

## *Don't Look Up*

**H**er name is Maria. Apart from the woman who took my money and history and the woman who took my blood, she was the only person at the clinic with whom I spoke. She greeted me in the waiting room. She opened a door—a steel slab that bolted when it closed behind her—and said my fake name. I picked up my things and stood to meet her.

A full-figured woman, burnished and dark, with broad bones and a round, open face, that day she wore a sarong striped in brilliant primary colors, and her mass of black hair shot out from her crown at sharply delineated angles.

This was my official greeting, she said, now that the necessities—the money, the history, the blood—were behind us. She took my hand and held it a moment. She closed her free hand over our grip and exhaled lightly, her lips shaping a benevolent smile. “Hi,” she said, giving my hand a firm squeeze.

“Hi,” I said, and smiled back, though I was sure I’d said that already.

She greeted me as if she’d been waiting all day for me, as if I had stepped into the company of friends and she was delighted to have me. I followed her to the reception counter. She reached over the top and picked up the file of forms I’d filled out. “Is this Susan?” she asked, waving the folder to someone in back.

“That’s the one,” a woman said.

Behind the counter, several women busied themselves at different stations. I couldn’t tell from the clothes they wore what their functions were. They wore blue jeans and T-shirts or gypsy skirts and gauze tops. Only one of them, I noticed, could be bothered to put on a bra. I tried to determine who among them was medical and who was not. The woman who took my blood sat at a desk and, with a dropper, drew samples from a tray of red vials. She dripped the blood in brazen dots across a row of glass slides. When the phone rang, she got up to answer it and settled in at that station, and another woman walked over and sat down in her place. Each seemed capable of doing everything. I scanned the walls for a medical certificate of any kind.

I approached the one woman I had not seen leave her seat—the woman who took my money—and leaned over the counter to speak to her.

“Is there a doctor here?” I asked.

“Yes, there is,” she said.

Maria put her hand on my back and turned me around to face her. “You did not have to ask her that,” she said, and smiled. “You could have asked me. I would have told you that.” She guided me toward the steel door.

“I’m your personal advocate,” Maria said. “You do not have to talk to anyone besides me.” She punched a combination into an electronic box at the side of the door. “That’s what I’m here for—to hear your concerns and answer your questions. I represent you in each step of the procedure.” I searched the room for the cashier and the reassuring discipline of commerce, but now that woman, too, had drifted off.

“Okay?” Maria said, and the door clicked shut behind us.

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My personal advocate is everywhere, and everywhere advocating. She is on every street and in every shop, on every bus and in every bar and late-night diner. She is ready and waiting any time I might need her, and there is, it seems, no time when I don’t need her.

She is on the street corner where I’ve dropped a sheaf of papers—our year-end report—and the entire contents of my bag. I spin and reach out in the whirlpool of pages, and it is her hand that delivers the tube of red lipstick, open and dirty, that has rolled into the street and the clear nail polish, which—it must occur to her, too—I could use for the run in my stocking.

She is in line at the druggist’s, a bright, new quarter ready in her hand, when I discover I do not have my checkbook, and the cash and loose change I empty onto the counter fall twenty-two cents short of my total. I study each of my items—toothpaste, tampons, and contraceptive cream—to determine which is the least essential. The checker is no help. I pick up the cream and move it out of my pile, and his face darkens with reproach. I put it back and reach for the toothpaste instead, and he lets out a heavy sigh. I search the counter for a fourth option. That’s when he says, “The lady here is covering it,” and in my peripheral vision she extends an elegant hand in the serene manner of a duchess. “You can thank the lady.”

There are, of course, no thanks required when it comes to my personal advocate. This is what she told me. This is her job, she said, to be there, to help do the things we have to do. She would stay with me, she said, she would not leave my side, she was there for me and me only.

“Your change?” the checker calls after me. The nervous chuckle that follows signals, no doubt, his realization that the pennies are hers.

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We stepped into a corridor lined with small rooms partitioned with flimsy gauze curtains. Maria led me into a warmly lit office with long rows of books and low, comfortable chairs. On the desk, a plastic anatomical model stood at attention, its brightly colored innards exposed. I recognized about half of them.

Maria explained how we would be spending our time together. She would describe the procedure and we’d discuss my concerns. She gave me a clipboard with a form to fill out that included a list of possible concerns—those commonly expressed by women in my situation—with added space for any unique concerns of my own. “The clinic is always looking to learn,” she said, “the unique concerns of its clients.” I got busy trying to think of one.

The form was an inventory of every conceivable worry, among them:

Are you experiencing anxiety about the procedure? What anxieties are you experiencing? Have you discussed the procedure with your partner, your family, or your friends, and if so, is/are he/they in agreement with your choice? If your partner, your family, or your friends is/are not in agreement with your choice, do you worry your relationship with him/them will be jeopardized by your decision? If you are not currently involved in an intimate relationship, are you concerned your decision will have a negative effect upon intimate relationships in the future? Do you feel guilt/anger?

There were thirty concerns in all. I studied the list for a long time, trying to determine which were mine. I searched the list from top to bottom, again and again, as if I were searching a list of magazine subscriptions for a schoolboy competing to win a big prize. I looked to Maria for guidance. “Take your time,” she said, “take your time.” Her face was hopeful and alert. I marked every box and returned the clipboard to her.

Maria looked at my form and smiled. In bolder ink, she put a second check by each of mine. She told me there was an evaluator at the clinic today and asked if I’d mind if she joined us.

“An evaluator?” I said. “That’s not you?”

“No, no,” she said. “I’m not an evaluator. I’m your advocate, remember? The evaluator is here to evaluate me, to evaluate my performance. Do you see?”

“My performance,” I repeated.

“My performance,” Maria said, “not yours.” The soft pads of her fingertips alighted on my knee, one at a time, as if I were a chord. “Are we good?”

I supposed we were. We were good.

“When does she come?” I asked.

“Well, now,” she said. She was quick to point out that I did not have to talk to her.

“Where will she sit?” I asked. “Or will she sit?” She could stand, too, I thought. I looked around the room to see where she might sit or stand were she to join us. It was important to know now where everyone was or might be at all times.

“She’ll sit in the chair there,” Maria said, “in the corner.”

I looked at the corner, at the chair, and put a person in it. The lady in the chair would hold a steno pad and wear spectacles on the tip of her nose. She’d have exemplary posture. “Okay,” I said, and nodded my consent. “She can do that. But I would rather she not join us where the procedure takes place. I don’t want to have to keep track of her there. I’m sorry.”

“Absolutely,” Maria said. “I absolutely understand your position. And I honor your position. You do not have to apologize to me, ever. I’m here to represent you, after all, I’m here for you and you only.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You do not have to thank me, either.”

Maria stepped out to collect the evaluator. Her departure upset the balance of the room. It was as if the room had suddenly shifted on its axis and I might slide off. Heavy books lined the walls, several exploring the relationship between our bodies and our selves. Nearly every book featured a puzzling dichotomy like this one. Some titles were familiar, and one or two had been on my list of books to read in my lifetime. I hadn’t gotten to them. I searched the shelves for any I had.

Maria returned with the evaluator, a young, pretty woman who wore the sporty weekend clothes of a bigger city. She nodded to me and sat down.

Maria began her presentation from the top. We would talk about the procedure and address my concerns for approximately twenty minutes, she said. We would then go to the changing room, where I would undress, and we would wait there, approximately five to seven minutes,

changing time included, for our turn. When our turn came, we would enter the procedure room. The doctor would not be waiting there. Maria would get me settled, and when we were ready she would ask the doctor to join us. There would be a brief examination—a minute, perhaps two.

“An examination?” I asked.

Maria looked in the direction of the evaluator. The woman lowered her head and turned the bangles at her wrist. She shifted, almost imperceptibly, away from us in her seat.

“I had a standard examination just this last year,” I said. “I had the yearly.” I looked from one to the other, Maria and the evaluator, and tried to address them both equally. “Probably I don’t need another one today.”

“The examination,” Maria said quietly, “is to locate and determine the size of the contents.”

I looked to the evaluator. She fingered the volumes in a set of numbered books, as if to confirm none was missing.

I nodded to Maria to convey that I’d grasped her meaning.

The procedure itself would take seven minutes. After the procedure, I would rest, approximately twenty to thirty minutes, in the recovery room. I did not have to address the doctor in any way, and the doctor would not address me. Maria would carry communications between us. This system, she said, was designed to separate the person from the procedure. The procedure was the procedure, she assured me, and no more. The person was something else altogether.

“The doctor attends to the procedure,” Maria said, “the advocate to the person.”

I repeated the equation in my mind. I would be the person, in this instance. I imagined a magic act—my body sawed through into two neat halves—top and bottom, person and procedure. I saw this done once at a show. A magician separated his assistant and passed a wand between the boxes in which she lay divided. The woman—a lean figure with a sparkling tiara—turned her face to the crowd. She smiled. She wiggled her toes.

“Exactly how many people will be in the room?” I asked.

“Four,” Maria said. “You and I, and the doctor and his assistant.”

“His?” I asked.

Maria sat up in her chair. “The clinic apologizes that the doctor is a man.”

“I thought it would be a woman,” I said. “Your ad says all women.”

It did not occur to me when I called to make the arrangements, when I asked what to bring and the lady said three hundred dollars cash and

a sanitary napkin, that I would get, with my three hundred dollars and my sanitary napkin, something other than a woman.

“We haven’t found yet, in this area, a woman as experienced as this doctor who is willing to perform this service. He’s been doing this for years,” she said. “He’s a master.”

A master, I thought. There are masters. “Does he do anything else?” I asked. “I mean, is this how he makes his living?”

“He has a regular practice here in town, too.”

Maria’s eyes darted back and forth between me and the evaluator. “Is this disturbing to you?” she asked. “Would you like to talk about this?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t guess it matters.”

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Fear does not exist in the moment, our systems analyst, Julio, says. All anxiety, he says, refers to a future event, and all sadness to the past.

“Where are you, Sister?” he asks me and taps his knuckles on my desk. “Where are you right now, this very moment?”

By the time I form an answer, the moment has passed.

Julio and I do not know each other. We do not know each other’s lives, and like the horoscopes, Julio’s messages are all equally appropriate all the time.

“Come,” he says, and writes down the address of the temple where he meditates. “Just come.”

He folds up the paper as small as a pill and drops it in my shirt pocket.

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It is as if we operate my body by hand, she and I; we squeeze my heart and push the blood through my veins. What’s left when the duties are divided and we’ve taken our places is Maria. Maria taking hold of my aimless arms—Where do I put them, Maria, where do they go?—and folding my hands across my chest—Here—and holding them firmly with hers—Like this.

What’s left is Maria washing the blood off my thighs and bringing my legs, one at a time, down to where a table should be.

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At the pool, I float in the family section past geriatric swimmers here for their aqua therapy. They take careful, guided steps down the steel lad-

der, their white limbs firm beneath their sunken weight. One woman—all tendons and ligaments—in a pink bathing cap and a loose suit with a skirt is stranded there. She stands at the rail and leans deep into her pelvis—a bony chasm her suit just conceals—and she looks out over the water and past the edge of the pool to another, more distant horizon.

“I’m coming,” she mutters repeatedly. “Here I come.”

Her friends, clustered in the shallow end where a young woman, pool-side, leads them through a series of arm exercises and urges them to worship the sun, open their arms to the sun, do not hear her. I swim to the ladder and reach up to her, as one would reach to a child about to attempt a great leap. She is not grateful.

“Out of my way, honey,” she says, her pointed toes searching out the last step. “I’m comin’ down.”

People have their systems.

At the last rung, the old woman slips into the pool and parts the water with her hands. She lifts her head to draw a breath, and the folds at her neck stretch away, taut and white. I hold onto the edge of the steel ladder and watch her glide away, rising with her wake.

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The mail has grown oppressive. I return from lunch, and my desk is littered with action ballots, with letters from women’s organizations in discreet gray envelopes stamped “Deliver to Addressee Only.”

“You’ve gone political,” Julio says, and gathers them into a neat bundle.

I take them from him and say, “I haven’t.”

The letters begin, “Dear Friend,” and urge me once again to join the essential fight to protect our freedom. My voice is urgently needed, the letters say, the opposition is growing stronger, time is running short.

“I’m with you on this,” Julio says. “I support this.”

I close the letters in the bottom drawer of my desk with my toiletries and other personals.

“I didn’t do anything,” I say.

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It was Julio who told me about the professional advancement exam. This is a census year—a year of accounting—and it is in precisely these times, he said, that the opportunities for professional advancement present themselves. The Census Bureau was testing for temporary and

long-term assignments in our county, for two hundred jobs at every level. There were professional positions, Julio said, for which I would certainly qualify.

“Is this how you want to spend your life?” he said, giving the cord of my Dictaphone a pull. “Plugged into this contraption? A scribe for the corporate religion?”

I pressed down on my pedal and my boss’s voice resumed. I liked, in my spare time, to manipulate his voice, slow the tape down so that his words became a single, unintelligible drone—a chant or a dirge—or to increase the speed and try, with quick taps of my pedal, to isolate each word.

Julio stretched the earphone away from my head and whispered in my ear.

“Take the exam,” he said.

I turned my dial to the highest speed. I listened to my boss’s voice race away, clipped and curt, and I decided I would not be left out. I would take the exam and join the Census Bureau. I would count Americans.

This is how I imagine life at the Census Bureau: We, the Census Bureau officials, drive along narrow brick streets with neat rows of houses, and as we pass, the families step onto their stoops. The husbands stand behind their wives and the wives hold their children’s hands. We pass, we record each family, we wave, and they go back in their homes and resume their lives.

At the high school where the exam was held, bright, chipper helpers in Styrofoam hats mingled through the crowd, directing the flow of traffic from their clipboards. “Census Now!” their buttons said. “Stand up and be counted.” The place had about it the ecumenical bustle of a county fair, and the halls echoed with mob anticipation, with the eager mumblings that precede a great trial or, in another age, a public stoning. Women with frosted hair and frilly dresses elbowed their way into examination lines, waving their registration tickets like press passes. One of the officials, an elderly man with suspenders and a belt, told me he hadn’t seen such a brouhaha since Harry Truman came to town to give a speech. The whole town was here, he said, everybody and his sister was here.

I looked into the crowd. The women’s auxiliary from one of the local churches was making use of the opportunity to have a bake sale. The church women, thin and vaguely ascetic, conducted business from a tin money box on their table, and most everyone, I noticed, carried something to eat—a bun, a brownie, a wedge of crumb cake. The whole town was here, and the whole town was eating, it seemed. The old man



crushed a bit of fudge in its stay-fresh plastic. Wasn't it a great day, he wanted to know.

I stood in line in front of my room. A tidy woman in a faded wool uniform scrutinized our registration tickets as if they were counterfeits. She held mine to the light.

"Name," she said. Her ancient uniform exhaled fumes that made me choke a little when I answered. "Spell it," she said. "Again," she said. She surveyed me ruthlessly, as if daring me to take it back.

I searched the crowd for Julio. It would please him to see me here in my pressed white shirt, my tailored slacks and oxfords. I had taken his advice, and it had set me on a new course. Just then the line started moving, and I found myself moving ineluctably with it. "Quickly, quickly," I heard the matron say to the stragglers. He would be proud of me, Julio. I was certain of it.

Inside, a number of test-takers were seated already in rows of polished desks bolted to the floor. Some slouched in their chairs and gazed at the ceiling, tapping their pencils with boredom; others sat erect, their faces alert, their hands folded and quiet on their desks. These were the postures of high school, and I stood hot and paralyzed before them, searching, as others rushed past to claim their seats, for my place in the room.

I felt her light touch in the center of my back. I turned around and saw first the button—Census Now!—fixed and resolute at her bosom, and then the Styrofoam hat, which sat at an oblique angle on her pyramid of hair, oddly distanced from her head.

Maria smiled. "This way," she said, and with her hand on my back, guided me to a seat in the corner. She slipped my bag off my shoulder and put it on the floor at my side, and with one lithe gesture, she coaxed the cup of coffee I had brought from my hand. "It's not allowed," she said, and in a reassuring whisper added, "I'll just throw that away for you." She did not say my name or acknowledge that she knew me.

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This was, she had said, the agreement.

In the recovery room, she offered me her arm for the walk to my bed—a girlhood bed with a flowered headboard. "Okay," she said as I took hold of her, "attagirl." I held her thick forearm with both hands, and she took the whole of my weight and unfolded me, like a jointed doll, onto the mattress.

She knelt beside me. “This is the end of our time together, Susan,” she said, and gave the edge of my pillow a perfunctory pull. “Now, this is the agreement.”

She told me that if we should cross paths again, she would follow my lead. She would not acknowledge me unless I acknowledged her first, and she would only speak my name—my real name—if I spoke hers.

“You set the terms of the relationship,” she said. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, though I hadn’t imagined a future together, a relationship to define.

“It could happen, you know,” she said, as if to dispel any doubt I might have. “It’s a small world; we’ll likely meet again. I want you to know you don’t have to duck into alleys when you see me. However you choose to know me, I’ll be perfectly at ease.”

I was startled by the tone of inevitability in her voice, by the cordial calm in her suggestion that this, too, had to be, but I attempted a smile anyway, and Maria’s face grew grave. She looked at me hard and squeezed my arm. She closed her eyes and nodded softly, then rose and slipped away.

“Thank you,” I said, and as she delivered my file to the recovery nurse and headed for the door, I said thank you again and added, in too loud a voice, “Maria.”

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I knew I had a pencil when I left for the exam. I searched my bag as exams were distributed and instructions issued from the front of the room. I had a vague awareness of Maria moving behind me—to the left, to the right, I couldn’t discern which—and I tore through the contents of my bag repeatedly. I pulled the larger things out—my wallet, my agenda, my cosmetics bag—and piled them on my desk. The voice of the proctor seemed to stop just short of me, to bend around me, and when Maria came by and balanced an exam on top of my things, I did not look up or say thank you. I was certain I had a pencil. I was certain because when I called to find out what I should bring for the exam and the lady said a No. 2 pencil and a picture ID, I bought a package of pencils, which I whittled by hand and distributed among my bags to avoid just this danger on exam day.

I returned my things to my bag and put it aside. I decided I’d gotten myself on some sort of course, and if I waited a few minutes and tried again, I would find the pencils. I found the pencils. I put one in the trough at the top of my desk and stacked my two spares behind it.

The man sitting next to me, a nervous fellow in a business suit, sweated copiously. He wiped his brow and neck with giant, bare hands. He smoothed the damp hair at the nape of his neck in one direction and the damp hair at his brow in the other. His head was at perfect odds with itself. Between wipes, he swung at phantom pests. They had singled him out. The rest of us were not harassed. He had no handkerchief, clearly, nor as far as I could tell, a pencil. I could offer him both—a pencil and a handkerchief—if he would accept them. It would be my pleasure.

The proctor said we could now open our exam booklets. The nervous gentleman must have anticipated this announcement from the moment he sat down. He whipped open his booklet and began writing furiously. He had a retractable gold pencil—the kind that belonged to an executive set. Probably he kept it in his handkerchief pocket.

I opened my exam booklet. The first question, nearly all the questions, included a vast, ruled space in which to respond. They required an explanation. I had expected choices. I had arrived outfitted with sharp No. 2 pencils prepared to fill in miniscule ovals.

I watched the other exam-takers write their exams. Now and then one looked up at the clock above the blackboard, whose minute hand moved invisibly. I tried to catch it advance, but if I blinked, I missed it. If I didn't blink, I still missed it. The proctor eyed me suspiciously. I cocked my head from side to side, to convey to him that I was considering the questions from every angle.

The nervous gentleman crouched over his booklet. His pace was steady, deliberate. As he worked, his shoulder pads hovered above his own shoulders, collapsing slightly and filling back up, as if his jacket breathed independently. The nervous gentleman was peaceful now. I hoped he'd get the job.

There was a message from Julio on my machine when I got home. He'd lifted my number from the file at work, he said, to let me know about coming events.

"Hey, kiddo," he said. "Just calling to see how you made out at the high school." He said he'd give me a quarter for every right answer I'd marked. I hadn't marked any. At the end of the two hours, I passed my blank booklet to the front with the others and left one pencil in the trough. Julio said there was a gathering tonight for new friends of the temple and suggested I come and celebrate my liberation day. Today, he said, was a new beginning, the first day of the rest of my life.

As he repeated the address, I faded his voice with the dial. I waited—I didn't have to do a thing—for the machine to quietly click off.

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I stand at the sink, washing dishes, the suds loose at my elbows. I can make a mess out of soap, even. She enters my consciousness like a song. She is in a delivery room, a surgical gown draped loosely at her shoulders. She smiles and takes the newborn infant, crimped and wet, and lifts it to the light. In my mind, I search the table for the face of the woman—is it me?—but my eye cannot get past the linen tangled at her hips.

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In the recovery room, we each got a handful of unsalted nuts, a gargle's worth of grape juice in a paper Dixie Cup, and two ginger snaps. I lay in my bed, and a young girl was brought in on the arm of an older advocate, a woman with high white hair and a sky-blue pantsuit, which, at one time, must have been up to date. Something was wrong with the girl. She limped like a lame horse, just touching her foot to the floor and snapping it high each time she gave it weight. It was a terrible jig she did across the room, and I cast an accusing glance in the direction of the recovery nurse. I assumed they'd done something to the leg.

The recovery nurse walked over and helped the advocate negotiate the girl onto her bed. Her bed sat perpendicular to mine, her pillow near my feet. After she lay down, the girl thrashed a bit and seemed to have no sense of where her arms began or ended. I drew my legs up to give her room.

The recovery nurse brought a chair to my bedside and sat down. I assumed she had come to explain, in the reassuring voice I had come to expect, what had gone wrong with the girl. She took a pad and pencil from her lab coat and started scribbling.

"Susan," she said, "I'm writing you a prescription for birth control pills, should you decide you want to use them. Of course," she added, "it's up to you."

She was a thin woman, with neat, cropped hair and sharp features, and she wore a modest silk blouse beneath her lab coat, with a modest scarf to match tied at her collar. It was, I could tell, her idea of a personal touch, and as she wrote the prescription, she patted her bow absently with her free hand to confirm that it was still there.

"I'm a smoker," I said.

“Well,” she said, still writing, “perhaps it’s time you stopped smoking, too.” She pulled the slip from her pad. “Hang onto this,” she said, “in case you change your mind.”

I folded the paper and put it in my gown pocket. She retrieved my bag from the cubicle in which my things had been stored and tucked it by my side.

“Perhaps it should go in here, instead.”

She moved briskly to the other side of the room to an older woman who, having rested long enough, had gotten out of bed and collected her things. She was shedding her gown now. The recovery nurse took it and draped it back on the woman’s shoulders and, taking the woman’s things, led her to an alcove in the corner.

I took my pillow to the foot of the bed and lay down. I hoped to get the attention of the young girl. Her back was to me, and I sat up to get a closer look at her. She slept with her legs drawn nearly to her chest and her face pressed to the wall, like a child. I positioned my pillow near hers and lay back down. A broad block of sun shone on our heads and gave the girl’s black hair a startling sheen. I wanted to touch it but reached instead to the window’s edge, where the frost had accumulated and risen in delicate white waves. I touched the glass, and in the hard light, the tips of my fingers were pink and filmy, transparent around a dark mass of bone.

The girl woke and turned to my side. She didn’t seem surprised or alarmed to see me there, so near her. I took one of my gingersnaps and placed it on her pillow. Her wide eyes fell from me to it, but she made no move to take it. She studied it, and I studied it, too, the plain, flat fact of it.

“Gingersnap,” I said, and laid my head down.

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She mans the table at the finish line, distributing cups of tinted water to participants in a walk-a-thon sponsored by the recreation center. She smiles and lifts a cup as I pass. I hurry into the building, my bag tight at my side. I go to the locker room and change my clothes. I pin my suit straps and tuck my hair into a cap, and I head for the pool door, pausing in front of the full-length mirror to make sure nothing’s showing.

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On my lunch hour, I walk my usual streets and make my usual stops, and gradually my circuit widens, and I’m walking down avenues I don’t

know and into neighborhoods far from the dense center of my day, and in some vague way I know I'm looking for her.

I dream of killing her. There is no bitterness or rage in it. I walk the streets of our town, though in the dream it's another town altogether; I go to the high school and shake the doors. I cup my face to the glass, but see just the darkened halls and the rows of trophies in glass cases. I sit on a bench in an anonymous corner and study the veins in my thigh. The one long artery is as thick and bulbous as a root. I understand that if I open the vein, she will come.

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It is officially spring now, and though the air is still sharp, the local businesses have unrolled their cloth awnings, and striped umbrellas have shot up around every table in town. It is as if we have come to the end of a long mourning, and the flags have been raised again.

I have thrown away my ten-dollar bill along with the withdrawal slip from the automatic teller. I lean into the trash to retrieve it, and as I stand, I see her sitting at a table with two others, laughing and drinking some kind of frothed coffee. I've never seen her in her private life. She laughs with her friends—a hearty laugh that soars over the street's clangor—and gestures broadly when she speaks. She leans into her conversation and her friends lean into her, interested, engaged. She lifts her hand, and the metal bracelet at her wrist casts a corona of shattered light around her. Her turquoise caftan flutters in the wind. One of her friends motions to the waiter to bring Maria another coffee. The other produces money to pay Maria's bill. She is a powerful woman, Maria.

She pauses then and looks over at me, a faint smile lingering. I don't avert my eyes. I hold my eyes open and let the grit the wind unsettles sting them and fill them with tears. It hurts. Maria looks away, twists the straw in her frothed coffee.

Look at me, I think. Look at me, I say. I say that I am crying, and there's nothing she can do. I'm crying, Maria. You can't help me.

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They have taken down the lane dividers and given the pool over to the families and the teenagers. I float on my back in the center, between the beach balls and the divers. The howling of the liberated moves me to join in the festive spirit, and I pull off my bathing cap and toss it over

my head to the side of the pool. My hair rises to the water's surface and snakes around my neck and arms. I lift my head to feel its weight.

Beneath the water's surface there is an entire culture I wasn't aware of before. I swim along the narrow black lines on the pool floor, like a catfish, and I watch the exaggerated, floating world of the children in their clusters. Two little girls have an underwater tea party. They press the pool walls and try to keep themselves under, bubbles escaping like dragon fire from their smiles as they pull their imaginary cups to their lips. A tangle of legs, thin and white, flutters near the surface, and from beneath the bulkhead some boys twist and bend, one in a cloud of bright urine.

At the surface, I float and they swim underneath me. I let the water rise around my face, and when my ears are submerged, I enter the subterranean chamber of my body. My heart pounds through me steady and low, and my breath resounds in my chest like a fierce wind. There is a sustained buzzing in there—a metallic hum. I try to locate its center, determine its source. Did I always have this, I wonder. I sing the note. I try to match its pitch and deep vibrato. It's low, beneath my range. I drop my voice an octave and hum toward it, toward the strange metallic chant beneath my heart and breath.

The pool doors bang open and a band of teenage boys runs in. They run and throw their towels to the floor, and they hurl themselves into the water, all at impossible angles. One does a cannonball off the diving board that sends a great wall of water over me. I'm tossed about; I can't distinguish anymore the inner rumblings of my body from the shifting currents of the water around me. I spin and reach out, my limbs adrift. My voice, which has grown distant and vague, wanders up and down a scale I no longer recognize.

"Hey," a child shouts. "Hey, lady."

A little girl bobs toward me, her pale arms reaching over the turbulent surface of the water. "Look at me," she says. "Just look."

The girl wants to demonstrate how long she can hold her breath under water. She can stay under for longer than anyone, she claims, for as long as a fish, for longer. She wants me to time her and see.

"Okay?" she says, and absently takes hold of me. "Okay?" She paddles a moment and peers into the water, and she draws a huge breath and dives down.

I lie back and count. I float and she moves beneath me. Her stirrings cast me up and pull me down across the broken surface of the water. I feel in my body, in the shrill whistles of the lifeguards, in the voices that echo from the four corners of the room, my own approach.

I count on—to ten, to twenty, to thirty, to longer.