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2561 words

### Thursday Night Disappointment

Across the street, a boy with a stick fit for a wizard taps a tune against the curb. His white t-shirt is covered with splashes of unpleasant brown. Neither of them should be out here, on a Thursday—a school day—but he seems more at home with this transgression.

*Does your father know you're out here? What would he think?* she wants to ask the boy because, though her mom does the shouting, it's her father's disappointment she fears.

Wind bites at her legs. The skin on the back of her hand goes scaly, freckled with white, completely dried out. All the while, her phone persists in silence.

Eight becomes nine becomes nine thirty, and Sue is still not here. Her mind refuses obvious explanations. Instead, she absconds into the bizarre—that Sue has been kidnapped, dismembered along train tracks, left for dead. These thoughts feel as real as the boy across the street, but they don't devastate her. They create interest. It's twisted—she knows.

Tap, tap, tap, goes the boy's stick. There is an old fashioned quality to him—like he belongs in a different time and space. Her mind replaces the stick with a banjo, turns the taps into strums. The cement becomes swamp water, becomes sludge and mud. Without thinking, she starts walking down the high street. Each step is echoed three times over—bits of the boys tap, tap, tap, following her like a fly humming at her ear. She doesn't know if she's imagining it or not. She doesn't turn around.

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Her computer dings and dings and dings. New emails flood her inbox. She refuses to acknowledge them. Thursday is her Sabbath. Her employees have learned to accept that she is

unreachable, temporarily dead, despite the fact that they can see her through the blue tinted glass of her office.

Still, she tries to preserve the appearance of professionalism, holding her book under the lip of her desk, rather than brazenly waving it around in the open for everyone to see. If they did see, however, they would be impressed. *The Heart of Darkness*.

She rereads every page twice. The words never speak to each other during the first pass. On second glance, the meaning is startlingly obvious. She feels strangely connected to Joseph Conrad's protagonist—a young sailor. Like him, she too is becoming obsessed with the elusive Kurtz, a British ivory merchant working deep in the Congo. The musket smoke on the page fills her nostrils. She notices then that she's grinding her teeth and wonders if, when she's old, they will be shorter, merely stubs, as a result. She uses this image as her justification when she buys a pack of Camels. The calming taste of nicotine, that warm burning smell, is the only sure-fire way she knows to set her jaw at ease. She doesn't let herself remember that this is the fifth pack of the week and wonders if her husband can smell it on her breath when she comes home.

On her walk to the deli, she pretends she is walking through the jungle. It is something she has done since she was a child—this radical fantasizing. Her fantasies have changed shape over the years—Tinkerbell and fairies as a child, hunky men covered in bronzer now that she's an adult. But, regardless of the content, her juvenile spirit and the level of absolute immersion remains; sometimes, she even makes sound effects under her breath—wooshes as bed covers flutter, swallowed roars as a pride of lions emerge from the brush, blistering raspberries in place of cannon fire. She has told no one of this habit, not even her husband.

The Congo smoke clears as she rounds a bend and she sees her daughter standing alone on a corner. Mel doesn't look out of place. She is only fifteen years old, but could be five years

older—her short, red hair, tousled, still damp from her morning shower. As a mother, she knows that she should stomp across the street and drag her daughter off to school, but she is arrested by memories of her own rebellious youth: particularly one bloody episode that involved climbing through the broken window of an abandoned barn right off of Route 85 with Devon Dennis. She had cut her thigh against a shard of glass on her way in, ignoring the long gash until she and Dennis were finished with each other. By the time Dennis got her to the emergency room, her skin was a marbled blue. The doctor gave her twelve red stitches, which she wore as a badge of honor until they dissolved into her skin, leaving no trace of a scar.

Hurriedly, she turns the corner, returning the Congo that only ever existed in Conrad's mind, a small tinkling hope following her into the twists of her fantasy, felt like a small burning along the ridges of her ears; a hope that her daughter didn't see her, and that for this moment, and this moment only, they remained mere strangers passing; Instead, they are just two steamers, sailing under different flags, carrying loads and loads of ivory and documents of the dead, unconsciously sharing the same river in the darkest, blackest hour of night.

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Mels finds herself in a bookstore across from the theater. Without Sue, paying the \$13.95 for a student matinee ticket felt like a waste. They hadn't planned on watching the movie anyway. They were paying the \$13.95 to be obscured. Life felt wonderfully intangible in the blue dark of the movie theater and Sue's basement and the bandroom after hours.

Mel moves from fiction, to mystery, to fantasy and passes ever closer to the register. Her dad and her sometimes spend hours here, browsing and never buying. Briefly, she looks up from the shelves and locks eyes with Ms. Lafferty, the thirty-something year old, who bought the bookstore from the previous owners sometime last year. There is a question in the older woman's

eyes: *Are you supposed to be here?* Mel considers leaving. But there is something conspiratorial about Ms. Lafferty's face and posture—some permission granted in the slight curve of her smile. This is an expression Mel's mom has never known.

Through the store's window, she sees the boy and his stick, hears the tap, tap, tap of wood against cement, and wonders if she should be afraid.

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Ms. Lafferty's attention moves, in quick succession, from daughter to father. A ping, then the text appears in a blue bubble: *Will be at yours by five? Sound good?*

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He looks up at the night sky on his drive back from her house to his. For the first time in his entire life he doesn't feel crushed by the firmament, its incalculable depth, or its promise of ever extending expansion. He thinks freely, almost naturally, about black holes and what they do to matter, about their dark pull that turns everything, complex and simple, into strands of spaghetti which then careen towards the end of time. He is excited, even a little aroused by the idea. Reaching over to his phone on his dashboard, he closes Google Maps—he knows the way home—opens Spotify, types in "SPACE PODCAST" into the search bar, and clicks on the first result. Almost without his help, the car mounts a spiralling onramp and merges onto the highway. Unlike usual, his mind doesn't contemplate death or the possibility of collisions with other cars. Instead, he listens, with absolute focus, to the assertive tones of Neil deGrasse Tyson as the physicist explains the process that unfolds when two black holes meet.

Tyson says, almost casually, that these two cosmic pits will eat each other—like polar bears do, or so he has heard. It seems Tyson is more interested in what will happen to the material floating nearby—the collateral possibilities:

“There is a particular path an object can take around two moving black holes that haven’t quite collided yet, where, by the end of a series of rotations, the object arrives at a point in time that is earlier than when it started its journey. Backwards time travel,” says Tyson.

“Imagine that,” he says to the otherwise empty volume of his Honda.

He leans over his dashboard and looks up. He decides that Tyson and everyone else are wrong. The night sky is not a void, but an ocean. He is convinced. It swells pleasantly against the invisible film that keeps it suspended. He wonders, under his breath, what might be swimming up in those depths.

The blood running through his veins, especially in his hands, around his knuckles and behind his palms, feels lighter than air. There is a distinct sensation of Lift. His fingers, acting on their own volition, curl around the wheel ever tighter. This is the schism in his body—half of him, primarily his insides, are pulling away from the ground, the rest of him, hands, feet, skin, are keeping him earthbound. This tension is almost pleasurable. It almost feels like being in two places at once. Being outside and insides at the same time. A solid and a liquid and a gas, not one or the other or the other. He knows how fragile this state of mind is, so he doesn’t fuck with it. He leaves himself alone and successfully forgets every corner of his life that doesn’t include her.

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Mel feels a strange sense of guilt for missing one unimportant day of school, compensates by devoting herself fully to the work she has missed, ignoring Sue’s many texts and voice messages. The math questions on her day-old worksheet, simple by her standards, have become a tangle of words—bad poetic phrases strung together in meaningless arrangements, riddled with misspellings.

$$2\log_4x + \log_4y - \log_4n^z$$

$$f(x)=3-2x^2$$

Becomes:

*Two logger rhythms. Longer, yes. Longer nightz.*

*Fixed when three becomes two.*

Rubbing her eraser into dust, she's been killing time, waiting for her dad to come home to apply his reordering touch.

Six becomes seven becomes eight. From her second floor window, she sees him pull into the driveway. She recognizes first the shapes made by the twin lights of his car. For a moment, she thinks she sees the boy and his stick, illuminated by the car's glow. A phantom. A trick of the light.

Running down the stairs, she meets him at the door. Hears his keys jangling. She blushes, aware that this level of excitement is strange—borderline inappropriate. The door swings open. His eyes, larger than hers, but the same color, seem to flicker as he sees her. Then, his smile reduces to embers. It's subtle, but she sees it. This wouldn't concern her, except it isn't the first time. Every Thursday, she becomes a disappointment to him. She doesn't know why. He looks at his daughter. The thin film holding the sky back from the earth pops like a bubble. His throat fills with something rancid. He swallows, but the taste persists. He swallows again. Nothing changes. He forces himself to smile.

"Calc?"

She nods.

"I'll follow you up."

The wallpaper of her room has faded over the course of the fifteen years since he pasted it up in anticipation of her arrival. The flying birds were colorful then, playful even. Now, their

beady stares are haunting. He wonders what they must look like in the dark, how his daughter can sleep with them always looking.

“Here, dad. These are the ones I can’t figure out.”

He reads the textbook. She watches him. His fingers run through his hair, speckled grey but still thick. He flicks through the pages. He is in a hurry to find understanding.

“Sorry,” he keeps saying, without looking up. He’s whispering. It’s almost as if he doesn’t want her to hear. “It’s been a while since I’ve done this. Give me a second.”

He feels again like he is in two places at the same time. This time it feels awful.

Sometimes, she likes to see him struggle. It gives her room to struggle too. He tut tut tuts in a quiet, unconscious way. She and her mom laugh about it when he’s not around. She wonders if she too has a tell—some tick that is always betraying her consternation.

He can’t keep the words from the textbook in his head. It’s not that he doesn’t understand the concepts. He knows how to unfold a logarithm, can push a function into its derivative, could do it in his sleep. But the specifics, the quantities in the problems, the array of variables, they seem to vibrate on the page. Little electrons. They refuse to stay in place.

“We can do this later. The test isn’t until Friday. This is just homework,” she relieves him. He is humiliated and grateful.

The room seems blurred, like he’s seeing it through wet eyes. He misses the woman’s bed. The lightlessness he feels when he’s with her. A tonic.

“Let me just make some coffee. I’ll try again. My mind, it’s still on work.”

His wife is in the kitchen. She is smoking near the back window. She doesn’t hide it from him anymore. And he doesn’t mind it. In fact, he finds her weirdly alluring. He likes envisioning fire in her lungs. This is something he will never admit.

“You ok?” She asks.

“Just tired. Finally struggling with Mel’s homework.”

“Yeah, now you know how I feel.”

“Hm”

“What is it?”

“Calculus.”

“No. Not the homework. You’ve got a face.”

“Do I?”

Something about his wife is startling and new tonight. He is ashamed by his gluttony. He wants a bit of everything. He wants this woman, her smoke, the tiles under her feet, and he wants the other, the one who makes life seem like thin fabric, like air and wind.

“You look beautiful,” he says. Blush crawls up his neck to his cheeks, leaving red, blotchy footprints on his skin.

“Look at you!” she says smiling now, the small overlap in her front teeth showing.

He scratches his head. He remembers feeling clumsy and confused on their first date, sitting opposite her at a restaurant, feeling like the table was oddly large, the distance between them unbreachable. *Maybe they should have sat side by side?* He stared at the menu studying the list of entrees, written in either Italian or French. To this day, he still can’t distinguish between the two. His mind was whirring. Her eyes were crushing him. Then the memory, or at least, his experience of it, becomes untethered from the truth. So when his younger self looks up at her from the menu, her face flickers, like an old cable television with bad reception. Two faces oscillate atop the same neck. His wife and the other. He blinks. The oscillation stops. The face settles on one.



“You still make me nervous,” he says, chuckling, enjoying the tingling of nerves.

“You’ve always thought that was a compliment,” she says, stepping in closer. “Did you eat at the office?”

Her eyebrows, knitted together by a few hairs above her nose, become arches. It’s almost like she knows. But she doesn’t know.

“There’s some of the soup you made over the weekend. Finish it up? Or I’ll have to throw it out.”

He thinks it would’ve killed him if she had prepared something for him.

She runs down the stairs, her calculus homework bunched in her hand, and sees her parents talking, her mom leaning her hip against the kitchen counter, her dad’s body pitched towards her mother, pulled by some invisible, wonderful, absolutely steady force. She waits and watches. He seems to uncoil a bit in her mom’s presence. When he smiles, his eyes don’t wince. She wants to join them, take in some of the smoke coming off her mom’s cigarette, but there is a fragility to the scene—like both adults were sculpted from ice or hot glass. So, she decides it is better to leave them be, to watch and enjoy, tapping her fingers along her goose-pimpled arms, with the sound of wood against cement drumming in her ears, building, a crescendo growing out from the dimmest quiet into a deafening roar.