if it’s not yours? Is it God’s?

HARRY:
She’s talking about God again, folks! Are you sure you’re not religious? Should I draw up plans for a little temple on the desert island?

PENELOPE:
I’m not Jewish.
HARRY:
A domed basilica, then. (PAUSE) No? How ‘bout a nice white church, red doors, tall steeple? I bet that’s what they like in Idaho. (LONG PAUSE) Oh, wait. I know you. You don’t wanna share. Not with me, not with the natives, not with anyone. I’m gonna have to build you a private chapel, all tiny and tucked away behind the banana trees where no one will see your faith.

PENELOPE:
I want Stonehenge. Will you build me Stonehenge if I promise to share?

HARRY:
(PAUSE) I get it. You want something that’ll stand the test of time. A permanent solution to your crisis of faith.

PENELOPE:
Who says I’m having a “crisis of faith?”

HARRY:
Aren’t we all?

PENELOPE:
I just want something substantial. Something not easily replaced. (PAUSE)

MUSIC CHANGES TO HIP HOP AND FADES OUT.
YOU HAVE TO TRY.

RIGHT.

NO.

YES.

YES.

YES.

YES.

YES.

IT WOULD BE HARD TO REPLACE A TANK,

THOUGH, THERE'S A LOT OF OTHER TANKS IN THE FIELD.

FEW COULD SAVE ANOTHER ONE.

HE'S HEARTS STILL BROKEN.
He was trying, wasn’t he? When, mere inches away, the people in the closet were gossiping about him, when they were snickering about the unfortunate appearance of his dog, when they were musing over his dog’s death as though they had a right to muse, the architect hadn’t left. He’d stayed, and staying was trying. Invisible in the dark hall, he clutched the black bag to himself. The man in the closet, it seemed, was the potter he’d once met, whose face he could not recall. If the architect had considered releasing the pair before this point, he certainly could not do so now. To open the door at this point would be to expose himself as their prison guard. And surely the potter would not reward his prison guard with a gift.

He hoped his prisoners would not be missed. The Birthday Boy knew he would not be missed at his own party, and this knowledge offended him deeply, though he knew not why. He’d spent his life avoiding his friends. Why should they miss him for an hour or two? Just before his escape to his office, he’d decided to be charming, as an experiment. He’d turned his attentions to a woman with whom he’d spent a few miserable evenings, a year ago. He vaguely remembered that she had cried throughout one of their dinners, but he could not, for the life of him, remember what had been the cause. In any case, she seemed to have forgotten about it now and she regarded him with an expression that might have been described as pity, if he did not know better. He asked her if she liked dogs.

The woman had nodded and smiled. She had well aligned teeth.

Encouraged, he asked if she’d like to see the remains of his own dog. He’d immediately regretted this and realized that his charm might have gone rusty from underuse.

But she seemed not to mind. Instead, she took him by the arm and led him to the unused, bizarrely-shaped fireplace that he’d included in the house’s plan for purely aesthetic reasons.
A bust of Schopenhauer sat on the mantle. The architect had always felt the man was speaking directly to him when he’d written that genius hits a target no one else can see.

The woman asked if he’d met someone called Penelope. He asked if Penelope was the woman made of legs. The woman shrugged and guessed that her friend had nice enough legs, though not so nice as to be considered constructed entirely of them.

At her comment, the architect began designing in his mind a grand ballroom with legs forming every surface. Leg arches. Leg window sashes. Puzzled-together legs in parquet flooring. He decided never to speak of it. When the woman pressed further about her friend, he asked if Penelope liked dogs.

*

In the closet, Harry teased her. “You don’t really like dogs, do you.”

Penelope fiddled with a feathered fishing lure hanging from her breast pocket. “I like dogs fine. They need lots of attention, is all.”

“And you do, too,” Harry said.

“Stop saying that. Ow!” The tip of the hook pierced her finger and she sucked from it what she could taste was a drop of blood, mixed with rust.

“Of course you need attention,” he laughed. “And you deserve it.”

“For what? I’m not like you, the famous Harry Potter. I mean Harry, comma, ceramicist. I’m a librarian. It is the profession of the thoughtful woman, the woman who doesn’t need a lot of hoopla. The kind of woman who’s just looking for a little peace and quiet.” Her finger had stopped bleeding, but she continued to nurse it.

“Ha! I don’t buy that for a second,” Harry said.

“That I’m a librarian, or that I’m looking for quiet?”
“If you’re a librarian, you hate it.”

“I don’t hate it.”

“But a little, you do. You hate it a little.” Harry stroked the fur coat. The heavy feeling of aristocratic luxury which cloaked his rented polyester costume was discordant, yet pleasing. “You hate being so quiet all the time. Little church mouse.”

“I love books,” she said.

“Sure, who doesn’t love books? I didn’t say you were a philistine. You’re just not the librarian type.”

“And what type am I?”

“Well, you’re wearing a silk dress for starters. That says to me SEXPOT.”

Penelope rolled her eyes in the dark. “It’s not that kind of dress, Harry. It has flutter sleeves.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“They flutter.” She almost added “Like gossamer wings,” but didn’t.

“Oh. Well, I still think you’re a sexpot.”

She sighed. “Go on. Anything else?”

“Yes,” he said. “You’re a sexpot who’s come to a surprise party to be fixed up with a discarded man. That says to me, DESPERATE sexpot.”

“I don’t think you should talk about discarded men.”

“Oh! Now you’re a SPITEFUL, desperate sexpot!”

“Gee, that’s so much better than librarian.”

“I didn’t promise better, Penelope,” Harry said, “But it’s definitely more interesting.”

*
So, this was Penelope, the Birthday Boy thought. A woman in a silk dress, desperate for attention. It was just as well they hadn’t been politely introduced. You couldn’t learn what you needed to know about people by talking directly to them. You could better observe them from a distance. How they carried themselves. How they moved, how they interacted with others, with their environments. How they handled silverware, how long they looked at a painting, and with what expression upon their faces. The architect briefly wished that the closet had a secret viewing hole, and that he was in possession of night vision goggles. But given the tight space of the closet, he realized it wouldn’t help to see her. He would have to be content to listen.

His buttocks and thighs were numb from sitting on the cold slate. He shifted the dog’s ashes to the floor, then wiggled life back into his limbs, careful not to make a sound. He wondered if anyone had gotten him a blanket for his birthday. He could use one now.

*
DID YOU BRING HIM ANYTHING?

WIN. I DON'T KNOW HIM.

BECAUSE ITS HIS BIRTHDAY... WHO DOESN'T BRING A PRESENT TO A BIRTHDAY PARTY! SOME DATE!

WIN. I SAID, I BROUGHT WINE.

OH... WEL, HE'S AN ALCOHOLIC.

OF COURSE HE IS.

GOOD WINE!

I LIKE IT.

BECAUSE, I'LL TELL YOU PENELOPE, ALL THIS TALK OF SEXPOTS IS MAKING ME THIRSTY.

I REALLY DON'T LIKE PENELOPE.

WHOS PENELOPE?

YOU KNOW ANOTHER PENELOPE?

NO, ME.

DON'T BE SO HARD ON YOURSELF. THERE'S A LOT TO LIKE.

MY NAME THATS ALL I MEAN. I DON'T LIKE MY NAME.

PREDICTABLE.

WHAT'S YOURS?

YOU'RE GOT A NICE NAME, SO OF COURSE YOU DON'T LIKE IT.

I DON'T THINK ITS NICE IF I THOUGHT IT WAS NICE, IT'D LIKE IT. BUT IT'S THE KIND OF NAME YOUR GIRL.

A LIBERAL?

EXACTLY.

SO SHORTEN IT. PIPPY?

AS IN PIPPI LOENSTOCKING?

PEE!

PENCIL

PENNY?

LINCOLN

UNION

NEBRASKA

POPE?

POPE? WHAT'S POPE?

TAKE IT OUT THE MIDDLE OF PENELOPE AND YOU'VE GOT POPE.

WELL, TAKE OFF THE FRONT AND YOU'VE GOT PIP.

HOW DOES THAT HELP, PIPPY?

ANTICLOPE THAT'S A FUNNY WORD, WHY ISN'T IT PRONOUNCED ANTICLOPE-MA!

YOU KNOW, HARRYS SHORT FOR HARRIET, I BE PORCUPINE-Y, BUT PEOPLE KEEP CALLING ME HARRY UP, SO I JUST WANT TO BE CALLED FOR A LONG TIME.

I HEARD THAT. SEE, IM FUNNY, EVEN IN THE DARK. YOU SHOULD SEE WHAT ELSE I AM IN THE DARK.

UGH, CAN'T YOU EVER GIVE IT A REST?

IT DOESN'T LET ME REST, WHY SHOULD I LET IT REST?

SO, LISTEN, I WAS THINKING THIS UNTIL COULD BE FROM BOTH OF US.

WHY WOULD I WANT TO GIVE MY POSSIBLE FUTURE HUSBAND AN UNC?

OH, HOW HEY, YOUR POSSIBLE FUTURE HUSBAND. I HAD NO IDEA.

NEVER MIND, THEN.

AND ANYWAY, I BROUGHT WINE.
YOU DON'T KNOW THAT
HE'S RAISING HE COULD BE
A HAPPY ALCOHOLIC
OR HAPPLY RECOVERING
HE PROBABLY HAS A
POCKET FULL OF AA CHIPS
THE ONLY KIND OF CHIPS THIS
BOY COOKS ARE POKER CHIPS
AND POTATO CHIPS
SO NOW HE'S A DRINKER AND
A GAMBLER
AND A FATSO. I'M JUST SAYING,
YOU COULD DO BETTER

YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING
ABOUT THE GUY. EXCEPT
THAT HE MISSIS HIS DOG
AND LIKES YOUR POTS.
AND HOW DO YOU REPAY
HIM FOR THE COMPLIMENT?
SLAPPER

ACTUALLY, SEE, SINCE HE
LIKES MY POTS SO MUCH,
IT WOULD HIT YOU A
COUPLE OF POINTS WITH
HIM IF THE PUN WAS
FROM BOTH OF US.
SEE HOW THOUGHTFUL
I AM!

I'M OVER HERE WORKING TO
GET THE TWO OF YOU
TOGETHER. YOU MISREAD MY
INTENTIONS, PIG-PEN
PIG-PEN IS NOT AN IMPROVEMENT
ON MY NAME, AND YOUR INTENTIONS
HARRY, COULD BE READ BY A
HOLEPLANT. WOULD YOU MIND
TERRIBLY, MOVING YOUR PACKAGE
AWAY FROM MY LEFT THIGH
IS IT POKING YOU
MY GETTING A BRUISE

SEEZ YOU'RE SOME
DELICATE FLOWER, PEERS

- Dr. Schlectendal (1885-86)
HARRY:
You know, after some careful consideration, I don’t think this guy’s right for you, Lopey.

PENELOPE:
You don’t cry?

HARRY:
When my dog dies I do.

PENELOPE:
You don’t have a dog. Do you?

HARRY:
No, but I would.

PENELOPE:
Cry?

HARRY:
Have a dog. I would have a dog. I can’t.

PENELOPE:
I can’t have children.

HARRY:
You win. (PAUSE) Are you allergic?

PENELOPE:
To dogs? No, why?
HARRY:
To children. Is that why you can’t have them?

PENELOPE:
Yes, how did you guess? Are you allergic to dogs? Is that why you can’t have them?
There are hairless one, you know. Hypoallergenic.

HARRY:
Agh! I would never get a dog from a breeder. Wretched types. I’d have to get a shelter dog.
And then I’d become one of those people that says--

PENELOPE:
I don’t know if I saved HIM or he saved ME. Right. Don’t be that guy. Of course, you
could get a shelter dog and not TELL anyone it’s a shelter dog.

HARRY:
I couldn’t do that.

PENELOPE:
Why not?

HARRY:
Because I’d get a mutt, and everyone would ask me what it was and I’d say I don’t
KNOW and they’d say WHY and I’d say because NO ONE knows and they’d say WHY
and I’d say because he’s a SHELTER DOG and they’d say AW and I’d say YEAH and
they’d say that’s so SWEET and I’d say YEAH and they’d say you SAVED him and I’d
say---? So, you see it’s an unavoidable fate. I can’t have a dog.

PENELOPE:
Just say it’s SOMETHING, then. Just make something up. You don’t seem to have a
problem making things up, DAVID.
HARRY:
Funny. You’re funny in your own way.

PENELOPE:
Everyone’s funny in their own way. What do you think he’s getting right now? The Birthday Boy.

HARRY:
Drunk.

PENELOPE:
I mean presents. What do you give someone who turns forty?

HARRY:
Hard liquor.

PENELOPE:
What do YOU want?

HARRY:
A wife.

PENELOPE:
But really. For your fortieth birthday.

HARRY:
Really. When I’m forty, I want to be married.

PENELOPE:
Oh. Well, you have five years to find her, I guess. That might not be enough time for a case like yours, but…
HARRY:
I don’t need five years. I’ve already met the perfect woman.

PENELOPE:
Oh? Do tell. What’s she like? Six feet tall, blonde, big boobs? Russian?

HARRY:
Russian? Why is she Russian?

PENELOPE:
Oh, you’re the type. You probably adore Dostoyevsky.

HARRY:
Who doesn’t?

PENELOPE:
Ugh. The Russians. Life is suffering.

HARRY:
Yeah. Right up your alley. What’re you complaining about?

PENELOPE:
You read a Russian novel and want to kill yourself. Like we really NEED that kind of thing.

HARRY:
(GETTING WORKED UP) We DO. We need that kind of thing. We need the Russians just as much as we need the Marx Brothers. And a six foot blonde, big breasted Russian wife would be great. It’s not what I meant, but I’m all for it.
PENELOPE:
Whatever. You said tragedy was boring. You said it like an hour ago. I remember. You’re changing your story. You’re a story changer.

HARRY:
And you make everything harder, don’t you? That’s your shtick.

PENELOPE:
Why? Because I’m not playing along with your spandex fantasies? Because I’m not groping a total stranger in pitch darkness? You think I should be friendlier? Given the circumstances, Harry, I think I’m being a goddamn saint.

MUSIC CHANGES TO TCHAIKOVSKY AND FADES OUT.

SCENE 11.

HARRY:
Wow. You’re hot when you swear.

PENELOPE:
I’m going to choke you if you hit on me one more time.

HARRY:
Huh. I GUESS I could get into choking. Not really my first choice…

PENELOPE:
Oh my GOD. We’re going to DIE in here. Why isn’t anyone LEAVING yet?

HARRY:
Do you ever swear in the library?
PENELOPE:
No.

HARRY:
But you want to.

PENELOPE:
I would if you were there.

HARRY:
I put you in touch with your passionate side. I can appreciate that. I get that a lot.

PENELOPE:
I’ll bet you do. Listen, would it be all right if we just didn’t talk for a little while? Could we just be quiet?

HARRY:
Phew! I thought you’d never ask! Okay, starting…NOW.
(cough)

(sigh)

(swallow)

(sniff)
PENELOPE:
Here, I found another candy.

HARRY:
Is this the one from the floor?

PENELOPE:
Gross. Of course not.

HARRY:
Thanks. (PAUSE) I wasn’t saying I wouldn’t eat it.

PENELOPE:
Okay.

HARRY:
Just that I wanted to know what I was in for.

PENELOPE:
Good to know.

HARRY:
But you should have it. I had the last one.

PENELOPE:
No, you dropped that one. It doesn’t count.

HARRY:
Take it.
PENELOPE:
No. You’re hungry, too.

HARRY:
I insist.

PENELOPE:
Well, if you’re gonna insist...

SOUND OF CANDY WRAPPER OPENING, FOLLOWED BY LOUD SUCKING

Oh. It’s caramel.

HARRY:
Lucky. I love caramel.

PENELOPE:
Ew. Not me.

HARRY:
Really? Give it to me, then.

PENELOPE:
It’s already in my mouth.

HARRY:
I don’t care.

PENELOPE:
I’m already eating it.
HARRY:
But you don’t even like it. If we die in here, do you really want to hate the last thing that was in your mouth?

PENELOPE:
No.

HARRY:
So give it to me.

PENELOPE:
But you gave it to me.

HARRY:
You gave it to me first.

PENELOPE:
(SIGH) Fine. Where’s your hand? That’s my thigh, Harry. There you go.

SOUND OF CANDY GOING OUT OF AND INTO ANOTHER MOUTH.

HARRY:
Mm. Num num num.

PENELOPE:
Really?

HARRY:
So delicious.

PENELOPE:
Great. Good for you.
HARRY:
Good for us. Our marriage has been consummated. It’s official. I can feel your teeth marks with my tongue.

PENELOPE:
Cut that out.

HARRY:
Now I’m putting my teeth into the grooves you left.

PENELOPE:
I’m gonna put my teeth into a groove in a minute.

HARRY:
Aw, relax, Pepe-la-Pew. I’m just hungry. The happy couple never gets a chance to eat at the wedding.

PENELOPE:
It’s because you have to say hello to everyone who came.

HARRY:
They told us to eat beforehand, but did we listen?

PENELOPE:
We never listen. (PAUSE) Anyway. We eloped.

HARRY:
(CHOKING A LITTLE) We did?
11:15 pm
WE ELOPED!

I'M ON YOUR SIDE.

YES, THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT YOU SAID.

SO WE ELOPED. GOOD AND NOW WE'RE IN A HOTEL ROOM IN PARIS. YOU'RE SAYING IT'S THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THINGS YOU'VE EVER SEEN.

I'M LOOKING AT THE BELLBOY.

NOT ON OUR HONEYMOON, YOU'RE NOT. IN FACT, YOU'RE UNUSUALLY FRISKY.

YOU MUST ME PRUGGED ME.
Marijuana, the architect thought. That would have made the evening infinitely more tolerable. And perhaps have given him an appetite. Earlier, he’d stood behind the curtains framing the wall of windows in the living room and picked cotton webbing from a piece of Limburger on his plate. Who had thought spider webs were a suitable decorative element in the same room with food? And further, while he could appreciate the gourmet appeal of a skillfully crafted stinky cheese, was such an odiferous food truly appropriate for a social gathering? He’d smelled the breaths of several guests as they’d warmed to his experiment in charm, and found himself reeling in olfactory horror. He’d only added the cheese to his snack plate to appear as though he weren’t a stickler for propriety. Yet he was certain that his own dog had never had breath so foul. Not even directly after his consuming the excrement of the neighbor’s cat.

Shivering now on the floor, he remembered how cold the window had been to his touch. The October evening spread out beyond in an almost liquid blackness. The Birthday Boy thought that the night sky, devoid of stars, resembled a squid ink risotto. Or a vast, cosmic bowl of beluga caviar. Either dish would have been better suited to the party’s theme and more conducive to social interaction than Limburger cheese. He’d not had a decent caviar since he’d been in Paris, he remembered now. He’d ordered it with room service and prepared himself for disappointment. Instead, he’d been disappointed that it had been so exquisite. It meant he would forever compare it to every other experience.

* 

Harry had the good fortune to have never been to a fine Parisian hotel. His lack of experience gave him the freedom to imagine. “You’re wearing a sheer pink peignoir with flutter sleeves,” he said.
Penelope chortled. “Suddenly you know what flutter sleeves are? And a peignoir?”

“You got it at your bridal shower. You do have friends, don’t you?”

“Plenty,” she said, twisting the cross around her neck.

“Of course you do. Anyway, your peignoir is covered in fuzzy pink pom-poms that bounce around when you move. It’s adorable. You’re parading around the room to make me laugh.”

“And you’re wearing an enormous hotel bathrobe that you have every intention of stealing,” she said. “And you’re holding a champagne bottle beneath it, pointing at me.”

“My gift, I say.”

“And I say Oh, my. And then we laugh really hard.”

“So hard,” he agreed.

Penelope cleared her throat. “Harry, um—”

“No. It feels good to laugh. I was a little sad.”

“On our wedding day?”

“My best friend wasn’t there.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’d been sending you love letters, right under my nose. Broke my heart.”

“But I didn’t read them,” Penelope said, “I would never read them.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Of course not, Harry. I love you. Probably.”

“Well, I worried that maybe you didn’t.”

“Well, I do.”

“Well. That’s good then. That’s settled.”
SCENE 12.
“LA VIE EN ROSE” PLAYS FOR A MOMENT THEN FADES

PENELOPE:
I’m not really a librarian, Harry.

HARRY:
What are you?

PENELOPE:
I don’t know yet. (PAUSE) Hey, what’s THIS?

HARRY:
What?

PENELOPE:
THIS.

HARRY:
Ow! Stop poking me with it. Let me see. Huh. It feels like a Swiss Army knife. You get this out of the jacket?

PENELOPE:
No, I carry a knife around in my dress.

HARRY:
I do like a dangerous woman. Let’s see if it has a… bingo!

PENELOPE:
What?
HARRY:
A wine opener.

PENELOPE:
Harry. That’s my GIFT.

HARRY:
I’ll say. Now you HAVE to go halfsies with me on the urn.

(SOUND OF CORK POPPING)

PENELOPE:
Fine. But only because we’re drinking my present, and because I’m not the kind of girl who doesn’t bring a gift to a birthday party.

HARRY:
Of course, of course. I won’t have ANYONE thinking you’re that kind of girl.

PENELOPE:
Stop hogging it.

HARRY:
I’m just putting my lips where your lips were.

PENELOPE:
We’re married, and you’re still doing this?

HARRY:
I’m not going to stop wanting you just because we get married.

PENELOPE:
You say that now.
HARRY:
And I mean it. (SWIGGING FROM BOTTLE)

PENELOPE:
I believe you mean it. But you can’t know. We can’t know what’ll happen. (PAUSE)
Okay, Harry. What’s the worst thing you wish you did? (LONG PAUSE)
Well?

HARRY:
I’m thinking. (PAUSE) I wish I had punched Skip.

PENELOPE:
Who’s Skip?

HARRY:
My ceramics teacher.

PENELOPE:
The Zen master was named Skip?

HARRY:
Think about it.

PENELOPE:
Okay. Thought about it. Dumbest name ever.

HARRY:
You’re missing the point, as usual. Anyway, when people ask about Tiffany--

PENELOPE:
Oh, NO. Your fiancé’s name was TIFFANY?
HARRY:
What?

PENELOPE:
You date a girl with a name like Tiffany, you get what you deserve.

HARRY:
Geez, Penny-lope. Bitter much?

PENELOPE:
I’m just saying, I already don’t like her. Sorry, go on.

HARRY:
You’re jealous. It’s okay. I hadn’t even met you then. Anyway, when people who knew us ask what happened with her, I have different stories I tell, right?

PENELOPE:
Of course. You would.

HARRY:
But if for some reason I tell the real story, like today, I usually say that I punched him.

PENELOPE:
But you didn’t.
No. I didn't. But that's the worst thing
I wish I'd done. Actually, worse
I wish I'd broken into his workshop and
broken everything. All his work. All the
wheels. The stocks. The tools. Everything.
I wish I'd broken his nose.
Or his jaw.
Or his hands.

WOW.

Yeah. I'm not violent, though.
That's my problem.

That's not a bad problem to have.

I'd love to know, though, if he really
believed all that tripe about
non-attachment. And you can't know what
someone believes until you test them.

Tests are unreliable, Harry. You can beat a
test. Like the Inquisition. The person on trial
might convince the court that they're
renouncing and converting. But it's really just a
matter of survival. I mean—up become a Nazi
if I had to. If I could pass for one.

I believe you would.

With the right pressure, people will give up
anything. Become anyone. That doesn't mean
who they were before was a lie. The point is,
you can't test faith. Only whether someone is
willing to die in the name of it.

DEEP.

It's not deep. Tell me you're dying in the name of some god. And I'll say
you're a martyr. And maybe you are. Or maybe you're just
disillusioned. And you're clinging to anything that could give your death
meaning. Or maybe you just want to be remembered.

But I'll never know because there is no test for faith.
There's no real-world Abraham and Isaac moment.

God is not going to suddenly intervene in your disaster of a life
and say "You passed, Harry! You're a true believer!"
FINE. THEN I WISH I'D SMASHED IT ALL JUST TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL BETTER.
I WANT TO FEEL POWERFUL. I'D LIKE TO WEAR THESE TIGHTS AND MEAN IT.

ACTUALLY, I DON'T LIKE WASHING SILVERWARE AT ALL. I'M NOT SAYING I DON'T DO IT.
JUST THAT I REALLY DON'T LIKE IT.

YOU CLEAN AND IT IS IMMEDIATELY UNDONE.
AND YOU CLEAN IT AGAIN.
DIRTY AGAIN.
OVER AND OVER AND OVER.
I WISH THERE WAS ONE THING,
ONE THING, I COULD DO
THAT WOULDN'T GET UNDONE.

BROKEN POTTERY IS SOMETHING
THAT CAN'T BE UNDONE, RIGHT?
PASS ME THE BOTTLE.
YOU WERE RIGHT.
THIS IS GOOD WINE.

THINK TO BE GOOD IS LIKE... HOUSEWORK.
YOU DO HOUSEWORK TOO?

NOTHING CHANGES:
NOT REALLY.

I DON'T LIKE TO WASH FORKS.

EVERYTHING JUST GETS DIRTY AGAIN.

ALTHOUGH I LIKE WASHING PLATES, SO SMOOTH.
WHY DO YOU BREAK THAT GLASS WHEN YOU MARRY? WHAT'S THAT ABOUT?

E.H. TRADITION:

THERE'S THIS NAMING CEREMONY BEFORE THE WEDDING, WHERE A GLASS GOBLET IS NAMED AFTER THE FAMILY'S GREATEST ENEMY.

MOST PEOPLE CHOOSE HITLER, BUT MY PARENTS CHOSE THEIR COUSIN MORT, BECAUSE HE STOLE FROM AUNT MARGE.

ANYWAY, AFTER THE HAPPy UNION, WE BREAK THE GLASS TO SYMBOLIZE VICTORY OVER EVIL AND IT WORKS, TOO. MY UNCLE MORT NEVER SPOKE TO THEM AGAIN.

TRUE STORY.

—Drawn by R. Taylor.

THAT IS NOT A TRUE STORY. WHAT'S THE REAL REASON? OR DON'T YOU KNOW?

YOU'RE SO JEW CURIOUS. NO, NO, IT'S GOOD.
YOU HEARD THE PHRASE 'REJOICE IN TREMBLING'?

UH—THERE'S THIS SONG, "WERE YOU THERE WHEN THEY CALLED MY LORD?" AND THE CHORUS GOES

SOMETIMES, IT CAUSES ME TO TREMBLE, TREMBLE, TREMBLE...
HOLY MOSES, BATMAN! YOU WERE TOTALLY IN THE CHURCH CHOIR!
I SHOULDN’T HAVE GUESSED. DARK, CANDLE LIT CHURCH, YOUR VOICE ECHOING AGAINST AN
ANCIENT FLAGSTONE, YOUR GAZE FIXED ON THE SINEW, DANGLING BODY OF YOUR
BRONZED LORD AND SAVIOR, DRAPED SUGGESTIVELY IN WHITE LOINCLOTH, AND YOU,
ALL INNOCENCE IN A MATCHING WHITE CHOIR ROBE!
NOTHING UNDERNEATH IT. OUR LADY OF ETERNAL HOTNESS.
THE ECSTASY OF SAINT PENELOPE.
YEAH, YOUR ROBE IS WHITE SILK, WITH FRILLER SLEEVES.

THEY'D KILL YOU ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE INQUISITION, HARRY. WHAT I WAS GOING TO SAY IS THAT THE WORST LINE OF THAT SONG IS:
WERE YOU THERE WHEN THEY NAILED HIM TO THE TREE?

I MEAN, EW...IT'S A LITTLE GRAPHIC. THEY'LL DO ANYTHING TO MAKE A PERSON TREMBLE.
I GET IT, CALUMNUS IS GRAPHIC.
BUT DO WE HAVE TO SING ABOUT IT?
FIRST THING IN THE MORNING?
I MEAN, WHO WANTS TO EAT AFTER THAT?
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO SIT DOWN TO SOME BIG
EASTER MEAL?
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO EAT THE SACRIFICIAL
LAMB AFTER SINGING ABOUT THIS PIECE IN
AGONY WHO DIED FOR YOUR SINS?

IT FEELS
A LITTLE
LORD
OF THE FLIES TO ME.
FRANKLY.

LIGHTEN UP, PENN STATION.
THEY'RE MAKING THE IDEA PHYSICAL,
SO PEOPLE CAN, YOU KNOW (WAVE)
INTERNALIZE IT.

THAT'S LIKE BREAKING THE GLASS—
IT'S A THING. A THING.
TO REMIND YOU.
REJOICE IN TREMBLING!
DON'T GET CAUGHT UP WITH
ALL OF YOUR JOY AND ALL OF YOUR
PARTYING, MY PEOPLE!

LIKE, REMEMBER THE DESTRUCTION OF
THE TEMPLE, RIGHT?
REMEMBER TO BE HUMBLE AND ABOVE ALL,
AVOID THE EVIL EYE.

DON'T SHOW OFF HOW GREAT YOU ARE
AND HOW GLORIOUS HAPPY YOU FEEL.
BECAUSE TOO MUCH HAPPINESS INVITES
WHAT? FOR THE WISE?

DISASTER, POPCICLE STICK, DISASTER.
SO YOU TEMPER (WHEE) YOUR JOY WITH A
LITTLE UNHAPPY ACCIDENT.
AND NOW YOU'RE BLESSED.
GOOD TO GO.
I WISH TO KILL THE MAN WHO HURT MY FRIEND
SKIP! YOU WANNA KILL SKIP!
WHO?
JUST A BAD MAN. SHE WAS MY BEST FRIEND
MURDER CHANGES A PERSON
A LOT OF THINGS CHANGE A PERSON

IS YOUR FRIEND—IS YOUR FRIEND OKAY?
MAYBE, NOW
TWO YEARS LATER
I’LL KILL HIM
YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT HE DID
I CAN JUST IMAGINE
THE BASTARD

YOU MEAN YOU WOULD HAVE KILLED HIM BEFORE!
BEFORE HE DID ANYTHING?
LIKE KILLING HITLER
WHEN HE WAS A BABY
THAT’S TRICKY, PEEPS
MORALLY TRICKY

PEOPLE WHO DERIVE PLEASURE FROM THE PAIN OF OTHERS ARE PSYCHOPATHS
AND PSYCHOPATHS DON’T CHANGE, THEY CAN’T
IT’S IN THE BRAIN
GIVE ME THAT!
I WOULD KILL HIM
BECAUSE HE WOULD NEVER STOP
COULD NEVER STOP
LIKE A ZOMBIE OR A RABID DOG
YOU’VE GOT TO KILL IT

YOU REALLY HATE DOGS, PAPALOTE
HITLER LOVED THEM
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT FISH? CAN WE HAVE FISH?
I LIKE ANGELFISH
BANG! I LIKE DEVIL FISH
THIS WILL NEVER WORK
OH WAIT
I’M THINKING OF DEVILS FOOD CAKE
WERE FINE
I'd kill him for you.

Would you?

Thanks, you're a peach.

Oh, but you're not violent.

Remember? It's your best quality.

Actually, my best quality—

New, New.

You never change.

Does that make me a psychopath?

I hope not.

I gave you permission to

die, if I am.

He has to die,

I've decided.

Not skip.

Oh.

I'll raise bail.

It's too high.

I'll speak at your trial.

I'll get everyone to speak at your trial.

I feel guilty because I am.

And even though I am a little sorry, I'm not that sorry.

For a long time

Ill visit you, every week.

Conjugal.

Yes, Harry, conjugal.

You're going away?

I can't let you do it.

I told you, Mother. Changes.

People. I won't let it

change you.

Well, we'll go on the lam together.

Bonnie and Clyde

Thelma and Louise.

Oh, you know. Maybe people who

don't die in the end.

We all die in the end.

Oops, don't be mad.

What?

I got caught. The bad

man is dead, but I got

caught.
An article he’d once read in the waiting room of an animal clinic had claimed that if a person worried that they might be a psychopath, then they most definitely weren’t. And while it had given the architect some small comfort at a time when he needed comforting, it also seemed a flawed logic, not to mention a gross generalization, to state that the nature of the disorder meant that one afflicted with it could possess no capacity for self-reflection. He was certain that, were he to be certifiably psychopathic, he would still worry about it. Indeed, having worried since first reading the article that he might qualify as such a wretch, he could now not help wondering if his additional preference of dogs to humans in any way suggested that he would make an excellent candidate for a genocide of gigantic proportions. But that would suggest that his highly refined moral code was a false construct of his ego. Which could not be the case. On the other hand, there were prisoners in his closet.

*

Harry sighed. “I got twenty years. Ten for good behavior.”

“It’s been a year,” Penelope said. “And you’re being very good.”

“I’m telling you to move on. Get married. Have a life.”

“I’m already married, remember?” She rubbed her bare ring finger with her thumb. “I already have a life.”

“This is no life.”

“I’m waiting. I will wait.” Her voice was soft.

“It’s been two years,” Harry scolded. “You don’t come as often. You missed Easter.”

“I went to Church.”

“You don’t believe in God.” Harry shifted the urn to his other arm.
“I pray anyway. For all the sacrificial lambs.”

“You don’t wear flutter sleeves anymore.”

“I’m a vegetarian, now.” Penelope drank the dregs of the wine, burped, and slipped the empty bottle into a large pocket in the fishing jacket.

“It’s been three years,” Harry said. “I’ve been training therapy dogs in prison.”

“I started seeing someone,” she said. “A veterinarian. He saves dogs from being put down at the shelter. I met him in the support group for spouses of inmates. His name is Ben.”

“It’s okay. I have a prison husband. His name is Ice-Pick. We spend long nights having just these sorts of conversations. The ones we used to have, you and me. He never left me alone on my desert island.”

“I never left you on the island!” Penelope spun to face Harry, blinking at him in the dark.

He shrugged invisibly in his silent fur. “Didn’t you? Not that I blame you. Ben saves lives for a living. Try to beat that, right?”

“You saved my friend.”

“I wanted to save the world for you. Ha. That was embarrassing, even as I said it. Even though I meant it.”

* 

The Birthday Boy gripped the bag in his hands. The shelter had warned him that the dog required long daily walks. But, they also warned, he preferred to run free. The small shelter cage would likely be his last home since, in his young life, he’d already escaped two yards, been hit twice by cars, which accounted for his face. The dog couldn’t be trusted. It
was a problem the architect was uniquely qualified to solve, and he planned the house around a complex pattern of hallways. They formed an elegant knot, a maze, a series of runways. These had amused the dog. They had freed him. They had saved him from himself.

* "I’m sorry,” she said.
"I’m not.” Harry shuffled his feet. “You look happy.”
"I’ll leave him.”
"Don’t.”
"Don’t you still love me?”
"I love you enough to let you go, Penelope. Marry the other guy. You’re off the hook.”
"I don’t want to be off the hook. I don’t want to be let go.”

One moment stretched into two, and neither spoke. The fantasy, having nowhere else to go, dissolved. They turned back to face the closet door.

"Did I ever tell you how raku is made?”
"This is no time for pottery, Harry.”
When you pull a raku piece out of the outdoor kiln, it's incredibly hot. It's so hot. Molten on fire, really.

Yea?

And you have to contain it, right? To put out the fire that's still inside of it, or the whole place'll burn down.

Okay.

So you have this metal container, lined with woodchips or newspapers or whatever, and as soon as you pull the piece out of the kiln, you rush to put it in the container. And it's so hot that everything around it catches on fire. Paper incinerates. Wood chips in flames. It's burning, it's burning. But you need to preserve the glaze on your piece, you can't let it get burned off in the fire.

Yea?

So you slam a lid on the can really fast. Cut off the oxygen. And the fire around the piece makes its final mark, and goes out. It's called fire's last breath. That's us. We've made our mark on each other.

Ah.
12:15 am
MUSIC CHANGES TO UPBEAT JAZZ AND FADES.

SCENE 14.

PENELOPE:
Let’s do it.

HARRY:
Finally! Let me just get out of these tights. Here, hold the urn.

PENELOPE:
Not THAT, Harry. Ugh! How is it possible for you to be so…and then sooo…

HARRY:
Sooo…good looking?

PENELOPE:
So something.

HARRY:
I am good looking, in case you’re worried about that. I mean, if that helps.

PENELOPE:
If that helps what?

HARRY:
Helps you decide. If I could be right for you. I’m tall, for starters.

PENELOPE:
You’re not tall.
HARRY:
How do you know I’m not tall?

PENELOPE:
Um-- your voice isn’t coming from above?

HARRY:
It would be weird if my voice came from above. (SHOUTING) Noah! Build me an ark!

PENELOPE:
(GIGGLING) I just mean—your voice is coming from somewhere under my chin.

HARRY:
Maybe my voice is coming from you. Maybe we’re just...you.

PENELOPE:
We’re not ME. If we were me, I wouldn’t annoy myself so much.

HARRY:
Fine, I’m not tall. But you’re wearing heels. Right? Take that into account. What, two inches, three inches?

PENELOPE:
I don’t care that you’re not tall.

HARRY:
I am good looking, though.

PENELOPE:
I don’t care. I don’t need you to be good looking. I just need you to be good. To me.
HARRY:

Good looking matters.

PENELOPE:

Well, maybe I’m not good looking.

HARRY:

Yes you are.

PENELOPE:

Maybe I’m very plain.

HARRY:

Not a chance. Not with that dress. A girl like you wears a silk dress like she means it. But one day you won’t be so hot. You’re getting older, too.

PENELOPE:

Great.

HARRY:

But it doesn’t matter. Because we met here. And you’re always going to be good looking in the dark. (PAUSE) So let’s do it.

PENELOPE:

Do what?

HARRY:

Do whatever you meant when you said let’s do it. Let’s do it, whatever it is.

PENELOPE:

Well, I don’t think we should kill anyone.
HARRY:
(LOUD EXHALE) That’s good. I was so worried that’s what you meant. And it didn’t turn out well for us.

PENELOPE:
Also, I don’t think we should break all of Skip’s stuff.

HARRY:
Alright...okay...Skip gets off scot free. As you wish. But you didn’t mean we should do it...so...?

PENELOPE:
Five years from now. Halloween, five years hence.

HARRY:
Hence. (HUMMING HAPPILY) I love that you said hence.

PENELOPE:
Five years hence, we’ll get married. If you don’t find a proper wife before then. And if I don’t marry the Birthday Boy.

MUSIC CHANGES TO BILLY IDOL’S “WHITE WEDDING” AND FADES OUT
Could he marry a woman like that? Knowing what the Birthday Boy now knew about her? That she’d plotted a murder, beat up a Zen ceramicist, and abandoned her imprisoned husband for a veterinarian? If anyone at the party was likely to be a psychopath, it was her. Was it any wonder that he preferred the company of dogs when humans were so perverse? He no longer cared if the woman was made of legs. Or if she moved exquisitely, handled forks with elegant delicacy, or if she stared at great paintings with an expression of profound understanding, appreciation, and awe.

He didn’t care if he was forty. He would not marry her.

He smiled. In rejecting the woman in the closet as his possible future bride, the architect became hopeful about the rest of his life. The world would remain unpredictable, vulgar, and dangerous but he didn’t have to marry it. And he certainly felt no shame over keeping her locked up. It was practically a public service.

Still, he wanted that urn. He wondered if the potter would be more likely to hand it over if he was in love. Love had a way of easing bitterness. Although, really, the potter had nothing about which to be bitter. By allowing their relationship to blossom, by bravely sitting guard at the closet door of their romance, the architect had protected them. He’d exercised benevolence over the subjects of his kingdom in a manner he’d imagined only his dog possessed.

The children of the couple’s union would have himself to thank. And while he’d keep his distance from their depraved mother, the Birthday Boy felt he’d make an excellent godparent. He would design complicated playhouses for his godchildren to explore.

*
“Oh. Sorry. No,” said Harry.

“No?”

“No. I’m not interested in a five-year plan. Even though you said hence. Why would I wait? To see if there’s someone better? You know how long it takes to find someone who’s good looking in the dark? I’m yours, if you’ll have me.”

“But I left you for a veterinarian.”

“Yes, Porpoise, you’ll have to try harder to keep your libido in check,” he said, “Or people will talk. I can’t even let you see the Birthday Boy. He’s tall and blindingly good looking. In the light, anyway. Let’s just agree to steer clear of him when we get out. We’ll make eye contact with the bean dip, and that’s all.”

“I’ll be too busy laughing at your Superman getup to notice anything else. And maybe we’ll never get out. What then?”

“Then this was a good way to die. Hold my hand, you.”

Penelope nodded and reached out in the dark. Though the strangers had been pressed together for hours, it was this gesture that signaled the crossing of a great gap. Her hand searched for his and found it closed. Propelled by the force of the moment, she pried it open.

“The other one!” Harry shouted. “The other one!”

His cries were punctuated by a tremendous crash.

*

Startled, the architect scrambled to his feet as ceramic shards skittered through the crack at the bottom of the door and danced across the flagstone.

*
Penelope gasped. “Was that--?”

“Mazel Tov,” Harry murmured, and he held her hand.

*

In the black hallway, the Birthday Boy sighed. It was a sigh of disappointment. Or relief. One hand held the bag of ashes. The other paused in mid-air, just above the closet knob. He suspected it would be cold to the touch.
In the beginning, there was nothing.

And God said
"Let there be light."

And there was light.

There was still nothing, but you could see it a lot better. *
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